SCP Foundation

Mankind in its present state has been around for a quarter of a million years, yet only the last 4,000 have been of any significance.

So, what did we do for nearly 250,000 years? We huddled in caves and around small fires, fearful of the things that we didn't understand. It was more than explaining why the sun came up, it was the mystery of enormous birds with heads of men and rocks that came to life. So we called them 'gods' and 'demons', begged them to spare us, and prayed for salvation.

In time, their numbers dwindled and ours rose. The world began to make more sense when there were fewer things to fear, yet the unexplained can never truly go away, as if the universe demands the absurd and impossible.

Mankind must not go back to hiding in fear. No one else will protect us, and we must stand up for ourselves.

While the rest of mankind dwells in the light, we must stand in the darkness to fight it, contain it, and shield it from the eyes of the public, so that

others may live in a sane and normal world.

We secure. We contain. We protect.

— The Administrator

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2018-07-01

SCP Foundation

Ebook edition

Assorted Tales

Tales E

Ears

My ears have always been temperamental, and their fragile inner workings frighten me just a bit; I don't want to make myself deaf by messing with them too much. I hardly understand how they work. Something about sound waves bouncing off eardrums?

Anyway, I talk about ears because I hate airplanes. There are tiny holes in my eardrums and they don't always drain properly. As a result, my ears often hurt like hell when I descend the many thousands of feet to my destination. I never feel more relieved than when they finally pop and I can hear again. The sound of ears popping, to me, is like crinkling paper being dunked in a fish tank.

Right now I'm on my way to O'Hare, and the plane is slowly going down to the runway. I can tell because my sinuses are protesting and my ears hurt. I don't ever cry because I'm in pain but God *damn* this is the worst pain I can remember being in, except for the time I got hit by a bus when I was 12. Even then, adrenaline kept the pain in check for a time while the ambulance carried me away. I have no adrenaline right now. Just earaches.

The plane beeps as the buckle-your-seatbelt sign lights up. The noise hurts so badly. The flight attendant says we're about twenty minutes from landing, and it's the longest twenty minutes of my life. The insides of my ears, all those tiny little structures, are squeaking against each other like fresh Brussels sprouts.

Once I've disembarked I can't hear out of either ear.

"Thnkyu, wlcm t Chcago," the flight attendant says as I leave. She had a nice voice at the beginning of the flight but now it's just muffled.

Next to the baggage claim, my left ear pops. Glorious, I think to myself, rattling the side of my head with my palm to loosen the tiny structures in my other ear. I pinch my nose and swallow. My left ear

pops again. Fantastic. The noise of the baggage claim is sharp, not in a knife way but in a cheddar cheese way. I shake my head again. Come on, right ear. You can make it.

Long after my fellow passengers have cleared away from the area, and my suitcase is the only one slowly revolving around the conveyor belt, my right ear doesn't so much pop as explode. I nearly topple off the bench in surprise.

All the sounds are ridiculously clear. I don't think I've ever heard this well in my life. I collect my suitcase and equalize my left ear again. Damn, this is amazing. I never noticed how dull my hearing was before.

I approach the duty-free shop to buy a bottle of juice. The man at the very front of the shop is browsing the wines.

"Long trip?" I say to him idly.

"Yeah, really," he replies. "Hopefully a bit of this and a bit of that'll help me unwind, ah?"

I start going off to the corner where the display fridge is, but stop when I hear the man whisper.

"Just take them."

"What?" I say, turning around.

"Hm?" the man says. He looks at me with a puzzled expression.

"I'm…sorry, did you say something?"

"No, I didn't."

I nod. Wonderful. I'm so sleep-deprived I'm starting to hear things.

"Chardonnay. That's good. Just take one of them. They're tiny, nobody will notice."

His mouth wasn't moving. It wasn't even open, and the voice was coming from behind his head.

"Stop that," I say to the mostly empty shop. "Knock that off."

The man looks at me and leaves. My heart is pounding so hard I think it might tire itself out and eventually stop working. My tombstone will say "went batshit, had heart attack. Will not be missed."

The woman behind the counter waves a hand at me. "Sir, are you feeling alright? Do you want me to call the medical station?"

There's a voice coming from behind her head too. It's telling me - no, telling her - to sneak some money from the register. What the fuck?

"Listen, something's going on here and I don't appreciate it. I'm not going to take this whole prank lying down."

She keeps one eye on me as she takes out her cell phone. I flee the shop. I can tell this won't end well, but all I can think about is leave, leave, leave, this place is fucking haunted.

There are people roaming the airport, and all of them have tiny whispers following them. "Fuck your boss, don't even bother showing up for the meeting." "Your secretary is pretty hot, isn't she?" "Your mother's suffering. Just end it now before she gets worse."

I cover my ears. Amazing hearing, and all I can hear now is one voice, and it's speaking to *me.*

"You're going mad."

Eating Crow

Patient Information

Patient #:_00245686_ **Patient Name:** _John _ **Date of Admission:** _05.06.2017_
Sex: _M__ **Ethnicity:** _Caucasian__ **Hair:** _Black__ **Eye:** _Blue_
Age: _32_ **Height:** _186 cm_ **Weight:** _81.2g_ **Emergency Contact:** _Nora (Wife)_

- Patient was admitted to psychiatric ward for a psychological assessment after complaints of a sudden irrational fear of birds. Patient reported being terrified of leaving his house due to his newly acquired ornithophobia. Patient's wife convinced him to allow himself to be driven to the hospital, after he began to refuse to eat with her due to being afraid to look out the window (Patient's wife explained that various birds are known to frequent their yard). Patient was discharged after a short period.

Doctor's Notes: *After talking with John and Nora, neither of them can explain the former's sudden irrational fear of birds, specifically crows. John appears reluctant to speak or think of them, citing feeling unnerved by their feathers and beaks. John was previously fond of leaving food out for the crows, and neither had any recollection of hostility towards them, even from crows not in their yard. I am suggesting Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, and will consider prescribing benzodiazepines (minor tranquilizers) should this condition worsen. Case is considered closed, but I will reopen should they come back in.*

- Patient returned on 05.23.2017 following what his wife described as a 'breakdown' after a crow accidentally entered their house through the chimney. Patient reportedly locked himself in the bathroom and refused to leave for two full days, only leaving when his wife forced open the door and dragged him to the car. As he had not left the bathroom in two days, patient was poorly nourished, having lost a surprisingly large amount of weight since his last visit. Patient discharged after two days, though he was apprehensive to leave. Patient prescribed benzodiazepines (twice per day, by mouth with food).

Doctor's Notes: *I spoke to John and Nora again, both of them were nervous wrecks. John can't even say the word 'crow' aloud anymore, which is definitely a step backwards. I'm prescribing him the tranquilizers, and Nora says she'll make sure he's eating right. The amount of weight he's lost in such a short period of time is troubling. He also complained of stomach and lower body pains, but I suspect that's because he hasn't eaten in two days. I prescribed a burger. In any case, I'm optimistic that he can make a swift recovery.*

- Patient returned again on 06.03.2017, complaining of severe abdominal pains, as well as general soreness. Tranquilizers had provided some help in easing patient's ornithophobia, but patient had become increasingly reliant on them, in some cases taking up to twice the recommended amount. Patient underwent an X-Ray, which revealed that his bones were partially hollow, causing significant physical strain. Analysis also revealed the presence of a new mass of tissues that was not previously present, connected to the stomach and the intestines. Patient hospitalized, currently in room 407, with Patient 00247851.

Doctor's Notes: *Neither of them seem to have any idea what's going on. Nora nearly burst into tears when the results of the X-Ray came in. John, as opposed to his previous behavior, seems strangely at peace with the*

situation, though that might just be the tranquilizers. He should be dead from a lack of red blood cells, but he seems relatively healthy. After we left room 407, Nora shared something particularly odd with me, that I hadn't noticed myself. John's eyes were black now. A unique case of heterochromia perhaps? He doesn't seem to be displaying any symptoms of Horner's syndrome or Heterochromatic Iridocyclitis, other medical conditions that can cause a change in iris coloration, nor is he displaying any noticeable vision problems. Though I'm not happy about it, the only thing we can do is wait.

- On 06.07.2017, patient began to develop numerous keratin protrusions on his scalp, as well as upper arms. While these cause only minor discomfort, they do cause significant psychological distress. Patient's posture has also begun to worsen significantly.

Doctor's Notes: *While we're not going public with this for the sake of John and Nora's privacy, we're increasingly at a loss as for what to do. Doctors from halfway across the country are coming in, and we're all drawing blanks. As for John himself, his mental condition is getting worse. He appears to be having trouble understanding me when I speak, and has developed an odd habit of turning his head to the side to look at me. The other patient in his room is a unnerved by his behavior, as am I. Nursing staff are having difficulties accommodating him, may consider a transfer to the psychiatric ward should this continue.*

- Patient moved to room 606 in the psychiatric ward, following an unprovoked attack on Patient 00247851, during which Patient 00245686 left his bed, climbed on top of the sleeping Patient 00247851, and began to bite and kick him, targeting the face, while waving his arms wildly. Patient 00245686 was quickly restrained, and both only suffered minor bruises and

scratches. Patient is unsure why he attacked the other man, and became distraught and unresponsive following the event.

Doctor's Notes: *I'm not sure what to make of this. I'm beginning to suspect the patient is undergoing some sort of psychosis in addition to whatever is afflicting him physically. Perhaps it's his way of dealing with his sudden fear of birds, by becoming one? On the subject of his physical ailment, however, the keratin protrusions are continuing to pop up. Some of them are beginning to develop soft filaments, like proto-feathers. The mass of tissues we detected in his abdominal region has developed into a sort of gizzard, with a few gastroliths starting to appear. What is* ***happening*** *to this man?*

- On 06.27.2017, patient left room unannounced, and ran down the hallway. Patient was unable to be located for roughly half an hour, at which point a nurse discovered the patient outside in the courtyard, jumping in place, vocalizing in a hoarse tone, chasing nearby birds, and eating the remains of a sandwich stolen from a doctor's office. Patient was brought back to his room without issue. Custodial staff noted a previously unopened window on the second floor was open, with traces of 'black fluff' in the surrounding area.

Doctor's Notes: *John's 'feathers' are springing up much faster than they were before. They aren't just keratin protrusions with filaments anymore, they're vaned feathers, with a small number of down feathers beginning to form under them. He doesn't speak anymore, and seems to have difficulty determining when he's spoken to. The psychosis, if we can call it that at this point, has progressed too far. The thought occurred to me weeks ago, but I dismissed it because of the absurdity. Now I'm almost certain. John isn't just adopting the behaviors of a crow. He's turning into a crow. It sounds ridiculous, but it's the most logical explanation any of us have. John's wife stopped coming in to check up on him. I can't blame her, John isn't*

exactly himself anymore. Nothing we do appears to slow down his condition, psychological or medical. We're at a loss, both literally and physically.

- Patient reported missing on 07.25.2017. Patient 00245686 was last seen bursting out of his room for no clear reason, and running at full speed to the nearest window, before breaking the glass, and jumping out. The current whereabouts of the patient are unknown, as no remains were found outside, and the fall would have almost certainly been lethal.

Doctor's Notes: *He flew away. Of course, we can't just give that as an official explanation, but we all know it. I tried to call Nora, but she won't answer the phone anymore. I'm in contact with a colleague, who says he knows people — S&C Pharmaceuticals, he called them — who may be able to figure out this situation, and maybe even find a way to help John. I hope, for his sake, they can.*

Closing Comments

Patient Status:_Missing_
Will be back for a checkup on: _N/A_
Case Status: _Closed_

Ecce Perago

And so, at last, it had come to this. Day after day, week after week, they had come to him. Talking to him. Telling him their lies, trying to see where he broke. They'd never realized how much they had told him instead. When you hear enough lies, you get a feeling for the truth. You can see the shape of the truth, by how the lies outline it.

He had everything in place. He'd had it in place for quite some time. Plans, plots, and schemes, all ready to go, when everything was right. In the end, all it took to spark it off was a simple cold. The old lady had already been quite weak, refusing to indulge in treatments like the others. An illness introduced into her system by a well-placed cough, and she passed away in her sleep. The numbers above and below her had came to him and offered him her numbers. He accepted, with a show of reluctance. Those who are shown to desire power are those least likely to be trusted with it.

And now O5-4 sat in his office. He had been given his mark of office. A foot-long length of bone, polished smooth. His name had been erased, not just from Foundation databanks, but from the minds of all who had known him. He was sure the other numbers knew his name, but soon enough, they wouldn't matter. He let his fingers drift towards the keyboard before him, and a half smile rose to his lips. Alone, with no one watching, he still felt the need to say, well, something. For posterity. "I feel like a super villain. Like Lex Luthor, or Adrian Veidt. Heh. 'Do it, Dr. Bright? I did it 35 minutes ago.'" As good a set of words as any.

Four touched a series of buttons, setting into motion the events that would place the entirety of the Foundation into his hands. Then he sat back and waited. Fifteen minutes, and everything would be his.

13

Thirteen was easiest. Mainly because O5-13 didn't really exist. Oh, the Senior Staff were told he did. There were memos, handed down by 'O5-13,' but it was just one more lie. Thirteen's vote was rotated to the other O5's, moving up a step any time there was a tie vote and the tie breaker was needed. But there was a power there. Knowledge, that only those who held Thirteen's vote could access. A simple (actually quite complex) computer virus snuck past the Overseers' firewalls, and bestowed the power of Thirteen to Four. Easy as that.

12

A large African man sat in his chair, behind an expensive desk. The room he used as his office could also quite easily be described as 'expensive.' The man himself could be described the same. Silk tie. Gold cufflinks. Armani suit. Shoes made from the skin of a very rare reptile. He wore dark wrap-around glasses, smoked glass framed in ivory, perhaps to hide his eyes, perhaps to keep him from looking too closely at the things he had to. Although he had once borne another name, these days he was known to one and all as O5-12. He was the accountant for the Overseer council, making sure the numbers added up, everywhere.

His assistant entered the office on schedule. Everything Twelve did was on schedule. From the moment he woke up, to the moment he went to sleep, and perhaps even his dreams, followed a precise, practical order. To do things otherwise invited chaos, and with chaos came death. The assistant walked calmly to the drink cabinet, opening it as he had done every day for years. Somewhere in his head, things were turning. A thing had been planted in his head, before he became Twelve's right-hand man. And now, this thing made him pick a different bottle than the one he normally did.

The glass was poured, and it looked like whiskey. It even smelled like whiskey. When the brainwashed assistant dropped an ice cube in it, it even bubbled a little, like whiskey. But, when O5-12 raised it to his lips and gulped it down, it didn't act like whiskey. Contact with the soft, wet flesh of his tongue and throat resulted in a chemical reaction. Instead of the sweet soothing burn of alcohol, Twelve was

rewarded with the swift, horrible burn of acid.

He was dead before the glass left his lips.

11

The two men sat across from each other, separated only by a chessboard. It was an old board, but they were old men. O5-11 was a pleasant enough looking Caucasian gentlemen, one of those old men who sit on their porch and offer candy to little children. Not the creepy kind. Eleven fiddled with a bracelet made from human teeth as he considered both the board, and his opponent.

"It's still your move, 'Leven," Agent Alto Clef teased his superior. Maybe the Devil, maybe a reality bender, one thing could be said for certain: Clef enjoyed these monthly games with Eleven. When his phone beeped to alert him to an incoming text, he almost ignored it. Almost. But he'd expected this. Sure enough, the text merely read 'Now.'

"Check."

"Where? You don't have check anywhere!" O5-11 leaned across the chessboard, searching for his opponent's move, his hands touching both sides of the board.

A sad smile on his face, Clef spoke. "There." He calmly tipped over his own king, and 300 amps of electricity charged into Eleven's body, frying his brain to a crisp.

"Checkmate."

10

O5-10 didn't notice when the air conditioning kicked on. It was just another distraction from the endless paperwork that filled her life these days. She was a strong, capable woman, a brunette, dressed in a functional long skirt and jacket. Every five minutes she'd raise

her hand to the necklace around her throat, a carved marble eyeball, dangling to stare at her paperwork with the same disgust she felt for it.

Her first indication that anything was wrong was when she realized she'd read the same page 4 times without comprehending it. By then it was too late. She could hear the clicking and hissing sounds being made by her body. Her hand refused to let go of the paper. Her hand refused to let go of the paper. Her hand refused to let go. Her hand refused. Her hand. Her.

9

He always claimed he was the unluckiest O5. The only one who didn't get to be a world-traveling jetsetter. Oh no. Nine was stuck deep in the middle of the ocean. Sure, he could travel to any of the water Sites, all couple dozen of them, but most of the time, he ended up here, deep beneath the sea, where no natural light could find its way. He was a pale man, small, always looking lost in the suits he tried to make look good. A bone-handled knife rested in his hands at this moment in time, as he stared into the abyss. It would have been poetic to say something gazed back, but the only thing outside the window in his office was water, lots and lots of water.

Several seconds later, the only thing inside his office was lots and lots of water. Between the water in his lungs, and the pressure so deep, O5-9 was the unluckiest O5.

8

A shower could never make her feel clean. No matter how many times she washed, she could still feel those things crawling across her skin, could still see all the people she'd condemned to death. Eight was not a pretty woman. Despite being one of a handful of all-powerful Overseers, she'd never gotten any work done, no surgery to fix her sloped forehead, her craggy brow, no lap band to cut back on her weight. Somehow, despite having no appetite, she'd still gained weight. Even naked under the water, she still wore a braided

ring of sinew on her left ring finger.

She turned the water up hotter, trying to blast away the horrible memories, boil them off. The heat felt very nice. Until there was nothing but heat. She didn't even manage a scream when her flesh boiled away. In fact, she may have smiled, because the memories, at last, were gone.

7

"I'm sorry, driver, I don't think I've seen you before. What did you say your name was?" Seven asked absently, fiddling with the ivory chopstick in her hair.

"Oh, it's Rodney. But most people call me Dr. Gerald."

6

He had been an Agent, once upon a time. When he worked the field, they called him Cowboy. People still remembered the agent, even if no one knew he was now the Overseer known as Six. He had been the best.

And now, he was an old man. Dressed as always in an immaculate white suit, his long grey hair pulled back in a ponytail, his trademark Stetson tilted at an angle on his head. Between his gnarled old hands he held a white cane, the handle carved into the shape of a howling wolf. At his back were his two trusted bodyguards, Thompson and Black. They were almost as good as him. One day, they'd be better. When they were, well, one of them could take his number, and he could retire. Maybe spend some time with his granddaughter.

He didn't look back when Black got a text. He never knew that O5-4 had once been Agent Black's personal physician. Or, if he had known, it wouldn't have mattered. He did, however, feel it when Black drew his guns. He began to turn, but, no, too slow. As he fell to the floor, he noticed Thompson falling beside him. But the hole in

the back of his head prevented him from noticing any more.

5

"It's an emergency, sir! We have to get you out of here!" The security guard hurried O5-5 and his secretary into the nearest airlock, and slammed the door shut behind the three of them. The guard leaned against the door, panting. "Keter, sir. It sounds bad." The secretary sniffed, but then, she always had pneumonia, or some other sinus problem.

O5-5 was nondescript. He dressed nice, but not well. His hair was… enh. His face was… blah. He didn't stand out. In fact, the only thing that was noticeable about him was the leather shoes. A nice, tanned leather. His secretary was an African-American woman, about 51 years old, quiet, with a rather large nose. She had always been his emergency escape, even if she didn't know it.

As the room proceeded to move upwards, the guard frowned, turning to look at the two of them. "Do either of you hear a hissing sound?"

The gas was fast-acting, invisible, unscented. It poured out of 108's nose at a furious pace, killing them all as they rode to safety.

3

"Well hey guys, how are you today? It's fantastic to see you!" Three looked like a teenage boy, late teens, blond hair down to his collar, jean jacket filled with patches, geek-style glasses. O5-3 never let himself be seen in person, or, at least, not for many years. He always showed up on a monitor, broadcasting from a white room, a fancy desk and old-fashioned computer beside him. While he always had a prop or two at hand, it was never anything real. In fact, O5-3 wasn't real. He'd died, decades ago, plugged into a prototype computer he'd invented. He just didn't go away.

The Overseer council took a vote, and decided they didn't care. He

was still their best coder. He could still do the job. So, they set his bone earring on the mainframe, installed some safety programs, and let him work.

An electromagnetic pulse set off inside the hardware that carried him removed him from this world at last.

2

60 km west of Astrakhan, a garden was in bloom. O5-2 took great pride in her garden. Of course, she was cheating, a little. She didn't mind. Once you get old enough, you don't mind using a few cheat codes to get things done. Two was the type of woman you pictured when you heard the word 'Grandma.' She always had a blonde shawl on, no matter the weather, and usually a pair of gardening gloves. She had a fantastic gardening hat a friend had made for her, pushed down tightly on her grey curls.

Her helper was an old friend, a man old well before his time, and maybe after it as well. He glanced up, a slight frown on his face, and pointed, looking uncomfortable. He wasn't used to this much attention on him.

Two had the time to look up and smile at the Russian satellite that was screaming down through the sky at her. She could have moved. She could have run. She noticed the 'rogue' satellite too early, and she could have made it to the spring, saved herself. But she didn't.

If anyone had been around to hear her last words, they might have been confused that what she chose to say was "It's about time."

1

And One. The first. Once upon a time, he had been known as the Administrator. All the power in the Foundation had been his. But he didn't trust himself. He knew that absolute power corrupts absolutely. So, he parceled off his power. Handed out badges of responsibility. Numbered them, and made sure they could balance

each other. Set up a system, so that if one died, the authority, the votes, were passed to another, so the balance would never be uneven for long.

And then he retreated from the world. Buried himself down deep, with only electronic means to keep him in touch with the outside. Which means that O5-1, still looking like a 13-year-old boy, still clad in the rags and bones that hadn't been used to mark the other 12, was completely alone. When his systems shut down, he didn't panic. When the liquid concrete began seeping out of the air vents, he didn't panic. He just lay down, and accepted it. After all, he'd been expecting it.

4

O5-4 stared at the screen before him, as the 13 lights shifted, back and forth, here and there. One dies a little ahead of another, so the vote goes to her, then she dies, so vote travels here… until, finally, at last, the votes were all his. The power was all his. The Foundation was all his.

Dr. Everett Mann, the Administrator, allowed himself one appreciative cackle. Just one. No sense going all maniacal about it. Besides, he had so much work to do. His fingers flew across the keyboards, as he prepared to change everything. As he typed, he muttered to himself.

"Good evening, Doctor. No, no, don't stand up…"

. . .

Eden

I remember the warmth. That is the first thing I recall. The light was there as well, the soft orange glow of a dying star. But the warmth… It cannot be easily described. It is nothing like the cold of this place.

There were others there, like me. We are large creatures, and so we do not live in a place crowded with rocks, as this system is. Our home is not filled with stone but with soft warmth, and with the quiet light of a star that has found its place. I was told that the star was young when we first arrived there, and there is an ancient one who claims to remember when it would still speak. I do not believe his ramblings.

We spend a great deal of time as children incapable of rational thought. None remember this period of their lives, though the caretakers tell us that it is amusing. We chase after debris with a joy that is lost to the old, cavorting through space with an innocence that some have spent an eternity trying to recreate.

But, of course, you are not here to learn this. You are here because you wonder what our purpose is, what I am here to do?

There is a seed within each of us. As we mature, it evolves. Eventually, it multiplies. The process is… complex, and I fear it is beyond your understanding. I will say that we may exercise some control over this evolution, and that many of our race take great pride in the complexity and beauty of their creations.

We carry this seed with us throughout our lifetimes, thousands of tiny lives held in an embryonic limbo. Some choose to never allow this seed to grow, unwilling to leave the glory of the skies for something so mundane as gardening. But others of us, we know what must be done.

And so we leave. We leave the warmth and joy and peace of that glad star and depart into the cold void. None who leave ever return.

No songs are sung of their success, no warnings returned from their deaths. None are heard from again.

We search through debris and rocks and vast stretches of black nothingness, looking for somewhere that a small seed might take root and grow. It is a long, impossible task, and my telling of it would take many of your lifetimes.

Suffice it to say that after a great deal of searching, I happened upon a small planet that looked rather promising. And so I took the plunge.

That is not an experience I wish to repeat. The fires of the air scalded me terribly before I came to rest in the oceans, and my recovery was long and unpleasant. But I had dedicated myself to this task, and I could not turn from it.

That seed within us… ruptures, that is the word. It ruptures on our landing. After that rupture, the seed is released. It grows within us, colonizing our bodies. As its numbers swell, some may find their way out to the world on which we have landed. I know that a few small creatures from within me have made their way to the waters of this planet, though the majority remain within.

Eventually, I will expire. That great impact shortens our lifespan, and the growth of a civilization within us does nothing to alleviate this. Eventually, those creatures within me will find an exit.

Everything will change.

« **Interlude - Drift** | **HUB** | **Antediluvian** »

Elder Baconator

The word processor's cursor blinked accusingly at Tilda, goading her into finishing the report.

It was always the same, dull story with directorship: it's lonely at the top, and it's lonely because you're sitting on a mountain of paperwork. Things took on a lot more gravity when the lives of everyone on site (and many other nameless, faceless people elsewhere) are affected by the stroke of a pen. Her pen.

And yet it was still dull. Monotone, monochrome. Easy to forget what it meant, what you were doing. Vital that you always remembered.

There were times when you didn't want to talk to anyone about it. No, not didn't want to. Couldn't. Isolation eventually wore down anyone, even if you were well-practiced with having few friends. Yet no matter what she wanted, there were things that only others who had previously occupied the Site-19 directorial office could understand, or even be told.

As it happened, one of those people chose that moment to knock on her door. She smelled the cigarette smoke first, then looked up to see a greying man in his mid-50's standing in her doorway.

"Dmitri, good afternoon."

Dmitri Strelnikov looked at his watch. "It is six o'clock, Direktor." She could hear the "k".

Tilda double checked the time on her computer monitor. "…Damn." She paused. "Also, cigarette, Dmitri."

He nodded apologetically and unceremoniously flicked his cigarette into the hallway. Not the first time he'd done that.

"Sorry. Smoking in this room is an old habit. Hey, you should try it.

Might be good for you." Not the first time he'd said that.

Dmitri settled into an armchair and looked around her office, both of which used to belong to him. "You should redecorate, too. The Brezhnev era does not suit you like it does me, Direktor."

She gave a tired smile. "What can I do for you, Dmitri?" She hesitated for a moment. "And please, just Tilda." When he'd been on this side of the desk, he'd insisted the same thing. *Call me Dmitri.*

"We had a shorter session today and I thought I would come see how you were doing. I say to myself, *'Maybe she needs a cigarette and I am the only one with a spare.'*" He smiled broadly. Tilda had never smoked.

Shorter session. She wondered what they were having Dmitri do. He had recently been pulled out of retirement (perhaps more aptly described as self-imposed exile) and made a training officer of Alpha-9. Perhaps *the* training officer.

She could ask. But that would require more paperwork, if the wrong people were tapping her office right now.

Tilda was technically cleared for all of that, but the papers took a while to make their way to her desk, and even longer to climb the pile. She needed to delegate more of this, but delegation was its own paper mountain.

He was expecting a response, about the cigarette. "It's very kind of you to offer. There is still time for me to pick up the habit." She motioned to her computer and the reams of paper on her desk. "You know how it goes, though."

Dmitri ground his teeth, stainless steel glinting occasionally as he did so. A former Russian airborne infantryman, he had lost a few teeth during bad jumps and some hack Soviet dentist had replaced the missing ones with stainless steel facsimiles. "I tell you what. Leave that go." He waved dismissively at her desk. "I will take you to dinner. I know a nice place. Quiet, good food, no questions asked. They also serve Coca Cola."

Might have sounded like a joke to someone else. But it appealed to Tilda. The cursor seemed to blink more aggressively. *Don't you dare*, it almost vocalized. *Work is more important than food.*

Her work saved lives. Her work ended lives.

Dmitri was waiting. Tilda looked at him again and nodded consent. The moment they left her office, he lit another cigarette.

She couldn't decide between a Wendy's number 7 or number 8. It had been so long since she'd eaten out, even at a fast food restaurant, that she really couldn't decide. Something light, maybe? Nothing worse than working hard on a stomach that feels like it's full of bricks. A salad, perhaps?

Dmitri approached the cashier. She looked very young, with an uncertain look about her. Tilda wondered if she was in college. For some reason, that thought aroused a sympathy that bordered on pity.

"Welcome to Wendy's," the cashier said. "Would you like to try the Son of Baconator?"

"No, I do not want the pretender. I want the Baconator elder, with quadruple bacon." He held up four fingers for emphasis.

"Sir, I don't know if we can—"

Dmitri cut her off. "Is this not America? Am I still in the Soviet Union? Why did I leave?" Dmitri gave her a hard look. "Why did I leave if I must settle for the pretend Baconator."

"S-Sir it *is* America, but…"

"Do you want a bribe? Do I have to bribe for this?" The cashier tried to protest, but Dmitri held a finger to his lips. "Shhh, no no. Here. Look at this." He placed a crisp fifty dollar bill on the counter and slid it towards her. "For you, for you. Quadruple bacon. I want the true Baconator father. Maybe even the Baconator grandfather."

Wide-eyed and confused, the cashier took the bill and punched in

the order. Satisfied, Dmitri stepped back. The cashier looked up at Tilda as if wondering what was coming next.

"I'll have what he's having."

It was unhealthy.

It was delicious.

Neither of them spoke for a great while, the taste of the cheap food and the knowledge of how bad it was for them bringing its own peculiar form of catharsis. As Tilda wiped her hands clean of grease, she had no recourse but to admit that she did indeed feel a lot better.

“So, how is training progressing, Dmitri? We’d might as well conduct a *little* business while we’re out,” she asked.

He moved to light a cigarette but a sorry look from the cashier stopped him. “We are moving along. I have been trying to drill them on quick threat detection and reaction.”

“How does that work?”

“They must learn that conditions can, how to say, ‘shit the bed’ in an instant. Sometimes you have mere seconds to react to a changing situation, and it will determine if you live or die.”

Tilda nodded.

“I will give you an example.” He pointed with the unlit end of his cigarette towards a man who had just entered. He wore an oversized sweater that looked a bit too warm for the current climate, and his body language indicated that he was possibly nervous or agitated.

“That man there, we will call him Sweater Man.” Dmitri’s and Sweater Man’s eyes met for the briefest moment. “What would you do, for example, if Sweater Man decided suddenly to shoot up this place?”

“What?” Tilda frowned. “I would call it in, if I could, and wait. Besides that, I would probably do nothing.”

“Nothing?” Dmitri looked displeased.

“Yes.” She watched Sweater Man staring at the counter, shifting in his oversized sweater. She remembered the mountains of paperwork. Saving lives, ending lives, whether you signed this piece of paper or whether you didn't sign that one. Inaction, action. No matter what you did, so much was all the same.

Dmitri leaned forward, clearly forming an argument. But whatever he was going to say was lost when Sweater Man lifted his garment, pulled out a handgun, and fired a round into the ceiling.

Chairs squealed as frightened children and parents alike dove for cover under the wooden Ikea tables. A baby started crying. Someone spilled a drink on Dmitri’s back.

Tilda glared at Dmitri with a tone carrying less alarm and more *‘What the hell have you done?’*

“ALRIGHT. NOBODY MOVE AND THIS IS OVER REAL QUICK.”

Sweater Man swept his weapon over the cashier and instructed her to begin filling a carryout bag with bills from all the registers.

Dmitri relaxed his hands, allowing his right arm to drop nonchalantly to his side, and waited.

When Sweater’s head was turned to the cashier, he nodded at Tilda and rose. With smooth, practiced motion, Dmitri’s gun hand lifted the hem of his shirt and drew his trusted sidearm. The weapon rose swiftly, meeting the target—

Dmitri slipped on a spilled milkshake. In stark contrast to how gracefully he had risen, he collapsed to the floor. His sidearm landed on the table in front of Tilda.

There were only seconds to react, but her brain still jumped through the usual hoops. This was not a choice she had wanted to make. Ideally she didn’t want to make *any* choice in this kind of situation,

but the die was already cast.

She felt her hand wrap around the bakelite grip as she, too, rose from her seat and drew down on Sweater Man.

The sights aligned, and beyond the front blade sight she could see the target's eyes go wide.

Flash.

She felt, more than heard, the report of the gun. Her eyes flinched. She felt her hand absorb the recoil as the slide cycled backwards and chambered a new round. She watched the lacquered steel casing fly past her peripheral vision. Glass shattered and children screamed, all of it silenced by piercing, ringing tinnitus.

When her eyes focused, Sweater Man was gone. The spent casing hit the floor, and with that her hearing returned.

Dmitri stayed on the floor and lit his cigarette. "You see what I mean, yes?"

She exhaled.

"You should have Everett look at that bruise," Tilda said as they alternately walked and limped through the hall. The adrenaline crash was hitting her hard, and she wanted nothing more than to sink into her office chair and do paperwork again. Maybe that was the real lesson to be taken from this: an appreciation of stability and relative safety.

"No, because he will try to replace my lungs again. I told him never again, not after last time," Dmitri said with an emphatic chop of his hand.

Finally they reached her office. She invited him in for a drink out of courtesy, but he politely declined, reminding her that she still had work to do.

A question loomed on her mind, and she teetered indecisively as to whether she should ask or not. She decided she had to know.

"Dmitri…did you orchestrate all of that?"

He gave a curt laugh. "I only wish I could have planned that. So perfect! It was complete co-insidious."

"…Coincidence."

"Yes, that is what I said." He clapped her on the shoulder, beaming. "I want you to know, you did well, even though you missed. I am sure the police found him."

Despite her exhaustion she managed to crack a grim smile. “Thank you. No more practical lessons, if you please.”

“I will try to honor this request, Direktor.”

She sunk into her chair. The cursor greeted her. It had kindly remained where she left it.

Eldritch Application

The man behind the desk watched as the cosmic horror before him paced back and forth, ranting what could only be described as its head off. "I am the ultimate hive mind. My influence is everywhere, though you normally cannot feel it. I am He Who Waits Behind the Wall. When I break through those tiny cracks in your reality, I am the very personification of decay and destruction. Black ooze, great tentacles, blood flowing from your eyes. My six mouths are ever screaming, and the seventh one shall sing the song that ends the world. My very gaze is enough to drive men to madness." It moved in closer, and made several dramatic motions with its tentacular appendages.

"No force can match mine. When I deem your world to be over, it shall come to an end. My power goes far beyond that of any other being you can think of." It worked its mass into the small wooden chair, and glared at the man. "I am decay, and I am destruction. I am Zalgo, and I am coming."

Multiple tentacles slammed into the desk. "So why *can't* I be an SCP?"

The director of the SCP Foundation showed no shock towards the black, amorphous monstrosity that sat before him. The piercing red light from the pinpoints deep in the dark mass did not phase him. Instead, they merely reflected off his glasses and his balding head as he looked down at his desk.

"Look," he began, riffling through a sheet of papers, "this is your fifth time attempting to apply for SCP status. I don't know how many times I've said this to you, so listen up. This is the final time. We do not have any interest in taking you in. You just don't work."

"Did you not hear me?" demanded Zalgo, growing in size rapidly. "I am the ultimate hive mind, and…"

"Yes, yes, we've been through this before. You are the ultimate force of destruction, and can end the world, and all those other qualifications you're always on about. There's no need to repeat them again. Now, I'm not saying I encourage it, but why don't you just go and do something dangerous, if you want in so badly?"

"'Do something dangerous?' My work over the past few years has been beyond dangerous. I have driven countless innocent children to madness, caused suicides all over this world, and bled into anywhere I can fit, and you ask me to do something dangerous?" The black mass rose up, drawing on its awesome power.

"Zalgo," stated the director flatly. "You find web comics, and you corrupt them."

The abomination from beyond the stars stared blankly at the director, then sank back into his chair, looking defeated. "Why do you want to be an SCP, anyways?"

"Well," sighed Zalgo through one of the non-screaming mouths, "that bloody Slender Man's been spreading his image around for quite some time now. Getting people talking about what he does, placing himself in photographs, inspiring stories, the usual affair. He's even got his own web series now! Can you believe that?"

"Yes," said the director warily, cocking his head to the side, "but what does that have to do with anything?"

"I'm new to the eldritch abomination thing, and need some publicity. The whole thing with the web comics is a start, but it's easy for people to use my methods and never mention my name, and let me tell you, that's a big mark against me. You lot take me in, and I'm a big name. Not as big as Yog-Sothoth or Azathoth, but big enough to get some recognition. So, how about it?"

An awkward silence settled over the room as the director took off his glasses and wiped them off with one hand, while holding his forehead with the other, deep in thought. Zalgo shifted nervously in his chair, awaiting the director's answer. At length, the director placed his glasses aside, and began speaking.

"Barring the fact that I refuse to participate in some weird contest of abominations, there's one big reason as to why we can't take you in. It's not a matter of money or difficulty of containment, oh no. We've got SCPs like 682, and it's pocket change to keep it locked up, even when it breaks out. And since you seem willing to cooperate with us, you'd be easy as pie to contain, as well. No, it's that you're just not interesting enough."

Zalgo seemed to boil with fury at this statement, and opened several mouths to make a retort, but the director held him off. "Allow me to explain. You are bursting with power, and have the capacity to end this world with a thought. That's all well and good for other organizations. But here at the SCP Foundation, we can't just accept you on those criteria. It's far too much. You're overpowered, you don't have a hook, and quite frankly, you're boring. When you get down to it, you just don't fit in with our image."

For a moment, it looked as if Zalgo was ready to end the director, right then and there. A few tense moments passed, the seconds ticking away as slowly as they could, before his shoulders sank, and the black mass sighed, "Alright, alright. You win. I'll just see myself out."

As the chair scraped across the floor, the director said, "Try Warehouse 13, or maybe the Chaos Insurgency. I'm sure they'll be a little more lenient than we are." Zalgo gave a grunt of thanks, and was gone, having melted into the walls. The director allowed himself a few moments of peace, before calling out, "Next!" and preparing himself for the next sob story.

A colossal green man with a squishy head and long, wavy beard of tentacles squeezed his way into the office, and stuffed himself into the chair. Riffling through a few more papers, the director looked up and stated, "Thank you for joining me today, Mr…?"

"Cthulhu."

Electronic Data

The weight of the statement fell heavy on the room. A dozen researchers in various technical fields shifted uncomfortably in their seats as Director Foster looked around the conference table.

Dr. Cimmerian spoke up from his seat in the back of the room. "So what you're telling us is that you don't know where it is."

Researcher Rosen nodded into his hands.

Director Foster shook his head. "Fantastic. Walk us through the process of how we lost a top secret two million dollar AI on the internet."

Researcher Rosen looked up and countered, "Well that's not exactly what's happened. The AI is missing for the moment but it's programmed to come back to Foundation controlled servers after two days without contact."

Director Foster broke in, "Just tell us what happened."

"Right." Researcher Rosen pushed his glasses up his nose. "Following the success of AIAD, we began work on a new generation of site AIs that aren't based on **2987-1**. Are any of you familiar with the Jarvis framework?"

"I worked with it at Site-17 for a bit," Dr. Cimmerian answered. "Can I just say that when we complained that Jarvis was a ridiculous name we never really considered you'd go with something as silly as the 'Robotic Interface and Computing Heuristic Advanced Research Database' for your next iteration."

Rosen looked around nervously and continued. "The point is that the Jarvis framework is useful but it's a truer AI. It doesn't interact with humans the same way that Alex and Glacon do."

Dr. Hopper raised his hand to interject. "We've been moving away from the human-like approach for a while now. The Foundation needs a cold and dispassionate AI as much as we need human based problem solving."

"Yes." Rosen nodded vigorously. "But the flip side is that we can't acclimate the AI to the world with human interaction, it has no use for that kind of data. What it requires is information."

Director Foster frowned. "Your solution to that was to let it loose on the internet?"

"Since it went dark," Rosen continued, "we ran a battery of tests with other RICHARD iterations and we think we figured out the problem."

"Enlighten us, then?" Dr. Cimmerian barked.

"Right. Uh, web development hasn't really caught up with our programming just yet, and we made several errors in how the AI interacts with non-Foundation databases."

Dr. Hopper raised his hand again before breaking in. "It turns out that Python web frameworks interact oddly with the AI. We still don't understand what went wrong, exactly, but we're working on it."

Researcher Rosen glared at Dr. Hopper before interrupting. "We're fairly certain it's either the CherryPy, TwistedWeb or Bottle framework that trapped the AI in a recursive loop."

Director Foster scowled. "Get it back. Cimmerian is the first wave of 'shit gets real'." Dr. Cimmerian saluted from the back of the room. "You don't want to be here when the next guy comes."

Rosen gulped. "I promise, our contingency programming should be foolproof. It'll return to our servers before the end of tomorrow."

Director Foster stood up from his chair. "I want a new contingency plan on my desk by the end of today in case that doesn't happen."

Everyone except for Dr. Cimmerian stood up along with Foster and began to file out of the room with shuffling steps. Once the room was empty, Foster sat in his chair and looked down the conference

table.

"It's really great to see you again, by the way," Dr. Cimmerian began. "Sheila still teaching?"

Director Foster laughed. "She's actually an assistant principal now. If she finds out you're in town she's gonna try to set you up with someone."

"I'm moving around too much to settle down but I'll bear it if she makes spaghetti for dinner."

"She'd love that, I bet. Though you don't gotta settle down to find someone for a little while."

"Fair. But interoffice romance has never been my strong suit."

"Shit. You remember the fallout from Clef and Kondraki's thing?"

Dr. Cimmerian's eyes went wide. "Dude. Do you realize you guys got your Dick stuck in a bottle?"

« **Four Stories Told In Order** | **`Rammer Jammer Yellow Hammer Hub`** | **All About That Base** »

Elevator

He was lost in hell. Or as hell, one of the two. He'd kicked and screamed to get here, and now he just wanted it to be over. Two days of computer and technology stuff, in a nice big hotel, with lots of food and drink. His girlfriend had been less than thrilled, to say the least, but he'd prevailed with a minimum of tears. It all seemed like such a good idea at the time. Now, he felt shell-shocked. Too many people, everything so expensive, rude and snide jerks everywhere, and the growing, acidic tension between him and his girlfriend was starting to come to a head.

He'd managed to drag her down to look at cell phones, but he'd run into an ex-girlfriend running a seminar registration table. She'd sort of cornered him, immediately pouring out her heart, how sorry she was, how much she missed him. By the time he'd gotten away, his girlfriend was well gone, only the aura of her rage hanging behind. He searched, demoralized, but she hadn't even returned to the room. He'd had to narrowly dodge the Ex a couple more times, reminding himself easily of why he left her to begin with. At least their car was still in the lot.

Slithering through the crush of people, he wormed out to the relative calm of the lobby. He just wanted to rest, to let the clock spin to the end of this nightmare, even if he knew it'd lose him position in the great argument to come. The elevators were packed tight, a hefty and unruly line pressed against them, and he sighed, looking around for stairs. He spotted a small, dingy set of elevator doors set against the far wall just as his Ex spotted him across the lobby. He dived for the call button like a drowning man.

The doors hummed, his foot tapping in a panic. If she caught him in a enclosed space, things could go badly quickly. The door bonged, and the tarnished steel door slid half-way open before stopping with a jerk. He slipped in, just as his Ex cleared the crush of people, the door shuddering shut on her disappointed face. He sighed, leaning

against the back wall, then wrinkled his nose at the sudden smell. He looked, and quickly recoiled from the wall. The metal booth was filthy, sticky with urine and something melted, the floor stained and scuffed, some mass of soft, filthy material making a small pile in the corner.

The booth was small. Very small. Barely big enough for one, let alone two. He looked to the door, and had a sudden flutter of panic. There were no buttons. No up, no down, no numbers, no emergency stop. Nothing. He felt a click and a hum, the car starting to rattle its way up, the flutter of panic growing as he contemplated being trapped here, but lost it almost instantly as the car stopped again. This had to be some kind of service elevator or something, which went to every floor in sequence. He had no idea if such a thing existed, but for him, now, it did. He'd just get off, apologize, and hike to the room.

For several seconds the door stayed closed, eating at his slim ledge of calm. Finally, one door shuddered a quarter of the way open, revealing a dark hall. He pressed hard, pushing through the slim gap just as someone emerged from the dark. He seemed tired, haggard, and totally ignored his half-stated apologies. The pale man shoved in the the elevator he'd just left, quickly disappearing behind the shivering door. As he watched the man leave, he saw no call buttons of any kind on the door frame. He sighed, looking around, the gloom illuminated by just a few bare bulbs strung along the ceiling. The walls, floor, everything seemed to be made of a dark, crumbling brick, slightly moist and…

Wait. What?

He'd gone up, not down. This sure as hell looked like a basement room, with the damp bricks, the uneven floor, the walls chipped and missing bricks in places, the…what the hell. The short hall ended in what looked like a “T” junction. The left side seemed to have a handrail, so that was probably stairs. There was a bulge in the brick on the left-hand wall, just before the junction, as if they'd bricked around a large pipe, and for some reason it scared the hell out of him. He started, nearly on tip-toe, sneaking silently down the dim hall. He reached the stairs without incident, no hisses or arms or anything leaping from the dark to tear him to bits, and grabbed the

slightly pitted handrail. He was three steps up before he heard the chuff.

It was the sound a sick dog makes. Phlegmy and echoing through a snout. He turned slightly, not wanting to at all but feeling compelled to do so. Opposite the stairs, down the other junction, a thing shivered. It was low and squat, about the size of a person laying down. It had four short, oozing legs, massive back eyes, and sawblade teeth. It looked like a partially-skinned possum, frizzy hair around large patched of black, rotten-looking muscle. It started to lurch up to the stairs, seeming to be in a great deal of pain, but still very fast. He flew up the creaking stairs, not realizing he was screaming for almost a half hour.

He ran. Insanely, he ran, up and up and up, trying halls at random, finding locked doors, bare rooms full of teeth, pulpy floors with large patches of rot, all sending him back to the stairs with hoarse screams, always the thing just behind him, leaving a dripping trail of slime and blood. He beat at the walls of the stairwell, clawing, watching as the bricks bled just as much as his cracked fingernails. A hallway choked with lines that felt like tendon ended in a flat mass of hard jelly the color of a cataract. He ran, and ran, voice gone, only a drip of blood from shredded vocal cords, stumbling and crawling like a drunk.

Lurching up, he found the ceiling of the stairwell, the stairs smashed against the wall as if the ceiling had suddenly slammed in against them. He turned silently in to the nearest hall, too numb to rejoice or despair, feeling the floor sag and wobble under his feet, glancing in a open doorway to see a massive mound of flesh that seemed to be absorbing smaller ones, barely noticing as a brick fell loose from the ceiling, clouting him on the back and letting loose a slow waterfall of pus from the now open gap. He stumbled, feet sludgy in the floor, half-swimming along to the vague light at the end of the hall.

He looked up, focusing dim eyes on a window to life. Grass blew in a night breeze around a packed parking lot, a hotel lit up like a tower of salvation behind it, people walking to and from cars, laughing happily. He flailed, crawling, croaking bloody yelps as he reached, straining, fingers stretching as a flabby, oozing paw sank hard into

his back, the flesh instantly turning black and flaking at the rotten touch. He screamed then, the ragged, broken howl of a deer with a wolf in its throat, the chuffing muzzle starting to search through the flabby bags and soggy tubes of its catch for sweetbreads.

The janitor sighed, edging up on the reeking mess. These goddamn kids, no respect at all, just wandering wherever they please. This says “staff only” on the fucking door, yet look there. He scowled, looking down at the pile of bloody vomit and shit. Honestly, what the fucking hell? Still, not his business to deal with the punks, just clean up after them. He did so, swearing all the while, hoping whoever did this was having a fucking hell of a bad time. The janitor scowled at the now mostly clean floor, pushing his bucket along to the stupid service stairs. They really needed to put a fucking elevator down here, but who cares about the wants of one old man? He shook his head, hearing the sounds of pounding and screams far off, some wild party or another to clean up tomorrow.

Fucking kids.

Embracing The Angels

The Southern Baptist Fifthist Church of Pensacola rarely - in all honesty - actually had full attendance. Most of the attendees were of those "January 5th and 5×5 Day only goers" types, that *said* they were Fifthists but really only went for the big holidays (but of course, all the while looking down on everyone else who did the same.)

But it just so happens that the literal end of the world could get even those types off their couches and into pews. Who knew! A scoop of armaggedon, handful of eschaton and a little something of what those Foundation eggheads called an “MH-Class 'Large-Scale Aggressor Overrun' Scenario” works *wonders* for bringing out the faith in us all.

When the first of these so-called "angels" had crashed down on the shore of Hy-Brasil, only a few had actually believed it was anything of the sort. Sure, it had five arms, five tentacles and five eyes, and a lot of people tended to hear its voice whisper things to them after it had died, but the Global Occult Coalition had killed it. Angels weren't supposed to die!

But then the other angels came, and boy howdy were there a lot of those. The argument that these were the beasts causing the apocalypse became a lot more convincing when there were $_{5}5^{5}$ of them, crawling all over the world, mindlessly killing everything they could see and doing their level best to wipe out human civilization as we know it.

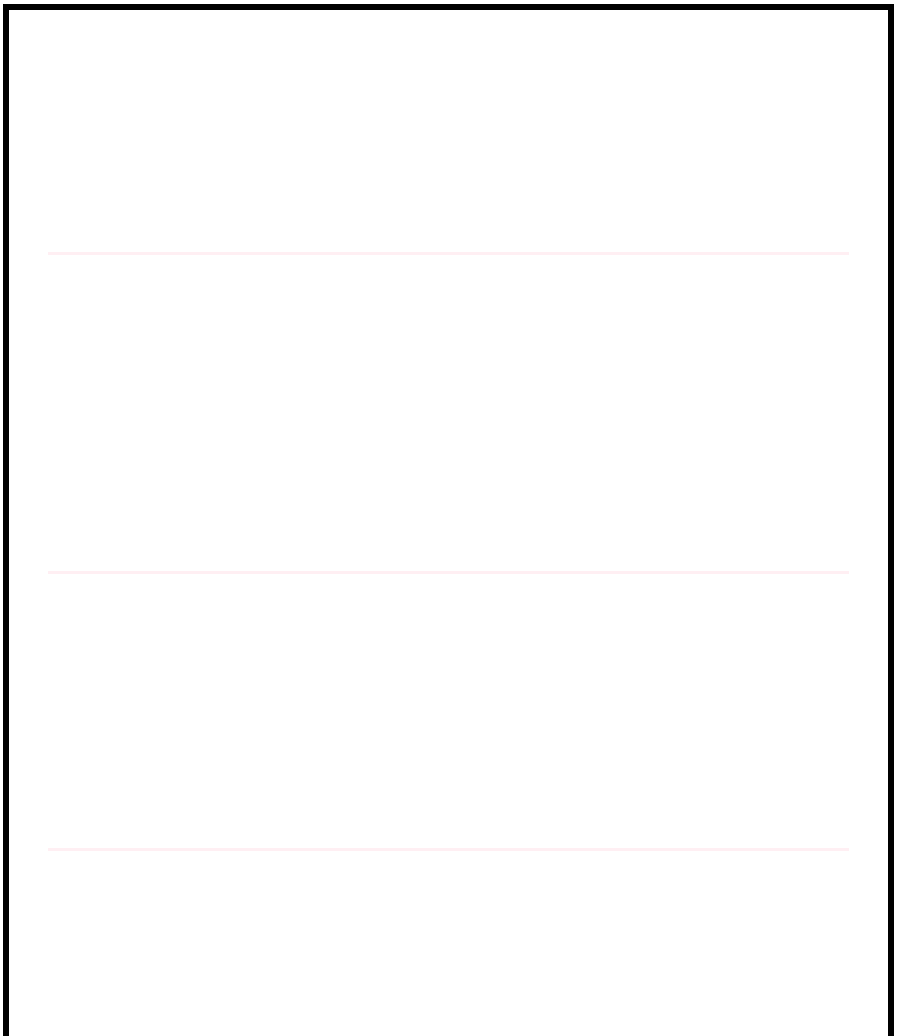
At the very least, the members of the Southern Baptist Fifthist Church of Pensacola were convinced that the world was ending, and they might just want to get on the good side of THE LORD before the end. Was it an automatic pass into heaven if you died in church? Maybe? Hopefully? Probably not. The optics looked good, at least.

The congregation had all filed in — with a couple of new converts, who had heard about these people who claimed the kaiju eating the

world were their own angels and at the very least thought it'd be interesting to give that a listen — and crowded the pews.

The pastor — a man who had previously spent most of his time preaching that the great 5tarfish above would help those who helped themselves, and faith in Him would be rewarded with riches fivefold — stepped forward to preach to the choir. A part of him, in truth, *was* indeed connected with the entity that poked through reality and had coiled around the concept of a Southern Baptist Church, but that part of him was the *religious* part and was subservient to his greed.

But at the end of the world, greed tends to fall quiet and faith tends to start screaming.



The problem with most Southern Baptist Fifthists was that any of the truly devout had their minds addled by their devotion to $_5 5^5 5_5$, which had the nasty habit of completely replacing the intellect of anyone who followed it. And anybody who wasn't truly devout most certainly wasn't going to listen to a sermon like that.

But as the pastor rambled on concerning the wrath of God and how Man had managed to draw it, there was a roar outside. It started alone, and was then was joined by a choir. The choir inside the church shut up and looked outside.

A swarm of so-called angels had descended upon Pensacola, hundreds of the little angels, not one taller than thirty feet tall. These were some of the smaller of the harbingers of the apocalypse - the big ones towered into the clouds, after all. Together, their cries drowned out all other noise in the world and to the ears of the Southern Baptist Fifthist Church of Pensacola, it was nothing less than beautiful.

Ideally, the churchgoers would lay their lives down before the swarm of angels that had come to deliver divine reckoning to them. But, unfortunately, as we have established, most members of the congregation were only tangentially Fifthist and reacted as any normal person would to a horde of five armed, five tentacled crocodile-squid-dinosaur-monsters.

Which is to say, not very well.

The beach around them had already erupted into chaos, with civilians and tourists trying to escape. Some souls had heard that the apocalypse was coming and had elected to continue on with their vacation plan? Was that stupid or prudent? I know that I, for one, would rather die on vacation than in Gary, Indiana.

The pastor was the only member of the congregation to embrace the angels. Without fear, he walked forward, a puppet dancing on the fifty strings of a greater being from out of time and out of space. Devout men and women stepped forward, walking behind their leader.

He stepped forward and his mind fell apart. His connection to FIVE had always been present, but seeing something that was so closely tied with FIVE brought it forward and ripped every other bit of his mind out, leaving it on the cutting room floor.

His fingers graced an angel for just a second before his head was in the stomach of the beast, and in that second he knew divinity.

Emergency Action Bulletin

UNITED STATES FEDERAL EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT AGENCY

CODE 102-01 ACTION BULLETIN

CRUCIAL INFORMATION BELOW

EMERGENCY BROADCAST 001

The United States Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), in conjunction with the United States Department of Defense (DOD) and the Office of the President of the United States, has issued a Code 102-01 Emergency Action Bulletin for all United States territories. **THIS IS NOT A DRILL. SEEK SHELTER IMMEDIATELY.** It is vitally important that all citizens in affected areas listen to government instructions and remain vigilant at all times.

INFORMATION FOLLOWS

At 5:21 PM Eastern Standard Time, several unidentified aircraft entered US airspace above the Florida and Georgia regions. The aircraft are believed to have first been detected by local radar and air traffic control entering the Florida coastal areas from the Atlantic

Ocean. The FAA has been unable to determine the origins and nationality of the pilots, though deducing such information assumes they belong to a recognized political state. Aircraft demonstrate properties inconsistent with any known commercial or military vehicle and are capable of achieving extremely high velocities. It is believed at least some of these aircraft are bearing explosive, biological, or chemical payloads.

Please remain in your emergency shelters and await further instructions from FEMA. If you do not possess an emergency shelter or are in a public area, seek out a basement or other subterranean structure immediately. It is currently not known if or when the next emergency broadcast will be transmitted. It is unlikely that emergency services will be available for some time. Additional information will be transmitted as it becomes available.

EMERGENCY BROADCAST 002

The United States Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), in conjunction with the United States Department of Defense (DOD) and the Office of the President of the United States, has issued a Code 102-01 Emergency Action Bulletin for all United States territories. **THIS IS NOT A DRILL. SEEK SHELTER IMMEDIATELY.** It is vitally important that all citizens in affected areas listen to government instructions and remain vigilant at all times.

INFORMATION FOLLOWS

At this time, FEMA is able to confirm that the aforementioned unidentified aircraft have successfully delivered multiple biological payloads throughout the continental United States. Known targets include New

York, Detroit, Los Angeles, Boston, Orlando, Miami, Atlanta, and Honolulu, though other cities may be affected as well. Due to the nature of this situation, government resources are strained. It is not known when government operatives will be able to perform search and rescue operations in affected regions. The payloads delivered by these aircraft appear to be gaseous, toxic substances that will induce serious injury or death if inhaled. Limited field reports suggest some HAZMAT suits and filtration apparatuses are capable of reducing or negating exposure to the gas. Under no circumstances should you expose yourself to the gas, intentionally or otherwise. Remain in your shelter until further instructions are issued.

Note that the gas appears to be colorless, odorless, and partially translucent. There will be little to no indication that an area is affected by the gas. The early signs and symptoms of exposure to the gas are not known at this time. For your safety, avoid all public areas indefinitely.

EMERGENCY BROADCAST 003

The United States Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), in conjunction with the United States Department of Defense (DOD) and the Office of the President of the United States, has issued a Code 102-01 Emergency Action Bulletin for all United States territories. **THIS IS NOT A DRILL. SEEK SHELTER IMMEDIATELY.** It is vitally important that all citizens in affected areas listen to government instructions and remain vigilant at all times.

INFORMATION FOLLOWS

This is a reminder to remain in your emergency shelters indefinitely. Ignore all sounds you believe may be

emanating from immediately outside your shelter. Ignore any "knocking", doorbell ringing, or other indications that somebody may be attempting to gain access to your shelter or the encapsulating structure. Ignore any vocalizations not made by members of your party. Remain as silent as possible at all times. Avoid excess emission of sound, light, and odors. Ignore any personnel requesting access to your shelter or claiming to be an affiliate of the United States government.

It is imperative that your shelter remain sealed at all times. If you believe an unidentified individual has entered your shelter, immediately seek out a sealed room and lock the door. Do not make any noise. Do not compromise your location in any way. Further information will follow.

EMERGENCY BROADCAST 004

The United States Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), in conjunction with the United States Department of Defense (DOD) and the Office of the President of the United States, has issued a Code 102-01 Emergency Action Bulletin for all United States territories. **THIS IS NOT A DRILL. SEEK SHELTER IMMEDIATELY.** It is vitally important that all citizens in affected areas listen to government instructions and remain vigilant at all times.

INFORMATION FOLLOWS

This is an emergency broadcast. This is not a drill. It is vitally important that you listen to all information that follows.

Immediately locate a sealed, opaque, preferably isolated room within your shelter.

Ensure all members of you party are within the aforementioned room. Lock the door from inside and barricade it with any available materials.

Ignore all noises not created by you or your party. Sounds that you believe may be originating from within the room are most likely misleading.

If you begin to experience fatigue, shortness of breath, or audio/visual hallucinations, cover your nose and mouth. Ensure you are facing a solid wall. Remain in a fetal position with your head as far from the other members of your party as possible.

If you see an unidentified figure within your shelter, immediately close your eyes and remain motionless. Do not make any noise whatsoever. Breathe through your nose slowly to ensure you are as quiet as possible.

Should any member of your party be unaccounted for, even if you were maintaining direct visual contact with them prior to their disappearance, do not attempt to search for them. Remain calm, silent, and motionless at all times. Any movement or noise will compromise you and your party's safety.

No further emergency broadcasts will be made.

This has been an emergency broadcast transmitted by FEMA.

Empathy

It was right in front of him.

He knew the danger he was in.

He knew that if he blinked, he would die

But he wasn't afraid.

He wasn't reluctant.

He didn't want to leave.

Instead he embraced the entity.

Felt its sorrow.

Felt its misery.

Felt its anger.

And then, he spoke.

"Good to see you again, old friend."

"It's been a while."

"A while indeed."

"I wonder how you feel now."

"How you feel after we did this to you."

"For so long."

…

"Hey, I can't blame you,"

"I know the feeling."

"I wouldn't act any differently."

"Especially not knowing no matter how I treated them, they would Always treat me the same…"

"Lock me up,"

"Keep me in here."

…

"I… I've realized my sins now."

"Working here was a big mistake."

"Dedicating my Life to locking up things,"

"Working in an endless prison."

"And I know how this must feel."

…

"I get it now."

"I'm flesh,"

"You're concrete and rebar,"

"We're different."

"But what gives me the right to do all this…"

"I don't know."

…

"I Think its time I give you justice."

"I'm submitting."

"I'll leave a note,"

"Otherwise they'll just blame you…"

…

"I remember the first time I saw you."

"Fear, grasping me."

"I couldn't believe my eyes…"

"You were actually real"

"And I was so afraid."

"I never realized…"

"What if you were too?"

…

"I'm not even sure if you understand me,"

"But for once, I'll let you win."

"I can't get you out of here."

"You know they would just put you back, anyway."

"But I'll let you escape in Another way."

"I'll let you escape."

"From me."

"From my ignorance and intolerance,

"From my mistakes and my idiocy,

"From… Everything I did to you"

…

"I Think my time has come"

"I Think I want to go now"

…

"Goodbye."

…

He closed his eyes

Expecting this to be his last sight

It was so Close

His vision almost gone

And then, it happened

His Eye, closed

He was no more

…

He saw only darkness

But it felt like a sweet release from all his sins

"This must be it" He murmured for himself

Opening his Eyes, expecting nothing

Expecting no World

No meaning

No Life

…

But there was something

There was an entity

With a rounded head

An odd face

Two stumped arms

…

And Traces of Krylon brand spray paint

…

"…"

"Glad to see you feel the same way"

Empedocles

Hippocrates,

I have heard about your research into the composition of man. Your methods are impeccable, and I commend you on not focusing on the realm of gods, but on nature itself to determine the course of the disease.

I have been told your method of taking a draught of blood and allowing it to settle without clotting, to cause the four humors to form. Having a surfeit of blood myself, I performed the experiment, and in fact did witness the split into the red blood, white phlegm, and yellow and black bile. The fact that it is then connected back to the elements of the world: air, water, fire, and earth, demonstrate how man is a world unto itself.

But here is where I found something further in my own fluids. Perhaps you have not found this humor? I say this because there are not four elements, but five, as seen in the mysteries of Pythagoras' pentagram. Asclepius himself had five daughters, and so, there must indeed be a fifth humor. I know not what this fifth fluid I found is, but know that the fifth element is the Void, the space between stars and the element that conveys light. You will find the fifth humor when you see the space between the stars.

Empedocles

Socrates,

We have not had opportunity before to speak, but I must commend you and speak with you, demigod to demigod. You might claim you are no demigod, but I have been speaking with a close traveling companion who assures me it is the case. You are one of five great men to walk this earth, proclaiming to make sense of what we perceive and conceive. The other four, in far-off lands, are here to

chase out gods and bring wisdom. My companion has shown me the joyous flow of life of the Twenty-Fourth, the storm's calm center of an Enlightened Prince, the bright embrace of action and inaction by Li Er, and the solid statesmanship of the Great Kong, and has proven that your influence will be more diaphanous still, floating weightlessly like starlight through the hearts and minds of all men.

It must be this way, for when the time for an idea comes, the idea comes. Time is relentless, at once both epochal, marking history by stelae, and interval, changing moment to moment. May we embrace the changes necessary to prevent stasis from gaining hold. Embrace the teachings of the four you will never meet and know you are yet that fifth.

Empedocles

Euripides,

It warms my heart to see your tetralogy do so well. Weep not for the play you lost in creating them. *Philoctetes* and *Dictys* were moving to the core, and we can all laugh raucously with *Theristai*, but it is *Medea* that stands out the most. Fear not that her killing of her sons caused everyone to recoil in horror; it will play far after any of us have passed. I am fortunate that my traveling companion brought my eyes and ears to Athens to feast upon the spectacle.

One thing I must offer: fear not your belief in passion. Far too often the people turn to the gods to explain themselves, but as a strict physician and naturalist, I am well aware that gods die in threes, but stars rise in fives. That Medea kills her brood is only the natural way; if we ever fully embrace **love**, or embrace **strife**, we will see the world end. End it will by an order as everything crystallizes into a single moment, or by a chaos as all falls apart, all decays to nothingness. Life exists only in the balance, and sometimes the drastic must be done.

Empedocles

Anaxagoras,

Your views on atomism, aggregation, and disruption have been crucial in my development of the balance between **love** and **strife** that our universe depends on. For that, I thank you.

And yet, I feel I must inform you of the greatest of Pythagorean secrets. Yes, with the pentagram, there is necessary reverence in the number five. However, the secret is this: just as there is another sense **`behind our ears`** in addition to our five we cannot perceive, just as there is another digit, invisible and intangible, on each of our hands, there is **`another number`** between one and five. It is not a sixth number, as that would be six, but a hidden number, impossible to count. What this means is that the five elements of the universe are insufficient to explain it, but there is another, one without substance.

It is only now, as the world pushes away from superstition from gods, and finds solace in the thoughts of man, that this new element, this element of the uncountable number, can be found. My traveling companion tells me that this is *Time*, the only item that even allows for the possibility of change. It is through time that aggregation and disruption have any meaning, that holds the universe between freezing in stasis, and blown like scattered dust to irrelevance.

The world is thinking in unison. Aggregation is dominant. I fear the state of **love** and the end of all Time comes soon.

Empedocles

Pausanias,

My great love, it pains me to write to you. You have always studied so willingly at my feet, taken care of me as I age, and know that you will continue my work when I am no longer here. I love you more than anything.

The world approaches consensus, is killing gods with abandon and replacing them with thoughts. Pythagorean tuning theory has grown, and the world beneath our feet hums in harmonics as the song reaches a crescendo.

Far to the north, past the sea and impassable mountains, far into barbarian lands, stands a temple to this harmony, this **love**. It is as magnificent as any temple, even moreso, and timeless in its nature, a tribute to Alagadda. You must never go there. It is there I must travel with my companion, instill **strife** upon the world, ensure that all time does not freeze as one moment. Not now. Not yet.

Weep for me, Pausanias. Your tears and cries will help feed the starving maw of disruption the world so desperately craves.

Empedocles

These letters have been dated back to approximately 430 BC and are held in the Foundation's non-anomalous records archive. Note that despite their non-anomalous nature, they have been classified as top secret at Level 4 access. Research into what they refer to is ongoing.

Of note is that Empedocles is believed to have ended his life by throwing himself into Mt. Etna in 430 BC. Pausanias, his *eromenos*, reported finding a single bronze sandal of Empedocles, tossed from Mt. Etna. He also mentioned that the volcano smoked heavily for days afterward.

Empire of Dirt (Part 1)

It was cold. Winter bore down on the black stone spires and slave pits and smokestacks of Daevon in a sheet of frozen lead. Snow and ash had mixed into an indefinable slurry that filled the narrow streets. The lamps fought uselessly against the encompassing darkness. In the gloom, some stray dogs picked at the frozen body of a slave that had not made it home to his master's hearth.

The artist reclined in her eggshell chair, nude. Silks and furs were draped haphazardly around her, more or less unneeded in the soft warmth of her studio.

The euphoria of the act was still fresh, the electric thrill of giving life to art. Her hands moved with precision and speed, detailing words, figures, shapes. Ink blossomed out across the sheet of vellum that was stretched out and held taught by jointed iron legs. Ink was the life of art as blood was the life of man.

She had made, created, given birth to, was art.

The ink had all pooled in the basin underneath her as she made the first incision, thin and black, pouring out of her body without staining. The gift of the Horned King, that his disciples might turn their own life into art for his glory.

She had worked quickly after that, carefully preparing the vellum, her heart filled with joy. She took the skin, treating it with the appropriate chemicals and spices, draining the rest of the ink off into the basin.

That done, what remained had been burnt in the furnace shrine set in the wall, with incense and prayers, underneath the painted stone form of the King, and it

was pleasing to the artist's lord. It was the King's command that he take part in the art, for if the King bore godhood in his crown, and the art was the artist, thus the art-artist likewise came to godhood.

According to tradition, the umbilical cord was tied around her neck.

She continued to work, pouring her life, her soul, into her art, and the frozen night pressed on outside. In time, when the grey smog-smeared dawn approached, she put down her pens, and smiling at the work she had done, the artist began to sew up the slit in her belly.

All this this was pleasing to Moluch, the Horned King Crowned in Shame.

—

Mary-Ann sat on the floor, propped up against the couch, and plucked at her guitar. Naomi sat and watched with bright eyes.

"I've walked ten thousand miles, ten thousand miles to see you… And every gasp of breath, I grabbed it just to find you…I climbed up every hill to get to you…I wandered ancient lands to hold just you… and every single step of the way, I pa-a-a-a-ay…every single night and daa-aaa-aay…"

"adaa," Naomi said, reaching out to touch the guitar.

"Yep. This is my guitar. I don't think you're big enough to play it yet, though." She set the guitar to the side and placed her daughter on her lap. "You'd try eating it, and you don't want a slobbery guitar, do you?" She gave Naomi a tickle.

Mother and daughter had the house to themselves that evening: Salah was out at the Chapterhouse helping with the graduation ceremony for this batch of recruits. It wasn't as if it was a closed affair or anything, but Salah had the car today and the timing didn't work out to come pick Mary-Ann and Naomi up. That was something of a disappointment, but so things went.

Mary-Ann checked Naomi's diaper. Nope. Still clean.

It had been a just over two years since she had been in their shoes, taking her oath of office, though all things considered that could have been another person entirely, wrapped up in a blanket of quiet, desperate, melancholy. Time and care and love had done their job at unraveling that cocoon. The world was brighter now. Life was better.

A sharp rapport of knocks on the front door interrupted her musing.

"Hm? Come on, let's see who it is." Mary-Ann picked up Naomi and walked to the door. The knocking continued, pausing every few seconds and starting up again.

"Hold on, hold on, I'm coming!"

Mary-Ann opened the door to see two men standing on the front step, one shorter and balding, the other taller with salt and pepper hair. Both were wearing suits: Not secret service suits, or Jehovah's Witnesses suits, but closer to insurance salesmen suits. Alarm bells went off in her head: never trust men who turn up in pairs on front steps wearing suits, ever. Their eyes confirmed her suspicions: Dull, glassy eyes, like a cow's. Foundation eyes.

Her stomach sunk.

Son of a motherfuck they have the address?

"Ms. Mary-Ann Lewitt, my name is Mr. Redmond," the taller man said. "The Foundation is in need of your assistance."

"If you want help, call the office of external affairs at the Chapterhouse. I don't know how you got my name or my address, but I want you off my property. Now."

"I'm sorry, I'm being unclear." Redmond continued. "The Foundation requires you *specifically*. This is a matter of the utmost importance, and it requires your complete cooperation."

"Important enough that you can just walk up to my front door?"

“Yes.” His face was completely serious. “I apologize, Ms. Lewitt, but time is of the essence. We are in the process of alerting the Initiative, but we cannot wait for the bureaucracy to play catch-up.”

Mary-Ann hesitated for a moment, waiting for her gut to percolate an answer. Amidst all the fishiness, she could feel that instinctive lump of certainty that something was seriously wrong and it needed dealing with right now. Her gut had spoken.

“Come on in, then. Make it quick.”

—

Salah glanced at his watch: 6:48. The graduation ceremony had finished up early. A small group of recruits this time, and a lot of the pomp and circumstance had been cut down significantly from the previous year.

Always such promise at the ceremony, but it was the next few weeks and months that would decide who stayed in the Shepherds. Death was always a possibility, but the more pressing subject was the strain of the position. People simply broke down, unable to cope with being thrown face-first into the horrific absurdities of the world. But, this was the Horizon Initiative, built on shaken faith that could still stand tall. They would do fine, Salah assured himself.

Salah got in the car. Time to go home. The digital watch on his left wrist reflected the evening sun.

—

Mary-Ann sat on the couch, Naomi in her lap. Redmond sat in the chair across the room. His accomplice Brown stood in the corner.

“The item in question is designated SCP-089, a Canaanite statue dating from the second century BCE. SCP-089 will provide a name, a command, and a fanciful description of a disaster that will occur if the named individual does not complete the task. Ten hours ago, SCP-089 underwent a locution event, naming you as the chosen individual.”

“And that means…what?”

“SCP-089’s demands are identical in all events: that the selected individual performs a ritual in order to prevent or stop the promised disaster event. This ritual will entail, must entail, the loss of that individual’s child.”

The universe froze. Mary-Ann stared at Redmond mutely for a moment, trying to process the information, trying to find some misheard word or slip of the tongue. He did not just say that. He did not just say that…He did. That is what he said. She pulled Naomi closer to her instinctively. No. She wasn’t letting them take her. Over her dead body.

“Get out of my house,” she said, voice low, barely covered up a savage snarl. “Get out. If you or your Foundation friends come back, I start shooting you. Got it?”

Redmond nodded.

“I understand, Ms. Lewitt. This is not an easy thing to accept. However, I cannot leave. SCP-089 has made its threat, and so the ritual must be carried out. If it is not, or if it is delayed beyond seventy-two hours, the disaster SCP-089 threatens will begin. We know of no alternative method to prevent these disasters from occurring.”

“Have you tried smashing it? Smashing it is a nice idea.” Mary-Ann’s voice dripped with mockery and venom. Fucking Foundation packrats.

“Ms. Lewitt, I believe you are at least somewhat aware of the principles of the Foundation. Our protocols ban the destruction of items and entities except in the most extreme of circumstances. Furthermore, the process has already begun. If SCP-089 were destroyed now, the ritual could not be completed, and the disaster would not end. Beyond this, it is unknown if SCP-089 causes the disaster itself, or simply warns of it. Its destruction could be the loss of not only a means of prevention, but an early detection system.”

Mary-Ann couldn’t help but laugh. It was a bitter, ugly sound.

“And that’s all it is to you, isn’t it? You just go around picking up new

kids to kill when the batteries run low."

“No. It is a necessity to prevent greater destruction. Do not be fooled into thinking that we are unaware of what it is that we do, Ms. Lewitt. The Foundation is aware of what it asks, and it asks only because it knows the alternative.”

“And what’s the alternative?”

Redmond cleared his throat.

“*’The earth shall tremble in the land of the people of Dae, and lo, all the peoples shall know the flesh that hates’*… we believe this to be in reference to an anomaly currently contained by the Foundation in the region of Lake Baikal in Siberia.” Redmond motioned for Brown to come over. He did, handing Mary-Ann a tablet. The picture displayed on it was the inside of a house, with something like a man sitting at a table. The thing’s skin was brown and waxy, a blobby, grotesque amalgamation of tumors and scar tissue and dried vomit. There was no head, just a melting mass of red flesh coiled on the tabletop. Mary-Ann made sure to have it positioned where Naomi couldn’t see the screen as she went through more pictures of infected people and rotting villages. To be completely honest with herself, Mary-Ann couldn’t help but compare these things to the Flood. Dangerous thinking, that. Thinking things operated on the same level as their fictional counterparts generally led to being dead.

“The anomaly, designated SCP-610, is an infectious disease, something akin to a virulent, easily communicable cancer,” Redmond said. “610 cell growth is capable of consuming a person within five hours, turning them into what you see there. There is no cure, save complete immolation. Eventually, when infected individuals progress to the later forms of the disease and are gathered in a high enough density, SCP-610 will begin to change the local environment, in a form of terraforming. At this point, it is capable of spreading by air.”

“Then destroy it. Just say it was a military test or something, you guys can get away with that, right? Or just a forest fire, I don’t know. Put more men on the job, double your security, put it on absolute

lockdown… for the love of God do your *jobs*!”

Redmond shook his head.

“The outcome is pre-ordained, Ms. Lewitt. If we were to attempt more security and hope that all would be well without the ritual, it is inevitable that a single infected individual would escape. Events would twist themselves until it happened. Slips of the tongue, slips of the mind, building up until that one fatal mistake occurs. Destroying it without the ritual would likely ignite full-out war, or many other unforeseen consequences.”

“You’re sure? There’s no other way.”

“If there was, we would not be here, Ms. Lewitt. I’m sorry.”

“How bad is it going to be? Maybe we can just wait it out…”

“The nearest city to the containment zone has a population of a five hundred thousand. If the infection were to take hold of the city, it would easily reach enough density to begin aerial spread and terraforming operations. At that point, it would begin spreading into Mongolia and China, through the Middle East, and to eastern Europe. Were the infection to reach this point, it is doubtful that even a nuclear sterilization of the continent would be enough to contain it. The death toll by then would be in the billions.”

Billions. It always sounded like a fake number, something so big that the average person couldn’t imagine the size. Just a word, something that didn’t even really exist. But that was a lie. It did exist.

“This can be stopped, Ms. Lewitt. Those deaths can be avoided.” Redmond straightened his tie. “Instead of a continent lost, instead of five hundred thousand lost, one life is given to save them. That is the definition of heroism, Ms. Lewitt. You and your daughter are in a position to save the world, or damn it. I do not say that lightly.”

Mary-Ann said nothing as she stared a patch of carpet off to the side. She didn’t want to look into those Foundation cow-eyes, not for this. Naomi was resting against her chest, breathing softly. Already asleep, even though her fate was being decided.

God, please, help me. Please.

“Would you die to protect your daughter, Ms. Lewitt?” Redmond asked.

“Yes.”

“Would you kill to protect her?”

“Yes.”

“Not a burglar or a murderer or a kidnapper. An innocent person on the street. If your daughter were sick, and the only way to save her life would be to walk out your door, find a child, put a gun to his head, and pull the trigger, would you do that, Ms. Lewitt? Would you kill him, and then kill his mother, and his father, and his brothers and sisters, his friends, his classmates, his teachers…everyone he has ever known or met or heard of? And you find that it isn’t enough. Would you walk down the street, and start killing his neighbors, and their families? Could you keep killing and killing and killing until five hundred thousand people were dead, just to keep your daughter alive? And then find out that it wasn’t enough, that she was still dying, that you had to kill more, and more, and more, until you can look back on everything you’ve destroyed and everyone you’ve killed and say that you did it for her. When she grows up, will you be able to look her in the face and tell her that you did it all for her?”

“Stop.” Mary-Ann looked up from the floor. “Just…stop.” There were no tears. The old hollowness was back, welcoming her into that gaping, toothless abyss with empty arms. Instinctively, the walls went up in her mind, the door was locked, but the cruel claws of the world tore down her defenses. There was no alternative here. The outcome was pre-ordained.

No…please, God, no…

She couldn’t do it. She couldn’t be that killer Redmond described. No sane person could. No sane person would wish for mothers and fathers and children that fate of life as a blob of cancerous flesh, mindless and undying. For a moment, her imagination turned Naomi into one of them, a lump of raw red meat and dead brown scars. Bile

rose in Mary-Ann's throat. No. She couldn't do it. She couldn't be that monster. She couldn't pass that fate to another.

But she would not live as the monster that killed her own daughter either. She would not live with that shame. She would not live with the guilt.

No. She would not live with that. She would only hope that Naomi would forgive her. That Salah would forgive her. That God would forgive her.

I'm sorry…

I love you.

"I'm going to call my husband," she said, finally.

"Of course," Redmond said.

Mary-Ann shifted Naomi on her lap, to reach over to where her cell phone lay.

Pick up your phone…pick up your phone…Salah, pick up your phone…just pick up your fucking phone for once in your life…

"Hello, this is Salah. I'm not here at the moment, so please leave me a message and I'll get back to you as soon as I can. Have a wonderful day."

"Salah, it's me. There's…there's been some big stuff going down. Foundation's here, they need me and Naomi to go with them. I'll call you again soon. We'll be okay. I love you. Bye."

—

> "And so Ab-Leshal returns to us, crowned in triumph," the slave-broker said as he looked out over the snowy city from his balcony, wine glass in hand. "The crowd goes wild."
>
> He had read the accounts of what they had returned with. Twelve thousand slaves, five thousand

greatmeasures of gold, seven thousand of iron, ten of bronze, the corpse of a god and the secret of true immortality. The greatest triumph of the age.

The slave-broker sipped from his glass. From his perspective, he was able to see one of the great concourses that led to the high temple in the center of the city, filled to trampling density with soldiers and celebrators. Each man who so as much held a sword or musket would find himself welcome in any whorehouse in the city, simply for having served under the command of Ab-Leshal, the First Sword of Daevon.

The slave-broker's magecraft eyes allowed him far better sight than normal men so that even at this distance he could focus on the people around the altar that had been set up at the foot of the high temple steps. There were the high priests, covered head to toe in crimson and robes. There was Ab-Leshal, more wall than man, tattooed and craggy. The Fourth and Seventh Swords were also present, slim and effeminate Jad-kar Dark-Blade and the neurotic, wide-eyed Bergon Soulbearer, each standing a respectful distance behind Ab-Leshal. There was Odrahn Kahd the Master of the Keys, Pratan Dai the Craftmaster, the Master Generals Hradun, Vasig, and Khazes, Curix Noan, the artist called the mistress of ink, and dozens of other government and religious officials, all dressed in their finest.

Surrounding the high altar were smaller altars, headed by towering idols of the gods: The King-In-Scarlet, the Nothing-In-All, the Hanged King, the Eternal Texts, Moluch the King Crowned in Shame, the Wonder-Maker, Gothog the Mighty, the Mother of Them All, Molug the Broken Fist, Carthac the Many-Faced King, and others.

A gong sounded, followed by three blasts on the twenty-foot temple horns. Bonfires burst to life at the feet of the idols, clouds of incense rising into the air as the chants started and the blood began to flow, first from the mammoths that had pulled the idols into place, and then

from the captives. They would work their way up, from the smallest to the greatest, finally sacrificing the pieces of the broken god itself. It would not end until long after sunset, when the gutters ran thick with scabbing blood.

The slave-broker did not kneel with the crowd, nor did he feel like taking part in the following orgy and slaughter. He was a well-traveled man, who had seen, bought, and sold a great many wonders throughout the empire and beyond. His fear and awe of the gods was on a purely professional basis.

The slave-broker drained what remained of his wine, his gaze lingering for a time on the bull-headed idol in the distance, before he turned and walked back inside.

« **Agricola In Insula Est Poeta** | **Hub** | **Empire of Dirt (Part 2)** »

Empire Of Dirt (Part 2)

The artist called Curix Noan smiled as she watched the slaves shuffled out from their carts through the slush of her courtyard. Fresh bodies from Ab-Leshal's conquest of the west lined up before her, men and women with heads bowed, arms and legs shackled, thick magecraft collars around their necks. Company mercenaries walked through the formation, barking commands.

"Three hundred slaves, one hundred and fifty male, one hundred and fifty female, as you requested," the slave broker said. His scarf and long coat fluttered in the icy breeze.

"And your nine hundred marks, Ser Eutmun." The artist handed the slave-broker the strings of coins.

"My most humble thanks," He bowed, sweeping the coins into his purse. "But I bring you more than simple supplies this time, mistress." He motioned to a pack of mercenaries, who brought another man of the west before the artist. "Consider this this one a special gift."

The man was particularly gaunt, taller than both the artist and the slave-broker, with a scraggly black mane of hair, dirty, leathery skin, and dead eyes. His arms were magecrafted metal, all the way up to the shoulders. The artist raised an eyebrow. Such expense on a slave who looked as if he would topple over in a sharp breeze? Ridiculous.

"It seems you are mocking me, Sir Eutmun."

"Not at all. This slave is worth more than all the others combined. His spirit is already broken, and so there is no need for a control collar. He obeys orders perfectly. As a

servant he will pay for his magecraft swiftly."

"Who was he?"

"A priest, or what passes for one among the savages," the slave-broker said, circling the slave. "He was captured at the Battle of the Valley, where the bronze god was broken. He had attempted to strike down the First Sword with a rock. A rock! Ab-Leshal took pity upon him and only tore off his arms."

"I see. And he lived?"

"By the First Sword's command."

Special enough that Ab-Leshal would single him out? That was impressive. The artist did not see it fit to question the First Sword's reasoning, and she felt no need to. This was indeed a great prize.

—

The lights were off in the house when Salah pulled into the driveway. That was odd. It wasn't all that late out.

"I'm home!" He called out as he opened the door. There was no response. The house was empty. He swept through the house, the empty space becoming oppressive with each room he passed through. Living room empty. Bedroom empty. Bathroom empty. Crib empty. No one out back. He checked the kitchen again, to see if he missed a note. Nothing.

Probably just went out to a neighbor's or something. Or went out on a walk.

Salah dug his cell phone out of his pocket. Ah, silly him: Forgot to turn it back on after the ceremony. He probably just missed the call, that's all.

One missed call was listed, from Mary-Ann.

"Salah, it's me. There's…there's been some big stuff going down.

Foundation's here, they need me and Naomi to go with them. I'll call you again soon. We'll be okay. I love you. Bye."

What?

Why would the Foundation be involved? And if they were involved, where was the message from the Chapterhouse stating that they were involved?

No. Something was wrong.

He immediately speed-dialed her phone. There was just a dead tone on the other side.

Oh no…

Salah listened to the message again, trying to piece together what was going on. It was vague, she sounded distracted. Worried by something. Had the Foundation told her to say those words? Probably. She would have explained everything if there weren't circumstances preventing it… but no contact from the Chapterhouse either…all cooperative missions went through there, so…this was something they didn't want the Initiative knowing about. And if that was the case, then…

Salah felt a chill prickle its way up his neck. His body shifted into automatic defense, jumping into the living room, snatching a lamp from a table. He felt a sharp pain in his side. Wetness. Blood. He glanced up to see a shadow flow through the air. Not a shadow. Liquid, thin and black.

Ink.

The splotch moved, shifting from walls to floor to air to the form of a short, balding man, with his wrists slit, wreathed in ink. Salah swung his lamp. The man *blorped* on impact, head spraying across the carpet and body splashing to the floor.

Singular thoughts snapped through Salah's synapses as he sprung back to the kitchen. Inkblood. Not cool yet. Foundation ambush. Needed gun. Safe in the wall. Combination. Grab gun. Turn.

The inkblood was already there, back in human form, wreaths of liquid forming razor edges around his hands. A fist connected with Salah's face, knocking him off balance. Shards of black sliced across his skin. The gun fell from his hand.

Forget the gun. Frying pan off the wall hook. There was a satisfying ring to accompany the splatter as it connected with the inkblood's head. He didn't completely dissolve this time, focusing more on regenerating the head.

Another swing, another ring, another splatter. Less splatter this time. Salah grabbed the inkblood by the collar and began to drag him towards the bathroom, smashing the pan into the inkblood's head whenever it looked to be repairing.

Kick the door down, throw the inkblood in the tub, stomp on his head, seal off the drain. Salah tossed the pan aside and tore open the supply cabinet. Remove plunger, snap over knee, impale inkblood through gut. Salah's lips moved in a string of a silent sura. Medicine cabinet, remove toothpaste, draw the circle around the broom, sloppy nonsense symbols around the edge. The symbol itself didn't matter: it just had to be a symbol for *something*. The inkblood strained against the makeshift binding, screaming, his ink now thickened into something like tar.

Salah breathed heavily for a moment. The binding was sloppy, but it should hold long enough to get what he needed. He left the bathroom, reviewing his injuries: the bleeding in his side was just from a grazing strike, nothing of great concern there. A few bandages were all it needed. Same with the other cuts. But later. Had to deal with the inkblood first.

The fierce tide of adrenaline had lessened enough for Salah to think straight. There was an inkblood in his bathtub. Tried to ambush him, probably planned on killing him in the first strike. Mary-Ann and Naomi were gone, with the Foundation. It was entirely possible that this was all a misunderstanding, the Foundation had come and gotten Mary-Ann and Naomi out before the inkblood arrived. But if that was the case, why was he waiting here in ambush? Just waiting until they returned? No. And if the Foundation was doing a rescue, they'd spare a few agents to spring a trap. And one inkblood wasn't

that much of a threat to multiple people who expected it. They were connected.

But they weren't obviously AWCY, Mary-Ann would have sniffed that out easily. The setup wasn't nearly theatrical enough, anyway. So, inkbloods either posing as or infiltrating the Foundation, from a source that wasn't AWCY.

He would find out soon enough.

Salah liked to think that he had a great deal of self-control. Most people said that he did. That was a dangerous game, control. Watching the tiger pen. Holding the keys to the cage. It put one in a position of total responsibility if what was under control got out of control.

Mary-Ann and Naomi were in danger. That was more than enough motivation for Salah to accept that responsibility. The cage had been unlocked. It was not a burning fire, nor a boiling maelstrom. No, that was anger. The cage had been unlocked and that young man had applied his rage to an older man's experience, and it came out as a cold, calm, monolithic hatred, deep and dark as the gap between stars.

He'd have to buy a new set of kitchen knives when all this was done.

Kitchen to hall closet. Drano. Gloves. Back to the bathroom. Hopefully, it would all be unnecessary. Most people would give up after the descriptions of what was to happen. That was what was really effective: the fear of pain, rather than the pain itself. But this man was Foundation, most likely conditioned to resist interrogation, and on top of that, mad enough to deal with whatever black things some of the artists associated with.

There was a line between a good man and a madman, and Salah felt himself crossing it. No sorrow now, no guilt, no regret for what was to happen to the man with ink in his blood. The same apathy towards the other that led to men with bombs strapped to their chests emptied out Salah for the first time in decades. He could feel it now, was aware of it, and didn't care. Not now. Couldn't afford to. Just had to trust that Mary-Ann would forgive him for it.

Salah returned to the bathroom, setting his implements on the floor.

“I’ll give you a chance to talk freely, to avoid the mess.” He put on the gloves. “Where is my wife and daughter?”

“Fuck you.”

“I’m afraid that is out of the question. That binding will only last for fifteen minutes or so, and I plan on getting out of here in five.” Salah rolled up his sleeves. “You know, some time ago I was asked if I thought I was the Spanish Inquisition. I said no, on the grounds that I am not Spanish. As far as inquisitions go, I can’t deny that claim. I was, some time ago, the person people went to when they had dirty jobs to fulfill, because, to quote an old acquaintance of mine,” he held up the bottle of Drano, making sure the inkblood could see it. “I was ‘a heartless motherfucker’.”

—

The car came to a stop. A chemical plant stood outside Mary-Ann’s window, lit by the lonely glow of security lights. The kind of building that thousands of people would look at and have it pass by without a second thought. That was a place that made chemicals. What else could happen there?

“We’re here,” Redmond said, shutting off the engine. “Entry procedures will take some time, but as it stands we are ahead of schedule.” He paused. “You’re doing the world a greater service than you can imagine, Ms. Lewitt. It will not be forgotten.”

“I wish it would be,” Mary-Ann said. Her hand rested next to Naomi’s cheek, waiting a moment before she moved to unfasten the carrier.

I’m sorry…

—

“Site thirty-six! Building four! Level three!” the inkblood screamed, foam bubbling out from mouth and eyes.

“And where would that be?”

The inkblood spat out a garbled set of directions. When he was finished, Salah nodded, and then poured the remainder of the Drano over the inkblood's face. The would-be assassin gave one final spasm and scream before fully dissolving into a puddle of black and empty clothes. There was no further movement. Salah unsealed the drain and began running the water, washing the inkblood's corpse down the drain. Nothing more than ink now.

He walked back into the living room and picked up his phone from where he had dropped it on the floor. No, he wouldn't call the Chapterhouse. With the alliance in place, there would be nothing but red tape everywhere. If the Foundation had been infiltrated, it would easy for those infiltrators to distract the investigation long enough that it would be too late to do anything. There was no time for niceties here, no time for red tape. There was no time to sit by and do nothing. The Voice had died while he sat by and did nothing. He was not going to sit by and do nothing and let Mary-Ann and Naomi die as well.

He dialed. After a few moments, a voice answered.

"This is DeMontfort."

“Henry. It's Salah.”

—

“Salah? What-”

“Mary-Ann and Naomi have been kidnapped.”

“What? Salah that's-“

“The Foundation has been infiltrated by an unknown party, and has kidnapped Mary-Ann and Naomi. I have testimony from one of their agents.”

Oh God… DeMontfort's heart skipped a beat. Did he?…he did. That tone of voice gave it away, the steel-edged calm. DeMontfort hadn't heard that in a long while. There was a time when the positions had been switched between the two of them. Salah was the cold, zealous one, and he the milder idealist. Now it seemed like they had

switched back to those old places. If Salah had fallen back on his old interrogation techniques that quickly…

“Salah, *what did you do to him*?”

“I found out where Mary-Ann and Naomi are. I need as many Wolves as you can get me, as fast as possible.”

DeMontfort ran a hand through his hair and sighed. Not today. Anything but this, any time but today.

“I can’t get you anyone, Salah. Project Malleus is suspended until further notice. Straight from the Tribunal. I have no power anymore.”

“You always have a backup plan.”

Yes, he did, and if he used that backup plan now, for this, there went everything he had worked for. Malleus was already lost, and his position was on tentative ground already…

“Look, I know we’ve drifted apart, but I’ve been looking at myself a lot lately…I’ve let Malleus get too far out of hand… this is all my fault, the mess the organization is in right now…”

“Henry, Mary-Ann and Naomi are going to die if you don’t help me.”

That voice again. The voice of a man who was dangerously close to losing everything. He'd crash and burn on this, DeMontfort could tell. If he didn't die during the attempt, of course. Nature's cruelty would most likely see him survive, to become some hollow parody of a man. Worse than he was when he arrived with Initiative, worse than DeMontfort had become. No, position didn't matter here. Lives were at stake, and a man's soul on top of that. Perhaps that was it. Perhaps God's plan here was simply to put DeMontfort's in a place where he could do some good. The allowance of evil so that a greater good might come from it.

Yes, that was it.

“Look, I’ll see what I can do. They haven’t cut all my strings.”

“Right.”

The call ended. DeMontfort sighed again, automatically reaching for the cigarette he didn't have with him. What a time to give up smoking. He sat down at his desk and removed a pad of paper from the drawer. He tore off the front page and wrote a short message on it.

Saturn Deer-It's time. Send them to the return address I gave you.

He folded the paper up into an airplane and threw it out the window. It swirled and drifted into the night. Fifteen seconds later, a second airplane flew back through the window, this one made of grubby loose-leaf.

You, coming to me for help? Holy shit, I should start buying lottery tickets.

DeMontfort made another plane. It was an awkward form of conversation, but it would do.

You agreed to this, Deer.

I agreed to look after some shit for Ursula, not you. By the way, how's that lung cancer treating you?

About the same as your little case of immolation. We have the agreement in writing, Deer. If anything, you are a man of your written word.

That's speaking contractually, and if we're speaking contractually, I don't give fucks for free.

I can't appeal to your sense of common decency, because you don't have one. I can't threaten you, because you tend to get over death easily. So, I will be honest: you will be supplying a raid on a Foundation facility. If the excuse to be connected to some hell-raising won't sway you, Deer, nothing will.

Raising hell, eh? I like it, but I could use a little bit more. I've got integrity to uphold, Henry. Set your bribe a little higher.

Money then? Some power? The loving embrace of a two-dollar whore?

Please. I got all the money I want and all the bitches I can buy. Implying that I pay for them and they aren't attracted to me by my natural suavity. Because I don't because I have that. You must not want this stuff very bad.

I can take you off the Active Interests list. No more having to deal with us. That work out for you?

Ha! You couldn't get me anyway. I just like hearing you eating that humble pie while you suck me off.

You're an irascible fuckwit, Deer.

I do my best. One order of shit dug outta someone's closet, coming up.

—

> The artist worked, and the slave called Cairn watched. In time, her work was completed.
>
> She built a machine, a great machine of iron barbs and steel spikes and flowing sulfur, animated by the three hundred screaming fleshy fruits impaled upon its thorns, twisted out of shape. The fruits were paired, male and female, set together, in a bouquet of flesh burning and screaming and fucking and hating and dying and living while blood and semen and bile and sulfur flowed and boiled and bubbled and flesh writhed and the flesh moved and the flesh *hated*.
>
> All this this was pleasing to Moluch, the Horned King Crowned in Shame.

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Empire Of Dirt (Part 3)

Daevon burned. Smoke blotted out a cold and uncaring sun as the streets flooded with feasting flesh and screaming gristle. The slave pits burned, the manors and gardens burned, the plazas swarmed with the aberrant throngs. Fountains ran red and brown. Pillars of flesh coiled around obelisks and temples, belching clouds of brown mist into the air. Occasionally, cracks of musket fire or the trumpeting of a mammoth overtaken by the horde would echo from the distance and then go silent.

It seemed as if the entire world was dying.

The slave called Cairn stood on the top step of the high temple, looking out across the city, watching it die. The empire was passing through the last violent throes of its death. Soon there would be nothing left but the pale grey steppes and the old, sick winds.

Cairn had no master now: the artist now writhed atop a silk bed sheet with the slave-broker, their bodies fused and bloated. A tribute in undying art to the Horned King Crowned in Shame. This quiet here on the steps was only a brief respite. The peace here would not last long.

He turned from looking at the city, and passed through the gaping hole where the great iron doors had once been set. Those doors had been torn apart, the metal crumpled like tissue.

The inside of the temple was stained with blood and viscera, strewn with shattered weapons and torn clothing and the stone corpses of shattered idols. Temple guards, acolytes in white, priests, even high priests in their red robes, all of them in pieces, hacked apart.

“Brother,” a voice boomed from the throne above the high altar. “I see they gave you new arms.”

“Yes,” Cairn said. “And I see you regrew yours.” There was a faint, sad nostalgia about using his native tongue again. He had not spoken it in so long…

A figure stepped down from the throne, walking past the high altar and out of the gloom. Ab-Leshal, the First Sword of Daevon stood here: eight feet of weather-worn muscle, scarred and tattooed. Wide nose that had been broken too many times, strong jaw, crooked teeth, stringy hair, all features of the boy Cairn had played ball with on the River’s bank.

“I did not expect them to take you as bounty.”

“They considered me a trinket. A little curiosity to keep around. The man who threatened the First Sword and was spared.” Cairn brushed aside his hair, revealed the brand on his forehead: khuk, the highest rating a slave could have. “Apparently I was an excellent conversation piece.”

“Indeed.” Ab-Leshal paused for a moment, distracted by some fleeting thought. “Why are you here, brother?”

“To bring you home.”

Ab-Leshal shook his head.

“I have written the Horned King’s gospel in blood across this continent, and every life I take now feeds him further. I feel my mind slipping into an abyss, and soon there will be nothing left but the savage, mindless animal. I am damned, brother. But I will do what I can with what time I have left. I will take this empire and all its gods to the buzzing, droning madness of hell with me.”

“There is still hope.”

“This is what I deserve. Mindlessness and damnation. I

have laid waste to our home, destroyed the Voice, and the Tree of Life is dead. No. You return, to guide what remains of our people. That is your place. Mine is here. To seek an atonement I cannot achieve."

Ab-Leshal sighed.

"The Seven Brides are dead. The scribes of the Texts and the Hanged King are dead. The Wonder-maker and Chou-dah-cleph and all the others have fled. Only Moluch remains. He will gather the legions, lead them here to me…and they will break upon me." A pause. "It would be best for you to leave the city now. Before they arrive."

Cairn nodded. What had to be said was said. They would meet again, he knew, and that would be their final meeting. When all had been accomplished, they would strike each other down.

He made his way back to the empty doorway, feet clapping on the mosaic floor.

"Brother."

Cairn looked behind him.

"God guide your path," Ab-Leshal said.

"And yours."

Cairn, son of Adaman the Hearer of the Voice, Chief Priest of the People of the Valley, the First Murderer, the Cursed Wanderer, disappeared from sight, moving towards the west.

Ab-Leshal, son of Adaman the Hearer of the Voice, Protector and Shield of the People of the Valley, the Great Traitor, Breaker of the Bronze God, First Sword of Daevon, the Butcher of the West, returned to the black throne of the high priest, sat down, and closed his eyes.

Sun set, and sun rose.

Sun set, and sun rose.

Sun set, and sun rose.

Sun set, and sun rose.

They had come. Men with swords and muskets and war-beasts flooded the high temple, and at the head of their column, a god.

Ab-Leshal opened his eyes, rose, and took up his sword.

Moluch, the Horned King Crowned in Shame, was pleased.

—

A tacky little ornament dangled from the rear view mirror of Henry DeMontfort's car, right next to the cinnamon apple air freshener. The ornament was a smiling, generic-looking humanoid with wings and a golden ring above its head, holding a scroll with the words "Don't drive faster than your guardian angel can fly" on it.

Technically, Henry DeMontfort was not driving over that limit. He was, however, driving faster than it was physically possible for his car to move. Montag was a rather fast flyer, though he did not have a scroll, halo, or wings like the little figure he inhabited. Or arms and legs for that matter.

Salah sat in the passenger seat, loading cartridges into a magazine. He had said barely more than a few words since they had departed, focusing instead on checking and re-checking the relics. DeMontfort was sure it was a better state than what he would have been in alone. Major crisis averted.

That was one of many. There was only the most basic outline of a plan, that plan being "get in, rescue Mary-Ann and Naomi, get out". That was effectively useless. They had no idea of the layout of the site, what the Foundation contained there, or what they would be up against. A hundred thousand variables got in the way.

But Salah was sure they could succeed. DeMontfort could see that clearly. He was completely, absolutely certain that they could pull off this rescue. Those variables didn't exist. The alternative was impossible. Any suggestion to the contrary, no matter how logical, would be thrown away. Anything short of his own death would be, at most, a minor inconvenience.

"They'll most likely be waiting for us."

"They might still think that I am dead, so that may just work in our advantage. And so would be focusing on a different kind of counterattack. This is the Foundation: they deal in shadows and secrets, but they also expect that everyone else does as well. The easiest way to knock them off guard is to attack in the open. It is the last thing they would expect, and the last thing they would prepare for."

"Because only idiots would try barging through the front door."

"Exactly."

"I've approved worse plans. What of the inkbloods?"

"I would assume that the source is contained within the site. As for the inkbloods, they are still Foundation agents, thinking like Foundation agents."

"So not a real infiltration. More of an oblique one. You're sure there's no outside party?"

"Beyond the original source? No. It would be guiding actions, but not controlling them. Inkbloods operate voluntarily."

"Right, right."

There was a pause. DeMontfort felt a little bit of that insane, this-has-to-work faith in the back of his mind. Highly contagious stuff, belief.

Ah, if he was going to die, he might as well be doing something good.

“We’ve gone completely insane,” he said.

“No. We’re just realizing that the world is.”

—

The break room reminded Mary-Ann of a hospital waiting room: Water cooler, bland furniture, out of date *Time* magazines on the coffee table, twenty-year old television. Comfortable, but not too comfortable. An imitation of comfort, with tension underneath like a taut rubber band.

Mary-Ann stared into the empty styrofoam cup in her hands. The tea was gone. Redmond said she could take her time, to say goodbye and collect herself. She’d tried to pray, but the words were hollow, echoing in her head without any reassurance from above that they had been heard. She was alone.

I’m sorry.

She threw the cup in the trash and picked up the carrier. Naomi was still sleeping. Maybe it would be quick. Maybe there would be no pain.

Maybe.

“Okay. I’m ready.”

Redmond nodded, and motioned for her to follow. Down a hallway, around a corner, down another hallway. Mary-Ann felt like she would fall under the weight of her own heart. A corn husk doll wobbling down a winding, wind-blown road.

The hallway ended in blast doors, SCP-089 stenciled in yellow on the metal. The agent typed in an access code and swiped a key card. Metal ground on metal, and the door opened.

The statue sat at the far end of the chamber: a bull-headed man on a throne, arms outstretched, wings wide, mouth open. A crude, ugly, horrible looking thing. A pile of wood sat next to it. She knew what it was for.

Mary-Ann swallowed nervously as the door shut behind her.

Abraham, take your son Isaac, your only son, whom you love, and go up to the land of Moriah. There you shall offer him up as a holocaust…

The borders of the room seemed to expand as she approached, the statue loomed higher than it seemed. A chill ran up her back. She could feel a presence there, surrounding her, spreading out from the statue. Something big and distant and inhuman, pressing down, tearing that hollow hole even further.

She was alone. Completely, utterly, absolutely alone. The Foundation and Initiative were gone. Salah was gone. God was gone. There was only her, Naomi, and the statue and its power, floating in an empty abyss.

The flame flickered, and went out.

Mary-Ann, take your daughter Naomi, your only daughter, whom you love more than anything else in the world, and go into the depths of Site-36. There you shall offer her up as a holocaust…

At least, when this was done, millions of people would go about their day as if nothing happened, and they would live out their lives as if nothing happened today, that it was a day like any other, filled with happiness and sadness and boredom and anxiety and anger and love and hate and laughter and tears and births and weddings and funerals and life. A million days today, and a million days tomorrow, and so on.

At least, Naomi would have saved them.

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son…

Mary-Ann was at the foot of the statue. She set the carrier down, and took Naomi out of it. Her daughter wriggled in her arms, but remained asleep. Mary-Ann kissed her daughter on the forehead and hugged her close, for one last time.

“Goodbye, Naomi. I love you.”

With one hand she reached out and opened the chest of the statue. Gently, she placed Naomi inside and closed the hatch. She bent down and began to fill the furnace that was the throne with wood and kindling. Build it like a log cabin, her counselor had said all those years ago at summer camp. Big logs on the outside, kindling and tinder in the middle.

There was a lighter there, sitting on the floor next to the wood: a cheap plastic thing one could buy at Wal-Mart.

Into your hands, God, I commend her spirit. Amen.

There was no answer.

Mary-Ann lit the fire.

—

A 2009 Honda CR-V smashed through the front doors of the Sanderson Chemical Plant at two hundred miles per hour. Metal screeched and crumbled and bent and burned in a shower of glass and shards of wall. The doors were torn off their hinges as Salah and DeMontfort leapt from the tumbling wreckage, wreathed in fire and mouths and eyeballs, landing safely as the hulk finally crashed to a stop.

They were in. Step one complete.

—

Naomi screamed. The sound was cut off by a cacophony of drums and cymbals over loudspeakers, and a rumbling that shook the chamber. Oily smoke billowed from the statue's mouth and nostrils. The rumbling grew louder, and the tremors more intense.

Any assurance that Mary-Ann had that she was doing the right thing shattered with that scream. She stood there, shuddering, unable to move, bile frozen in her throat, tears welling up in her smoke-reddened eyes.

She had done it. She was burning her daughter alive.

Murderer

She was saving half a million lives. More than that.

Monster

Eventually, Naomi's screams would stop, choked out by the smoke. Her death would be a few pitiful gasps for one more lungful of air.

You killed her.

When that was done, and the smell of burning fat and cooking meat would fill the chamber, rising up with the smoke.

Death is too good for you.

When all was done, the door would open, and there would be nothing but ash and charred bones.

You deserve to suffer

Tiny, charred bones.

No.

—

DeMontfort brought a donkey jawbone down on an agent's head, liquefying it. Behind him, Salah fired a stream of burning white bullets down the hall, searing through ink and body armor alike.

—

Mary-Ann's arms shot back up to the hatch and tore it open, ignoring the searing heat. She grabbed Naomi out from the statue and ran towards the far end of the chamber, as far away as she could from the statue. Naomi coughed and sputtered and gasped and cried, her skin raw and red and burning.

"No no no no…oh God please no… I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry…Sssssshshshshhhhhh…it's okay, mommy's here. Sshhhhhhshshshh mommy's here…you are my sunshine, my only

sunshine…you make me happy, when skies are grey…" her voice creaked off-key with desperation, as the grim realization that she had rescued Naomi only for her to die in her arms rose to the surface of her mind.

The coughing and gasping stopped.

Oh no…

Mary-Ann pressed a finger to Naomi's neck. There was a faintest pulse there, and the tiniest wisp of breath from her mouth. For now. Mary-Ann let her held breath and rested her back against the wall, holding Naomi in her lap as gently as she could. If Naomi was going to die, it would be better like this. Better to die like this, than alone and abandoned in the bowels of that thing.

Another tremor shook the room. Naomi opened her eyes, just a tiny squint, and nestled herself against Mary-Ann's chest, as if seeking protection from the pain.

She doesn't know I put her in there…she just woke up in a fire and I saved her…

The tears came again, though this time from the pain of being forgiven.

"It's okay. I'm here."

—

A massive, noodly appendage lashed out of the splatter of marinara sauce on the wall, slamming through the blockade of Foundation agents. It twisted itself into a thumbs up as Salah and DeMontfort ran past before returning whence it came.

—

Mary-Ann sat there and watched the statue belch smoke and the furnace burn bright, and listened to the rumblings of the earth below. The question of why no Foundation agents had come in yet, or the threat of what would happen from a half-finished ritual came to her mind and faded just as quick. They didn't matter. Not now.

A strange peace fell over Mary-Ann. The same sort of peace that a condemned man had on his last night, perhaps. Naomi still loved her, even here, at the end of everything. That was enough. Enough to fill the hollowness, enough to keep the world from crushing her completely. Enough to keep that one little flame alight in the dark.

It was enough.

Mary-Ann had killed. She had killed a whole lot of people, some of whom probably didn't need to be killed. That had been her life: taking lives so that others could live in peace. Standing in that ugly, bloody margin between the dark and the light because someone *had* to stand there. She'd taken so many lives out of the world, and only brought one into it, and even after trying to destroy that one little life, she was still loved.

That was enough. She wasn't a monster. She could keep living, keep enduring the pain and the guilt and the shame. With that little bit of love, the world shifted into clarity.

She wasn't alone.

God was there, in that little bit of love between a dying child and her broken mother, stuck in the deepest pit of a vast, uncaring, absurd, and horrific universe. God was there, recognizable when everything else had been stripped away. That little bit of love, in all its frailty, transcended all the pain that surrounded her, all the grief and anguish, all of it.

Peace. She was at peace.

Mary-Ann's gaze once again moved to the statue. The presence was still there, but lesser now. Lesser now that she had recognized that it was a fraud. The despair she had felt before, it was a lie. A lie to make her despair, a lie to break her spirit, a lie to make her afraid, and through her fear, lead her to a horrific act. A lie big enough to make her carry out that act willingly.

A coward's ploy. The work of sniveling, warped, pathetic power, hiding in fear behind the shadows and lashing out its own despair on humanity. Never overt, never forcing its hand, no. It broke people. It

made them afraid, through lies and shame, drove them to greater and greater depravities. And it fed off of that. Coward that it was, this power had grown old and strong feeding off of that despair.

Fuck that noise.

Mary-Ann raised a middle finger at the statue and cloud of smoke and smiled, the first time since she had been playing her guitar for Naomi.

“All right. I’ll call your bluff. You want her so bad? Come at me.”

—

“This is the room.”

“Right.” DeMontfort punched the blast door.

—

Mary-Ann sat bolt upright at the sound of crunching metal. A massive dent had appeared in the door, then another, another, and then a fist tearing through the metal. The hand withdrew, and the puncher tore it wider, wide enough to stick a head through. The helmeted head that poked through the hole was that of Henry DeMontfort. Mary-Ann felt as she might just break out laughing.

“Mary-Ann.” He nodded politely before retracting his head. More creaking, more crunching, and DeMontfort had torn the hole big enough for someone to step through.

Salah stepped through the hole.

“Mary-Ann!”

He cleared the space between the hole and Mary-Ann in an instant, and dropped to his knees next to his wife. There were tears welling up in his eyes.

He made a rescue mission.

“Are you okay? Are you hurt? Did…oh God help us…” He took in

Naomi's current condition, horror creeping over his face.

"She's alive," Mary-Ann said. "But she needs help, fast."

"Right. Henry, could we use the Matilda to stabilize her?"

"The cat we tested with it came out fine, so-"

"We'll use it." Salah unslung the beaten old traveling bag of Mary MacKillop off his shoulder and opened the mouth as wide as it would go. Mary-Ann handed him Naomi. He gingerly placed her in the sack, and drew the drawstrings tight. There she would remain in stasis until removed.

Mary-Ann stood up, stretching her arms. Everything was clear now. The future unfolded in front of her. She knew what had to happen, knew what she had to do. The power was drawing closer, with each rumble of the earth and cloud of smoke. Coward that it was, it was a powerful coward, and she had threatened its work.

Salah was next to her, the bag once again over his shoulder.

"Henry how are we looking?"

"Maybe a minute and a half until they get past what we did to the elevator," DeMontfort said from the other side of the blast door. Salah put his arm around Mary-Ann.

"Let's go."

Mary-Ann smiled, shook her head, and moved Salah's arm away.

"You two get Naomi somewhere safe. I'll finish things here."

"What?" Salah's face switched from relief to dumbfoundedness in an instant. "Mary-Ann, I'm not going to leave you behind, we can get you out of here."

"It's not that. Do you want to know where those burns came from? She's burnt because I put her in that furnace. Right over there. There is a power behind that statue, and it lied and connived and misled me until I was *willing* to burn her alive. I'm going to kill it."

Dumbfoundedness turned to horror.

“Mary-Ann…”

“Go. I’ll catch up to you. Just trust me. I’ll be okay.”

Salah said nothing. Mary-Ann wasn’t surprised by this. She could see it in his eyes behind all the horror and relief and rage and care, that he understood. She wrapped him in a hug and kissed him.

“When you get home, I want to you go to my dresser and look at the bottom of my sock drawer,” she said. “There’s something there for you.”

“All right.”

“I love you.”

“Love you too.”

“Yoink.” Mary-Ann swiped a long obsidian knife from Salah’s belt. “I’ll just be borrowing this. You guys get out of here.”

“Right.” Salah hesitated a moment before ducking out of the hole.

Their footsteps were swallowed up by the rumbling. Mary-Ann calmly walked towards the statue, now cloaked in its cloud of smoke, hefting the knife in her hand. The blade was incredibly sharp, and she didn’t believe that it was much more than that. A very sharp knife was all she needed.

—

Salah couldn’t believe what he had just done. After all he had done to rescue Mary-Ann, he was willingly leaving her behind. His rage was gone. It was not that he believed that she would win, no. He knew that she would. It was a certainty, as certain as if the sun would rise tomorrow.

One final push to freedom, then. The last surviving inkbloods and guards had regrouped themselves, and Salah found he was not troubled by the bullets and slashes of black that once again filled the

air. Those were only a hiccup on the way home.

—

The smoke, now a sizeable mass, coalesced into a column, swirling and thundering about. The tremors were almost constant now, humming in the deep.

Mary-Ann tossed the knife from one hand to the other. The coward was revealing itself, and she had no fear of it. She was ready for it. Her pain had melted away, replaced with strength. empowered by all those who came before her, all those mothers and children crying out for vengeance, for justice.

The column collapsed into a compact blob of black. There was a single, final tremor, and the statue exploded, spraying the chamber with molten bronze and shards of clay. The smoke melted away into nothingness.

Standing where the smoke had been was something like a man, ten feet tall and hairy with the head of a bull, curled horns, and tattered crow's wings. A misshapen crown of tarnished bronze rested on top of its head. It stank of clay and coals and old stale sweat. Spittle and foam dribbled down to the floor, steaming.

It lumbered forward, footfalls like lead, and stopped a few feet in front of Mary-Ann. It stooped low in a mockery of a bow.

"Hail the little whore of Babylon, hail!" It raised its head, its lips twisted into a crude facsimile of a smile. Mary-Ann locked her eyes with the thing's twin coals. There was no fear in her eyes, no fear on her face.

"You are brave, and you are a fool, whore." It rumbled in a voice that shifted continents. "You challenge Moloch the mighty with your little rebellion. Ab-Leshal, the First Sword of Daevon himself could not even defeat me, and you will attempt with nothing more than a cooking knife? Foolishness on top of foolishness. I have called your name, Mary-Ann Lewitt, and you are mine."

Mary-Ann continued to say nothing.

“A pity your tongue is gone, whore.”

Still nothing.

“Your silence grows tiresome, whore. Speak. Make your pleas. Cry out to your impotent sky-god to deliver you. Beg for my mercy. Whatever you wish. Your silence is dull.”

Mary-Ann smashed her head into Moloch’s face.

—

The wreckage of the car and the exit were in sight, as were the bulky, shadowy forms that were waiting outside, backlit by the floodlights mounted on their SUVs.

“Shit!” DeMontfort spat. He grabbed a piece of metal from the car and held it like a shield in front of him while Salah ducked behind a pile of rubble.

Keep them safe.

“Montag, where are you?”

There, a little spark nearby. Leap, roll, grab the tacky little ornament, throw it to Salah.

“Montag, get them out of here!”

Salah felt himself surrounded in a whirlwind of fire and eyes as the ground fell away underneath him and he flew away into the night. For a moment, he glimpsed DeMontfort charging through the agents and their line of vehicles before darkness enveloped him.

—

Whether the moment’s recoiling was the result of surprise or pain, it was an opportunity thrown wide open. Duck down, forward, move up, single swing to the testicles, pivot to the side. Moloch howled in pain as steaming blood splashed on the concrete floor. It smelled like sulfur and iron.

Stars burst inside her head. A fist smashing down on her. Bones snapping. Thick, leathery fingers grabbed her hair, pulling her up from the floor, her scalp tearing and bleeding. She screamed, but the sound was cut off the furnace blast of the god's bellow. Her skin peeled and blistered from the heat. She swung the knife, the blade glanced off of the thick skin. Moloch tossed her aside like a broken, bleeding rag doll.

Mary-Ann's body rolled to a limp rest, and was still. The god snorted and lumbered over to her prone form, ready to finish its work. It grabbed her body, raised her to its mouth.

The knife lashed out, burying itself deep in Moloch's eye. It bellowed, and the knife drew back and stabbed again: face, neck, eyes, snout. Blood poured from Moloch's face as it dropped Mary-Ann to the floor. Air rushed out of her lungs along with the *crack* of ribs.

"Death would be too good for you, whore," Moloch boomed. "All break eventually under the weight of their own shame. Do you not remember your nights with your legs spread wide, moaning and crying as they fucked you and tossed you aside? You were never more than a passing pleasure, a slut to bed because they had become bored with their right hands." Moloch's face was right next to Mary-Ann's head, his furnace breath enveloping her with its burnt-flesh scent. "You think he cares for you? He is nothing more than a lonely and desperate man. He took in a worthless piece of shit like you because he couldn't catch a better woman. So he settled for you. A monster and a slut. Nothing more." Moloch sat down next to her, legs crossed. "My most pitiful servant."

There was movement. Mary-Ann pushed herself up, rising slowly… slowly…slowly… to her feet. There was nothing but pain now. Raw, red, searing pain. Her left arm hung limp, the shoulder crushed and useless from the impact. Her clothes were torn and soaked crimson. One eye was swollen shut, the other half-blinded by the blood that ran down from her torn scalp. Hair was matted and clumped with crimson. Ribs crushed. Fractures everywhere. Pain everywhere. Pain. Pain. Pain. Pain.

She was smiling.

“F-f-fuck you.” With a last burst of strength, she reached out and tore the knife from Moloch’s eye. Millennia of mothers and fathers and children cheered, screamed for the Horned King’s blood.

“Fuck you.” The knife plunged into Moloch’s other eye.

“Fuck you.” Moloch’s throat.

“Fuck you!” Mary-Ann threw herself against Moloch’s chest, and the bleeding god toppled onto its back.

“Fuck you!” Again in the chest. “Fuck you!” Again and again, emphasizing each shout with another stab of the knife. "Fuck you! Fuck you! Hahahaha! Fuck! You! Fuck! You! Fuck! You! You picked the wrong mom to fuck with, motherfucker!”

The burst of strength ended. The end was here. Mary-Ann could feel it, approaching like an old, long-awaited friend walking down the street.

“Heh…eh-heh-heh…you…can…” Blood dribbled over her lips with her raspy, mumbling breaths. “Run…but sooner or…or later…”

She tore the knife out of Moloch’s chest one last time.

“God’ll…cut you down.”

Mary-Ann swung the knife back down, down deep into Moloch’s forehead. The Horned King shuddered, and its last breath rattled out of its lungs. She pushed herself off the body, took a few wobbling steps away from the corpse, and fell to her knees. She stared off into space for a moment. Her lips moved with the beginning of some silent word.

Mary-Ann Lewitt fell to the blood-stained concrete floor and died.

« **Empire of Dirt (Part 2)** | **Hub** | **The Settling Ash** »

Empty Nights

Beneath the ashen skies of a soon-to-be dead planet, stood a mountain, a stark form against the flatness of the wasteland surrounding it. Upon the mountain was an old man, sitting on a sun-bleached rock, watching the dust clouds dance amidst the stones. For the first time in what seemed like forever, the old man felt no need to go anywhere, no compulsion driving him to plague the innocent with his presence, no deathly Brothers destroying everything in his path. It was a small comfort, since there were no innocent left to plague. No guilty either. Nothing at all.

After some time, though judging exactly how much was impossible and indeed pointless, the old man spotted a figure beginning to climb the solitary mountain with some difficulty. As it finally ascended to the top to collapse in front of the old man's rock, he saw it was another man. One of his arms was gone at the shoulder, as were his teeth, his hair, and most of his toes. Slowly, the broken man climbed to his feet and sat on a second rock, facing the silent elder. After a few false starts ending in fits of coughing, he said:

"So, it was you then. I assumed as much."

"Yes."

"You know, some of us cynics had a wager on which one of you Keters would end up doing us all in. Most of them bet on that stupid lizard, but I knew he didn't have it in him. Man, you should have seen the looks on their faces."

"I suppose you always knew it was going to be me?"

"Nah, my money was on the girl. I don't think anyone imagined it would be you, how could we? We thought you were a stable anomaly, if a dangerous one. Never figured you'd be the one to so royally screw us over. What the hell happened?"

“Why do you care? It’s not like it matters anymore.”

The broken man considered this for a moment, absent mindedly pulling on something hanging on a chain around his neck. “I guess asking questions is a hard habit to lose. Like living, in my case. So, let me repeat that: what the hell happened?”

“The rules changed.”

“That much I figured. Your anomaly used to take some time to manifest. How did it become instantaneous? Why?”

“I do not know why the Brothers decided to end mankind, or why they chose me as their instrument, other than to torment me. I never thought they would go this far to do so. As much as they hated me, their duty to the cycle of life and death was always more important to them. And yet, here we are.”

“If you can’t give me a why, how about a how?”

“It is tragically simple, really. Throughout the eternity of my search for the Third Brother, the First and Second only came to haunt me when I stayed around humanity for too long. They did that to isolate me, to make me hurt, to spite me. Coming and going, and always mocking me as they took someone away because of my folly, never allowing me to stay in one place. Until that day.”

The old man turned his gaze to the horizon, though the smoke made it difficult to see very far.

“That day, they came and never left. They didn’t mock me, or taunt me, or say anything at all. No mention of my failures in the past, or the ones still to come. No, they simply pushed me towards a specific location, with a force I couldn't hope to resist, like a moth before a maelstrom. A bunker, built into the side of this mountain.”

“Armed Sector-25. No one was supposed to know about it. Hell, I wasn't supposed to know about it.”

“I didn’t. The Brothers did. I saw them… doing things to the guards and the facility as they lead me in. I’m not quite sure how to describe it. Destroy is too weak a word. I have seen them commit countless

atrocities throughout the years, but never with such purpose and efficiency, and yet with so little appetite for their work. When they were done, and I reached the bunker's inner chamber, I saw why they lead me here."

"Armed Sector-25 held thirty-three percent of the Foundation's nuclear devices in the northern hemisphere. Damn."

The old man nodded. "And the warheads needed to carry them."

Following the old man's example, the broken tried to look around as well, but his eyes were too weak to see much of anything. He shivered, and the old man removed his tattered coat and handed it to him, looking at him thoughtfully as he covered his gaunt frame.

"How did you survive? As far as I know, you are the only one."

Giving the elder a humorless, toothless grin, the broken man removed the ornate amulet from its place around his neck and dangled it from a four-fingered hand.

"Let's just say you're not the only immortal around. I can't die as long as this thing is around, not really. Every time I do, someone else picks this thing up, and there I am again, like some jack-in-a box."

"There isn't anyone left. Trust me on that."

The broken man turned the amulet in his hand, and when he spoke next, there was a hint of fear in his voice.

"Not now, maybe. But someday, something will find it again. It will never end. I just want it to end."

Frowning, the old man looked to his own possessions, to the small sack still hanging around his belt.

"This sack was supposed to save me, one day. I was supposed to use it to catch the Third Brother and gain my freedom. One last use, and no more."

Gently, he took the amulet from shaking hand of the broken man,

opened his sack, and tossed it inside. The sack's rope tightened around it, with a sense of finality. The old man knew it would never open again.

"What use is freedom now?"

It was silent, for a while. The broken man fell asleep, his breath shallow in his ravaged chest. After a while, the breathing stopped, and the old man was alone.

Until someone laid a gentle hand on his shoulder, and a cold voice in his head.

It is time to go.

"So you finally come, Third Brother, All-Death. I have searched for you for so long, and you come when I have nothing left to give you. The gifts are all gone."

They are of no importance. It is done.

"Of no importance!? You have tormented me for eons because I dared win them from you, destroyed the lives of countless others in your grudge against me, and now you have betrayed your duty and purged all life from this planet just to do so again! How dare you tell me they are of no importance!

You fail to understand our purpose. We did not gather your kind into the silent halls to spite you. We did it to save you. All of you.

At that, the old man began to weep, tears falling on the barren rock at his feet.

"What is left to save? Everything is gone. You killed them all."

A physical death. The physical form is a temporary, fleeting notion. Other things endure. In the silent halls, they will be safe from what is to come.

"What kind of safety is death? What could be worse?"

Strangely enough, there was a hint of kindness in the voice when it

next spoke.

Life could be. Come, and be comforted. Our grudge is finally done.

The hand left the old man's shoulder, and was now extended towards him. He took it.

You are the last of the deathless. The rest have been taken already. It is time for you all to finally rest.

Sometime later, a small silvery object fell from the sky, and dug itself into the ground. It examined it and the air, and determined that, despite the elevated levels of radiation and the regrettable lack of sapient life, this planet was still perfectly suitable for experimentation. It sent a signal.

And in the ashen sky was now a hint of metal.

Empty Spaces

The Captain focused his binoculars and scrutinized the valley below. The highway bent around the hills, littered with refuse and empty cars. Beyond the road was an inlet. The muddy waters flowed sluggishly, packed with flotsam, around the bows of a listing destroyer. A suspension bridge had collapsed on the stern of the ship. The vessel had remained, half submerged, for the short months since the war. The yellowing corpse of a cow had lodged in its trailing cables. Through his binoculars, the Captain could see the flies dancing around it, even from his roost atop the hill.

The tarp around his shoulders ruffled in the sharp wind, and he drew it close. The gray plastic blended well with the mottled land, the dead grass, the darkened sky. A convoy was plodding the highway below, vehicles winding around the broken asphalt and drifting ash. The lead tank had a dozer blade fixed to it and was shoving aside the rusting car-carcasses obstructing the road. A small detachment of soldiers followed, maybe twenty five. They wore black uniforms, and marched before an eighteen-wheeler. It was low slung, heavily armored. A second tank took the rear, turret swept back to ward off attack.

The Captain thought eagerly of the contents of that truck. As he looked back at his gathered men, he saw they did, too. Rifle Company B hunkered on the ashen mount, hands tightly clutching weapons. They needed action to take their minds off the burning in their lungs and the pangs in their bellies. They were tired and worn from these wretched months. Some of them had worn out rad-suits and were coughing piteously, spitting little globules of mucous and blood. Miserable as they were, they perched like hawks above unsuspecting prey.

What that convoy was guarding, they could only imagine; incredible wealth, an armory of devastating technologies, or one of the last politicians – those dogs who brought on the holocaust. Or perhaps it

was something more. There were rumors, from travelers and sporadic radio contacts, of strange and unnatural things occurring across the globe. Tales of walking dead, of machines that spoke, of unearthly creatures and men with godly powers. A few weeks ago they had come across a great fat man who called himself the King of Philadelphia. It was as if his every word was gold, and they would have gladly submitted to his every order if the Doctor hadn't put a round through the back of his skull.

The Doctor was back at the camp. Lately he took no interest in the raids, speaking of nothing but the Eden Gate. The men were demoralized enough without their leader babbling obsessively about some old story. There were whisperings about the Doctor that spread among the soldiers. That he had been a top researcher, a director in some enigmatic international program. That he had gone insane.

The Captain had been his friend years ago, before he joined the British Army, when things were first starting to fall apart. He was there when the Doctor partook of the Spring of Youth. He had helped push the dioxin barrels in when the Doctor was done with his injections. The rusty red drums cracked easily, bleeding the oily chemicals into the cold, clear water.

Five months ago, Company B had come over with the European invasion of the States. They quietly went rogue when everything collapsed. And when the Captain found the Doctor again, they took him as their leader.

The caravan drew closer in the valley below, and the Captain spoke a few words into his radio. And suddenly it was all chaos for the convoy, and tattered green raining fire down on shiny black. When the first shots hit, the soldiers below scattered, taking cover behind wreckage and returning fire into the hills. The Captain's men whooped like red Indians, their rifles cracking sporadically in the bleak sunlight.

Their numbers would quickly have over-swept their prey, but they held back for the two tanks, which fired blindly into the hillside. And the small band below might have pulled a hasty retreat, might have saved their cargo, if not for the ruined destroyer lying in the waters

to their right side. The destroyer was tilted, half sunk, but the bow still sat above the water. The refurbished and manned front turret began turning. The members of the convoy had no time to react. The naval gun flamed, and the lead tank exploded, blasting sharp chunks of metal dozens of meters.

The black-armored operatives were quickly reduced in numbers. Someone – a white-suited figure – had extended their torso from the hatch of the remaining rear tank. The person lifted a megaphone, speaking clearly in a woman's voice.

"Cease firing! We are not with the United States government!" Perhaps she had recognized the uniforms of soldiers on her assailants. It was of no matter, though, as a second rumbling blast from the destroyer announced the end of her short plea for parley.

Soon the victorious ambushers were down among the remains of the convoy. They sifted through the bodies and the scalding fragments of the two tanks with hope for loot. The Captain stood eagerly by as two of his men clipped the lock away from the back of the eighteen-wheeler. They threw the double doors open. Several cowering scientists and a series of electronic panels were exposed to the light, and the two soldiers climbed up. The Captain listened to the brief bursts of gunfire.

"What's up there?" he yelled into the cavern of the truck.

"Not much…hold on," one of the men called back from the depths. "There's another door farther back here. We've got to cut through these chains."

There was a clink of metal against metal, and the man called back again. "It's a bare room. There's nothing back here but…" He snorted derisively.

"What?" yelled the Captain, growing impatient.

"It looks like a guy in an oversized clown-suit. What the fuck!"

The soldier laughed again. He poked his head out of the truck, grinning at the Captain. There was a subtle snapping, and the man

collapsed.

It took only a few more minutes for the one hundred and thirty one members of Company B to be killed. A few seagulls were the only witnesses to the oddly proportioned creature. It moved rapidly across the landscape in short and erratic jumps.

The sun began to set, and the Doctor settled comfortably down on the torn out rear seat of an old sedan. He cradled a steel banjo in the curve of his lap, strumming a few slow chords. He breathed the acrid air of the outside world unfiltered, unaffected by the deadly conditions. The tall creature had halted twenty paces before him, transfixed by his unbroken stare. The Doctor's eyes watered and burned, but he had no need to close them. The thing stood awkwardly alone in the gathering darkness.

"Looks like we're going to be here for a while, big man," the Doctor said, sighing. Then he added, "At least until I break one of these strings." He nodded to the banjo. The odd figure stood, silent and unmoving.

Empty Unmarked Grave

>run fmc.exe -t
Foundation Mail Client (Text Only Mode)
>chkbox
You have **1** new message. You have **5739** old messages.
>readmsg new
Reading All New Messages…
1 new message found.

From: The Administrator (1.1.861.291|
artni_3ujk2bv6j3b5.nimda#1.1.861.291|
artni_3ujk2bv6j3b5.nimda)
To: O5 Primary Reroute Address (1.1.861.291|
artni_3ujk2bv6j3b5.5o#1.1.861.291|
artni_3ujk2bv6j3b5.5o)
Cc: Senior Staff Primary Reroute Address (1.1.861.291|
artni_3ujk2bv6j3b5.ss#1.1.861.291|
artni_3ujk2bv6j3b5.ss)
Date: [FIELD EMPTY]
Subject: Now Cracks A Noble Heart
Content:
Over my many years as Administrator of the Foundation, I have found the job progressively less taxing.
My responsibilities grew at first, but with my institution of the O5 council, my job was functionally reduced to an optional veto on high level votes.
I have not used my veto power in the history of the Foundation. This speaks volumes of the competence of the elected personnel.
As I have grown older, my ability to continue my duties to the Foundation as a whole has drastically deteriorated. My position does not continue to have any significance, or indeed, relevance, to this organisation.
As such, effective immediately, I am stepping down from

my role, with no incumbent to take my place.
This will likely change nothing of your day-to-day operations, and I hope you will continue on with your work as normal.
Friends and colleagues, I leave the fate of the world in your capable hands.
Thank you for your service.
The Administrator

You have not accessed this terminal in ten minutes. Do you require assistance?
>logoff
Does the black moon howl?
>logoff Override BaseCommand *1-0001
Goodnight, sweet prince; and flights of angels sing thee to thy rest.

Jeremy was a corgi of simple tastes. After having been gloriously liberated from his previous owner, Her Royal Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, Jeremy's job had been to collect the mail. His brothers, Jeremy, Jeremy, Jeremy, and Jeremy, all had substantially more exciting jobs, such as ice cream retrieval or orbital space station design. But he didn't mind. Jeremy liked collecting the mail anyway.

As he did every day, Jeremy brought the mail to his benevolent owner, Doctor Isabel Helga Anastasia Parvati Wondertainment V, PhD. Isabel had been spending her morning being astonishingly productive; she had been spinning in circles with her arms out while whistling for almost four hours straight. Jeremy dropped his mouthful of paper in front of her and gave a helpful, positive woof.

Dearest Isabel;

I hope this letter finds you well.
As you know, your mother and I have been hard at work on our own private projects.
Your position as Lead Toy Designer has been filled extraordinarily well. Sales have been up across the board.
Unfortunately, I have found myself particularly

predisposed by current arrangements, that being the event of my demise.
Don't be sad about this! I was getting rather bored anyway. Out with the old, in with the new!

That being said, I will no longer be keeping the position of Key Creative Director And Big Boss Man, again, because I am dead.
Hence, I am elevating you to the position of Key Creative Director And Big Boss Man Lady! Congratulations!
I trust you will live up to the role as only my daughter can.

I have always been proud of you.

Dr. Reginald Philbert Lionel Archibald Westinghouse Wondertainment III, MD, PhD, DDS, Esq.

(P.S. Your mother sends her best regards!)

Jeremy looked at his owner expectantly, anticipating a pat on the head for expedience and a job well done. Isabel sat on the floor and read the letter, her grin slowly turning to a look of deep and profound confusion, then unspeakable sadness, with tears dripping down her cheeks, then excitement and elation. She reached over to Jeremy, flipped him upside-down, and rubbed his belly as he rolled around in bliss. Tears continued to stream down her face as she laughed happily. She shouted out towards the corridor:

"Jeremy and Jeremy! I need some celebratory ice-cream, stat!"

Isabel turned to the large, moustachioed painting of her father on the wall, wiping the tears from her cheeks.

"Bye, Dad."

Lars Celarent, the Dean of Alexylva University's Interpretive Dance department, was returning to his office after a delicious breakfast of cheese that tasted like celery. Upon arrival, he noticed a small letter slipped halfway underneath his door. Lars leant down and picked it

up; the red wax seal still warm to the touch. He tore it open with his fingers, and slipped the letter out into his hands. The cursive was curly to an almost unreadable degree, but Lars was able to make out the meaning behind the words.

> To My Colleagues;
>
> I regret to inform you that, effective this morning, I am tendering my resignation as Chancellor of Alexylva University.
> As many of you know, I have been serving as Chancellor in-absentia more and more as of late.
> With the event of my death last night, I am left with two options: resign, or serve in-absentia indefinitely.
> Seeing as my time will now be heavily invested in no longer existing, my resignation is the more responsible path.
> In accordance with official University policy, my successor will be elected this afternoon by popular vote.
> Please act responsibly until that time.
> Murdering your peers beforehand, while not technically against any rules, goes against the spirit of the election.
> Similarly, negating the event of their birth should be looked down upon, though substantially less so.
>
> Thank you for allowing me to serve you all as Chancellor over the past years.
> I wish you all the best of luck with your future endeavours.
>
> Gratefully yours,
> Chancellor Westinghouse

Lars fetched his formal attire, bulletproof vest, and sniper rifle. A new chancellor had to be elected, and with any luck, it was going to be him.

James Seudon entered the tiny church. He'd driven for five long hours, twisting and turning his way through the mountains, leaf-covered roads leaning dangerously towards tipping his car off the

side of a cliff. And here he was, not a human being for miles around. Which was odd, because he was supposed to be meeting a local Roman Catholic priest. James looked at the solid hardwood door. The lock was heavy and thick; James pulled out a pick gun and had it open within seconds. The church was clearly long abandoned, dust covered the rotting wooden seats. Every step James took on the stone floor echoed as though he were in a much larger space. He walked towards the stand at the front, then noticed a clean white envelope sitting on it, tied shut with thick red ribbon. James pulled the bow apart, opened the envelope, and began to read the letter inside.

> Mister Seudon:
>
> Well done on finding your way here. I apologise for the remote location, but it was necessary to isolate you.
> I have selected you to be my successor in the field of religious artifact research.
> Congratulations!
> Should you not desire this job, feel free to report this location to your superiors. I imagine they would reward you well, destroying decades of my notes and research in the process.
> But of course, then you wouldn't be able to look at my collection for yourself, and I think we can both agree you wouldn't do that.
> James, you're one of the few people who asks the right questions of the right people.
> Unfortunately, the wrong people have taken notice. You need to go to ground, and trust me, there is nowhere safer than here.
> Should you wish to continue, enter the confession booth, and loudly proclaim 'I Am Free Of Sin'.
> You will know what to do from there.
>
> Yours in the Lord,
> Reverend Lionel Philbert

James read the page curiously. He looked up and noticed the small confession booth to the side. He walked to it and opened the door. James then pulled out various tools, scraping samples from the side

of the box, the ground, the dust between the stones, and investigated them avidly. Satisfied, he entered, sitting huddled inside the box. He re-read the letter, reassured himself, then shouted the words to the booth's empty other side.

"I am free of sin!"

Eric Burke walked into his office. With the unannounced disappearance of the previous Acting Director of the Global Occult Coalition, it was necessary to elect a temporary stand-in. Burke had been moved up two levels of hierarchy, since all of the predecessor's immediate juniors had turned down the temporary position, preferring to maintain control over their various departments. Burke had leaped at the opportunity, applied, and after a single day he was given the job. He considered it unusual, but considering the way that the GOC operated, it was well within his weirdness parameters. He was showed to his (temporary) office by a secretary, who soon left the room to fetch him a cup of coffee. Burke noticed a folded sheet of paper on the top of the desk; he unfolded it and began to read.

> To my Successor:
>
> You likely believe you have been elected as a temporary substitute.
> However, my notice of resignation can be found in the top drawer of this desk.
> Let me be the first to congratulate you: consider yourself the new Acting Director.
> You have been briefed by others on what the role entails; standard administrative tasks and so forth.
> I trust that they have done their job, and that you now know yours.
> However, there is one matter which they have not been briefed on.
> Do not inform anyone of what I am about to tell you.
>
> You will likely never meet your immediate superior, Madam al Fine. Without going into details, you should not want to.

You will likely receive weekly letters from Madam al Fine.
Without going into details, you should not open these.
Burn them immediately upon receipt. Do not open them. Do not tell anyone you are doing this.
If anyone asks, all of your actions are in accordance her dictates.
Do not seek out Madam al Fine.
I trust you have been a member of this organisation long enough to understand that some orders should not be questioned.
This is one such order.
Please dispose of this letter as expediently, untraceably, and permanently as possible.

I wish you the best of luck with your new position.

Sergeant Reginald Ulysses Law
Acting Director, United Nations Global Occult Coalition

The secretary entered the room with a tall mug of dark brown coffee, placed it on Burke's (no longer temporary) desk, then left. Burke tore the paper to shreds as soon as she left the room, threw them into his coffee, stirred them twice with his finger, and downed the hot beverage in three gulps. Nothing's properly disposed of until it's been through a digestive system, he thought.

Bijou Dashwood heard a letter slide through the slot at her door. She had thought that the snow outside would have postponed the mail; then, she realised that the mail had come yesterday. Confused, Bijou left the kitchen, walked to the front door, tore the envelope open, then pulled out a folded letter and a small metal needle from inside. She read the letter, face slowly hardening, then scrunched it up into a ball. Bijou returned to her living room and threw the letter into the crackling fireplace. She slouched into a large armchair, fire warming her feet, as the edges of the paper glowed, then turned black and crumbled into ashes.

To the recipient of this letter, I apologise in advance.
This was sent by an automated system. I don't know you, and you don't know me.

Welcome to the Chaos Insurgency. You're the boss now.
You might be thinking, how the hell did I get this job? I didn't apply for it.
You almost certainly hate the Insurgency as much as I do.
That's why I became the boss. To rein them in.
I sabotaged them from the top down for years. They never noticed.
There are people in this world who are completely, profoundly selfish.
Some of these people are in the position to do serious harm to society at large.
The Insurgency is a collection of the worst people with the greatest potential.
You have likely been directly affected by the actions of the Insurgency.
You likely have done research of your own to oppose them.
You almost certainly wish to abolish them from existence.
But it is vital that you do not shatter the Insurgency apart.
The key purpose of the Insurgency is keeping these people unified and controlled.
Further reductions into factions could result in a war that could tear the world apart.
The Insurgency requires a leader who can continue its stagnation as best as possible in a covert manner.

My system has chosen you.

If you consent to this, please insert the enclosed needle into your left eye.
You will understand more afterwards.
It won't hurt, I promise.

I regret putting you in this position, but anticipate you shall rise to the occasion.
Archibald Mirum

Bijou looked at the needle in her right hand. It sounded like nonsense, but she could feel something inside of the point calling

out to her. She held her left eyelids apart with her left hand, moved the needle to the surface of her eyeball, and thrust it deep into her pupil.

Bijou clenched her jaw. It was not painless. But it was worth it.

The Manna Charitable Foundation received an anonymous five million dollar donation.

Marshall, Carter and Dark discovered five million dollars had disappeared from their coffers.

The Janitor noticed a buzzing in its pocket as it escaped from the chaos far below.

> **Sender:** Critic Reroute Number (662-639-4663)
> **SMS Content:** Hard Drive Sixteen.
> File - infohazard_images_492.7z
> Password - 3jkb25bv6266kla3j2b6kindejbkreb6k26j4bv2346jg23
> The instructions are in there. You will know what to do.
> I love you. Thank you, and farewell.

The Janitor did not read the message until the following morning.

Ruiz Duchamp woke up staring at an intriguing installation piece. The piece itself was composed of several hundred mobile phones, all taped speaker-to-microphone, in a long, snakelike weave.

"Bluh."

Ruiz wasn't sure quite when he had gone to sleep. After The Critic had died, he'd felt somewhat detached. He felt cheated of his prize. Ruiz groggily slapped himself in the face, trying to rouse some semblance of coherence within his noggin. It wasn't working.

Ruiz walked past the reception, out the door, three doors down the street, entered his favourite coffee shop, and asked for a double-strength espresso, which he then used to down his daily caffeine

pills, multivitamins, and antidepressants.

And then, Ruiz finally woke up.

Then he remembered that there was a dead body still sitting in the middle of his exhibition room.

“Shit! Carol, hold onto this!”

Ruiz placed his coffee into the hand of the confounded barista, sprinted back to 'wowwee', and took a look at the body that was once Nobody. At least it had been a clean shot; were it not for the circular hole in the centre of his forehead, or the dried blood that had run down his cheeks, or the teeth that had broken from the sudden impact, or the smell of his body beginning to decompose, or his extremely dishevelled suit, with his customary grey fedora (also punctured) dropped beside the seat with burn marks and blood at the point of impact, you could almost think he was still alive.

Ruiz threw a blanket over him and started walking back to the coffee shop.

Enasni Si Gnihtyreve

He inhales and exhales at a pace and intensity not unlike a buffalo mid-coitus. Of course, it isn't like anyone can hear him, given that the building is screaming while red lights strobe the corridor. The thought briefly crosses his mind to calm down- and then the signal from the squad leader pushes the thoughts out of his mind. They burst into the room. Objects are strewn around and smoke is filling it from the corridor. The squad locks gazes with the hideous beasts cowering in the corner, behind overturned desks and tables. Some of the creatures whimper, staring fearfully at the squad. One squadmate retches inside his helmet, staring at the hideous abominations. He himself is barely keeping his breakfast down staring at them. Where is their *flesh*? Where are their *arms*?

They're missing so many limbs, and so much flesh, and yet they aren't bleeding… he can even see their organs through what little remains, hidden beneath stolen coats. One of them reaches into their coat- it's pulling out a weapon! He immediately pounces on it, ripping its head from its shoulders. The other creatures scream, a cry to action for the rest of the squad. They fall upon the fleshless abominations, peeling away limbs, ripping out organs, crushing bodies between their hands, *butchering* the creatures and painting the room in bodily fluids as the lights flash in fear and the building wails. The rest follow his lead. The sirens and their screams are *deafening* him and then it's all over.

"Good work", he hears, and he accepts the adulation quietly. He looks back at the bodies with a small amount of empathy for their plight - and finally the sight of oozing, candy-red liquid, spreading towards his boots, gets him. He's a trained killer, a remorseless slayer of monsters, a Knight of the Flesh, a decorated MTF member, and he vomits, barely pulling his helmet off in time to splatter the floor in pasty brown sludge. Looking at these grotesque bodies that attempt to masquerade as humans, he knows that the world will be much safer without them. He begins frisking the creatures.

One stirs, and he quickly crushes its skull within his four palms. It slumps without a sound, and its coat falls aside to reveal an ornate golden necklace with a beautiful ruby. He smashes a sacred boot down on the cursed object, caving in the creature's chest. The necklace is unscathed, sending pain shooting up his foot, so he carefully kicks it deeper into the pile. The amulet can burn with its damned owners. Outside, he watches as the building is blown to bits, incinerating the bodies and damning them to eternal clockwork torment. Its death cries ring in his ears.

-

She watches keenly as the ceremony begins. The Keepers of Flesh are chanting the words of the Sacred Cleansing Process, smacking their bellies to produce the beat, and circling the purification altar while the music thumps and throbs in her skull. Fireflies flash, illuminating the clockwork demon, whose kicking and swinging from the ropes that suspend it provide a demented rhythm.
Red-blue-**drumbeat**-green-purple-
kick-yellow-green-**drumbeat**-
blue-*kick*-red-**drumbeat**-
kick-blue-yellow-green-
drumbeat-**drumbeat**-*kick*-
and she writhes and spasms in a horrific *mockery* of dance, lost in the crowd and swaying to the beat. Somehow it attracts another, whose arms fly everywhere in tune with the explosive **drumbeat** and then the music switches over to the final *crescendo* and suddenly they're -are they tangoing? -
yes, they are tangoing, and she barely even knows
what a tango is, much less how to do one,
but this *other* woman is calling all the shots.

They spin and spin and the lights are whirling around and she is *radiating* heat and the demon is being lowered into the cleansing pit to the roar of the crowd. It keens and suddenly candy-colored liquid is raining from the ceiling but *nobody cares* because it is time for *purification* and suddenly they're lying together and she is on top and feels the soft touch of her body and her lips and then the hard shell of a pill.
It dissolves on her tongue and she savors the familiar tang. The club

begins to swirl, and then it gets warmer and warmer until the woman starts to melt.
She whispers about being *cold*,
but the heat is *collecting* on her skin,
milling on it and *buzzing* on it and
sopping up the sweat seeping from her pores.
It reforms into flies, *swarming* around her
and *clinging* to her skin and scrabbling
and making her itch and it *burns*!
Oh god it burns! She's *bucking* now, and the demon finally stops keening at the bottom of the pit. It screams as the Great God *devours* it whole, cleansing and purifying its soul. The crowd *roars* in envy and ecstasy, a wave of sound that strikes her eardrums at the climax. Bolts of lightning pierce the sky and now she's barreling down the road, hoping to make it home before falling unconscious in the middle of the road. Out of the corners of her eyes, she can make out the buildings around her leaning away, nervous that she will vomit on them.

She dashes down the street, which *twirls* around itself and makes her dizzy. The lampposts are growling and rippling. She skips around one, giving it a sharp rap. It whimpers and the rest of the lights quiet down. Now she's running and *running* but it's like she's stuck in one *place* and then that place is in the grasp of two Flesh Guardians.
"Out after curfew?" they rasp. "Explain."
Their voices are oozing and striking each other in a *cacophony*
that makes her head pound and she desperately tries to say *something*
but the words are tripping over each other and blocking her mouth and *suffocating* her. "B-bad," she chokes out, " bad soma,"
and they release her and she falls hard onto the pavement.

It squeals in protest while the Flesh Guardians snicker, their batons out and ready to dispense a beating. Their disrespect is *infuriating*; can they not tell who she is?
As she gasps for breath, she raises her hand to display the insignia of Mobile Task Force Gamma-2 engraved in it, and the Flesh Guardians have enough brains to immediately hoist her up, tripping over their own words in an attempt to apologize for their stupidity.

She waves the goons off and stumbles down the street while they sweat to themselves, terrified that tomorrow they and their wives and children will awaken for cleansing.

-

It's two in the morning when he is *awoken* by the screaming of a family downstairs. He attempts to return to the sweet embrace of sleep, but the calls of the Great God beckon him to work. He gets out of the bed, uttering a short prayer to answer, and steps foggy-headed into the bathroom to cleanse himself. Standing in the middle of the room, cleansing tendrils probe him for impurities, popping the crust from his eyes, shaving excess flesh, and evacuating his bowels before pushing him out. Once he is certain that he is properly cleansed to receive the teachings of the Great God, he sits down at the desk and begins to write. The Great God teaches him the history of the universe, injecting it directly into his mind through the Great God's power, and he studiously copies the teachings down. During a lull in the sermon, he scrutinizes the work. Everything that he has written down contradicts what he was told the previous night.

Clearly he was not listening properly the previous night; but to write it all wrong is a grave error. The children must learn their history in an unbroken chain, and this is the second time in a row that he has had to revise his own teachings. Penance is in order to apologize to the Great God for failing to deliver his message. He steps into the kitchen to pick up a peeler from the drawers. Returning to the desk, he places the peeler to his arm, and begins to shave his flesh as an offering. Strips of flesh are *cleaved* from his arm and fall to the desk, where they are quickly absorbed. He winces, but does not cease his efforts, uttering a prayer of apology to the Great God. Mid-prayer, he sneezes and his arm twitches, and *severs* a nerve and several blood vessels.

He lets the blood drip onto the desk, positive that the Great God will appreciate the extra sacrifice. It burns, so after several minutes, he jams the useless arm into his mouth and down into his stomach, gagging at the acrid taste, accepting it as punishment for failing to complete the prayer. The sermon begins again, and he continues writing, breathing through his nostrils to avoid embittering the arm,

careful to ensure that he writes down exactly what is taught. When the sermon is over, he tucks the writing away into a folder. He can see the rising sun, illuminating the deep crimson sky, indicating that lessons will begin within the hour. Picking up the folder, he walks to the door and steps out.

One door over, some Keepers of Moloch demand that the family next door surrender their child. The father and mother keep their mouths *shut*,
but the baby is *bawling*, even though
it has been born, raised, and
pampered for this moment its whole life.
He just wants the damn *thing*
to shut up because its *incessant* wails
are *ringing* in his ears.
All he wants is a drink, *any* kind of drink to shut it up.

But it doesn't matter. He has the words of the Great God to strengthen and enrich him with the knowledge of their illustrious history. His sacred duty is to enlighten the children, so that they may grow up as proud devotees to the Great God. The sun is shining bright, the sidewalks and buildings are humming, and his arm is starting to taste sweet. He nibbles on the elbow thoughtfully as he prepares the lesson plan for the day.

-

One-two-hurl-prod.
One-two-hurl-prod.
One-two-hurl-prod.
One-two-hurl-prod.

The teeth gnash. The belly rumbles. She continues to feed it, walking one step back to collect the body and one step forward before throwing it into the mouth and prodding it in-between her two teeth. It lows in satisfaction, blasting a putrid odor and hot air over her. She is almost overcome by the heat and the stench, but solders on, collecting it from the esophagi that ferry bodies from the crypt to the Great One's abode. Occasionally they scream. As always, she walks one step back, one step forward, hurls it into the mouth, and prods it in-between the teeth, where it is quickly pulverized into

paste. Occasionally a fire breaks out from the grinding of unsatisfied teeth, providing illumination and a death sentence to the acolyte in charge of feeding it. The two teeth next to her ignite, and the warmth is comforting. Her fellow acolyte makes a short prayer before diving over the railing into the fire. His blood extinguishes the flame and spatters the catwalk, which sputters in surprise. She idly observes that it will make things more slippery for the next acolyte.

At that moment, she notices another acolyte snapping to attention. She follows suit, sinking to her knees to pay the appropriate deferences to the High Flesh, She Who Listens. Much to her surprise, She Who Listens grasps her by the shoulders, lifts her up, and sinks to her knees instead. It is in this manner that she, a mere fourth-class acolyte, learns that her child is the Destined Oblation, the greatest gift imaginable to the Great God.

She is ferried out of the chamber, through the pulsating corridors in a magnificent procession. Music. A golden, jewel-encrusted palanquin. Hundreds of overjoyed, onlooking citizens and buildings, establishing a thruway several hundred cubits long that leads to her domicile. Before she has even stepped through the door of their home, her husbands know. They lock eyes and nod their heads solemnly, eyes welling with pride. In the next room, the infant is bawling from hunger pains. Its eyes are bloodshot, and its throat sore. She caresses the infant and lets it suckle, as they are returned through the streets, which vibrate with joy, to the chamber of the Great One. Together, she and the infant peer into its gaping brown maw. A wave of hot air escapes the pit that is the gnashing teeth, and far, far below she can make out the gleam of a lake of digestive fluids. Together, she and her son bask in the glory of the Great One. She can taste the bond that exists between the three, that of mother and child, flesh and blood, sweat and tears: nothing less than a portion of her soul.

She tosses the child into the mouth. Its wails are cut short by the gnashing teeth, and she looks in on envy before collecting a body from the esophagus and feeding it to the Great God.
One-two-hurl-prod.
One-two-hurl-prod.

-

This has no ending. This has no story. This has no context.
Great God help us all.

Encounter

It's been a long day.

First the absolute *bullshit* at the hotel last night (what kind of asshole puts a family of four in a one bed smoking room?), and Shannon wetting the bed, and Tate flipping out over that (but at least he's asleep in the backseat for now, right?), and then crawling out to the car this morning to find that some jackass had hit and run torn off the back bumper in the night, and now *this.*

Stephen Forrier grumbles to himself over the staticky half tuned radio (couldn't even find a fucking station for *miles*) and tries to soothe his panicking children. Nikki and Shannon are *terrified* of storms, and it's a damn good thing Tate's a heavy sleeper, because lord knows he'd wreak havoc if the girls woke him up… Stephen sighs. This would've been so much easier if Nina were still… Nevermind.

The car's blinking emergency lights serve only to deepen the surrounding gloom. The storm had come on heavy and fast, and Stephen had been shocked at how quickly the dark clouds had enveloped the daylight. He'd hoped to make it back into town by tonight, but no chance of that now.

The ends of the power lines loosely draped over the hood cast sparks over the surrounding puddles, and the splintered remains of the pole and blown transformer blocked the road behind the car. Trapped. Stephen sighs again, softly stroking Nikki's curly hair. (It'll be alright, baby. It's okay. Daddy's here.)

He'd tried to call for help on his cell when the lines fell, but the storm and remoteness got him nothing but a dial tone. (We're sorry, your call can not be completed as… *Damn* it.) Nothing to do now but wait, he supposes, and his eyes glaze with boredom and tiredness and loneliness and fuck you I don't deserve this and for a time he sleeps, until a faint sound wakes him.

Slosh, slosh, splash.

Stephen shakes his head, forcing his groggy mind to adjust, and looks out the window. There. At the edge of the shadow, just outside the headlight's flickering glow, a figure is making its way along the lines, looking for a way around. (Probably some fucking drifter. *Just* what I need right now. Better lock the- oh shit.)

As the figure edges closer and closer to the puddle where the power lines lie, Stephen feels his mind race as adrenalin kicks in (This motherfucker's going to get himself *fried*!). He opens the door and jumps out of the car, rushing toward the oncoming silhouette.

"GET BACK THAT'S LIVE CURRENT GET BACK, GET *BA*-"

Stephen's warning dries into a choked off shriek as the figure looks up at him with a face suspended from nothing, whipping at him with strange heavy *tentacles* of flesh and light. He staggers back from the *thing* and dives into his car, locking the doors and fumbling for the pistol in the glove compartment.

The next morning, a man who must work for the power company and a man who claims to be a policeman give Stephen a cup of coffee and ask him long questions about what happened in the night. At first, he's reluctant to talk (they'll think I'm crazy. Or stoned…), but as time goes on he opens up, explaining everything. He's too numbed by dread to notice how the policeman doesn't look surprised, or how the power company men are using HAZMAT gear to get samples of the puddles. The officer gives him a pill. Valium, to calm his nerves.

By the next morning, he doesn't remember a thing.

End

It wasn't like I didn't feel guilty. Of course I felt guilty. But a man's gotta do what a man's gotta do to stay alive sometimes, and even as I gazed at the tank containing Mr. Fish, the final capture of my assignment, all I could do was give him a sad look and walk away. What else could I have done for the poor guy, without putting my own neck on the line?

The part that really sickened me about myself was the ease with which I went through with it. I've done a few things that people would consider extreme, but I've never *betrayed* anyone. I mean, they all came. All I had to do was set up some traps, maybe a firing squad with some tranqs and bam, they were all contained. Yeah, whatever. I'm sure they all hated me before anyways - ever since what I did with Sweetie everybody's been wanting me dead.

Yet, it wasn't that difficult when I captured her this time. There she was, walking through the forest, a gun in her hand that seemed so out of place in such dainty little fingers. She was searching for me. I came out from my hiding spot and looked her over. She was still as beautiful as she had ever been, and I couldn't help but feel a little flustered.

"Hello."

"Afternoon."

And she began to pull the trigger. But no one is quicker than me. Even as her first shot whizzed by my head she collapsed. I'm not sure why I risked myself like that. Maybe I just wanted to talk with her one more time.

I leaned over and pulled out the dart from her neck. And then I just stood there for a moment, looking over her prone body. When I touched her it still sent shivers down my spine. I even took out my knife and held it less than an inch from her skin, considering cutting

her again. But I didn't. I'm not rolling that way anymore. And I did need to drop some old habits.

Was it really my fault in doing this? I didn't have a choice. I mean, I was discontinued, and then Stripes comes after me. Me being on his list and all. My only way to live was to join the guys who would Protect me no matter what the cost. They helped me get Stripes, so I guess I owed them a favour after that. A favour big enough to keep me catching all the others. Like the one that was behind me.

I walked down the long hallway from the containment chamber to the office of my new boss. A true mastermind, if there ever was one, and always dedicated to his cause. It was really a silly cause. "Secure, Contain, and Protect." What kind of bullshit was that.

I opened the door to his office.

"He's caught, boss," I said to the man behind the desk.

"Ah, good work," said the man.

"I suppose I'll be taking my leave now." I nodded to the man.

"Ah, not so fast. We can't just let you go like that." Can't say I wasn't expecting that. Still, there were other ways out.

"I've done my job." I could give less of a shit about how much they want to study me, I was getting out.

"Ah, yes, but you're an SCP object yourself."

"Boss, please." I placed a look of desperation on my face. Just biding my time.

"Listen, you've done us good, you'll get your own furnishings and cell with the best service." The man walked over to me as he spoke. Good. I placed my grip on my knife.

"Boss, I'm asking you from the bottom of my heart." I began to pull out my knife, ready to place it at his throat.

I saw a flash of movement towards my thigh, followed by a sudden

pain. I looked down to see a needle sticking in it. Quick guy. Quicker than me. I hadn't thought anyone was quicker.

I stumbled and collapsed against the doorway. The man watched me as I closed my eyes and drifted away.

"Sweet dreams, Mr. Redd."

_

Previous: **16. Mr. Fish** by Dexanote

Next: Epilogue by Anaxagoras

Back to Hub

Happy birthday iamtycho

End of Line

"Glad to see everyone here."

"For those of you who don't know me, I am MTF Commander Jessie Merlo of ***Gamma-13****. This is Commander Damion Creed of Tau-51. Those of you from* ***Mu-13****, welcome."*

"Let's get right to it then, shall we? Within the near future, we are anticipating a reactivation of ***SCP-3560****, followed by an assault on the site. This assault is likely to be led by* ***SCP-3860****, or as more of you probably know him by now, Vincent Anderson."*

"Our resident Thaumatologists have identified eight key positions throughout the facility that may serve as entry points for the inhabitants of SCP-3560. These include most of the labs in F and G Wings, sections of H and A, and the administrative offices. These areas have been fortified with several ***Hoffman Portable Electro-Thaumic Units*** *by our on-site staff. However, they alone will not be sufficient to deter a mass assault."*

"Until such a point that Command believes that SCP-3560 is likely to remain inactive, we'll be on standby. Each of your teams has been equipped with the needed materials for rapid exorcism. I'm told that the ammunition was reverse engineered from some old Specter tech by the ***Conwell Lab*** *before he retired. Good stuff."*

"3860 is to be terminated on sight. He'll try to make his way to the ***AIAD*** *lab; we think he wants to destroy an AI construct housed there. This is why so many of you will be stationed nearby. We believe 3860 is desperate and heavily wounded, so be ready for a fight."*

"Heh. Of course, this all hinges on the residents of SCP-3560 not killing 3860. Keep your fingers crossed that happens, and that this all proves to be a quiet, uneventful lockdown."

"-a quiet, uneventful lockdown."

Jessie Merlo's words echoed in her mind as she sprinted through the war-torn halls of **`Site-64's`** G-wing. A spectral Taita unit was in hot pursuit, its numerous legs crawling after her. The blood of three of her fellow agents dripped from its blades. Ahead of it, a small hoard of phantom Peregrine units led the charge.

"This is Merlo!" she shouted into her mic as she turned a corner. The Taita unit was closing in. "G-Wing has been overrun, Taita unit inbound, my team is down, need back up n-"

The agent felt her leg slip across a pool of blood. She hit the ground with a loud crack; her momentum carried her into the next intersection.

"No, no, no, no, NO, NO, NO, NO!"

She fumbled forward for her gun, attempting to preserve as much of the distance between her and them. She slipped again.

Flipping herself over, she leveled her pistol and fired off the rest of the magazine. Silver bullets crashed into the spectral automatons. One by one, the Peregrine units were exorcised — popping out of existence. The Taita unit gave a loud mechanical whine in protest, its form beginning to evaporate as the incantation took effect. It still crawled forward, blades whirling. Jessie crawled back on her hands. She hit a wall.

She closed her eyes and waited for the pain.

"STAY DOWN!"

Gunshots. A loud, mechanical whine. Silence.

Jessie's eyes snapped open. From her left, a team of Mu-13 agents approached. Their guns were trained on where the Taita unit had crumpled. The lead agent spoke into his mic.

"Mu-13, Team C. G-Wing resecured, retrieving casualties, over."

He looked at Jessie and smiled.

"You alright, Commander Merlo?"

"Never better," she said with a nervous laugh. A Mu-13 agent helped her to her feet. She reloaded her pistol and surveyed the carnage down the hall. Then, she closed her eyes and sighed. "That thing came out of the fucking floor and eviscerated three of my agents. Too big for the Hoffman units to do much other than give it a tickle."

"Yeah, ghosts will do that from time to time." The Mu-13 leader signaled for the rest of his team to make their way down the hallway and search for survivors. "Always fun."

"Any sign of 3860 on your end?"

"Negative."

She frowned and rubbed her temple. "Come on. You've got to make your move eventually."

"We have to make our move eventually." **Hector** observed as he loaded a rifle he had acquired from a deceased MTF operative. The apparition turned its head to the frail cyborg that sat at the nearby security console.

"I'm well aware of that… #31," Anderson replied with labored breaths as he typed away at the keyboard. "Our move will go so much better, though… if we know where we are going. Benny will be… back soon. In the meantime, we can prep."

"Right. Couldn't we just have Benny fry the computer now? Save us the trouble?"

Anderson shook his head.

"This was always meant to be… a one-way trip. I need to say… goodbye. You understand?"

Hector nodded.

"It's your funeral."

"So, it is." Anderson gave a wheezing chuckle.

A few minutes later, a shimmering orb on spindly legs phased through the wall. It let out a little chirp to announce its presence.

"Speak of the devil." Anderson held out an open palm. "What have you got for us, Benny?"

The droid vanished, then reappeared on Anderson's hand, delivering an intricate series of chirps. The old cyborg nodded. With his spare hand, he pressed the enter key on the security console.

Throughout the facility, the sound of security doors shutting filled the air. The lights died and were replaced with the soft glow of emergency lighting. Nodding at his work, Anderson removed a black flash drive from the console. A simple white ampersand was branded on its front.

"Help me up, #31." Anderson pressed Benny to his chest. The little droid phased through the tissue and vanished. "It's time for us to leave."

"Report."

Assistant Director of Task Forces Clarissa Shaw stood within the main site security office, which had since been turned into a temporary command post. The low buzz of several Hoffman Portable Electro-Thaumic Units filled the room, ensuring a bubble of ectomorph exclusion. Before her, multiple screens showed video footage of the halls, labs, and offices of Site-64.

"Gamma-13, Team B, Cafeteria has been cleared. We've managed to close the SCP-3560 instance in the kitchen. Tau-51 A assisting in mop up. Over."

"Mu-13 Team C, G wing resecured. Recovered Gamma-13 A operatives and are still assisting with evac of casualties. Over."

"Tau-51 B, standing post. No sign current sign of target or additional hostiles. Over."

"Mu-13 Team B, primary SCP-3560 instance secured top side. No additional hostiles since the fifth wave. Standing by, over."

"Think he gave up?" a security technician asked, looking up from her monitor.

Shaw shook her head. "This was a pretty elaborate effort to just throw in the towel like that. He's got something up his sleeve, we just got to figure out wh-"

The room went dark. Emergency lights kicked on.

"You've got to be fucking kidding me," Shaw said under her breath. "Alright, everyone, game day, whatever fucking happened I want it fixed! Tau-51 B, incoming!"

Ten members of MTF Tau-51, Team B, stood in the dim emergency lighting. Each had their weapon at the ready. The security doors up and down the hall had been sealed, leaving them alone in the dark. Within a confined space. Nearly half a mile underground.

No member of the team made a sound, save their breath. On occasion, each member of the team swore they could hear the other's heartbeat.

Where are you? A bead of sweat rolled down the operative's face. His eyes panned the dark hallway.

Click.

The lights came back on. The task force members blinked as they readjusted to the brightness.

"Control was that you?" the team leader asked.

"Negative, this is all on Anderson."

"Any visuals? Help us help you."

"Negative, those systems are still down. We're trying to get them back up as fast as we can. Hang tight."

"Easy for you to say," the team leader mumbled. "Looks like we're still in the dark, fellas. Stay-"

Two team members dropped, their armored forms ballistically shredded.

The surviving members turned, leveled their weapons, and opened fire as a phantom Peregrine sprinted across the hallway. It had a machine gun in its hand and phased through the opposite wall.

"Contact!"

The team fanned out and prepared itself for a game of cat and mouse. The game did not last long.

The door behind them opened to the sound of crackling electricity. The team leader turned his head. Vincent Anderson stood at the threshold, his index finger extended. A blue bolt of energy lashed out from its tip.

Three more members of the team dropped. The remainder scattered, only to be struck by globs of neon-orange goo. The material hardened into a shell, incapacitating the unfortunate soldiers.

"I believe… we're done here. #31, would you kindly?" Anderson stumbled to a wall to prop himself up. Soon after, Hector reappeared and approached the cyborg, offering his shoulder for support. The two began to make their way onward.

"I think that went well." Hector stepped over a cocooned MTF operative.

"Swimmingly." Anderson nodded.

There was a series of bangs. The cyborg fell to the floor, his spectral companion evaporating in an instant. Several silver bullets lodged themselves in his torso. He turned his head. The monochrome comedy mask had chipped from where it hit the floor.

One of the MTF operatives squirmed away.

Anderson let out a shallow sigh. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a glob of neon-blue goo, chucking it through the air. It landed on the operative with a small plop, then began to hiss. Anderson watched the agent squirm and howl as their skin began to melt. Seconds later the operative then became still. A baseball-sized hole had been punched through the orange cocoon.

Anderson shook as he got himself back on his feet and hobbled to the nearby wall for support.

"I-I-I-I don't think… we'll-ll-ll-ll… have any more tro-tro-tro-trouble, will we-e-e-e-e-e?"

Anderson crept onward. Eventually, he arrived at the door Benny had informed him Phineas resided behind.

As Anderson reached into his pocket to pull out more of the neon blue goo, the door opened. The old cyborg was met face to face with the business end of a shotgun. Behind it was Director Sasha Merlo. Anderson looked at the weapon then into his nemesis's eyes.

"Well played, Sasha," he sputtered.

BANG

Anderson slumped to the floor. Sasha pumped the weapon again and fired.

BANG

Once for all the agents lost.

BANG

Again for all the careers ruined.

BANG

A third time for the grief he had given her family.

BANG

A final time for herself.

The final shells hit the ground. Vincent Anderson was still.

Sasha let out a sigh and lowered the weapon. She watched the body for a minute in silence, then began to laugh. Kneeling down, she pulled off the comedy mask and threw it away.

"Got you."

Sasha returned to her feet. She wore a satisfied smile as she went to assist the bound MTF members. She stopped when she heard a sad chirp. Slowly, she turned to look over her shoulder. Atop Anderson's corpse was a familiar Amur drone. The drone looked at her, then darted off towards the computer housing Phineas.

"No."

Sasha sprinted to the door, just in time to watch Benny dive through the air, phasing into the computer's hard drive.

"No!"

She pierced the room, slamming her hand into the button to activate the AIC. The computer sparked, and for a brief moment, a message flashed upon the screen.

Goodbye, Director Merlo.

The screen then went dark.

"NO!" Sasha howled and began to beat on the keyboard with her fists. "You don't get to win this time, Vince! No!"

She then shook the console, before kicking it several times.

"Director?"

Sasha did not hear Jessie enter, nor see the multitude of MTF operatives standing in the doorway.

"God damn it! We had you! We had you fucking bastard!"

"Director!"

"Rot in hell, Anderson! ROT IN HELL!"

"Mom!"

Sasha felt her daughter shake her. Her expression of rage melted away.

"Mom," Jessie said. "It's over. You won."

Sasha nodded and closed her eyes as tears built up. Jessie pulled her into a hug, and Director Sasha Merlo, former Commander of Asimov's Lawbringers, broke down.

Silence fell Site-64, save for an old woman's defeated sobs.

Vincent Anderson awoke upon his back, a blanket of mist obscuring the monochrome canopy above. He slowly lifted his head and looked around, he was alone.

With a relieved sigh, he got to his feet and brushed himself off. He was still dressed in the clothes he had worn when he died, the fabric pierced with countless holes from the shotgun blasts. Despite this, however, his pain was gone, and he felt lighter.

"Guess this answers one question," he said to himself. For a moment, the old cyborg took in the silence. "Rest in peace, Phineas. Where ever you are, I'm sorry."

The silence was broken by the sounds of applause.

"Well done." A familiar voice sounded from behind a tree."Selfless as always."

`Saker #76` stepped into view.

"Now, I believe a debt has come due."

Anderson raised his index finger and then paused. A frown soon appeared.

"Your magic won't work here, Mr. Anderson." Another voice cooed from Anderson's right. He turned to see a Peregrine unit emerge from the mist. "You're dead."

Anderson backed away and raised his other hand. A long thin wire shot forth and pierced the Peregrine's head. The droid shot back, but within a few moments was back on its feet and resumed closing in.

"We're dead too, you idiot," laughed a third voice from behind. "You have no more cards left to play."

"Stay back!" Anderson shouted. He whipped the wire around, slicing through several droids. The laughter that surrounded him only grew louder.

The wire snagged, and Anderson looked around. His vision was filled with the smiles of scores of androids.

"Hector won't let you do this," Anderson shouted. "**The Maxwellists** will come for me. I'll get to the Data Transmuters. I'll escape. Eventually, I always —"

"There's no place left to escape to," Saker #76 cut him off, shouting above the deafening roar of laughter. "It's the end of the line, Mr. Anderson. Welcome home."

Six Months Later

Upon the Oregon Coast, a man and a woman sat within the confines of their cottage. Curled together on a couch, each had a glass of red wine in hand. The warm rays of the dying sun cast themselves through the glass patio door and painted the room's interior with vibrant yellows, oranges, and reds. The waves in the distance caught the light and danced with fluid fire as twilight set in.

The woman yawned and rested her head on her husband's shoulder. In return, he wrapped an arm tightly around her and kissed her forehead. She smiled and gave him a quick peck on the cheek.

"Thank you," Gabe spoke.

"For what?" Sasha asked.

"Coming through the other side in one piece," Gabe answered. "And not leaving me to spend these years a widower."

"Well you know me, I do try." Sasha snickered.

"Do you miss it?"

"I think part of me always will. But hey, all things come to an end, right?"

"Right," Gabe chuckled. "Still, thank you all the same."

Sasha nodded and then grinned, raising her half empty glass of wine.

"To Asimov's Fuckups," she said.

"To Asimov's Fuckups," he replied.

They then returned their eyes to the horizon, in time to watch the sun fade and give way to dusk, and a sky full of countless stars.

« **Volatile Memory** | **End of Line** | **END**

End of the Month

Researcher Felix was playing a game. To his left sat D-2768, who liked to be called Sam. To his right, D-478, Harry. Across from him, Jeremy. The board was spread before them all, miniature figures locked in an eternal battle to the death.

"Well Sam. It seems as though you're being attacked by a Mage. Best roll and avoid that."

Sam shuddered, stretched, and tapped a switch. Through one nearby window a slight flickering light was visible.

Click
Crack
Click

Felix glanced through the window, and then looked back at Sam.

"Congratulations Sam. A sixteen."

Sam shook himself, horrified, but at least he wasn't dead yet. He hated himself.

"Alright Harry, your turn again. Try not to cock it up too badly."

Harry slid his figure, a cleric, closer to Sam's warrior and directly next to a small goblin enemy.

"I wanna punch that one right there, if I can."

"Indeed you can Harry. Roll."

Harry tipped the switch without hesitation.

Click
Crack
Click

"Ooh, too bad Harry. A four. You missed him, and how you managed to is beyond me. Rotten luck. Jeremy?"

This was Jeremy's third game, and Felix was quite impressed with that. Normally people had given up by then.

"Backstab the bastard in front of me."

"Excellent choice. Roll."

Click
Crack
Click

"You killed the poor man! Oh dear. Excellent form though, I do appreciate that. Continuing! Sam?"

"I- I'd like to attack the same guy as last time."

"Fantastic. Roll."

Sam froze, his finger on the switch, shaking violently.

"Come on Sam, we haven't got all day. Roll."

Sam made a fist, and bashed his hand against the table. He stood, his chair clattering to the floor behind him, and screamed red-faced at Felix.

"I can't do it! I can't do it anymore! This is awful, how can you do this to people it's outrageous and I won't participate in this for another-"

Sam barely even noticed the taser before he was out cold.

He awoke in a small concrete room, his orange jumpsuit replaced with a black design bearing a large, white number on the back.

"Oh no. Oh no no nononono…"

He could hear everything through the metal sliding door that made up the entrance to his cell.

Click

Crack
Click

And somewhere around the room, the sound of a door banging open, pausing, and slamming shut.

Click
Crack
Click

Sam pulled himself together. He would die with dignity. He wasn't here because he had lost, he was here because-

Click
Crack
Oh God.
Click

Not his door. Not this time.

Another step closer though. He could hear muffled sobbing.

Click
Crack
Click

Another door. The one next to his? The anticipation was-

Click
Crack
Click

The sobbing was gone. His door didn't open. But Sam knew he was next.

Click
Crack
Click

The door to his cell shot open and the tiny floor inside tilted up, dropping him out into the large circular room beyond. The door slammed shut behind him.

He looked around the room in a daze. Nineteen other men and women dressed like Sam stood pressed against the walls of the room, staring behind him in a mix of horror and apprehension. A slew of dead bodies in the same suits as theirs lined the walls, their heads twisted into unnatural positions, a look of pure fear locked on their faces, terror etched into their expressions.

But where was *it*?

Sam followed the gazes of the other occupants of the room, towards the door that he presumed had opened before his.

A statue, holding the still-twitching corpse of a woman, frozen in place.

Sam wretched, grabbed at his stomach, began to stand-

And then the lights went out.

Click
Crack

Endings

> **Note:** This is part ten in a multi-part story based around the events leading up to the containment of **SCP-2982**. It is recommended that you read the previous entry Forgiveness first, or start from the beginning **At the Library**. You can even take a look at Golan too, for a tale based on one of the tests of the SCP object.

The story so far… *Helen Gwandoya and Aidan Brown are just two of many blackmailing victims of Harold Maine, a petty, unambitious man who has a mobile phone that can change people in gruesome ways. Even though the phone gives him almost unlimited power, he uses it almost exclusively to extort money from his associates and neighbors.*

Thanks to Maine, Helen is thalidomide impaired, and her daughter has been murdered by Aidan, an ordinary man turned grotesque, invisible half-man half-lobster paedophile by the same man. Nevertheless, the two are forced to act together if they are to escape Maine's clutches, and manage to enlist the help of another victim, ex-radio presenter Geoff Mansani, who Maine has altered so that everything he says is autocorrected.

Between them, they come to the realisation that they will never be free as long as Harold Maine lives.

Unfortunately for Helen Gwandoya and Aidan Brown, Geoff Mansani is also working for Maine…

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"We do this *now*."

"I don't know," said Aidan. "Maybe we should - "

"I'm not giving you a choice," said Helen. "We do this *now*. The last thing he'd expect is for us to strike him at home. We finish this. We get rid of him and then - "

"What? What then? We go back to normal? We get arrested? We stay as we are?" Even in the relative safety of Helen's home, Aidan's voice was hushed.

"You can't get arrested," Helen countered. "Nobody can see you."

Aidan took a swig of whisky, the platelets on his face clicking in appreciation. He savoured the taste before swallowing, allowing its warmth to permeate itself through his corrupted, nonesuch system.

"*He* can see me," he said finally. His claws clacked and closed fitfully. "He'll fucking see me and *everything* will be lost. What if he can read my mind? How do you know he can't do that right now? How else would he know about us?"

"I don't know," Helen admitted. "What would you suggest? Do you think waiting is a good idea? I sure as hell don't see him getting any weaker as time goes on. And I sure as fuck don't see us getting any stronger."

"So what's the plan?"

"We go to his place. I knock on the door. He opens it. You burst in, I leave. You find out how he does what he does. We know he overwrites something, you find out what. Make him change us back. You kill him. You leave. How you do it is up to you, but I can't be there. I can't watch."

"That's the plan? *You knock on his fucking door?* And then a crippled monster who can't even fucking walk without sticks, is expected to somehow interrogate and then kill him? How? Bad fucking breath? Jesus. What if he's got company? What if he's out? What if I can't do it and he screams and people come? Jesus - what would he do to me after that? What would he do to *us*?"

"You think it would be worse than it is now? I don't have hands anymore. I don't have a *daughter* anymore." Helen rounded on

Aidan. "And you - you're a half-crustacean child-murdering paedophile. We live in dread every minute of the day. There is no release from this. How does it get worse?"

Aidan shrugged and leant forwards, massaging his apologetic lung. "I don't have answers," he said. "What about the fan club? There might still be others like us. We could band together."

"We tried that," said Helen. "Dont you remember Olivia Hulme? The self-harmer? We're not X-Men. Even if we found somebody - and you *know* that won't happen now - what could we do? Everyone's too scared to help."

"Not everyone," said Aidan.

"True," said Helen. She turned to the third person in the room, the one person who had yet to speak. "You're the only person who's on our side. What do *you* think?"

"I think type rockery, " said Geoff Mansani. "I think you're rockery." He stopped and gathered himself. "Rockery… Right."

Aidan straightened up again, his good hand forming a fist and kneading the small of his back as he did so. "Jesus, it fucking aches," he complained. Mansani continued, ignorant to his presence. "The VB last told me exodus CV is an CV aural on his own turf… "

Aidan snorted in derision. "Wow he's on your side," he said, "Hold the front page."

Helen disregarded him. "Carry on, Geoff," she said.

"Itself the lady thing he'd elect," he said. "Last… thing… he's expect. Am attack on gotta own peppery…. On… his… pen… own… property."

"That's easy for you to say," Aidan said, and a noise like ruined laughter came from his throat. Helen shot him a warning glance. "Oh come on," he said. "And anyway where's *he* going to be when the shit hits the fan?"

"Doesn't matter," said Helen. "Whatever help he can give - " she turned quickly to Geoff - "*you* can give, will be appreciated. Even if you're just the lookout. Whatever you can do, we'll take."

Geoff Mansani pulled something from his jacket. A stubby black cylinder with prongs at the end. Aidan Brown's good eye widened in amazement. "Fuck me," he exclaimed. "Is that what I think it is?"

Geoff placed it carefully on the coffee table. "It's a trader… tray… razer… Fuck. Silecroft socks. Electric socks. Shocks."

"A taser?" Helen asked. Geoff Mansani nodded. Aidan whistled.

"Guess that swings things back in our favor," Helen said. "Ok - come back here before seven. We'll finish this before the dawn."

"Jesus H Christ," said Aidan. "This is madness. How the fuck do you expect this to work?"

Helen shot him another withering glance and he raised his claws in capitulation. "Okay," he said. "Okay. You win."

"He won the see another sunrise," Geoff said.

"No," Helen agreed. "He won't see another sunrise."

Geoff Mansani nodded silently, thinking about his last conversation with Harold Maine. Less than a week ago the man had woken up, shit-covered and terrified, and demanded that Geoff come round straight away. He had suffered the most vivid nightmare, Maine said. He had been attacked in his home by Helen and Aidan, and they had literally turned him into excrement. He had come apart, flesh turning to dollops of dung as he watched, and - as Helen, the love of his life walked away - the lobster monster had dragged him into the tiny bathroom and flushed him away forever.

Just a dream, but horrific nonetheless.

Maine trusted Geoff Mansani, he said. He had told him that if he helped foil such an attack in the future, he would give him his voice back. Hell, he would make him a *star.* So now, with just such an attack mere hours away, the ex radio presenter had a difficult

decision to take. He had promised to help Maine, and if he *did*, he would be relatively safe - but he would never be free.

He looked at Helen, at the ruin of her arms and hands. At her hollow, sunken eyes. She had been crying a lot, he realised. The rape and murder of your only child would do that to you, he thought. His eyes went involuntarily back to her birth defects. Her disfigured, malformed fingers, her tiny t-rex arms.

He shook his head, the road suddenly clear, and made his choice.

"You can VB reply… VB relying… rely CV on me," he said.

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Carol Paris waited in the unmarked car. The sun was low in the sky, a baleful beacon in the gathering dusk. "Come *on*," she whispered. "What's going on?"

A heavily built man gestured for her to wind down her window. She shook her head. He brought out from his jacket an ID badge and held it for her to see. He came round to the passenger side. She opened the door, and Lieutenant Dimitri huffed into the seat next to her. She repeated her question. "Always wondered what you look like," she said. "What's going on?"

"Things have come to a head," said the agent. "Our hand is being forced. Shame, because we were about to put covert surveillance in place. Too late now - we waited too long. Oh, and Caruso says he told you so."

"He did, did he?"

"It's no secret he wanted a Meet and Greet weeks ago. He doesn't know why we had to - "

"He doesn't know a lot of things," Carol said. "Leave it at that…"

"Okay…"

"Damned right, okay. So what's going on now? Why the sudden activity?"

"F1 and M2 have just turned up at Harold Maine's apartment. MTF is on its way, they should be there any second. Hopefully they're not too late."

"Christ," said Carol. "Time is 21:17. We'll be there in ten if the traffic's good."

"Yeah. I just hope whatever made us hang back with this one was worth it."

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Helen stood at the main door of Harold Maine's apartment block and looked at the watch Mansani had bought her just for this occasion. Eight thirty seven. Aidan and Geoff Mansani had gone ahead of her, walking quietly and anxiously up the stairs to the fifth floor, lost to the gloom in the badly lit hallways.

The plan, such as it was, was simple. Aidan and Geoff would go first and hide around the corner of his apartment. There was no danger of Aidan being seen, after all, although the smell would sooner or later give him away. Helen would follow them up and knock on Maine's door. Surprised at her visit, Maine would allow her inside. Aidan and Geoff would burst in and overpower Maine. Helen would leave and the two men would try and drag out as much information from Maine as they could about how he performed his grotesque miracles, and make him change them back. Then they would kill him. If they could leave with the source of his power, so much the better. Otherwise they risked it falling into the hands of someone else, and they still wouldn't be free.

It would look like an accident, so there would be no struggles, no screams, no police involvement.

Eight thirty-eight. It was time. She pushed open the front door and walked in as confidently as she could. Sounds of televisions turned up loud to hide the neighbors' arguments. Cheap carpet, badly

painted walls. The scent of cigars, cheap cigarettes and joints. She walked up the first flight of stairs to the second floor. There were wonders right here in this building; monsters both human and otherwise; malevolent, horrific miracles that defied understanding. That the mundane and the grotesquely fantastical could live side by side so easily beggared belief.

The third floor. Damp on the walls, mould forming in the corners where the moisture gathered. Less noise. A TV or two, and a sound system pumping out aggressive, misogynistic music. She proceeded onwards and upwards.

The fourth floor. The air seemed heavier - no, that wasn't right. It felt like it was *thicker* somehow, as if there was some anomalous force in effect that slowed her movement and made her fight for every new intake of breath. She looked at the mould thriving and plotting in the corners, could almost see the spores spreading like gossamer-thin threads along the walls and ceiling. She was breathing them in, she thought, and she closed her eyes and envisioned her lungs blackening with damp. She felt it worm its way into her bloodstream, felt her body temperature drop as the filaments took hold within her.

Get a fucking grip, she said to herself. She looked up; the mould was just mould, the black patches just that - but the sense of dread, of active, alert malice, did not leave her.

The fifth floor. This was it. Harold Maine's domain. There was a grimy, clingy feel to the air, as if countless years of cigar smoking hung invisibly in the corridor. Once again she found herself fighting to breathe. The carpet was grubby and damp. There were unidentifiable shapes within the weave that giddied her senses. She looked back down the hall, saw the ceiling light flickering in the gloom. Dust motes drifted lazily in the small circumference of ungloom, swirling randonly like deep sea protozoa. It felt like she had somehow found herself on the sea bed. And wouldn't that be appropriate, for a lobster man and a woman who's hands were more in keeping with something crawling on the ocean floor? The patterns on the carpet spoke of chasms and unfathomable, dank darkness, of things hidden and waiting and hungry in the depths of the world. Was this why the air felt so heavy - because she was underwater, and an ocean of weight was above her?

She pushed the images from her mind as best she could and counted down the numbers on the doors. Thirty nine, forty, forty-one… forty two. She stopped. Unlike the others, this door had a heavy metal grille placed over it, locked from the inside. She listened for a moment - there were sounds of life inside. A radio, running water. Metal on crockery.

She knocked on the door, vaguely aware that she was almost about to lose control of her bladder, and waited for a reply. Around the corner, she hoped, Aidan and Geoff were poised to strike.

There was movement inside the apartment. Noises getting louder as the occupier grumbled his way towards the spyhole. The plan was shit, she realised. It had zero chance of working. Her only hope was to flee. She was about to run, no longer equal to the task ahead of her, when the door swung open inwards and the monster she had come to unravel revealed himself. It regarded her initially with surprise, then greed, then suspicion through the locked grille. It was a creature of few words.

"Fuck," said Harold Maine. "What the fuck are you doing here?" He peered over Helen's shoulder into the hallway behind her. "Fuck," he said again. "You alone?"

"Yes," she replied.

"You look nervous," he noted.

"I… wanted to talk to you," Helen offered.

"Why?"

"I was hoping that maybe we… I feel so alone. Since Angela died."

"Oh yeah," Maine grunted. "I heard about that." She felt his gaze drift down to her ruined arms. "I'm sorry for your loss," he said, but he licked his lips with absent minded wanting.

"It's - I can't talk out here."

"Yeah," Maine said. His eyes narrowed. "Something smells… *fishy*, doesn't it?"

"I don't know," Helen said, her heart suddenly pounding in her chest. *Christ*, she thought. *Please don't see through this*. Maine watched her bosom heave, entranced by the rise and fall. "I just knew I had to come here," she said. The words almost failed her.

Around the corner, Aidan's legs shook. *Just open the fucking grille.*

Maine pondered. He had always wanted her and she was here at last. Helen Gwandoya fought the surging panic; she knew she looked terrified and vulnerable, broken and desperate. That's what Harold Maine would want, that's what he would expect. Her one chance at entry into the apartment depended on lust overpowering common sense.

Around the corner Geoff Mansani and Aidan Brown gave one last prayer to whatever gods still cared for them, and steeled themselves for the horrors ahead. The time was upon them. The time of reckoning.

Maine raised his eyebrows and clicked his teeth. Then, his eyes never leaving her, he unlocked the grille and cast another look around the hallway. Satisfied that she was indeed alone, he pushed the metal frame outwards. "You'd better come in," he said.

The metal grate swung open. The apartment beyond was dark, illuminated only by a silent television and the neon signs outside. Maine wiped his forehead as he beckoned her in. "This must be my lucky fucking day," he whistled, and Helen Gwandoya crossed the boundary silently. Behind her, an ex-radio jockey and a blasphemous, crippled child murderer checked one last time for witnesses, and swung around the corner.

Harold Maine had minutes to live. He would be found dead by a secret organisation, his head lodged face down in the toilet, apparent victim of a bizarre accident. He would not be missed or mourned.

Geoff Mansani picked up his pace. He knew the lobster thing was right behind him, although he could neither see nor hear it. He held the taser under his jacket, reassured by its weight, and counted down the door numbers. Forty five, forty four, forty three. He

reached forty two just as Gwandoya disappeared inside. The neighbors left or right or above or below would not call the police or raise the alarm, no matter what ungodly noises they heard. And if the police did come, they would be waylaid and distracted. A mother suddenly screaming for a lost child, a dispute between brothers that would spill out into the corridors and slow things down. There would be confusion and chaos. They knew what was expected.

And so did Geoff Mansani. He grabbed the metal grille even as Harold Maine swung it shut and pushed past Helen Gwandoya. He could feel Aidan Brown's presence behind him, hot and damp and vengeful, and he guessed that Maine could see him too. Why else would he have just lost control of his bladder, if not at the sight of the lobster thing at his door? His next words confirmed it.

"You!" Harold cried, and his face was white with fear. Aidan Brown pushed past both Helen and Geoff and grabbed Maine by the throat. He turned back to Helen and panted, "Get out. Go!" She looked at Mansani briefly; he was readying the taser, waiting for Aidan to bring Maine down. Although Maine struggled, he was undone by Aidan's extra bulk, his vestigial legs and carapace weighing down the man even as he cried out in alarm. He sank to the floor with a shriek.

Aidan looked back at her again. "Go!" He shouted, and this time she obeyed, but not before one last glance; Geoff Mansani was standing over the two entangled on the floor, taser in hand, ready to deliver the incapacitating blow. Each of the three looked more terrified than the others.

She fled the apartment in tears. Suffering was suffering, no matter how well deserved. The door slammed shut behind her and she half ran, half stumbled down the corridor and down the stairs until she reached the bottom; she sank down sobbing onto the floor, gasping for breath, and waited for damnation or deliverance.

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Some Are Born To Endless Light

It is a pleasant Sunday morning.

Reaching her hand out to shut down her bedside alarm, May lazily rolls off her bed, her hair messily thrown over her face as always. Shoving strands aside, May swipes across lines of messages from her friends, all wishing each other a good night. Timestamps all from over 12AM. Yeah, last night was a blast. May yawns as she drags herself into the bathroom and heats up the water. Nothing beats the winter cold better than a warm morning shower, she thinks, as she dresses up and ties her hair into a bun.

May dances down the flight of stairs, humming a soft rhythm along the way. Sliding the kitchen door open, May is greeted with the delicious smell of pancakes and bacon. Two others are also in the kitchen, beaming at her.

"Morning, sweetie. You are early today."

"Morning, Mom. It'd be a waste to sleep in on such a beautiful day" May smiles, suddenly realizing an absence. "Where's Dad?"

"Oh, he had to leave early. Said there were important things to deal with. Strange weather or something." Mom chuckles. "Sometimes I honestly wonder if he's working at a research institute or a fantasy nerd club."

"Ha, could be." May pulls out a chair and sits down by her young brother. Mom brings each of them a glass of milk. They have breakfast and talk about silly things. May is happy. Life is peaceful, and she wishes it to stay like this forever.

There was a deafening bang, and before the sound reached their ears, the light from outside the window scorched their eyes and vaporized them into nothingness.

May snaps upright from her comforting bed, sweat pouring profusely from her face. She scrambles up towards the window and forces open the curtains. Typical sight for a winter morning, nothing odd or out of place. A car is parked in front of the house.

It was just a nightmare, May reassures herself, her breathing still heavy. She reaches for the phone that she knocked over in her panic, swiping through the messages again. Yeah, it was just a nightmare, probably not a good idea to watch horror movies before bed, May smiles as she sends a playful blame to her friends. She throws the phone aside and begins her morning routine.

"Morning, hon. You look exhausted."

"Morning, Dad. Probably from staying up too late."

"It's not bad to stay up every now and then. Prepares you for future sleepless nights working on papers and stuff." Dad winks at her.

They sit down and have breakfast, and her dad begins to talk about his strange encounters again. May is intrigued by how her dad always makes it so immersive and believable, even if she is wondering if he has been playing too much DnD like Mom said in her dream.

Another strange encounter occurred that morning, and the stories were cut off by a new Sun rising in the middle of the town, obliterating everything it touches.

May snaps upright from her comforting bed, sweat pouring profusely from her face.

Something isn't right.

She scrambles to the window again. Still a normal sight for a winter morning. May is in shock. What is happening? Is this some kind of future prediction, or telepathic warning? She sits back down on her bed, face in her hands, trying to comprehend the sheer incomprehensibility of what just happened to her.

May skips her morning routine, wraps a jacket over her pajamas,

then hurries down the stairs, past the kitchen, towards the front door.

"Morning, sweet- Wait, where are you going?"

She opens the door and is greeted with a barrage of freezing winds in her face. Coughing up the snow in her mouth, May turns her gaze upon the sky. Something is *definitely* not right. Behind the thin layers of winter clouds, she can make out the faint, ever-changing silhouettes near the horizon. More like masses of shapeshifting colors, colors that are definitely not normal for a sky color. As she is stunned by the odd sight, her dad walks up behind her. His mouth drops a bit.

"This… this is not normal. Wait a minute, I'll be right back."

She watches as he runs back into the house, pulling out his phone and dialing someone. Within minutes, he returns with her dumbfounded mom and brother, not understand anything that's going on. There's barely anything happening, anyways, just your typical color-and-shape-shifting-thingy in the sky. Her dad shoves all of them, still in pajamas and thin jackets, into the car and drives away from town, looking very concerned. However, May, in the front seat, can see in his eyes that he doesn't know what to do. Maybe this is nothing more than a weather phenomenon and her dad is worrying everyone over nothing.

Her thoughts, along with her family's, and also their car, are completely wiped off in an instant. The last thing any of them ever saw was a blinding white light.

May snaps upright from her comforting bed, and instantly knows that something is *extremely* wrong. Without any thought, without scrambling to the window, without even putting on a jacket, May finds herself at the kitchen door, screaming at everyone to get out of the house. Her dad isn't there. He has left early again.

Screaming to no avail, she pulls at her mom's arm, drags her to the front door. But her mom is not, at all, worried by the thing in the sky as her dad was. May is desperate. With her mom looking at her as if

she has gone nuts, she knows that it was pointless. May runs. Runs as fast as she can, ignoring her mom yelling at her from behind. She runs past houses, past people moving in the opposite way, past the occasional vehicles that pass by. Her legs are in pain. She keeps running. At times, she runs into people that she knows, friends and neighbors alike, no one has any idea why she is running away. No matter what they ask, her only response is, "*Run.*" She keeps running on the snow-covered path, for what seems like eternity.

It was finite, however. All that's left of her is a faint shadow on the nearby wall, which is later washed away by torrents of poisoned and filth-filled rain.

May snaps upright, and runs downstairs.

Her dad is there.

Without a word, she brings him to the front door. It worked. At the sight of the sky, her dad immediately escorts her clueless family to the car. The engine comes to life, and off they go. Her mom and her brother keep asking questions, and all she is able to respond is "*We need to leave.*" Her dad is no better. He appears to be in deep shock, sweat pouring from his pale face. He looks as if he has seen some kind of otherworldly eldritch horror. Maybe he has.

They keep driving, and driving, and driving. They reach the town border. They keep driving, driving, and crash into something. A transparent, no, *invisible* barrier. Encasing the whole entire town. As she gazes helplessly into the road beyond, her dad frantically scrambles through his phone, calling for help forces.

This time, May actually had a split second to look at the light, before her eyeballs are torn off from her face. She briefly writhes in agony as her skin melts away from her twisted flesh and bones, tainting the once-white snow.

May snaps upright, and there was light. Her blood splatters onto the invisible wall, drop by drop joining each other.

And again, there was more light. Her flesh melds into her mom's, with the bones of her brother smearing over.

Once more, another blinding light. May's organs burn her inside out, fixing her to the once comfortable bed.

Not enough, here's more light. The demons slip through the makeshift barricade in her garage, toy with her mind and feast on her flesh.

She stands inside it. There is only light. Nothing else.

It keeps repeating over and over, the endless light slowly burning away the will of escaping in her.

May wakes up. She lies on her back, staring at the bland ceiling.

She sits up, peeks through the window curtains.

It is not just a small spot near the horizon anymore. They are all over the sky now. Masses of ever-changing shapes and colors, every time more chaotic than the last.

May smiles, teardrops forming in her eyes.

She looks down. Some people on the street appear to have noticed the signs of the end.

Of the light.

Maybe the light is the reason behind all of this.

Maybe the light has brought her an eternity of suffering.

She can't escape.

She can't fight against it.

She can't let herself succumb to the light anymore.

Her breaths shorten, drowned among muffled screams. Her hands fight each other to resist the urge to cling on to the light.

From the chair beneath her, one could see a shadow rocking back and forth.

At the end, there was light, keeping her shadow in place one last time.

Item Description: A nuclear snow globe. When shaken, instead of falling snow, it shows a miniature-scale nuclear explosion. It emits no radiation, sound, or force, and the explosion pattern changes every shake. Aftereffects such as radioactive snow and black rain have been observed. At random intervals, the snow globe will contain a small shed, car, or truck, which reacts to the explosion.
Date of Recovery: - -
Location of Recovery: Sokrovenno, Russia.
Current Status: In storage.

Mitochondria

There are vague memories of light at the beginning.

His body is compressed and cold. There is the cold of concrete on his skin so much that it is his skin- the cold smell of paint and rebar in his breath that's lost in the twisting passageway above him. From time to cold, cold time he hears the cave move, scratch, rumble, the only movement his body has.

He struggled once to move his leg, to feel it, but the rock is cast to his foot, his bones fuzed together (how many joints does a man have?). He cannot remember being smaller than eight, remembers when he grew, grew, his back became large enough to crack the concrete compressing his ribs, (move his abdomen to conserve heat but it is cold) but his ribs are conformed now, twisting and turning around the hard concrete. No room to move. Arms out in front. There is no crying. No crying. He cannot see- the concrete is conformed around his open eyes, only his nose and mouth exposed to air, the tube in his anus. The time he cries the tears stick to his skin and pool into the (cold) concrete.

There is food.

Food comes to him. Comes. Comes. Smacks onto him so he must eat in order to breathe. Hair. Nails. Teeth. The bones cram into his throat and make him choke. The marrow is the best. Animal fur. Blood fills the cavern and he almost drowns, almost passes out, he cannot move, his head is trapped inside. (How many joints does a man have?) For he only has his jaw, slipping, slamming, darkness inside. The womb. The womb. The womb. His abdomen constricts and he shits out the pipe.

Time moves faster sometimes than not but there is no passage, how many joints does a man have? His father. Sometimes, the cave mouth opens and there is a moment before wet meat slaps down on his crusted lips that he sees harsh white light flood inward and the

muscles of the rock constrict, he is one but cannot move. It does not speak but gives him food. He loves the rock as it hugs him tight. Pelvis broken and regrown to the curvature of the rock's insides he opens his mouth with blind desperation and consumes hair sliding down his throat long, long hair, then lips like his own that squish like skin and burst into meat and then teeth that grind against his own and he struggles to breathe again.

It's cold, cold, cold, his world is cold and hard and dark. He hears nothing through the concrete in his eardrums. He has been here as long as the rock has moved and it took his shape, roughly, he laughs.

Arms outstretched, **`the rock`** feeds him.

Enjoy the Silence

I like it here.

I always liked the little pockets of forest left over between cities, the places where it wasn't worth anyone's time to level the ground or log the trees. It's not exactly the wilderness, but it's peaceful enough to give you the feeling, and there probably aren't bears.

Since my eardrums got busted, of course, it wasn't the same. The sunlight and shadows were the same, but half the quietness of the woods is actually the little sounds of leaves and twigs and maybe water. Just enough noise to make you feel like there's hardly any. Sometimes people ask me (with those long pitying faces) how I can live without music, or voices, but I think it's that not-silence that I miss the most.

When we secured **`this place`** back in '03, and the others told me how the sound was baffled almost out of existence, I figured hey, everyone hears the same nothing here. I'm not missing anything. I guess I was pissed off at Mace for a while when we found he'd brought Smith here — who the hell did he think he was? What gave him the right? But whenever I had some time off in the area, I would come up here and sit and it started to make sense. Nowhere safer in the world.

Zhao's saying something. The others are looking at her like they can *almost* hear her. Dee rolls her eyes and waves impatiently at the area. Zhao sighs and starts signing instead.

Any ideas?

I think it's pretty obvious, Richards signs. *Maybe it's just a visit. He made this place for her — I'm not surprised he can't keep away.*

Dee and Zhao nod, but something's bugging me — something I've forgotten. It's happening more often than I'd like these days. I should

know why this is important, but it's jammed in a crevice in my head and I can't dig it out.

Up the hill and I can feel years of dead leaves crunch under my feet. Can't remember that sound anymore either, but half of it comes through the soles of your shoes anyway. Speech-to-text scrolls down my HUD as Dee grumbles about the hill, but I tune it out as usual.

I find the right vantage point behind a tree leaning back from the crown. From there I can see moving undergrowth in three directions where my teammates are coming, and one sorry-looking old man (old? no older than me) with a gun shoved in his belt, standing in a shaft of afternoon's last sunlight like he planned it. Knowing him, he probably did.

There's an older iPod and a pair of portable speakers sitting next to the cairn he left for Specialist Zoe Smith. And a hole in the ground just before them. And a tarnished silver urn overturned, a white sheet over the spilled contents.

I hoped they would send you, Charles Mace signs to me.

I hoped I wouldn't find you, I respond. *Haven't you done enough to her?*

Not yet.

The iPod screen shows something's playing. Of course no one else can hear it either. I flip on the HUD's zoom function to read the screen.

It's safe for us. The sound waves won't travel far enough. But it'll work for her.

"**Two four zero two**," I say out loud. It feels hoarse and for a moment I'm not sure if the software's picked it up properly, but then I see Richards's face through branches of red leaves, across the clearing about one o'clock. He looks… I don't know what that look is, but he damn sure knows what's happening. "He's trying to bring her back."

She knew this song before. Mace smiles. *I'll teach it to her again.*

The white sheet ripples a little. The leaves aren't moving.

I thought all I could do was give her peace. I should have known it wasn't enough. I won't fail her again.

He must see how I'm watching over his shoulder because he turns and pulls his gun on Richards. From the way his head moves I think he must be talking. Good luck with that, Richards can't lipread for shit.

And then Zhao just walks out of the bushes at my three. Her hands are empty, and it's hard to tell through the glare on her visor but I think she might be crying. What does she think she's doing?

It started going downhill when she left, she signs to Richards. *It fell apart when she died. We need her back.*

Oh.

We can't just come out of the woods with a dead colleague, Richards signs, but I can definitely read that expression. That's "please talk me into this" if I ever saw it.

We're facing armed resistance, Zhao signs. *No alternative. If we can't stop him…*

She and Smith were close. For me she was the kind of friend you make at work. You're glad to see them there, but nothing follows you home. I felt it more when she went on leave than when she died. But that doesn't mean Zhao is wrong, does it? Maybe we never had Eta-10's cachet, but we did lose something and it wasn't just a skill set or someone to spend coffee break with. She was the heart, or maybe the spine. Something you can't replace.

Mace looks from Richards to Zhao, then smiles and tucks his gun back into his belt. *We can all go back,* he signs. *I lost something too, when she died. Don't we all want another chance to fix our old failures?*

Sure, don't we all — if it were that easy. But what if it is? What if this

is all it takes, and you really can go back?

Richards stands upright all of a sudden. *Failure,* he signs, and his hands are trembling. *Paris. And the song at* ***`the party`****.*

The memory I was digging at suddenly tumbles out. Decades ago we got called out to *Sommes-Nous Devenus Magnifiques?*, it must've been the '84, because the organizers wanted us to mop up after this pretentious little shit Smith kept running into. Someone who kept harping on how everybody around him was a failure (except for him, of course) and this time he'd written some interminable po-mo requiem that turned half the anacoustic enthusiasts in Europe into screaming neurotics.

Because of the nightmares.

I was wondering when you would figure it out, Mace signs, looking at once smug and disappointed. *Consider yourselves lucky. My original plans for* ***`that piece`*** *were* far *more elaborate.*

Richards looks stunned. He's saying something to himself, but I can't quite catch it. I make a move toward the iPod, which has just kept on playing while we debate. They burned her body to ashes and laid her in an unmarked grave, and suddenly I'm glad for that sheet. How long now before those ashes swell into blackened meat and reeking rendered fat, wrapping around unshattered bones, slick with jellied blood —

Zhao stops me. I try to pull away, but she's got her fingers dug deep into my arm and she's not letting go.

She would have known right away, Mace signs. *She wouldn't have forgotten me. No one will forget me anymore.*

"She fought it!" Zhao shouts silently at me, shaking my arm to make me look. Her face is grotesque behind the visor, wrenched with desperation, streaked with tears and with colored lights from the HUD. "She wanted to live. The Foundation could have saved her, she begged them to save her, there's a dozen skips that could've done it but they let her die!"

Yeah. She fought it. It chewed up her belly and bred in her bones and still the doctors tried to burn it out, she wouldn't let them stop. They drowned her in poison and she still called for more. Last time I saw her she was yellow as old linoleum, skin hanging loose even on her skull, she was so thin. And that's where she'd wake into life, too weak to scream.

"You have to give her this chance! This is what she would've wanted, you know it is, you know it!"

Yeah, I know it.

I don't care.

I don't want it.

I grab a noisemaker off my belt. 110 dB, thirty seconds. More than enough.

Zhao tries for it. She misses.

Mace turns around just in time to see the sonic grenade land dead-center on the sheet.

He pulls his gun on me but doesn't fire. He knows it's too late.

The air ignites around us. There's no way this many butterflies could live in this small an area, but here they all are anyway, the guards Mace created to defend her. He was right the first time: she didn't belong in an unmarked grave. She belongs *here*. Safe. At rest after that last terrible fight, and all the ones that went before. Not dragged backward out of an ugly lingering death just because sometimes it's hard to let go.

As the monarchs swarm her grave, I can see tiny jewel-green pellets dropping out of the air. 2402's only defense: shrink them back into the chrysalis. It won't be enough. I can feel the pressure shift against my poor blown-out eardrums and I know the silence has won.

Mace is screaming, pulling at his hair — gun's still in your hand, buddy, bad idea. Better let me have that so you don't hurt yourself. It's probably not necessary to hit him in the face too, but I can't for

the life of me see why I shouldn't.

Zhao and Richards come out of cover, looking poleaxed the both of them, whether from sensory deprivation or something else I can't tell. Dee scrambles up from my left a few seconds later. How much of this she's put together is anybody's guess, but she looks… approving? Satisfied, anyway. A good day's work. She puts the restraints on Mace, none too gently, and gives me the thumbs-up. I pick my way through the tremor of orange and black wings to recover the iPod and its speakers.

When I turn back Zhao is looking into the ragged grave, where no butterflies have landed. I don't think she meant for me to see her face.

Enkidu

The Epic of Gilgamesh is one of the oldest ones in the book, one of the oldest stories written by the human race (that people these days care to remember, anyway.) It's a story that's been told time and time again throughout the millennia; a tale of pride, of redemption, of man's eternal struggle against his own nature, and his acceptance of his place in the universe.

Gilgamesh is the great king of Uruk. Wise, robust, unbeatable in combat, half-divine, one of the mightiest rulers in the entire world. But he's also arrogant, egotistical, and cruel to his subjects, who cry to the gods for relief. And so the gods send Enkidu, a wild man formed from the clay of the Earth, to end his reign of terror and teach him his role. But rather than defeating Gilgamesh through force of arms, he befriends the great king, and the two of them become as close as brothers. Together, they defeat all the horrors the gods can send at them - the terrible giant Humbaba, the rampaging Bull of Heaven, and the other monsters that history has forgotten or are now known by other names. In the end, the gods decide that Enkidu must die for his failure, and despite Gilgamesh's love and the ministrations of his healers, he slips away.

The bereaved king becomes obsessed with his own mortality, and searches the world for a way to cheat death. He travels far and wide before he meets Utnapishtim, the oldest man in the world, the only man to ever become immortal, and is humbled by him - for when the wise man challenges him to remain awake for seven days, he cannot even conquer sleep, let alone death. Utnapishtim relents and tells him of a single plant which can grant him unending youth - but after diving to the bottom of the sea itself to acquire it, it is stolen away from him and eaten by a snake.

Thus the tale ends, with Gilgamesh accepting his mortality and returning to Uruk to rule as a kinder, humbler lord. That's how the version that's known today ends, anyway. I went to great lengths to

ensure that the last few tablets were never rediscovered by anyone smart enough to piece things together. The truth is, Gilgamesh learned from Utnapishtim that there is a balance between life and death. For a man to live longer than his allotted time, others must have their lives cut short. For a man to live forever… well, it took years for Gilgamesh to figure out the techniques and teach them to those of his priests who were loyal enough, but in the end, he learned the secret.

At first they took the old and the sick to the sacrificial altars. Then the children, babies torn from their mother's breasts and thrown onto the pyres. Then the women - especially the virgins - who suffered untold depredations as the priests of Uruk snuffed out not only their lives, but their souls. Soon, anyone who showed their face on the streets of Uruk was fair game for those who served only out of the hope that they would be taken last. In the end, they were forced to turn on each other. The work was finally completed when the last two of the elders slit each others' throats while singing a song of praise to their new god. Gilgamesh would live forever - as king over a city populated only by the dead.

None could stop the great king as he tore a swath of destruction across the world with his new-found gifts. Entire armies fell before him, city walls crumbled at his coming. No man could defeat him - and even if he were cut to pieces and seemingly killed, he simply rose and returned again, bearing the scars of his defeats proudly as he hunted and annihilated those who had dared to stand before him. He sought not wealth, nor women, nor even worship or adulation from those he conquered - he did it because he could, and because it pleased him to do so. He always sought a greater challenge.

And the gods answered his challenge. They sent Enkidu back - for even from the land of the dead, he saw what his friend, his companion, his brother, had become, and could not abide it.

To bring the dead back to life is a difficult thing even for a god, of course. He was not as he had been - they couldn't find all his pieces and had to replace some of them with iron and bronze, and none who looked upon him could doubt that he was not a natural man. They granted him two divine boons to ensure that he would complete the task he had failed at before. First, a curse - that he

could never stay long in one place and become idle, for a pestilence would follow him and the men of the land would not abide his presence, nor would he find any food to eat. Second, a blessing - that no man or god, not even Gilgamesh, could harm him without harming himself.

The battle between them would have been a story told by people the world over - if any who witnessed it had lived. Entire empires crumbled around them as they grappled - great Al-Ilas with its silver spires, the city of Vemura and its fabled seven citadels, and I seem to recall that even the land of the Devas did not long endure when the battle found its way into their realm. The battle might have been the doom of all mankind itself - but on the dawn of the seventh day, in the seventh month, in the seventh year of their fighting, Gilgamesh struck Enkidu harder than he could bear, and when he felt the pain he had dealt to his brother, he fell.

"Let me go, my brother," said Gilgamesh, "for the day has broken, and I can fight no more."

"I cannot, my brother," Enkidu replied, "unless you shall let me bind you until the day the world is undone." And though it pained Gilgamesh to do so, his love for his brother was so great that he relented.

And so Gilgamesh was bound and sealed away, to wait until the day when he would face a power great enough to defeat him once and for all. As for Enkidu, the gift the gods had given him could not be surrendered, and he has wandered ever since. The story of the two brothers passed from history into legend, and Enkidu made sure enough of the details got forgotten that nobody again could do what his brother had done. In time, even the names got changed around. Enkidu would be known by many names over the years as he came and went; Osiris, Lazarus, Wandering Jew, St. Germain, and so on.

I'm pretty sure my name never really was Enkidu to begin with, though.

Ennui

> On / / , **SCP-1733**'s test log was found to have accumulated several more viewings. Upon discovery, the video was going through what is estimated to be the playback. Most of the video showed the stadium filled with multiple mutilated corpses of many figures present in previous playbacks. In the last five minutes of the playback, a single blood-drenched audience member wrestles the camera down and places it on the floor in front of him. The following is a transcription of his monologue:

I couldn't bring myself to do it, man. I just couldn't. We all agreed a while ago that we'd just kill ourselves in whatever way we could, but I just can't do it. We're in a living hell, and I'm still too much of a coward to die. I just… I can't…

> The man cries for the following twenty seconds.

This is all I can think of at this point. Trying to use the camera to get to someone out there. They've tried it before, they've tried it so many times, and it's never worked but… I just gotta try something. There's dead bodies everywhere, and this is all I can think of. It's a TV camera. Someone's gotta be out there. Producers or audience or… just someone who can help. I've gotta try.

If… no… you out there. You've gotta be out there. We're trapped. I don't know how, and I most certainly don't know why, but we're trapped. The game's been going on repeat for… God, I lost track back in the hundreds… It's been awful. It was just this weird feeling at first, but now I know that the exact same few hours have been happening again and again and again and again. And there's no way out.

For most of us, at least. I think there were a few lucky people who left in the middle of the first game to do… something. I don't know.

Once the crazy religious guys figured out that they could leave when nobody else could, they started torturing 'em. Never got a word out before they resorted to just bashing their heads against the walls at the start of every repeat.

But other than them, we don't have any way of getting out of this building. I'm not even sure an outside exists anymore. We're just in limbo, going around and around and…

> Several seconds of heavy breathing, followed by nervous laughter.

The shit we've seen. Only took a few dozen go throughs before they started forming cults. Didn't take much longer before they were sacrificing players and children in a desperate attempt to get out. And it just got worse and worse from there. There was an outright war this one time; at least, they *tried* to have a war. Gave it up when they realized it was pointless if nobody stays dead. Few guys tried some psychological stuff on the heads of the people who could get out. They stayed catatonic for the rest of the time. We've had fires, electrocutions, shootouts - you'd be surprised how many crazy fuckers brought guns - holy crusades, cannibalism… even that day when the religious nuts tried drowning the babies in the backed up toilet.

But it just keeps happening. We can change the way things happen all they want, but once that timer runs out, a few minutes later, everything goes dark and we're sitting right back where we started. The time between the go-throughs varies. Sometimes we have to wait a few minutes, sometimes a few hours, sometimes it's almost as fast as you can blink. It's all relative, of course. Feels like no time has passed at all once the go-through starts, but you can kinda remember an empty black period, like you don't even exist but you're aware of it. It's really freaky.

This one time, this one glorious time, we were gone for what felt like years. I was ready to just cheer that we'd finally gotten out. Then I realized that if I could cheer, that meant the game had started again. But just imagine: we could have just been out forever, and all the things that happened after they started trying to kill the kids would have never happened.

But… we just kept going and going. The violence, the sex, the hatred, the fear, it was all there, and it just kept going. I died a fair deal of times during it. They even pulled my lungs out in an attempt to build a golem of some kind. But it's all in vain. I realized pretty early on there's no way out.

And then everyone else did too. Every go-through, we'd have a few more people joining in on the suicide pact. They'd jump off the balcony, or get the guns and shoot themselves, or just bash their heads against the wall til they dropped. You'd have people being dragged along into it, people resisting, a few crude bombs designed to bring the ceiling down on us but… you know the drill by now. We die, it resets.

So that's where we are now. Pretty much everyone but the smallest children have agreed to kill themselves as soon as everything resets. They drag the younger ones along. The ennui's finally gotten to us. We've all done the absolute worst things a person can do, even me. I've made myself sound like some kind of white knight while doing this, but really, I've done some horrible things too. I fucking brutalized a kid in one of the hallways out of frustration and just left him there. We hit rock bottom and kept going til we fell out into the void.

That's that. Everyone else here has lost all hope, and I'm pretty much on the brink. It's only because I've got you out there listening that's keeping me here, and believe me, you're not that much help. I've got a kid's upper torso two feet away from me and the blood just keeps getting closer. There's a ringing in my ears and a voice in the back of my head that just keeps thinking of all the ways I have to kill myself. But so long as I've got someone out there, I…

Oh, fuck, who am I kidding? There is no one out there. There hasn't been from the start.

> Thirty seconds of silence.

I was never too much of a religious man. But I did go to church. Every Sunday. They said killing yourself is the fastest way to go to hell. Low as you can go. This place seems to be a whole lot lower than that. So if I just blow my brains out, maybe I've got a chance of

climbing out of this place.

Or maybe I'm just gonna wake right up here again.

> The man walks off camera. The sound of a gun being loaded is heard, followed shortly by the click of the safety being turned off. End of tape.

Entomophobia

"Cold, not cruel" is how the Foundation was always described to you. From day one, you were told that the Foundation's actions were based on this motto.

As an Overseer, you were supposed to keep it that way. Remain a cold, emotionless organization run by cold, emotionless humans. No matter the situation, you were to keep a straight face devoid of any emotion. Even if the world was coming to an end.

Yet there was something different about this scenario. You've seen the world end more times than you could count on both hands. What specifically could make this apocalypse worse than all the others?

"It's just my mind," you say to yourself. "we'll activate **SCP-2000** or something and set everything back to normal within a week or so." You raise yourself up from your seat and decide to take a walk around Lunar Area-32. This is the only facility you never knew by heart.

As you paced around the virtually lifeless Lunar Area-32, an almost childlike wonder filled you. Not only was it amusing to you that there was a facility on the moon, but it had everything you'd expect from it. It reminded you of when you were a child, watching the landing of Apollo 11 with your **ray gun firmly in your hand.** It almost brought a smile to your face. But all the years of drilling the words "cold, not cruel" killed it off before you could even stretch your face. To prevent yourself from getting nostalgic, you started to walk to the Level 5 dorms and check on the situation back on the blue marble.

On your way back, something caught your eye. A "New International" Version Bible. Laying on the floor, almost as if it was placed there specifically for you. You abandoned Christianity after you read about **that plane.** The exact date and time was imprinted on your head.

The 4th of January, 1981 at exactly 12:05 PM. The moment you stated that God was dead.

Despite all this, the book was attractive to you. You picked it up and headed back to the restricted area. Upon returning, you decided to flip through some pages of the Bible. Despite the fact you swore to never return to God, everything in this book amazes you with that same childlike wonder. The revelations, the Angels, the beginning. It was all amazing and almost made you want to convert back. You decided to flip back to "Exodus" and read some stuff in there.

> If you refuse to let them go, I will bring locusts into your country tomorrow….

That was before the loud notification on your "SCiPtop" disturbed you and forced you to drop the Bible, and head onto the laptop.

> ***WARNING:*** *ARBH-SCENARIO CURRENTLY IN PROGRESS. CLICK HERE FOR MORE DETAILS. ALL UPDATES WILL BE ENTERED HERE.* ***TURN ON YOUR SYSTEM NOTIFICATIONS!*** *ALL DETAILS ARE CURRENTLY* **UNCLASSIFIED** *FOR ALL CLEARANCE LEVELS.*

Nothing you haven't seen before. But you weren't too familiar with the whole ARBH Event, so it wouldn't hurt to take a quick read of the file. You stopped reading about world ending scenarios after **`those aliens invaded`** because you decided that dying in the darkness was better than dying in the light. This one was different though. It wasn't an alien invasion or **`World War 3`**; but just a load of bugs.

> It's named after the biblical 8th plague, the plague of locusts. ARBH is the phonetical translation of the Hebrew word for 'locust', אַרְבֶּה.

…Biblical plague? You reread it just to make sure it wasn't your mind pulling tricks on you. And the it said exactly that. Biblical plague. Right then and there. You flipped open the Bible and tried to find the section you just read. You were just about to come upon something relating to a biblical plague prior to that damn computer distracting you. Yes, there it was. Exodus Chapter 10. Verses 4 through 6.

> If you refuse to let them go, I will bring locusts into your country tomorrow. They will cover the face of the ground so that it cannot be seen. They will devour what little you have left after the hail, including every tree that is growing in your fields.

Your heart stopped. You swore on your life that god was dead. All the horrors and apocalyptic events you've seen were enough to prove this. Even if god wasn't dead, he would have abandoned us by now. No loving god would let all of this happen. But a loving god would not live through all this. After sitting in your chair for a half hour pondering the great thought that just came to you, you came to one conclusion.

This god is a vengeful god, and he is **a bug**.

Everything you had believed for over half a century had just been crushed right in front of your eyes. God wasn't dead. God was alive. He was seeking revenge. These locusts were just the beginning. There was no other option from here on out.

In that moment you began to break down into anger. You told yourself a big lie all these years. For more than 50 years, you thought one of the most dangerous entities in the universe was "just fairy tales". You launched your laptop at a door and smashed a lampshade with the laptop's remains.

You began to think that there could be a way out of this scenario while you were smashing the lamp. "Anger isn't going to help… I'll just get more grays on my scalp". Maybe you could make a "deal with the devil", so to speak. Before you joined the Foundation, you

were a telemarketer. A professional BS'er. Finding a way out of this should be easy. You picked up the Bible and prayed.

> Dear god, spare my world and everyone here will serve you eternally.

Nothing.

You prayed again. With more meaning and even using archaic language.

> *Oh lord, spare this dying world and all shall serve ye for eternity.*

Nothing.

One last time. With more emphasis than before.

> ***Father above, we repent here and now for all we have done. Retreat your locusts and let our world continue. We shall serve ye for eternity. Not as slaves, but as children of you. In your holy name, amen.***

Nothing.

Nothing! That's all it was! That's all it ever would be! It was just an endless voice with no meaning. Oh what was the point of it all? None! You had no control of what this mysterious bug god was doing and now you had lost control of your body as you broke down in to tears. All those years of trying to entrench "cold not cruel" into your mind and blockading any and all emotion had been useless as now you were on the moon crying like a child who had juice taken from him.

And yet you kept crying, not even over the bugs. But everything you had done over the years. **`Cheating death at another man's expense`**, **`feeding men to an eel just to make other men forget anomalous tidbits`**, oh it was all horrid! But you never thought it was until now. Such a hard thing to comprehend for one man like you. Seven minutes of silence in your puddle of tears would help you get over it.

"Come on, Charles. Get your dumbass up". You lifted yourself up and sat back down. You've accepted that bargaining with this god is useless, you're too low on manpower to physically confront him. You…

You're out of options.

And you have accepted this fact.

There are no more options left to fight the big bug bastard in the sky. It was time to call it quits. Under the desk was a .44, your favorite. Still in good shape too and it was fully loaded. A rare find these days. Shame you were about to waste it. The cold, metallic barrel of your favorite gun was pressed firmly against your forehead. It felt almost comforting in a way. Now to just to pull the trigger…

Zero Hour

Insect Hell

/

Entropy

It was inevitable. In a world full of monsters and cosmic horrors and all sorts of weird things, it was bound to happen. The end of the world. Some of the SCPs were designed to do it anyways.

But it wasn't ever supposed to happen like this. Doctor Parker sat in his office, pondering what was happening. A week ago, it had all been fine. Many had left in the previous years, but containment had been maintained, and the world was, for the time being, safe. Life wasn't normal, but it went on.

And then came the start of last week. A huge drop-off of Foundation personnel, while often mourned, was never considered odd. This group, though, had vanished out of existence. Many could remember them, but records of their deeds and history were simply gone. Task forces were assembled, naturally, but to no avail.

The next day brought worse news. SCPs started disappearing. At first, it was the small ones, ones that had been locked up in the back of everyone's memories, like SCP-132. But then the more important ones began vanishing. Everyone swore they could remember SCP-082, but it wasn't in its cell. Its cell didn't even exist any more. The day 173 vanished was the worst. It had started the Foundation. With its disappearance, many lost hope.

Two days after it all started, the task forces figured out something of a pattern. Many researchers and doctors were vanishing after all of the SCPs and Foundation history they had archived went. Not much to go on, but it gave those remaining an impression that there was some order to the senselessness around them. Though it didn't help matters, as those who made the discovery vanished soon afterwards.

The world began to die. Whatever was eating away at the Foundation wasn't satisfied; it wanted to devour the whole world, and it was. Within a day, most everything was gone. At that point, it

was only a group of less than a dozen, hidden away at Site 19 with the last SCPs. They had built up a field designed to combat entropy. A relic of a genius mind who had long ceased to exist.

On the last day, Doctor Parker locked himself up in his office. In the past hours, the men and women around him had vanished, along with all their hard work. Site 19 was being consumed all around him, and only his office remained safe. So he ran in, locked the door, and waited. For what, he didn't know, but he waited nonetheless.

Heaving a sigh, Doctor Parker lifted himself out of his chair, and walked across the room to the mirror hanging on the wall. He was determined to stay alive, but he could feel himself slipping. Having never archived an SCP, he had lost nothing to the decay. But that wasn't true. He had lost friends, he had lost family, he had lost the entirety of the world he lived in.

And now he was losing himself. Bits and pieces of his memory were fading, even though he was only in his late twenties. Even here, with a smaller version of the device protecting him, the last remaining part of the world he knew was vanishing. Anger tried to cloud his thoughts, but there weren't any left.

Turning towards the door, he hoped against hope that opening it would reveal something. The day before he had done so, and found nothing but an infinite whiteness. But maybe he had just been tired. Maybe now, with a clear head, there would be something awaiting him on the other side of the portal.

He opened the door, and he saw madness.

There *was* something outside his office, but it wasn't anything like he knew. A whole new universe was making itself outside. Even though it was only in its formative stages, Parker could tell right away that it would be done soon, and when it was, it would be nothing like the one he knew. There would be no room for Doctor Parker, or the SCP Foundation, or anything sane and right from the one before.

Doctor Parker stood there for the longest time, letting all of this sink in. He could fight on. He could fight and make his own niche in the new universe. It could try its hardest to reject him, but he could

survive, and he could make a living. Hell, he could even rebuild the whole of *his* universe, with enough time.

Then, he stepped out into the entropy, and let it swallow him.

Envying the Dead

He stared at the opaque glass of his visor. It was nothing he hadn't seen before. Every single day, he looked at nothing but the misted over surface. He had wept the first few months. By now, he didn't feel like mustering the energy to cry. Most days, he couldn't muster the energy to do much of anything. Not that there was anything to muster energy for.

His eyes traced the spiderweb of cracks in the glass. He knew it better than he knew his own face. He recalled being handsome, back in Russia. He had attracted a wife whom he vaguely remembered being beautiful. Of course, there was no telling just what his face looked like now. He knew it had been years, but just how many he couldn't guess.

The accident though, that he remembered quite well. It had all been going so perfectly. They had told him he would be the first human being in space. And perhaps he had, before the explosion. He had been the only one actually wearing a full suit when it happened. His friends, they had been lucky. At the time, he had mourned for them. He had gone through years of training with Sergei and Andrei, and watching them be torn apart by fire and shrapnel had been the worst moment of his entire life. Now, though, now he envied both of them.

In the beginning he had prayed to God to be rescued. The air in his suit was only supposed to last a day, maybe two, without resupply. At first he had counted off the seconds in his mind. When he reached three days, he stopped, the burn in his throat made sure of that. After what he guessed was five days the gnawing pain in his stomach took up all of his attention. When he went for almost a full week without asphyxiating, his prayers slowly turned from rescue to a far more desperate wish.

In his grief-stricken state, the ramifications of his continuing existence were slow to occur to him. Eventually it dawned on him that, even if he had continuous oxygen, he would have long ago

died of dehydration. At first this seemed like a miracle. He was so hopeful, certain that the motherland would not leave him here in the empty void of space.

When the *thing* had first attacked him, he had prayed for death. He had prayed to die rather a lot over however long he'd been stuck in this suit. God hadn't been sitting by the phone, it seemed. The Devil hadn't been especially receptive either. None of the old gods had bothered showing up. Perun, the god of thunder and lightning, the one his wizened grandmother used to whisper about in front of the hearth, well, apparently he wasn't in a prayer answering mood either. When the second attack came, he finally gave up all hope of being rescued. *It* had him now.

That had been a long time ago. He had stopped praying to anything before long.

After the praying had ceased, the screaming had started. He had screamed and screamed for days. Once, his throat had become so damaged that he had choked on his own blood. That had been the last time tears welled up in his eyes. For a moment, a brief, shining moment, he had hope, hope that he could finally die. He really should have known better.

For what felt like weeks he begged himself, God, anything, to let him just die of dehydration, of starvation, of asphyxiation, anything. There was no way he could be alive anymore, not after floating in space without supplies for this long. Yet, he stubbornly remained breathing, breathing and suffering.

Abruptly, the constant feeling of motion -the whistle of what air there was this high in the atmosphere rushing past his suit, the sharp tug of G-forces against his flesh- his only link to existence outside his suit, slammed to a halt. He knew what that meant. He knew all too well. It had come for him again. The pain arced through the same spot in his chest, just as it had before, time and time again. He screamed, this time in agony, not in fear or despair. Unbidden, his hands rose to his helmeted head. He knew it was useless, but he had to try anyway. His gloved fists pounded against the hardened dome. He never saw what menaced him, never knew what it was that tormented him. It didn't really matter. Knowing wouldn't change

a thing.

Oh but it was so much worse than before. Whatever the *thing* was, it had gotten much better at hurting him. He had stopped screaming long, long ago, but now he found his lungs being voided of air against his will, his vocal chords, scratchy from disuse, finding a purpose again. He screamed for an audience of one. No one but him heard. His fingers, so clumsy in the bulky suit, reached above him, to fight back, an involuntary response to the pain. He knew there was nothing there that he could touch. There never had been.

His screams grew louder and louder as the pain spread through his entire body. His hands came back from their fruitless quest to beat a frantic tattoo against the glass of his helmet. It had to break. It had to. Something like desperation filled his heart, a diseased, atrophied cousin of hope. It hadn't broken before, but now it would. This time would be different. Death would come, death would free him.

It didn't. The comforting rush of the vacuum, his last hope, didn't sound in his ears. The burning agony reached a new crescendo, and he felt fresh tears in his eyes, for the first time in so long. His efforts to break the helmet ceased, fingers instead scrabbling in what he knew was a futile effort to breach the pressure seals. Then, as quickly as it had appeared, the searing departed. He gasped for a long time. He couldn't bring himself to bother feeling relief. It would be back soon enough.

Aleksei's breathing finally calmed back down. Once again, he stared at the misted over surface of his visor. It's not like it was anything he hadn't seen before.

Epilogue

You slowly awaken in a blank white room. You can't remember anything. Wait, that's not so. You know how to talk, how to walk, what things are, but some things, like how you got here, what this place is, and who you are swim beyond the grasp of your mind. You search for a name, but have nothing.

You seem to be wearing comfortable clothing. It feels tailored. There's something stiff in the back pocket of your jeans. A piece of paper, with a list of names written on it. You read:

> Wow! You've just found yourself your very own Little Mister, a limited edition collection from Dr. Wondertainment!
> Befriend them all and become Mr. Love!!
> 01. Mr. Clank
> 02. Mr. Headless
> …

The list goes on, but you don't read it. Instead you crumple it up and hold it tight. There's something soothing about having.

You decide to turn your attention to your surroundings. Four white walls, one with a door. You go to it, and it swings open at your touch. A park, with people walking and playing. The building behind you is just a shack. People holding things that…

You realize who you are, your name pounding through your head with more certainty than anything you've known before. Mr. Collector. And you know what it is you do. You see the invisible strings from your hands to the toys and trinkets and baubles of these people and you grab them tight and *pull*. A hundred things that you know should be yours suddenly are, as their former owners look about in confusion for what were their possessions. Because this is who you are. You're Mr. Collector.

Except… that's not right. You don't know anything like you know that. There's something wrong with that. You realize, in a way that feels somehow more real, that you have another name.

Oh. The people are shouting at you demanding that you return "their" items. You ignore them. Of course you're Mr. Collector. Only Mr. Collector could touch the invisible strings. But could you also be someone else? A name, a name, it continues to elude you.

Now there's a police car coming up, and the officer is coming. The cold black of his gun would nicely complement the sheen of this earring you hold. You reach out and it rips free from the holster and it's yours now. You love your collection more than anything.

You have a thought. In your mind you visualize a cord from you to whatever you were before (Before? The part of you that booms out that you are Mr. Collector doesn't like the notion). You pull and there's nothing there, nothing you recognize as a name. Just a cold string of letters and numbers, signifying nothing.

The officer grabs you, spilling your precious collection to the ground. You scream in anguish and inside your head cling to the only thing you have left. O5-4.

Previous: End by Salmander

Fin!

Back to Hub

Epistula

The following message was intercepted by a Foundation Special Intelligence Team in September of 2012. The original source has yet to be identified.

To my Brothers and Sisters:

Greetings, and the peace of God be with all of you.

I have heard stories of disarray in our midst of late, and they have troubled me. This organization was meant to be a work of unity between our faiths, and yet we have begun falling back upon our old prejudices and ancient rivalries. Already we descend back into darkness and fear and fanaticism, running from the light of unifying truth.

I hear of brothers fighting against brothers, of sabotage and lies, and worse, a brother sent to a pointless death in the hands of a group that is not even our enemy. Have we already stooped so low to become like the followers of the Machine, to spray our innards at the slightest provocation in so-called service to God? Am I to believe that we are no better than the fanatics?

This madness cannot be allowed to continue.

A fractured organization is no organization at all: rather, it is a horde of competing factions, too busy trying to wring the neck of their brothers to notice the enemy at their door. This cannot be allowed to continue as it has for these many long centuries. We must be strong, stronger than we have ever been. Was that not why we unified? To become stronger by aiding each other?

The time for division is *past*. We are brothers and sisters in faith, followers and servants of the same God. Why then do we fight amongst ourselves? Do you hold on to your old ways so tightly? Are you afraid to let go? In the desert, we were as children, and we

spoke as children, and so God spoke to us in words that children knew, in ways that children could understand. Now, we have grown, and we see the world through older eyes. We are prepared for the truths of adulthood.

We three children of Abraham were given the truth of God, but it was given to us each in our different way. For each of us it has been worn and wearied by ages and the fleeting memories of man. It has been stained by the powerful and the corrupt, who desire reinforcement of their own beliefs rather than the knowledge of the truth that those beliefs sprung from. Through these relics, we may not simply protect and keep them in due reverence and weaken dangerous beliefs, we may also discover that truth that we have lost. It should not be that one man may discover an item or a passage that supports his preferred way of thinking, and then he discards the rest. Instead, all relics that may be truly known as divine or related to the divine, even those that are challenging to our beliefs, must be considered.

What we will discover will test us, and many of our number will retreat to the comfort of what we have been told that we know. Those who persevere will be shaken, broken, and reborn in glory.

God spoke to humanity in the desert, and just now we are able to piece together His words.

I hope that this message reaches wise ears, and if it does not, may it at least be the ears of an honest fool.

Epitaph

Dr. Iceberg wove his way down the hall on a makeshift I.V. crutch, with Dr. Gears limping alongside. Most of the security teams and cleaning crews had already passed, so they had the hall to themselves, which was probably for the best as neither was too stable. Iceberg had his hand clamped over his chest, and wheezed every few steps, flecks of blood dotting his tattered clothes. Gears stood straighter, but tipped hard to the right with each step, a slow, steady stream of blood leaking from a wound in his thigh on his tattered, scorched left side. They walked, two scorched, broken, bleeding men in an empty hallway, stumbling and weaving to the Infirmary and leaving small patches of blood and burnt material behind. The officer on the security cameras for that area took almost no notice, logging only “Doctors passed, injured.”

The request form read “Application testing for possible military/ decommissioning via thermal and H.E. materials”. It should have read “Dr. Iceberg throws bombs at things”. Being as explosives, triplicate oversight reports, and chocolate bars were his three major passions, this shouldn't have been as bad an idea as it was. Things were going well while the conventional explosives were still being used, but when Dr. Iceberg started using his “home brew” devices, things rapidly started to go less well. Several explosions were forceful enough to receive complaints from Site Security, while the second-to-last device caused some major damage to the outside walls of the test chamber.

However, much like throwing a football in the house next to a breakable vase, “blow things up” is a game that is fun right until the last time it's played. The last toss was an item labeled on the test manifest as a “Slowbomb”. It seemed to be a dud at first, the wire-wrapped cube sliding harmlessly to a stop at the far end of the chamber. As the two men watched from what they felt was a point of safety, the device slowly started to distort, then rip apart, showing a white-hot mass of roiling plasma inside its structure. It expanded like

a flower opening in a dream, moving an inch every ten or twenty seconds, a slow-motion explosion. It was as the rapidly swelling wall of flame started to march past the “safe beyond this point” line that Iceberg's manic grin started to fade.

The next slice of time was hazy to both men. Dr. Gears was able to recall slightly more details, but most of it boiled down to flames, alarms, men in containment suits, and the strong smell of frying pork. Both were funneled out to triage, made capable of walking, then sent down to the infirmary under their own power. The Walk of Shame is a very different thing inside The Foundation, and Iceberg was especially glad that the hall was empty. Gears, as always, was impassive, and except for the bodily damage and limp, appeared basically unchanged from when he entered the testing room. As they approached the infirmary Iceberg wondered, for the thousandth time, if he really was some kind of robot.

The infirmary admitted them with a minimum of notice, as they were dealing with the after-effects of a light bulb that, when powered up, emitted light that caused most bones to start to liquefy and extrude through the sweat glands. Neither of the two doctors were overly injured (by Foundation standards), so they quickly found themselves in hospital beds and nearly forgotten as the team rushed to deal with newer and stranger injuries.

As Iceberg fingered at the cool gel patch covering a nasty burn on his right arm, he looked over at Dr. Gears. Impassive as always, his leg was wrapped in a soft cast and elevated, with several small gauze patches on his face, neck, and arms in varying shades of red, pink, and black.

Iceberg winced a bit, feeling something mildly fractured shift in his chest, and nodded to Dr. Gears. “Ahh…sorry about that, again. I… really didn't expect it to get that out of hand, honestly.”

Gears nodded slightly, still facing the ceiling. “There is no need. Accidents happen.”

Iceberg leaned back, sighing as the pain killers started to pull him down in to deep, dreamless rest.

He woke with a groan to the sound of tapping. Gingerly shaking his head to clear it, he turned to see Dr. Gears tapping with a stylus at the screen of a tablet laptop. He seemed ignorant of Iceberg, or at least uncaring, so Iceberg decided to try and see how sitting up would go. The first flex of his abdomen brought a lancing comet of pain arcing through his chest, so he rapidly decided to postpone any testing and fell back with a groan.

Gears finished, carefully placing the computer on a side table and nodding to Iceberg. “You were asleep when they changed your wrappings. You won't be able to move in any serious way for two days. I will be unable to walk for four days, and have had to reassign our schedules to others.”

Iceberg sighed, closing his eyes as he eased back on the pillow. Two days of hospital food and company with a man who's been accused of being a robot multiple times, rarely in jest. Lovely. He passed some time daydreaming, mentally working out the kinks on the Slowbomb until he started feeling restless again. He turned again to Gears, watching him stare at the ceiling, arms crossed, breathing regularly. “Hey Gears…are you awake?” he asked, hoping he wasn't sleeping with his eyes open again. He knew it was just a trick you could learn, but with Gears, it was just creepy.

The tall, thin man turned his head slowly to look at Iceberg, face nearly immobile but for his mouth. “Yes, Dr. Iceberg, I am. What is it?”

Faced now with the older man's full attention, Iceberg suddenly felt oddly uncomfortable and unprepared, as if he'd suddenly been called on to answer a question while he'd been daydreaming. “Uh… well, I was wondering…why do Kain, Agent Fritz and that one tubby janitor always call you Cog?”

Dr. Gears stared a few moments, blinking slowly. “Your last name is not Dr. Iceberg, correct?”

Iceberg blinked, taken off-guard, before stammering, “Y-yeah…I mean no…or, I mean, yes, that's not my last name.”

Gears nodded, making a small gesture with his hand. “It is an

alternate identification designation assigned by Site Security. Policy on this topic has been in a near-constant state of flux, both due to alterations in administrative staff, and planned security cycling. Most of the identification designations are picked at random, with some following a set assigning protocol. Some also appear to have been chosen as a form of 'gag' or 'inside joke'. However, this was not always the case."

He paused, taking a breath, and Iceberg kept totally silent. This was the longest non-work or survival related conversation Gears had ever engaged in with Iceberg, and he didn't want to break the spell.

"During my intake, the security protocols were still being derived from old military designations and acronyms. My initial designation was 'C.O.G.', derived from the initials of my name. Later, when a determination was made that this was too much of a security weakness, my designation was altered to 'Gears', most likely due to my extensive work on SCP-882 and the similarity to my previous designation."

Iceberg sat, processing a moment before speaking. "Wait…so…Cog is your initials? So what is your actual name?"

Gears blinked several times slowly, still watching Iceberg, and the young man knew that no answer was forthcoming. He changed tactics, hoping to probe for more information, the exercise taking his mind off the pulsing pain in his side.

"Alright, so…Gears, honestly, are you a robot? Or like…a Vulcan or something? You have to admit you're not really…ah…normal."

Dr. Gears laid back, resting his hands on his chest. Iceberg was expecting silence, or his methodical, mechanical "I am not a robot." reply that really did nothing to help. Instead, Gears drew in a breath slowly, and explained. "My mental peculiarities are somewhat sedate when compared to the various emergent coping mechanisms developed by other staff members. However, I can understand how mine are particularly noticeable. No, I am not a 'robot' or any other form of altered human, or non-human." He paused, blinking several times, before continuing. "I simply…adapted too well."

Iceberg watched the older man reclining in the hospital bed, confused. He could almost swear that Gears seemed…conflicted, or even depressed. He was about to ask, when Dr. Gears started up again. “I am not an emotionless robot. I feel. I feel pain and sadness at the loss of a friend. I feel joy when achieving a positive goal, and regret when falling short. I feel fear, even horror, when faced with things capable of great harm, or worse. It is not that I can not feel. It is that I can not respond to it. Much like the feeling you have when on powerful narcotic pain killers, I am aware of my feelings, and what I am supposed to do with them, but they feel distant… disconnected. Like seeing someone crying, and feeling a slight empathy for their plight, but not being moved to tears yourself.”

Iceberg sat, slightly stunned. His damned imagination ran off almost instantly, trying to conceive of going through everything he had already been pushed through…but this time, unable to react. Feeling all the pain, and joy, and fear, but being locked away with it, like a lunatic in a rubber room. Observed, logged, then forgotten. Iceberg shuddered, unable to look directly at Gears for a time. When he finally looked back, Gears was still staring, and Iceberg had to repress another involuntary shudder. He was about to ask another question when a nurse came in and carted him off for some blood tests. He was also informed that an oversight committee would be looking in to his explosive research at the end of the month. By the time he made it back, Dr. Gears was already asleep.

The next day Iceberg woke up late, and to his great joy was able to move with a minimum of blinding pain. The bed next to him was empty, and Iceberg looked at it thoughtfully. Since being recruited by The Foundation (fresh from college, no less), he'd been paired up with Dr. Gears almost constantly. He'd been very scared at first. Many of the new recruits reacted with varying degrees of fear, awe, and pity when he told them his new assignment, which did nothing for his already limited confidence. What's more, it took months to realize that Gears didn't actually hate him, that it was just his default setting of total indifference. Even worse, they kept getting assigned to the worst jobs…he still shivered to think about his first run-in with an SCP-882 breach.

Still, after all this time, he knew next to nothing about Dr. Gears. Many of the other staff were pretty vocal about who they used to be, and some even were allowed a semi-normal life outside the site. Gears, however, was a black box. No idle conversation of the past, no hidden tokens or photos in the desk (he'd checked), no… anything, really. Never leaves the site except for Foundation business, never takes any time off, never engages in any non-work activity unless forced to. What was even stranger was that NOBODY knew anything about him. Even the classic busybodies around the site had no real clue who he was, and the database became a large, password-encrusted tower of doom when asked about Dr. Gears.

The sharp click of the door brought Iceberg back to reality quickly. Gears hobbled slightly as he worked his way to the bed, laying down and adjusting a bandage at his side. He spoke to the ceiling, not a gesture or look for the man he was addressing. “I am being released early. You will need to remain here for another day, but I expect you to be ready to resume your duties as soon as you are released.”

Iceberg sighed, shaking his head and looking away. Silence drew out for long moments before Iceberg turned, looked pointedly at Gears, and said “What the hell happened to you? I mean…what the fuck, man? You're goddamn Spock but without those little lapses of human feeling…did they experiment on you, did you have a breakdown, what the hell?”

As Gears stared at him, Iceberg became acutely aware of the fact that what he had just said may amount to insubordination or “unauthorized security probing” of a level where “large men with guns” is the most comforting portion of the disciplinary measure. The two men stared for what felt like a long time, Iceberg almost unwilling to blink, feeling a creeping measure of fear on par with reviewing security tapes of SCP-173.

After a time, Gears blinked, slowly, and nodded. “What happened. I have been asked that multiple times, and I know of many more theories to this effect. What happened…was nothing unique. Nothing that is impossible to repeat, or hasn't happened to others. It is easy to assume that there was a single 'defining moment' in the transition to my current state, but I do not believe this to be so. It is… gradual. Like a sickness. After a time, you simply wake up…

different.”

Iceberg shook his head, processing this new tidbit. “Okay…so you just… declined, I guess? Jesus… I mean… how the hell does something like that happen? You still haven't said what actually happened, what started this…”

He trailed off as Gears turned to stare at the younger man again. “Are you loyal to The Foundation, Doctor Iceberg? I assume you will reply in the positive, but think before you respond. I am loyal, but not because of a sense of duty or empowerment. I believe, fully, in the work being done here. I believe that, without The Foundation, humanity as we know it would crumble in a very short time. I believe that we, the few with the resources and means to do so, have the direct obligation to insulate others from all that we are containing.”

The door to the room opened with a small, poorly-oiled and annoying squeal that went totally unnoticed by Iceberg. Even as a young-ish doctor entered and started reading off discharge information in the general direction of Dr. Gears, Iceberg still heard little. Unsettling ideas were bumping around, unpleasant recollections of tests ordered and observed… of instances where the “greater good” overwhelmed normal human decency. Moments where he knew, for a fact, that he should be repulsed… or frightened… or at least unsettled, but felt only mild interest, at best. He snapped back from the increasingly stormy seas of his mind when Gears started to leave the hospital bed, aided by an arm from the doctor. “…why are you telling me this?” he asked.

Doctor Gears turned slightly and spoke to Iceberg over his shoulder, his voice carrying that odd toneless quality again. “In regards to your request in relation to our future work, you may find the literature I mentioned enlightening. In addition, there is an epitaph in Tasmania, Australia that may prove useful as a motto or guide stone. I will expect you to report in for new assignments as soon as you are discharged.” The young-ish medical doctor looked between the two others, slightly confused and wary, but continued to help Gears from the room. Iceberg was left alone in seconds, both unsettled and deeply confused.

It wasn't until days later that Iceberg got the chance to try and investigate the rather cryptic message. Gears had mentioned nothing more about anything he had said in the hospital, and Iceberg had found himself deluged with paperwork and solo testing. He had barely spoken to or seen anyone for nearly two days, and finally decided a little investigation might break up the tedium. It took only a little prodding to find what he was looking for, but it took more time to process:

"As you are now, so once was I
As I am now, soon you shall be -
Prepare yourself to follow me."

Iceberg sat alone in the deepest bowels of the underground site, surrounded by mounds of neatly typed records of horrors and atrocities, and tried very hard not to feel cold.

Do You Wish You Could Disappear?

June 1

Date: June 1 20 09:15

From: Eric Radford (of.pcs.nimda|drofdare#of.pcs.nimda|drofdare)

To: Southeastern Region Requisitions Department (group: of.pcs.qer|sutsaehtuos#of.pcs.qer|sutsaehtuos)

Message Subject: Personnel for Manned Exploration of SCP-

Attachments:
innova_exonera_predictions1.pdf

Message Body:

Good morning,

I'm reaching out on behalf of SCP- 's lead research team at 42 with a time-sensitive request. Offshore Site- is fully operational, and is now capable of housing personnel to supervise a long-term manned exploration of the SCP- structure, launched from the access point under Site- . This exploration has been deemed necessary by the director of Site- , as well as SCP- 's current lead researcher and her team.

A full report of what these personnel will be required to perform is included in the attached report. Also in the attached report are the

predictions of the research team regarding the progress SCP- has made in the past several years; Researchers at Sites and 42 have confirmed that containment procedures have officially been advanced to Stage II. The time for extensive manned exploration is now; the clock is ticking and you know as well as I that the Council does not want to see containment procedures advanced to Stage III for at least another years. We need more time to prepare, and to get more time, we need more data.

While this request is large and will no doubt require going through multiple channels of approval with multiple departments (I'll be sending a similar email to the Ethics Committee shortly), I trust that you will recognize the urgency of this matter and act accordingly.

Thank you,

Eric Radford
Director of Site-42

June. June 1st. It's not a bad day for you. To your knowledge, you've never had a bad June 1st; spring pollen is gone, spring tourism is gone, and summer temperatures and business hours are here to stay for at least three or four months. Things are good, you tell yourself as you pull your tired legs up onto the base of the barstool. Things are good, you tell yourself as you take a halfhearted sip of flavorless domestic beer. You're as unconvinced as you ever were.

A man stops you on the way out of the bar. "Hey, you from around here?"

You turn around. "Just moved here from DC three days ago, actually."

"You got somethin' funny-lookin' about you."

"I could say the same about you," you mutter. *Redneck drunkard.*

"Aha- I like that! You feisty! I don't mean no harm. All I mean to say is you look like you from the city. Whatcha doin' down here at the beach?"

"Fishing and drinking, I guess. What are any of us doing?"

The man ambles closer to you. "Look, out-of-towner, let me tell you a thing or two. You say you like to fish? You won't be pickin' up normal fish around these parts, here. Not anymore. You know them military folks at Sunny Point, across the Cape Fear, there? Buddy of mine says they're up to somethin', and I can smell it. There's somethin' not quite right about all that across the river. That Sunny Point over there, and that nuke plant. It's messin' with the fish, I reckon, the water ain't right no more."

"Is that so. Well, I have to get home." You pick up your pace and motion to the sidewalk, wishing you'd taken the car.

"Aww, shucks, if you don't wanna be bothered, I can skedaddle. But I saw an out-of-towner in there at the bar, I just had to warn 'em. Me 'n the guys have been readin'. Readin' about some freaky military stuff you won't believe is real, I tell ya."

"Okay. I'll keep it in mind. Have a good night."

The man mumbles something and stumbles back toward the bar. You've only lived in Carolina Beach for a little over 72 hours, and it's about how you expected thus far. You amble back through the windy, sand-covered streets to your apartment complex and double-lock your door for the night.

June 2

Date: June 2 20 10:12

From: Southeastern Region Requisitions Department (of.pcs.qer|sutsaehtuos.seilper#of.pcs.qer|

sutsaehtuos.seilper)

To: Eric Radford (of.pcs.nimda|drofdare#of.pcs.nimda|drofdare)

Message Subject: Re: Personnel for Manned Exploration of SCP-

Attachments: none

Message Body:

Director,

Apologies for the delay in response. This required some significant discussion between our staff. This is a steep request. I understand the gravity of what this anomaly is putting at stake, and thus the necessity of the request, but we cannot approve something of this magnitude and with these conditions for personnel selection without first getting Ethics Committee approval (as you are aware). I will compose this email to the Committee on your Site's behalf and send it this afternoon. If all goes well, they will vote on the issue within 24 hours, and your final verdict will be returned to you within 48 hours. I expect the timeframe could be extended to up to 96 hours if obstacles are encountered, but it's unlikely.

Thank you,

Jacob
Southeastern United States Personnel Requisitions Department

"Good morning. It is 10:15 AM, June 2nd, 20-"

You roll over and swipe left on your phone to silence the robotic voice of the alarm. The pure white light of the sun reflects off the Atlantic and into your balcony's sliding glass doors. You remind

yourself of how thankful you are to have moved towns, and use the energy to propel yourself up out of bed.

While you're brushing your teeth, you hear your phone ring. You ignore it until you're ready to leave the bathroom. Upon looking at your notifications, you see a new text message from the number that called you. *Hey, how you been? It's your old pal Wes from Washington. IDK if you had my number saved. How's North Carolina? Got that lack of government presence you'd been looking for? ;)*

You sigh and prepare to type a reply. *Sorry, I was in the bathroom. Good to hear from you. And yeah, it does, though this conspiracy theorist was haranguing me last night at the bar, going on and on about how the nearby military base and nuclear plant are poisoning the fish or whatever. Other than that, don't have to think about those things too much. How are you?* You hit *send* and put your phone on the kitchen counter while you pour yourself some cereal.

You consider going out for the day, but figure you might as well take advantage of your one remaining week of post-moving break before you have to go back to work. You sit down on the couch in your pajamas, trying to appreciate the ocean view and bright, friendly color scheme of the decor. You find yourself missing Washington DC's white marble and black asphalt quickly.

A new text from Wes appears on your phone. *Remind me, did you stick with the Bureau or go back the civilian route?*

You answer, *I'm a real estate agent now. I want nothing to do with that world anymore.*

I feel ya, his response says.

You figure you'll have a real conversation later, and turn on the television to waste away a few hours.

June 3

Date: June 3 20 09:28

From: Southeastern Region Requisitions

Department (of.pcs.qer|
sutsaehtuos.seilper#of.pcs.qer|
sutsaehtuos.seilper)

To: Eric Radford (of.pcs.nimda|
drofdare#of.pcs.nimda|drofdare)

Message Subject: Request Approval

Attachments: approval_form1.pdf

Message Body:

Director,

The Ethics Committee voted 2/3 in favor of allowing your request to pass. Today, I'll be tasking my department with finding individuals who fit the parameters requested and arranging retrieval plans. We'll mostly be using algorithms to search for certain physical statistics and employment background, so very little of the work done will be manual or time-consuming. Arranging extraction of personnel will be trickier, especially with a volume this high, but I've contacted the best amnesticist I know and she'll be driving down to 42 tonight to make arrangements with your Containment & Retrieval agents. We'll try to make this as seamless as possible so that your researchers can get started ASAP.

All you need do is print out this approval form, sign it, and fax or scan-and-email it back to me. As soon as you've done that, I'll set the ball in motion on our end.

Thank you,

Jacob
Southeastern United States Personnel

"What's the date?"

"The third."

"Right, thanks." You finish scribbling on the check and hand it to the gas station cashier. "Sorry, I just moved to town and I'm a mess. Usually I'd pay with card."

"We're fine with the old-fashioned route down here, don't you worry."

"Appreciate it. Have a good one."

"You do the same. Welcome to town."

You smile and walk out to your car. As you're pumping gas, your phone rings. It's the first time someone from the local 910 area code has called you.

"Hello?"

The person on the other end is clear and friendly, and asks for your name.

"Depends, who's asking?"

"I was informed of how to contact you via channels at the Federal Bur-"

"Oh, no no no. I'm gonna have to stop you there. I told all of my superiors that I was cutting all ties. Not on bad terms or anything, but government work wasn't for me. I'm not interested."

"I'm afraid this isn't negotiable. Is there a good time and place for a few of our operatives to meet with you and discuss a matter of urgent security?"

"This doesn't sound real. Look, if someone at the Bureau needs me, you guys need to do it through the right channels. I don't trust this local area code. Are you the FBI's Wilmington office?"

"No, we are not."

"Are you going to tell me which part of the Bureau you're from, then?"

"All of that is sensitive information, but can be discussed in-person if you can just inform us of what location works for you and what time."

"I don't mean to be rude, but I'm not inclined to follow someone to a shady meeting when they won't even tell me which part of the agency they work for. Please inform whoever you talked to at the Bureau that there are more secure and straightforward ways to contact me. I cut all my ties with the Bureau fully legally, no loose ends. I work in real estate now. If it's really, truly urgent, you know the right way to reach me."

The other end is silent for about five seconds. You hang up and take the gas pump out of your car. You make a note to yourself to text Wes about it when you get home.

June 4

Date: June 4 20 10:36

From: Eric Radford (of.pcs.nimda|drofdare#of.pcs.nimda|drofdare)

To: Southeastern Region Requisitions Department (of.pcs.qer|sutsaehtuos.seilper#of.pcs.qer|sutsaehtuos.seilper)

Message Subject: Re: Request Approval

Attachments: none

Message Body:

Good morning,

Thank you for your help in keeping this process straightforward. We received the

automatic approval confirmation yesterday, and officers from Site-42 C&R have already made preliminary calls to 113 of the selected persons. Some of them, especially the ones with government background, are clearly going to come willingly. I assume that we need not communicate further now that things are in motion, but don't hesitate to reach out to me if anything comes up.

Thank you,

Eric

"Only a month until fireworks!" a young girl pipes up to her mother.

"That's right, honey!"

You give a small smirk at the family hiking in front of you as you scoot around them and further down the trail. It's only 75 Fahrenheit today, but the sun is beating down; still not too bad for June in the southeast, you figure, and you've packed water with you for the day.

As you're taking a picture of the Cape Fear River from the shore by the trail, an incoming call pops up over the screen. It's a 202 area code — Washington. You sigh and answer it. "Hello? Yes, that's me. No, you- Are you the department that called me yesterday? I can't meet in person. I don't know what else to tell you. *I quit.* I'm not in the business anymore. I don't know what legal recourse you have for trying so hard to contact me, but- Excuse me, how can it be mandatory? I told you I *quit.* I have an apartment now, and a new job. You can't take me anywhere. No, don't argue with me. Either tell me which department you're from or leave me alone."

The call goes about as badly as the last one. You hang up and try to focus on nature for the day, but the hair on the back of your neck stands on end for the next few hours.

Around 9:30 PM, you arrive back at your vehicle in a rush. You still have 30 minutes until the park closes, but nightfall was heavy and dark and had you jogging out of discomfort for the last half-mile or

so. You guzzle water as soon as you're locked in your car, make all attempts to shake off the leftovers of the eerie sensations of the forest, and drive the short distance home.

There is a man in black clothing standing on your porch. You sling your backpack over your seawater-splattered shoulders and walk up the stairs to your door. "Hi, can I help you?"

The stranger greets you by name, confirming your suspicions, and motions to your door as if he's inviting you into your own apartment.

"No, uh- Just slow down, please. I just got back. Are you the branch of the Bureau that keeps calling me? I know you had to have my new address on record, but you guys weren't supposed to come here unless it's an emergency."

"My name is Agent Rogers. I work for the SCP Foundation. We attempted multiple times to explain to you on the phone that we can't disclose that except in person."

"I don't know who you are, then. Are you FBI?"

"No, we are not."

"Then what do you want with me? There are plenty of other ex-government agents to harass."

"Your history as a government employee qualified you for a serious career opportunity. One you may be interested in considering."

"I told the Bureau and I'll tell you: I'm done with government work. Period. I sell beach houses and drink beer now, okay? I'm not a Washington drone anymore."

"We are not government. I would be happy to give you more details if we can go inside."

You suck your teeth and eye your vehicle over your shoulder, watching for any movement. "You're awfully pushy."

"I don't mean to be rude. These are simply urgent matters."

You keep scanning the parking lot, trying to figure out which vehicle is his. You realize you haven't lived here long enough to tell who owns what, and turn back to the man. "Okay. Fine. You can come in and talk."

"Thank you." He smiles with expressionless eyes and follows you through the door, seating himself at your barstools as you walk to the sink to wash your face and hands. "In your time at the Federal Bureau of Investigation, did you ever hear of the Unusual Incidents Unit?"

"Yeah. Once. Figured it wasn't real." You splash your filthy face with cold water, hoping enough small talk will make the man realize you're not interested in the offer.

"It's very real. The UIU does what we do, but on a much smaller scale. You are aware of what the UIU is tasked with, no?"

"All that weird shit. Area 51, *Men in Black* shit. I never see those things actually happen, they're always hoaxes, so I never thought much of it."

"You never see 'it' happening because my organization contains it. 'It' being anything anomalous. Things regular government and law enforcement don't know how to handle. One such anomaly is here, in our ocean, with our largest research facility situated a few hundred kilometers offshore." He points out the balcony at the smooth, moonlit surface of the Atlantic. "And that one is flaring up. Badly. We need more personnel to staff that site, and if necessary, explore the anomalous structure under-"

You throw your hands down, splattering water. "Okay, and why are you telling me this? Are you going to have to kill me afterward, or something? I don't know why you people won't listen when I tell you that I *don't want to know.* I'm done with government work. And you say you're not government, okay, fine, but you *act* like government, with all this sneaking around and hiding phone numbers and not speaking over the phone, and I'm ready to leave that part of my life behind."

"I understand. What *you* need to understand is that 'that part of your

life' is not ready to leave *you* behind, so to speak. Due to your history with the FBI, you have been selected for mandatory service. At least temporarily."

You freeze and slowly move around the kitchen, trying to keep your panic under control. You just saw two figures flit past your porch window. You wince and look for your phone. It's still in your pocket. You breathe a sigh of relief and take a microwave meal out of the fridge.

"Okay, well, I'm not going to be okay with that. So go have a nice night and I'll take you to court about it, I guess."

"We do not function that way, I'm afraid."

You swallow. "What do expect me to do, then?" you ask, slitting the overwrap on the meal with shaking fingers.

"We expect you to come with us."

"…Right now?"

"Eat your dinner and pack your things and leave within the next hour, yes."

You feel a little anger rise over your nervousness, slamming the microwave shut. "Look, Agent… Rogers, right? You seem like a nice guy. You're nonthreatening, you're well-spoken, you're just doing your job, I get it. I was you once, just without, uh, all of… whatever that is that you guys do. And that's where I'm not you, you know? I'm not your type. I don't think I'd function well around 'anomalous' things. I barely functioned around real human criminals. This work isn't for me, man, and I just want to enjoy this new apartment and my new life."

"Like I said, this can be temporary. And the organization will pay your rent while you're gone. Plus some, obviously."

"I don't want to go. I'm not going."

He raises an eyebrow. "Look, I'm really trying here. You have the background to know how these things work. Are you *absolutely*

certain that you want your official response to be refusal?"

"Okay, you know, you're making me *so* nervous. Please get out of my apartment."

"I'm not going to leave, but I'm also not going to hurt you. If you would just let us talk about this a few minutes more, I really think you'd be pleasantly surprised with the opportunity."

"I'm sure it's great, really. And I do mean that. I get that there are people who are good at this sort of thing. But it's not for me."

"The Foundation disagrees on that. Your history shows-"

"And does your Foundation know me better than I do?" You start moving toward the door to lock it. You do so slowly, not breaking eye contact with Rogers. He doesn't do anything in response. You shuffle back over to the microwave and take out your food.

"No, I do not think we know you better than you do. But we do know what your previous government employers have told us about you, and you are a perfect candidate for this assignment."

"Or so your superiors have told you. How do I know — how do *you,* the agent the higher-ups send to do dirty work, know that that's the truth? Like I said, I was you once. You're not always operating for the purposes they tell you that you are."

Rogers sighs. "I have not seen any reason to doubt that the Foundation's motives for contacting you are truthful."

"Right. You haven't *seen* any. I'm not going with you. I'm really, really not. You can leave now."

A pained expression crosses Rogers' face. "I'm not going to leave. This *can* be done the easy way."

A lump rises in your throat. The microwave meal suddenly seems inedible. You seat yourself next to the agent at the counter and eat slow, methodical bites. The two of you sit in silence for a few minutes.

"…Are you going to comply?"

You cough and sputter on a bite of meat and reach for your glass of water. "I'm actually kind of panicking right now," you say quietly, looking to the side.

"I understand."

"Please just help *me* understand, then. Why does my history with the FBI give some agency I've never heard of the power to demand that I work for them? What happens if I refuse?"

"If you refuse, which you have been, I will continue to explain-"

"No, I mean how is this going to happen? I'm saying no. What's your response?" Your pulse is pounding in your head.

"Our response is that this will be easier for you if you don't resist."

"Hooooly fuck, okay. Okay, I can't believe this is happening right now." You put your head in your hands, grasping your hair with sweaty fingers. You shoot a glance at Rogers. He looks somewhat sympathetic, which somehow makes the situation even more unsettling.

"So, again, if you want to eat, shower, change clothes, that's fine. But I'm expected to return to the facility with you sometime tonight."

You look from the balcony to your food to Rogers' holstered pistol and back again. "…Okay. Well, uh, this killed my appetite, so I guess I'll… go get in the shower? Is that okay?"

"You'll come willingly, then?"

"Um… no? I mean, I would not call this willing. You're just making it pretty clear that it's not really an option, so I'm kind of still processing this."

"Alright. Go ahead and take a shower, then. I don't recommend changing into anything too nice, because we'll give you new clothing when we get to the Site."

"Okay." You duck into the bathroom and brace your head against the wall. "Uh, feel free to get a drink or snack or something if you need. I guess." You don't know how to be polite in a situation like this, or if it even applies.

You walk into your closet and take out a plain black T-shirt and pants.

You'll take a shower to get the grime off, leave the water running, and then climb off your bedroom balcony. That's what you'll do. It'll be a 30-second sprint to the bar, where you can tell the bartender what happened, they'll call the cops, and you'll be back in the real world. That's all it takes. In 15 minutes this will already just be a crazy story. You just have to get there.

You turn on the water and wash yourself in a four-minute blitz. When you're out and dressed, you leave the water running against the side of the tub, turn the bathroom vent on for extra noise, and begin sneaking through your closet and into your bedroom. There's one part where the hallway is visible from the open bedroom door, and you wince as Rogers almost looks at you, but he misses you by a split-second.

The fresh air hits your open mouth and eyes in a salty blast. You try to get your bearings as you put your hands on the weathered wood railing. It's only 15 feet down. What's one uncomfortable fall into some bushes in exchange for avoiding kidnapping? You brace yourself to jump over, taking one final look toward the lights of the bar on the other side of the wall of thick foliage by the parking lot.

You're glad you notice them before they notice you. Two people dressed in all black just like Rogers, standing on the sidewalk by your car. *Fuck.* If there are still two of them on the porch, that means these people sent *five* agents to come get you. Maybe it actually is important.

Think, think, think.

Maybe it's the action of Rogers standing up and walking toward you that does it, or maybe it's just the panic all spilling over at once, but something compels you to swing over the railing anyway. You crash

into the bushes and take far too long to roll out of them; by the time you're on your feet, you can hear the two agents that had been standing outside running a few meters behind you. You make a beeline for the bar, unsure of what's going to happen once people see you, but desperate to reach that point anyway.

You're sprinting down the sidewalk, relieved by the glow of the bright streetlights, when one of the men tackles you from the bushes and puts you in a choke hold. You scream into his palm as he clamps it over your mouth. "You are going to walk back to your apartment with us calmly and slowly when I let you go," he mutters, "or I will inject you with a sedative more powerful than horse tranquilizer and you will be unconscious for twelve hours. Is that clear?"

You nod against his hand, tears flooding your eyes. He lets go of you and you stumble out of the other side of the underbrush and into your apartment parking lot. The two men follow a few meters behind you as you walk up to your porch. You left your door locked. You curse under your breath and knock. Rogers opens it with a less sarcastic expression than you expected.

"Now that we've made it clear that this is non-negotiable, I will ask again: Are you going to comply?"

"Fuck. Fine. Yes. Whatever answer you wanna write in your fucking paperwork," you mumble, wiping your eyes and nose.

"Noted."

You sniff and stumble into your bedroom to pack whatever they'll let you take, and as slowly as possible. You turn the water off in the bathroom and take out your phone. *No service.* Go figure.

June 5

Date: June 5 20 14:45

From: Mallory Wickerford (of.pcs.ces|drofrekciwm#of.pcs.ces|drofrekciwm)

To: Eric Radford (of.pcs.nimda|drofdare#of.pcs.nimda|drofdare)

Message Subject: Re: Request Approval

Attachments: dclasstrainingregimen.pdf

Message Body:

Good afternoon,

Thank you for your assistance in acquiring subjects for the planned series of manned excursions into **SCP-3069**. As you are aware, 3069 is large beyond comprehension and we estimate that unmanned excursions will continue to yield inconclusive results; we are already in Stage II of containment procedures, with an Innova-Exonera Event imminent, and we simply do not have the time or resources to approach this with anything other than raw human numbers. The explorations will be long-term, lasting months, and personnel will be exposed to environments and influences that could be lethal or worse on the regular. Obviously you gather why we could not use Foundation employees for this, and Site-42's supply of D-class personnel was going to be far too few. Thus, I'm thankful that the Ethics Committee approved the Civilian Use Protocol request; I'm told that approximately 250 of the 500 individuals selected from the surrounding coastal area are from government and law enforcement fields, which should lead to significantly less infighting among personnel than the typical behavior for D-classes. Beyond that, I'm told that full amnesticization of the subjects was also approved, which will make everything so much simpler moving forward.

I'm hopeful that these excursions will reveal key information about the internal mechanics of SCP-3069, and potentially even reveal a

way to prevent the incoming Innova-Exonera Event(s). Our research director admits that while she has never conducted explorations with this high a number of personnel, she feels confident that efforts — and lives — will not be wasted. Too much is at stake when it comes to 3069; I can only hope that these efforts will be enough.

With respect,

Mallory Wickerford
Site Security Director of Site-3069

"What is the date?"

"June 5th."

"What is your designation?"

"D-104-E."

"To what facility are you assigned?"

"Sites 3069 and 42."

"Okay, thank you. You may proceed to the deck. We'll be leaving port in about an hour."

You nod silently. *104-E. 3069. 42. June 5th.* Numbers are all that can occupy your head. Numbers and data. You're smart enough to know there used to be different things in your head, but attempting to articulate what they were gives you a throbbing headache, and you prefer to focus on the numbers.

"104 of 500 cleared," the interviewer says into her microphone. You shudder and zip up your jumpsuit against the harsh winds as you walk out across the deck of the aircraft carrier and toward the endless Atlantic horizon, a sour chemical taste on your tongue.

Glass x Diogenes 4 Life! <3

Disclaimer: This tale uses the word "fuck", and not as a curse word, as meaning what it means in the dictionary.

The doctor gazed into the looking glass. In the looking glass was the looking Glass, reflected by their own glassy look into Glass's looking glass. Looking, Glass made their looking glass show Glass's ass, the looking glass showing a crooked ass as Glass crooked to move Glass's ass's crack away from the glass's crack that made Glass look aghast.

"How's the ass?" asked Glass, unsure whether that Glassy pass would pass as ass.

"Eh," said Diogenes. "I've seen worse."

The two of them were doctors, and not the "let me write you a prescription" kind of doctor, or the "invented a soft drink" kind of doctor, or the MFA kind of doctor, although Diogenes might have liked art. Glass probably didn't. But there was one masterpiece that they both enjoyed equally, and it was found in Diogenes's bedroom. It was the poshy French poster for some movie or a street or something that hung above Diogenes's bed as they fucked each other until the air was unhealthily thick with fuck-smells.

They were not the most prominent faces amongst the senior staff, not to everyone else. If you asked someone about them, they might not be able to describe their appearances, or their personality quirks, or what genders they are, even if that person was writing a story about them. But those things don't matter when you're in love. Which they were, with the idea of frequent animalistic sex between shifts.

They had toys, only to be used with each other, or maybe with themselves if the other wasn't around, but with the agreement that they'd think about each other or maybe role-play like the toy was the

other person but turned into a sex toy that could still talk and was nervous about the whole situation. The really kinky stuff was really just for show, because Diogenes figured that having a whole hidden shelf of sex equipment would be sort of badass compared to having a lonesome dildo shoved in a drawer somewhere. Mostly they stuck to the bare necessities: Velcro-brand velcro cuffs, a blindfold nicked from a cognitohazard station, and a Lowe's paint stirrer to administer smacks and stir the sex paint[1]. Diogenes had a double-ended number that they had named "Twin Peaks" (to go with the bullet vibrator Eraserhead, and the less said about Videodrome the better) but Glass objected to it for reasons that should be obvious.

"I'm really dissatisfied with my work right now. I know we're doing good, and I know we're more successful than ever, but it feels so empty and futile. We're killing ourselves in a career of sacrifice to a world that never asked for the service and doesn't know we're doing it. Did you know that the Foundation takes ownership of everything I come up with and then uses almost none of it that doesn't have any application in keeping weird things from touching people or each other? I could have won the Nobel Prize in whatever it is I do. I could have recognition, and not just the facial recognition that lets me in to see the animal monster. I could have accolades other than the Skippy for Best Cube and the Lifetime Stare-At-This-To-Reset-Your-Meme-Addled-Brain Award. I and you, Diogenes, are stuck here, for life, and the only comfort I have in this sterile hell is found in your sweaty, tremulous genitalia," said Glass. Or, that's what Glass would have said if they weren't face-deep in Diogenes's sweaty, tremulous genitalia.

Footnotes
1.

Erstwhile and Again

…

Temperatures expected to drop today, with a high of 43, rain all day with a chance of sleet or freezing rain this evening, low of 23, so make sure and salt those sidewalks and stairs today. This weekend's set to be colder still, high of 32 on Saturday with a 30% chance of snow accumulation greater than one inch. That's your local weather, it's 6:45 am on December 12th, 1997. Up next, Tschaicovsky's famous Nutcracker Suite performed by the Boston Philharmonic orchestra.

Dr. Thaddeus Xyank rubbed a bit of sleep out of his eyes and pulled himself into a sitting position, arching and cracking his back. A morning much like a few dozen others that had passed in rapid succession. Routines have their charm. Glasses, toothbrush, shirt and tie. Lab coat, keycard, coffee and bagel. Briefcase, hallway, "Good morning, Phil." "G'Mornin' Dr. Xyank, sleep well last night?" "You bet," office, check for mail. Close the door, roll up the blinds. A dreary Friday morning, damp and grey. He was glad, for once, for oil heat and basic climate control. The mindless inconvenience of "roughing it" among ancient savages was finally becoming comfortable. He took a sip. Still a little too hot, but it would do to start drinking it.

> ~*You have* Four *new voice messages.*~
>
> *"Dr. Xyank, it's Marcus. We've hit a snag. Transport is working, but the field size is proving to be a little unstable. Last test object was a chair and only half of it went through, and the other half was pretty seriously irradiated. I've reviewed your notes about timing, and I think the precision required might be beyond our equipment's capability. I'll be in the lab around 10 if you've got a minute. No rush, still a few more things to check."*

The white board was turning pink, it had been written, erased, and re-written so many times. Notes were beginning to slip out of the margins everywhere he looked. His calculator booted, loaded at 50% opacity, and transcribed everything lightning-fast for the double-check. The problem Marcus Kitterman had called him about only required nanosecond precision. That shouldn't be out of reach of a Pentium… unless the radio chatter around the site…

Xyank sighed and relaxed, suddenly very glad the department was working exclusively with inanimate objects, at least for the time being.

> *~Next Message~*
>
> *"This is Athena Anastasakos calling in a shift-end report. Experimentation progressing nicely, however the topology of our model is causing difficulty. Request permission to recruit two additional engineers from Extra-D at Level 4-Delta clearance to finish the device. Please let me know as soon as possible."*

Athena was doing a wonderful job keeping up with the Tachyon emitter design. 281 was a smart little object but it offered almost no insight into the nuts and bolts of temporal displacement or dilation. It was, after all, just a large battery tied to an alarm clock. However, it was about three kilos heavier than it should have been, and the circuit board in/out voltages just didn't add up. Something else was hiding on the 'seventh' side of the device.

> *~Next Message~*
>
> *"Hi Doc, Burt Tomlin. Expect a visit today at… 0800. Can't tell you more here. Bye."*

Bertrand 'for christ's sake just call me Burt' Tomlin? Whatever for? He hadn't seen Burt for more than five years, since the 176 incident. A chill momentarily lingered at the top of Thad's spine as he sank into his chair and opened a very empty briefcase where he kept a few blank files to 'read' from in case someone with the wrong clearance came in unannounced. Tomlin wasn't one of those, though. He had the right clearance. He should. He was on the

recovery team when…When. If he was coming so soon…

> *~Next Message~*
>
> *"Good evening Dr. Xyank this is Dr. Piedmont. I just wanted to thank you for… crap, it's 1997, isn't it? Never mind, Thad. We'll be in touch."*
>
> *~End of Final Message~*

…Doctor what? What could he possibly be thanking… Oh.

In that case, Thad considered it was best to start work for the day. The sooner he actually cracked this damned nut, the better. A receiver, five key presses, and a ringing on the other end. Trees outside blew in the rapid wind, knocking the last of the autumn leaves loose.

"Junior Researcher Anastasakos," she answered, her exhaustion obscured by a thin veneer of professional demeanor.

"It's Xyank. Can you secure the line please?"

Five atonal beeps.

"That should do," Athena groaned. Thad could practically see her rubbing her eyes over the phone. "I presume you're calling about the request I left for you?"

"I am," Thad replied. "Do you have any techs you'd prefer to work with? Anyone you've dealt with before?" Thad booted up his device and began to scroll through the roster.

"Not particularly," Athena answered. "I just need someone's help bringing the last board into view. We… it's been a very long week, and we've made a lot of progress, but if I can't actually *see* what I'm reverse engineering-"

"Understood. How many do you need?"

"I thought I said two, but… Yes, two is fine."

"Alright, I'll have the paperwork in by this after-lunch. Gotta go now. Visitors ought to start popping in any minute now."

"Oh? OH! Right. Thank you," Athena said, relieved.

"One more thing, Attie; get some sleep. You're no good to me exhausted."

"What about the deadline?"

"Ms. Anastasakos, we are working on a temporal displacement device. There are no deadlines." Thad glanced at his watch. 0700 exactly. One hour remaining.

"Except when there are," he corrected himself. But he had already hung up.

Thad was making passionate love to a phase transformation when 0800 reared its ugly head and the door handle jiggled. Sigh. "Come in!" he hollered, not looking up from the red marks flying frantically across the page. His left hand slipped under the desk and grasped the Beretta 92 service pistol waiting there… you know. Just in case.

The door hesitated for a moment as the latch slipped and when it opened a gust of dust, wind, and desert heat burst across his senses like an atom-bomb. Dr. Xyank winced and coughed and raised his hand as two khaki-clad folks pushed the door shut behind them and pulled off their glasses. One male. One female. Loaded for survival in a hostile world. Carrying concealed firearms. Tired.

And neither of them were Burt Tomlin.

"Dr. Xyank! Thank Christ, it worked." The woman pulled off her headscarf and pulled off her goggles, spraying dust around the office like it was someone else's job to clean it up and no one was trying to get some work done here today. Thad cleared his throat conspicuously.

"Can I help you?" Xyank asked impatiently, the pen finally dropping. He peered at them over his lenses as the male dropped a rucksack, grabbed a small waterskin, and started filling it from the water cooler

in the corner.

The man in the desert drab chuckled, and shook his head. "That's funny. Real funny. I bet you get a chance to do that a lot." He drank deeply and voraciously as though it had been days since he'd last had a drop. "We made the rendezvous just like you told us. Fifty-seven days, eight hours, twenty-one seconds exactly. Now if it's all the same, I'd like to be debriefed so I can go home and see my cat, please."

Thad's head cocked to the side. The specific time interval meant something. It always did. Reduced to seconds, that was 4953600 s. Divide by the basic "now" interval of 11.25 s and that's 440320 temporal units. So they either missed the drop or… "…What year did you start in?"

"Doctor, enough is enough," the female said, slumping into a chair and taking the skin from her partner. "I mean, you mentioned you might be a little confused when we got back-"

"Did I?" Thaddeus had never before realized his talent for understatement. "Well, so I am. Humor me, please."

The realization washed past the pair of them as they looked around the office. As though things were missing. Crucial things. The male looked at his companion, leaned over to the door, and opened it on a busy hallway. Tentatively, he stuck his be-watched wrist past the jam, and sighed. "…We're Agents Gregory Hartford and Vanessa Freedman… From July 5, 2019 CE."

"And you're on assignment for whom?"

Vanessa closed her eyes and slumped forward. "…For you, Doctor." She reached into a satchel and produced from it a small gilded-clay cup, placing it on the desk before him. "It's Safe… But don't put any water in it. And be careful. It's come a very long way."

The Doctor's lips drew into a tight frustrated line. The visitors had made it right on time, according to the current model. He cursed his future self for all the extra work, but realized it was no use. This was exactly the kind of hole he was making it his life's work to close.

"Thank you both for your contributions. Welcome to 1997." Thad archived the time, date, names, and object recovered, then picked up the receiver and pressed no less than 19 buttons in rapid succession. "12, please… Dr. Thaddeus Xyank, regarding a 'pick-up'… Yes, I'll hold." This was going to be a very busy morning.

Marcus indelicately picked his nose and wiped it on a bit of wrapper left over from the breakfast sandwich he purchased at 9 o'clock. To his credit, he used the hand sanitizer next to the console before doing anything else. The smoldering remains of a chair were still laying on the floor of the test chamber. "…Two minutes," he said, sliding down the computer bank and re-checking the in-room Geiger counter.

"How many of these tests do you run in a day, Mr. Kitterman?" Thaddeus peered at a screen showing the recorded event. 281 activated synchronously to the EM transmitter. A temporal bubble erupted and retracted in the center of the test chamber. There was a flash of light and a radiation spike, and then the bits left behind collapsed.

"Anywhere from ten to twenty, slowly turning up the Δt as we go. Everything between 3 seconds and 5 hours works fine, but past that, the field starts getting irregular and—" across the room, the counter erupted in a series of clicks. "Oop, here we go."

A loud cracking sound and a bright flash of light later, 2/5ths of a chair fell into the pile of remains. Alpha, Beta, and Gamma radiation, and a few million free neutrons to boot flew across the room in every direction.

"Yikes," Thad said flatly, leaning back in the chair. "Thaaat's not supposed to happen…"

"Mmmmmhm. At that level of radiation a human traveler loses all their hair in a few days and their pancreas soon after," Marcus said, shaking his head. "I'm thinking it's because the event-horizon ends up shearing so many atoms when passing through a solid object, but until I can get a *success* under my belt, it's hard to tell."

Thaddeus looked over the bank of monitors as his calculator began printing to his vision to check and recheck the expected values. Everything turned up green. And so it was time to ask the stupid questions.

"You've rebooted?" he asked.

"Yup."

"Verified the timer's accuracy?"

"To the picosecond." Marcus said, tapping the cesium clock in front of him like an old friend.

"And the Faraday Cage is closed?"

A loud banging sound in the adjacent testing chamber made their hearts jump into their throats. A steel I-beam, 2 m in length with the word "NO" plasma-cut out of its center had just slammed into the floor, apparently from nowhere. Marcus Kitterman looked sheepishly at the displeased Dr. Xyank, who rubbed the bridge of his nose and sighed.

"…Mr. Kitterman. Please take greater care to account for radio chatter in the future." Thad looked out into the testing chamber and let the air flap out between his lips. "Now get a Faraday cage built in here and resolve that paradox. Immediately."

"Yes, sir," Marcus answered, with a phone already in his hands.

After lunch there was another man in his office uninvited that was still not Bertrand Tomlin. What's more is that he was busily staring at the contents of the briefcase. Or rather, the lack of contents. And the badge hanging off of his belt only had a bright red "EC-3". This man did not belong here.

"EXCUSE ME."

The L3 jumped out of his skin and spun on his heels hands up and clenched, ready to pound the shit out of whatever he saw. The look in his eye was easy to recognize. This man had seen things… A lot

of things. Some of them above Thad's pay grade. Fist cocked back, the L3 caught himself, blinked back to his senses, and relaxed, slumping onto the desk, gripping his chest.

"Jesus Thad, you scared the shit out of me!"

"It seems you have me at a disadvantage. Who, may I ask, are you?" Thad asked gruffly. The voice sounded familiar but he couldn't place it.

The L3 stood and offered a hand which Thad reluctantly took. "Dr. Lowell Piedmont, EC-3," he said, a smile creeping back onto his face. "You know, you're not a very easy man to find. Even when you do exist."

"Yeah, I get that a lot," Xyank said, kicking the door closed behind him and hurrying behind his desk. The briefcase closed with a *thwack* and latched shut on its own. "What is it I can do for you Dr. Piedmont?"

"Nothing. Well. Nothing yet." Dr. Piedmont replied. "But… I don't know, I suppose later there will be something. Only… huh. This is hard."

"Only I've already done it?" Thad offered as he tapped a cup of water and sipped it slowly.

"Yes… You've both already done it and haven't done it yet, apparently. Which is confusing." Dr. Piedmont ran an unwelcome finger along one of the side tables, looking at it like others had before him, as though something should be there.

"This may come as something of a surprise to you, Doctor, but this isn't my first temporal anomaly," Thad said, watching carefully. Waiting for an excuse to call security or kick him out or something. Anything. Some manner of clue that he'd seen something he shouldn't or knew something he couldn't but something about the bags under Dr. Piedmont's eyes said there wasn't much fitting that description.

"Don't I know it!" Piedmont finally said. "This whole office… Well… I

guess you'll figure it out, soon enough."

"Pardon me, sir. But is there anything at all you have for me apart from cryptic references to future events?" Thad's patience was at an end.

"…Only that the 'Esoteric Containment' department is your friend. And if you find yourself in need of any…let's say *pertinent* information… Well, you've shaken the right hands." Dr. Piedmont winked and left a card on Thad's desk, and left. "Good Afternoon. Glad we could meet. Again."

Dr. Xyank looked at the card for all of forty-five seconds before he decided 'what the hell' and picked it up.

Dr. Lowell Henry Piedmont

Ethics Committee / L-3

Ex. 8-065-92

"…Oh Goddammit."

The rest of the afternoon was blissfully uneventful. Quiet calculation, a good tasty and nutritious meal followed soon thereafter by a relieving and cleansing bowel movement, some postulation and speculation and one or two calls to Attie and Marcus to see how they were progressing. His own tachyon field detection project was about to make the 442*i* a reality. Six dozen years early, too. And it was as he looked at the whiteboard proving it could be done, head propped up on one hand, and wondered how it was possible to invent something before it was invented, that a knock came at the door.

Quickly, Thad pulled a projector screen down in front of his notes. "Door's open."

Around the jam and into the room came one Agent Bertrand Tomlin, looking awfully dapper in a bowler hat with a handlebar mustache,

muttonchops and brown tweed jacket. He peeled the facial hair off and spat some stray fibers from his lips. "Sorry I'm late. Missed the drop by nearly half an hour."

Before Xyank could mention that it was just as well and he had quite a busy morning regardless, a magazine was dropped on the desk, in mint condition although the date of publication said clearly "1892" right there on the plain blue cover. Just beneath the white text: *Foundation*. "Would you mind telling me what the hell your name is doing in this journal?"

"What?!" Thad grabbed it up and flipped to the contents page. Sure enough, there he was. And Athena's name, too. "This *really* doesn't seem like me. Why in hell would I publish findings that haven't been found yet?"

"I was hoping you could tell me." Tomlin said, pulling his collar apart and kicking off his ill-fitting shoes. "Now that you've…Wait, you said it hasn't be found *yet*?"

Thad looked at Tomlin's stupid face in manner that made it clear how stupid that face was.

"Don't you look at me like that, Thad. Don't you *dare* look at me like that. I have been holding your hand for five years of my life, trying to get you caught up with *yourself* and I'm going to damn well tell *one of you* about it!" He slammed the chair onto the ground, and sat in it, staring at the Doctor as he purposefully mussed the pomade out of his hair. "You told me time travel was invented today. You told me this, from my perspective, thirty-seven hours, fourteen minutes and… seventeen seconds ago. Factor in that 18.47 hours of that was on May 1st, 1892 CE. What does your model say?"

Thad picked up a red pen to write it out and Bertrand knocked it out of his hands.

"Just. Calculate."

"…August 19th twenty… no…forty-sev… Yegods! There's no way that's right!"

Tomlin's eyebrows kissed the ceiling as his arms and legs crossed, mouth drawn in a tight frown. "I'm going to be honest with you, Thad. I don't even remember meeting you anymore. How old I was or how old I'm supposed to be or which Causal String is fucking which. Now, I'm tired. I'm achy. I smell like dog piss, horses, and rail-yards. Something has fucked our shit up royally. Either we've gone too deep or not deep enough, and I need to know from you, *right now*, at the very least, that Time travel was invented *today*!"

The phone rang, and Xyank picked it up. "Thad Xyank…"

"Dr. Xyank, it's Athena Anastasakos. Can you-"

Thad's fingers flew across the keys as his face lit up. "You're not *serious*?"

"We got the last board in view. It's so simple I'm embarrassed we didn't think of it ourselves. The device employs a novel enzyme. Dissolve it in water, and it acts as a superfluid at room temperature. All you need to do is shake it and the motion of the molecules actually causes a *luminous bloom*! Relativistic motion in a test tube! At *room temp*!"

Thaddeus, as though he'd seen a ghost, glanced at the title of the paper he had not yet written. "And we can reproduce it?"

"With a goddamn high-school chemistry set! Erm. Pardon my language," she replied.

Burt Tomlin, just barely able to hear it breathed a sigh of relief, finally allowing himself to relax.

"Okay. First thing tomorrow morning you and I are writing a paper. And then we're going to test it."

"But Doctor, we're *months* away from a safe, functional prototype!" she protested.

"I understand, but right now I know of at least twenty seven open loops that need closing and if I find any more there's no way we'll be able to keep track of…" A light bulb turned on in his head. "…Check that. Let's talk more about this tomorrow. Something's just come up."

Thad slammed the receiver down and spun in his chair, raising the projector's screen so that Tomlin could see it. "Does any of this look familiar to you, Burt?"

"Yeah, that's a Temp Ex, for TVM."

Thad frowned and rubbed his nose. "Burt… for the love of whatever god you wish, hold my hand for just five minutes longer and repeat what you've just said in English, please."

Tomlin rolled his eyes and sat back. "Fine. It's a Temporal Expression."

Xyank's blank, wanting stare bid him to continue

"…Temporal Expressions are a memetic/info-nomalous method of temporal displacement, allowing any event boundary to serve as both horizon and vehicle to the chosen destination. This one resolves to 'TVM', or, 'This Very Moment.'" Tomlin checked the board. He grabbed paper and jotted the expression from memory. Then pulled a watch from his pocket and studied it closely. "Yeah… it's a little archaic, but that's definitely a Temp Ex. I thought you said you hadn't invented it yet."

The Doctor smiled. "Apparently, I have."

Thaddeus Xyank cleared his throat half-heartedly as he looked at his own office window and slipped the package inside. Had it really only been a few months since all of this had seemed so hopeless? He considered for a moment opening the door and stepping inside, patting himself on the back, giving him the pep-talk in person as living proof that one day, one day very soon, all the work would pay off…

But he already had not. And so he did not.

Instead, the good Doctor Xyank pulled a pad of paper from his pocket, and jotted down a quick equation. He walked slowly past stock-still bodies of friends and colleagues, through all of the rats stuck stubbornly in the maze of causality, to the door at the end of

the hall where Eternity awaited him with arms thrown wide.

…

Part Two: The Deep End | **Part Four: Exit History**

Ethical?

"State your name for the record, please." The voice echoed through the vast space, amplified by the microphone.

"Um, Dr., um, Dr. Robert Feldon, sir," he said into the microphone timidly. It was the first time he could ever recall being timid. Usually, *he* was the one with the booming voice, echoing out from on high in a dark room.

Of course, this room was hardly dark, in fact it was illuminated as well as or better than some of the rooms in the facility Feldon had worked at before the Masquerade failed. And the man, or rather men and women, accusing him were only slightly higher than him.

He observed the group before him carefully, looking, as he had in the past, for weaknesses, for fears, for *anything* he could use to his advantage.

They stared back with the same expression.

Feldon began to sweat.

"And your former position with your past employer, Dr. Feldon?" the man in the middle spoke again.

Balding, slightly corpulent, dark clothing, glasses. A dead stare. The same expression many had thought Feldon once wore at similar times. Except that Feldon was slightly younger and more fit. Completely bald, but in his former line of work, that could only be expected.

Feldon cleared his throat and spoke into the microphone again. "Former head of the Foundation's Ethics Committee, sir. Before it was phased out to this body, sir."

"And how long have you held this position?"

"For the past seven years, sir."

Despite himself, Feldon heard a bit of pride creep into his voice and inwardly cringed. A quick glance confirmed his suspicions. They had heard it as well and were less than pleased.

The group murmured a moment before a glance from the man in the middle quieted them. He seemed to be the man in charge, and would presumably lead the entire hearing.

"…I see. And for how many of these…SCP objects…were you involved in devising the 'Containment Procedures,' Dr. Feldon?"

"Well, that depends on what you mean by 'involved' actually. Do you mean objects in whose containment and research I was personally involved before my appointment to the Ethics Committee, or do you mean objects in whose containment procedures I was involved in the approval or revision of following my appointment to the Ethics Committee?"

"Answer the question, please."

"Right," said Feldon, looking somewhat nervously at the other, silent members of the panel, "Um, at a guess, something close to, um, 435. Maybe 437."

"Any particularly…*notable*…procedures, Doctor?"

"To be honest, sir, they all start blending together after awhile. And when you consider all the information I've been privy to that is above even *your* paygrade, it's little wonder I remember no specific procedures. Sir."

Shit, why am I back-talking this group, the people who determine my future? thought Feldon.

"Yes, well, that is subject to change. Very shortly, we should have access to all the information. As the UN New Committee on the Ethical Containment of Anomalous Objects, Events, and Creatures, we will require knowledge of all that the Foundation contained and is currently containing. Procedures deemed unethical will be revised. If no revision is possible, containment on the object will cease. If the

object itself is deemed inherently inimicable to human life, it shall be destroyed without exception."

Feldon privately wondered how many of them would be left on the board after they discovered some of the Foundation's blacker secrets. Things only the former O5 Command and the Ethics Committee were cleared to know.

"Doctor, please, the question."

"I'm sorry, sir. Could you repeat the question please?"

"Were you involved in the containment of objects numbered, 453, 231, 158, 239, or any objects classified as 'humanoid' by your former employer?"

Feldon looked away, wishing he could lie and deny any involvement.

"Yes. Inevitably, all the members of the Ethics Committee were at some point involved with a humanoid object. We did our best to reduce the object's discomfort while keeping it contained. He or she, I mean."

"You are aware, Doctor, that most of your humanoid containment procedures violate many laws in many countries, I trust?"

"We didn't have a *choice!* If we hadn't, the world could have ended!"

"Doctor, the general populace still has little knowledge of what your organization terms 'reality benders'. As such, it is thought by many to be highly unlikely that a pregnant woman or a young child could possibly destroy the world. Have you any evidence to the contrary?"

"Plenty," said Feldon, beginning to move from the stand at which he had been placed, before realizing the two rather large men who had accompanied him in wouldn't let him walk around. "Prior to my time as head of the Ethics Committee, I observed testing involving SCP-239. During testing, I saw 239 shift entire rooms in a secure Foundation facility to suit her liking. In this case, a giant doll house. This wouldn't have been so bad if she hadn't also shifted the personnel in the rooms into life-size, animate ragdolls, complete with their memories and personalities. When told she had to turn

everything *back*, she told the head researcher to, and I quote, 'go away, butthead'. I trust I don't have to explain what happened to the poor man's head, but suffice it to say, he went away. Walked out the door and disappeared. Eventually, she got tired of playing with her 'dolls' and they simply vanished as well. This was one incident out of *many* and this was by far one of the least serious."

"And the woman you designated SCP-231?" asked the man in the center, already disapproving of an answer that hadn't yet been voiced.

"Sir, there are some things no one wants to know. I assure you that is one of them."

"So you consistently subject a human being to something so horrible you won't speak it aloud or commit it to paper, and you see nothing unethical in this?"

"Oh, I see plenty that is unethical about that…by conventional ethics, at least," he said with a grim smile, "You see, what most people don't realize about SCP-231 is that it isn't a single pregnant female. What everyone in the general public knows about SCP-231 is, in fact, incorrect. The general public, and frankly most of the enlightened public, yourselves included, are unaware that SCP-231 is actually designated SCP-231-7. She is the seventh and last of the women we contained with the SCP-231-X designation. The others all died. They died either due to a break in the containment procedures we designed, by their own hand, or by our attempts to remove the…fetus. On one occasion, SCP-231-1 actually *did* give birth. The resulting incident caused hundreds of casualties. Were you aware of this, sir?"

The panel remained silent, absorbing the information.

"And were you aware that each fetus has had the potential to cause or has caused more catastrophic damage than the last?"

The panel sat still, silent, fidgeting slightly. The bald doctor now had the upper hand.

"You can all fact check me when you have clearance, as trite as that

sounds."

The panel looked uncomfortable for a moment more before the man at its center spoke again.

"Doctor, this body will determine that for itself. Even taking into account what we now know about what your organization termed 'reality benders,' we find it hard to believe that any being under the age of ten has enough to power to, as some of your peers have put it, 'vaporize my head' despite the information you have provided. Additionally, whatever the hell you're doing to the *person* that you have *objectified* as 231 *will stop* as soon as this body has the official power to do so."

But they were a little less sure, a little less full of themselves, Feldon could see it. He felt the power shift in the room. This was *his* stage now.

"Very well…sometimes seeing is believing. But if you find out you are wrong, what then do you intend to do?" he asked smugly.

"Dr. Feldon, this hearing is not about what we as a body intend to do. This hearing is about you and your peers and your decidedly unethical treatment of many human beings of many nationalities. As such, this avenue of discussion is closed. Is that understood?"

"Of course. Do you have any further questions?"

"Do you contain anything that *doesn't* destroy the world?"

"Well, we have a two-person llama costume wearing galoshes. Before we took it into custody, it was being used for psychic-dissociative recreation, but then its users overdosed and died."

"…what?"

"Never mind. Any further questions?"

"Yes. To the extent of your knowledge, do any of the containment procedures you've authored or revised contain intentional harm to human beings?"

"…yes."

The panel as a whole frowned at this.

"And do any of the containment procedures you've authored or revised place other human beings in danger?"

"Yes. But we—"

"And do any of the containment procedures you've authored or revised involve cruel or unusual treatments of human beings?"

"…define 'cruel and unusual'."

"Doctor, that statement in itself is enough to convince this panel that you are of questionable moral judgment. Your actions have been, by your own admission, unethical."

"So, in light of this, in light of the possible deaths of hundreds or thousands or more, that could be caused by *one* of the entities we contain, what is ethical? What is right and wrong? What is cruel and unusual? Are you prepared to ask these questions every day for the rest of your time?"

The panel was silent for a long moment again.

"As the Ethics Committee, were you not trusted to keep the Foundation ethical? In this, you failed."

"You think I failed? Wait until you know. You'll want me to come back, to take your jobs from you."

"Because of your statements Doctor, let it be known this committee is recommending that you be permanently dismissed from any work with the Foundation in its current iteration. Additionally, we are recommending a full psychological evaluation in an institution of our choice. Should any problems be found, treatment, regardless of length, is mandatory. Remove him."

Two large men, the ones who had brought Feldon into the room, escorted the former Ethics Committee head out of the room to a waiting vehicle that would take him to a mental institution, one of

many that former Foundation employees were being sent to regularly following the new necessity of following international laws.

The man who had served as the head of the panel looked at the members gathered alongside him.

"Bring in the next one."

Two weeks later

HEADLINE: FORMER FOUNDATION "ETHICS" COMMITTEE HEAD RELEASED, RETURNED TO SERVICE

May 10, 2014

Today, Dr. Robert Feldon, the former head of the Foundation "Ethics" Committee was released from the institution he was placed in following the UN Committee hearing two weeks ago and restored to his former position. The majority of the panel declined to comment on their decision to repeal their choice and return Dr. Feldon to his former position, replacing panel and Committee head Gregory Rexin as leader of the UN New Committee on the Ethical Containment of Anomalous Objects, Events, and Creatures.

When questioned, Rexin said only, "In this world, this world in which everything we know is turned upside down, what is ethical? What is right and wrong and how do we define cruel and unusual?"

Further comment was declined. Cont. pg. 2A **ETHICS**.

Ethics

The man in the bush is sleeping in the fetal position, shivering. A light snow, the first of the year, swirls on the wind. The man's blanket is pitifully thin, and there's only a square of cardboard between him and the frozen ground. Johnson doesn't have to wake him up. He can feel the man's wariness, like an animal's.

"Hi," Johnson says, casually. "Pretty cold out here, isn't it? I work for the shelter. Can I take you somewhere you can sleep inside?"

It takes the man almost a minute to sit up. He's shaking violently. Might not have survived the night had Johnson not come along. He finally pulls himself, coughing, into an upright position. Hugs his knees.

"Do you smoke?" Johnson crouches next to the makeshift bed. The man shakes his head, still coughing.

"Good, good for you. That's good. Well, how about it? Can we go inside?" The guy nods, once, and struggles to his feet. It's hard to guess his age through his shaggy beard. He definitely looks under 35, though, which is important. 21 is the ideal age; fully developed physically, with minimal extra wear to control for. Americans 40 and older are always a total crapshoot, in terms of fitness. You take what you can get, in any case, but younger is better. Finding better candidates means doing a better job. Doing a better job means everything.

The van's about two blocks away. Five others are waiting inside, enjoying the special heaters that work when it's turned off, so they can't steal it. The van has numerous anti-vandalism measures like that discreetly worked into its interior. You never know what these people will try to do.

“My name is Ben,” the man says, though Johnson didn’t ask.

Six in one night is a pretty good haul, even for Johnson. Three of them look to be in decent health, including a female. She’s younger than he’d have preferred, but you work with what you’ve got. It’s hard to find females outside the medical system, and they’re always in demand.

“What kind of music does everybody like?” Johnson asks cheerfully as the van pulls away from the curb.

Would you harm one person to save two others from harm?

It’s raining. Johnson always thought it was just something people said, about always raining in Washington, but that’s what the weather’s like every time he comes.

The guards at the prison eye him up and whisper to each other as he passes by. He recognizes a couple of them; he’s been to this prison before. He’s sure the guards hear things, just like him. A secret known by a dozen people just isn’t a secret anymore.

“You again,” the warden says. “I knew it was something when they called me out of bed.” Security knows to wait in the hall, but Johnson can picture them outside, ears cocked, straining to be in the loop.

“I’ve got the forms ready, sir." Johnson reaches into his briefcase. “All I need is your signature, and we’ll be ready to start loading them up.”

“I’ve heard. I can’t believe you have enough helicopters to lift all these men. Where’d you say the crash was?”

“Northwest, by the border." Johnson's answer doesn’t matter; the warden isn’t expecting the truth. “It broke up in midair. We have a large area to cover for survivors. Time is important.”

“Of course." He signs, Johnson hands back the acknowledgment of transfer, and three hundred fates are sealed. “I knew it. Had to be something. This is a huge order, even for you guys.”

The way he puts emphasis on “you guys” makes Johnson look up, makes him really check the man out. The warden’s face is smug, like Johnson’s reaction told him something he wanted to know. He wonders just how much the warden’s in on. Everybody hears things. The warden might know more than Johnson does himself.

He’s never met this one before, only seen his name on files here and there. They wouldn’t normally go to him, but the maximum security pen they normally use just had a shift in management. His employers haven’t had time to establish connections over there yet, and they need subjects right now. They really are going to a forest in Washington, and it’s really to grid search, but they’re not looking for plane crash survivors.

Highly aggressive selenium-based organisms have been coming from somewhere inside. Approximately every three hours, another wave pours from out of the treeline, each exponentially bigger than the last. This morning they were coming 8 at a time. In another ten hours or so, at the current rate, there will be an attack by more of these animals than there are humans on Earth.

Johnson has no idea what his bosses will do when they find the source of the infestation. He's not afraid; they can do anything, once they know where to direct their effort. But first, someone needs to find out where that is. There’s no time to conduct a search with commando teams or set up robots. They need sheer numbers to get the job done in time.

Would you murder 300 citizens to save the country?

“They’ll all be given commendations, and transferred to preferred-treatment facilities for the rest of their sentences,” Johnson lies, “so you won’t be seeing any of them back here again.”

The two men look at each other. Neither one moves to shake hands.

“Well, you’ll find compensation for your time in the mail in about two weeks. You can’t know what a difference you’ve made here.”

That part, at least, is true.

He hates psychiatric hospitals. It’s not the atmosphere, and of course they’re not enough to creep him out; he just never knows what he’s getting recruitment-wise. Prisoners are one thing. They aren’t as dangerous as one would think, and they're usually in good condition aside from drug histories and the odd chronic injury, but most importantly they're predictable. Candidates from the mental health system, on the other hand, could be irrationally defiant. That's bad for timetables.

“I hope the new home works out for her,” the administrating nurse chirps. Johnson was given a list of names that—according to their data mining—might fit the requirements for an urgent research assignment. One of them is on suicide watch in this hospital.

“Yes, well." Johnson snaps open his briefcase. “We have a great volunteer with a soft spot for orphans. When she heard that, um, Michelle had no family to go back to—well, how is she supposed to rejoin society without one?”

“I agree. I totally agree,” the administrator beams. She hands him a thick folder, marked with post-its where he needs to sign. “I’m so glad you could take her. She's been in and out for years. We’ve been trying to find a group home placement for her, but it’s been tough.”

“That’s what we do. Help with tough situations.”

They just contained a statue that women with a particular blood type see in their dreams, once they’ve been near it. When they have the dreams, they wake up pregnant with monsters. They tracked the carving to an empty fishing village in northern Russia, after the dreams started coming to women in the next town. His bosses need to find out why the area of effect is increasing, or in a few more months there won’t be a society for the woman to rejoin. Not woman. Participant. D-249-9907.

“It’s just nice that there are people out there who can help.” the administrator takes the papers back and puts them in her desk. They’ll be stolen and incinerated by the end of the night. The participant will be exposed to the statue, but he’s heard that they’re actually studying whether the anomalous embryo can be surgically

removed before it tears its own way out. They have to do this to make an emergency plan, in case the area of effect keeps increasing. Or in case another one turns up in the middle of a city. If the surgery works, and the participant survives, they'll use drugs to wipe her memory so they can use her for something else.

"I'm glad you're out there doing it," she says. "You should be proud."

Would you commit a rape to prevent an indefinite number of murders?

If a person walks in front of a bus, and you can divert the bus' path, but doing so has an 80% chance of killing everyone on board, what do you do?

When Johnson got promoted to his security job, they gave him a test where he had to sit in a dark room and answer hundreds of these questions. They did it more than once, sometimes waking him in the middle of the night, dragging him back to the harsh spotlight and uncomfortable stool.

At first, he tried to give them answers they wanted to hear, but the hundreds of questions became thousands of questions, timed, variations repeating endlessly. It was impossible to fake, partly because it was so disorienting and partly because he couldn't tell how they wanted him to answer in the first place.

During the second week of the evaluation, he realized that he not only didn't know what he was supposed to tell them; he didn't know what he really thought. He lost his point of reference, his moral compass disassembled altogether. The answers came easier after that.

Would you allow two men to die to save one woman?

Would you bury 15 children alive to prevent 300 adults being burned at the stake?

By the end of the fourth week, he knew things about himself he never would have discovered on his own. He came out of the

interview process stripped of his optimism and with a new respect for the horror simple numbers can hold. He didn't know what to expect, or what the whole thing was for. He thought they might fire him. Or worse.

For the last interview, they asked him to come in the morning at an ordinary time. There were no clipboards, no lab coats, just a gray-haired woman in a business suit.

"What would you do to save the world?" she asked.

Johnson said, "Anything."

Ethics Committee Observer Orientation, Pt. II

"After this orientation, you will have a short session with a few Observers who can give you more hands-on information, as well as answer the more… informal questions you may have. Instructions on how to connect to Ethics Committee's secure instant relay chat and the correct room for this session are included in the required reading you were given at the beginning of the orientation. All of you have already been assigned login information."

"Welcome to Ethics Committee, and the Observers."

*** Connecting…**
*** Connected, logging you in…**
*** This username is protected. Please input your credentials, or use another username.**
*** <USERSERV> IDENTIFY ************
*** Checking credentials…**
*** Credentials accepted, please wait…**
*** Connected**
*** Welcome to Ethics Committee secure instant relay chat network! You are running version 4.8.11.**
*** Joining rooms… (#ecinit)**
*** Connected**

*** Now joining: #ecinit**

ROFEBRON Believe that's everyone
ROFEBRON Counted right number of people
NATAWONG this is everyone
ARCMITCH This looks about right.
ARCMITCH So, everyone here has been through orientation already.
ARCMITCH If you haven't, I have no idea how you possibly got here in the first

place.

HZRDBHT Hello everyone, new Observers.

TRNROSNR So, who wants to run real orientation this time?

NATAWONG me

CHYAMAG absolutely not

ROFEBRON No

TRNROSNR You are the last person allowed to run real orientation

CHYAMAG I will

TRNROSNR Chibi, I'll help

*** CHYAMAG set mode +m on #ecinit**

CHYAMAG questions can come later

CHYAMAG but for now, we'll run orientation this way

CHYAMAG first of all, welcome to Ethics Committee

CHYAMAG and welcome to the Observers

CHYAMAG I'm sure all of you know sirc from using it in your various departments

TRNROSNR Observers rely heavily on Ethics Committee sirc for communication and collaboration

TRNROSNR As you could probably tell from the above conversation, we're a little more laid back about how we talk to one another

TRNROSNR Some of us do write as if our shift key is broken, though

NATAWONG some of us want to relax sometimes

CHYAMAG you're gonna be working with each other relatively closely, likely in small groups such as the six of us you see in here

ARCMITCH That would be us

NATAWONG waves

CHYAMAG there's also the main observer

	room, which is #ecobsm
CHYAMAG	you'll likely end up finding yourself with a group of a few others who you work together very well with
CHYAMAG	make a room for yourselves on ECsirc
CHYAMAG	we're all professionals with a very serious joob, ,sure, but there's not much of a reason to be so stingy about how you talk to each other
TRNROSNR	We have greater concerns beyond hyperprofessional emails
CHYAMAG	now, with that part out of the way
CHYAMAG	on behalf of absolutely every Observer
CHYAMAG	we're sorry
CHYAMAG	I know that you've been prepped on what this job is, and you've been warned what it will do to you
CHYAMAG	and by both your consent and your mental profile, you've been determined to be a suitable Observer
CHYAMAG	I will say this righ tnow
CHYAMAG	things can and will be worse than you think
TRNROSNR	Your job is covert monitoring and investigation of Foundation activities regarding breaches in ethical protocol
TRNROSNR	This is one of the hardest jobs in the Foundation, and not because monitoring and investigation is difficult.
CHYAMAG	Ethics Committee establishes what the Line We Do Not Cross is
CHYAMAG	and we watch that line
CHYAMAG	unseen by everyone else except for each other
CHYAMAG	you will see some goddamn awful

things

CHYAMAG and sometimes you will have to say "this is fine" even if it isn't

CHYAMAG because if you don't do it, something worse will come

CHYAMAG sometimes you will find things that are so clearly unnecessary, and yet

CHYAMAG they continued

CHYAMAG let me put it this way

CHYAMAG we ain't optimists anymore

TRNROSNR I doubt most of you are optimists anyway, since you're here, but the rose shades come off here

NATAWONG theyre gonna snap right in half

HZRDBHT You're going to feel sick a lot. Physically and mentally.

ARCMITCH This is why we talk to one another.

CHYAMAG you are goign to make friends here in this department

CHYAMAG you fucking hold onto them

CHYAMAG they will keep you sane

CHYAMAG nobody is going to look at the things you say to each other unless there's a damn good reason for it

CHYAMAG this job is going to weigh on you like a fucking anvil

CHYAMAG you talk to one another, you help one another

CHYAMAG on the job and in private

TRNROSNR Nobody in the Observers is a one-person team

TRNROSNR Take it from us. We're serious about not isolating yourselves

ROFEBRON Don't try it

ROFEBRON You might die

ROFEBRON Not a joke

TRNROSNR Your job is very g-ddamn crucial

TRNROSNR	And you cannot talk about this with anyone other than other Observers
TRNROSNR	Other Observers are the only people who can know that you're an Observer
CHYAMAG	well, and the EthCom staff psychologists, but they're a busy bunch
CHYAMAG	for obvious reasons
CHYAMAG	well, now that we've scared you all shitless (sorry) I guess if anyone's got any questions?
TRNROSNR	You're free to disconnect if you don't. Remember to join #ecobsm as well, and set it on your auto-join list
NATAWONG	ill be ur friend if u dont have any friends mine are mean to me
*** CHYAMAG set mode -m on #ecinit**	
TRNROSNR	For fuck's sake, Wong
NATAWONG	see what i mean
CHYAMAG	ANYWAY, questions?

*** Leaving room…**
*** DISCONNECTED**

Ethics Committee Orientation

Good afternoon, Doctor. Sit down. Your schedule has been cleared. Do not attempt to leave the room until you are told that this session is over. The door is already locked, but it is crucial you pay attention. Good.

You are now part of the SCP Foundation's Ethics Committee. This is not a demotion.

Sit down.

Yes, you're terrified. You think you're being punished for some failure, some lapse of judgement, some horrible disaster that you were involved with. You think that your career with the Foundation is over. You might even have thought that 'transferred to the Ethics Committee' is a euphemism for 'killed'. This is not the case.

You'll notice I said "killed" instead of "terminated". That's a deliberate choice. On the Ethics Committee, we don't use euphemisms.

Because of the work that the SCP Foundation does, a lot of personnel think that the idea of the Foundation having an Ethics Committee is just a bad joke. Or they know that the Committee exists, but they've got the impression that we're an ineffectual laughingstock. A bunch of purposeless seat-fillers who wave a rubber stamp that says APPROVED, and never dare to voice an objection.

Yes, I see you've heard the jokes. Here's one - 'how many members of the Ethics Committee does it take to change a lightbulb? None! The Ethics Committee can't change *anything*!'

No, it's all right. You're meant to laugh.

We make an effort to sustain the impression that we're useless,

because we are the secret power within the SCP Foundation.

Sit **down.**

Yes, there are the O5s. They judge what is and isn't *safe*, and that's a vital and important function. But we are the ones who advise the O5s on what is and is not *acceptable*.

You've done horrible, awful things while working for the Foundation — don't try to deny it, Doctor. We've *all* done horrible awful things while working for the Foundation. That is one of the unavoidable consequences of working with SCPs. And on occasion, you've wondered if we are the, quote unquote, bad guys. Well… we're not. And that is because of the Ethics Committee. This is your first lesson. Do you understand?

Remember this: *the Foundation is not evil.* We do not torture people "just because". We are against unnecessary cruelty. Which means somebody has to decide when cruelty *is* necessary. And that somebody is us.

Stop trembling.

It is important that you remember this. It is your second lesson. *The Foundation does not rule the world*. The Foundation *serves* the world. Do you understand what that means? Regardless of what the general population might *think* it wants, what we do, what the Foundation does, is in the overall best interests of that general population. Yes, I'm sure you *did* realize that already… but you haven't thought of the deeper implications. You've consoled yourself by thinking that all the torture and murder is for the greater good. This implies that there *is* a greater good… and a lesser good. It implies that there are multiple distinct goods, and that these can be quantified and compared. This is what we on the Ethics Committee *do*.

We are the ones who balance the moral costs of everything the Foundation does. And in order to balance those costs, we must *know* those costs. Do you realize what that means, Doctor? It means that *we know everything the Foundation does, has done, and will ever do*. Everything that has ever been redacted or expunged,

we know it. Every last detail.

Yes, including what **SCP-447-2** does when it comes in contact with dead bodies. Yes, we know exactly what **Procedure 110-Montauk** is, too. We should. We're the ones who designed it.

No, it's quite all right. It's a common reaction. Perhaps we shouldn't schedule these meetings directly after lunch, I suppose. Here, wipe your mouth.

You will no longer be participating in active research. You may consider yourself a researcher at large, flitting from one project to another, from one *site* to another, at will. This is not a secret; you are welcome to tell all your friends that you have been transferred to the Ethics Committee… if you can deal with the jokes and the pity. You will observe what is done, and ask the participants — and yourself — *why* it is being done. If at any point you feel that something is excessive or unnecessary or *wrong*, you inform us. We will summon the people involved, and ask them questions, in that meek ineffectual way that your coworkers have mocked.

And then, word will filter down from the O5s, through the many levels of our bureaucracy. And those who are unethical will be given reprimands which will be noted on their permanent record. Or their pay will be cut, or they will be demoted, or they will be transferred to another project.

Or they will be shot for crimes against humanity.

This is your third lesson. Remember it.

The 'P' stands for 'Protect'. The Foundation protects humanity from SCPs, and we protect the Foundation from itself. We judge what is and is not acceptable for the Foundation to do. We balance evils so that *on the whole*, and *in the long run*, evil is minimized.

No, you don't have a choice about being on the Committee.

…Yes, the irony is lovely, isn't it.

Etymology of die Glocke

FROM: Otto Weber
TO: Ursula Weber
SENT: 10 October, 1939

Heil Hitler.

How are you, my wife? I hope all is well at Magdeburg. As you may have heard from the radio, we have attained victory in the September Campaign. More importantly, I am alright. We may have married in haste for fear of the worst, but it appears that our fears were unfounded. Nonetheless, that spur of the moment gave me reason to fight on. I owe it to those church bells that gave us that thought. At least among my fellows, I know what I am fighting for. You.

That being said, my deployment is still ongoing so I cannot return home yet. Until we reunite, these letters shall be our correspondences to each other.

Sincerely

Otto Weber
Ahnenerbe SS

FROM: Otto Weber
TO: Ursula Weber
SENT: 24 December, 1939

Heil Hitler.

Merry Christmas, my wife. I have received your previous letter and am astonished. To think that it took only that one night to conceive a child, this is wonderful news. There was so little time, and we overcame it. This is

absolutely encouraging to me.

That being said, I am sad that I cannot be with you during your pregnancy. There is still so much to be done here. Seek help from our parents, for I am sure they will help. We must discuss on the name at a later date.

Sincerely

Otto Weber
Ahnenerbe SS

FROM: Otto Weber
TO: Ursula Weber
SENT: 1 July, 1942

Heil Hitler.

My wife, thank you. Your words certainly hold a soothing influence over me. If only you were present by my side, the influence would dispel all ill thoughts at once.

I have taken time to reflect on your previous letter, and acknowledged some of it to be correct. I still do abide by my personal belief that my rejected proposal to PROJECT KOLOSS was intended to deny me of directorship. It might have applied *untermensch* superstition, but that is but a social construct. Regardless, I agree that **`the current director`** is not at fault. He is a fellow patriot, as you said. So long the Reich benefits, there is no need to fight over appointments. I am already at a high rank as it is.

But enough of my rants over work matters. I hope the family is doing well. I am pleased that you speak so highly of me to Elisabet. I only pray that I can tell her my various exploits myself. KOLOSS was a misstep, but do tell her that too. Elisabet can learn from her father's experience.

Sincerely

Otto Weber
Ahnenerbe SS

FROM: Otto Weber
TO: Ursula Weber
SENT: 21 February, 1945

Heil Hitler.

My wife, I hope that the family's resettlement in Breslau has been progressing well since my last correspondence with you. It is regretful that I cannot be there by your side, but we know that the Reich needs me more. Now more than ever before.

You should know by now that the Reich has not been faring well since the disastrous ventures at the Eastern Front. Our enemies are indeed overwhelming us, even with our stock of *wunderwaffe*. Perhaps my rejected proposals might have changed the outcome, but there is no reason to speculate.

Thus, selected colleagues and I have been preparing for a change in tactics, from offense to defence. It is a matter of time before they overrun the Reich entirely, therefore we must defend. Ah Time, it once again brought us trouble, like our marriage. We began to know each other too late, and rushed through it due to coincidence. Additionally, it took only that first and last night to conceive Elisabet. Certainly, Elisabet and our marriage are at least our meagre victory against Time. Thus, it is fitting to name this defence initiative ***'die Glocke'***, after the bells that began our tale of victory. The enemies can tear themselves apart, but we shall rise victorious from their corpses. And by 'we', you and Elisabet are definitely included.

Leave the settlement and come to me in our base at the Owl Mountains, where *die Glocke* awaits. The security detail will escort you there, should you give the order (They know the path). We can be together again and *die*

Glocke will guarantee that Time shall never impede us.

We will not leave without you and Elisabet. As *Obergruppenführer*, I promise.

Sincerely

Otto Weber
Ahnenerbe SS, PROJECT DIE GLOCKE Director

Euclidean Thinking

I climb up to the edge, and pull myself over to the next space. I really wish I could have studied more, there's so much here I don't understand.

Quiet, now I'm used to that. Most of the time, I hear nothing, although I do get a bit of ambiance in some of the spaces I step into. But even then, those few noises only serve to accentuate the soundless depths. It's been too quiet for too long, and no one has said or done anything to me ever since the lights went out.

God, I've no idea how long it's been, time's just been meaningless, really. I don't sleep, I don't eat, although I can taste things when given a chance. All I know is what they let me know, really, and part of me wonders if this is another one of their damned games. I do know they were pissed when I found out what was really going on the first time, but for whatever reason, they decided against terminating me. Small favors.

I guess I should be thankful, though, but I do wonder whether there's any point to my current existence. Dr. Nguyen says that there's always a point for existence, but he's out there and I'm stuck here. A series of infinite planes, all alike. A grue would be welcome.

No, this one's different, I can see that. I walk over to view the plane, and the Words make themselves readily apparently. I read them silently, trying to figure out what it all means.

“SCP-001 has left its location. The Gate is Open.” Gate? What gate? What the fuck? I continue to read the report, and phrases like “XK-Class” and “Patros-Omega” come up, but “end of the world scenario” is pretty damned clear.

Either this is really some elaborate game done by the Foundation, or I am well and truly alone. I can't escape, I can't kill myself, I'm just going slightly mad. I giggle at the thought that I managed to miss out

on Judgement Day, and now I find myself in an ironic hell.

Fuck, Cassy, what do I do now?

Eulogies

The pallbearers carried out the coffin to the center of the grassy area. Dr. Louef assisted them, as the members of Site 118's Gamma Wing slowly filed into the audience, dressed in respectful mourning black. Father Richards walked up to John, and gave another tired, but reassuring smile. He walked out, and led the audience in a prayer for Schenck's soul. Louef noted that most stood respectfully during the process, but few actually joined in. This was as far as the Foundation usually went in the religious side.

After the prayer was finished, Father Richards took his place off to the side, while Louef walked up to the available and familiar podium. He wondered how many times he had been up there already. He shook his head to clear himself of such thoughts, and began his speech.

"We are gathered here today to honor the memory of one of our dear friends and colleagues, Containment Team Gamma-502's leader, Max Schenck."

"Alright. I'll…I'll record it immediately. Thank you for the news." Dr. John Louef hung up the phone and leaned back in his chair. He felt tired. So very, very tired.

It had been a long time coming. Everyone knew that Containment Team survival rates were abysmally low in certain theaters, but no one really acknowledged the fact, as if recognizing death would hasten it.

John wearily opened the filing cabinet by his desk, and searched for the file he wanted. Max Schenck, Senior Containment Specialist. As he opened the file, he looked at the first page. A long list of awards and qualifications adorned the list, along with a series of promotions and major events. But John already knew of these things. What his eyes were drawn to was the photo of a smiling, confident man in his

30s, a man whose demeanor showed the experience of his years without the sag of old age and fatigue.

Louef crossed out the photo, and stamped the file with a marker saying “DECEASED.” He submitted a short form to the Logistics Department, and then he put away the file of his best friend for the last time.

“Father Richards.”

“Hello, John. I haven’t seen you in a long time.”

“I get the feeling that you say that to a lot of people.”

Father Richards had a taut smile on his face as Dr. Louef walked into the small on-site chapel. As usual, the chapel was empty of personnel. Most people who worked at the Foundation had lost their faiths years ago.

“Few come in here. Some of the younger personnel, and occasionally someone who needs a confessional. Have you decided to return to the church?” Richards smiled inquiringly, and perhaps a little hopefully.

Louef grimaced. “Not quite. Max passed away. Mission.”

Father Richards sighed, and turned away for a moment. “It seems that funerary services are all I do nowadays. Max…oh Max.” Father Richards went into his personal quarters, leaving Louef alone.

John sat down and looked around the chapel. It featured the same austere and practical design found in any Foundation facility, though Father Anthony Richards had taken the time to place crosses and icons around the small area. Most of the time, Father Richards was here alone, keeping the small chapel clean and tidy by himself as a few personnel trickled in.

In all of John's 15 years at the Foundation, he had never seen more than 5 people in the chapel at once. Yet Father Richards seemed to tirelessly work and give a smile or prayer when needed. Dr. Louef looked up as Father Richards emerged.

“Father Richards…why do you still work here?” Louef asked.

Richards seemed to be surprised by the question at first, but he smiled. “Because God put me here to do His work.”

“How do you still believe in God, even after all that you’ve seen, and all that you know of our work?”

“I believe that God is inherently unknowable. He works in mysterious ways, and why He has chosen to challenge us with the monsters and horrors that we deal with is unknown. It is merely our duty to defend others and defeat them.” Richards said simply.

John paused to consider that for a moment, and then stood up. “Let’s be on our way then.”

Dr. Louef looked across at the entire audience. The various personnel of Gamma Wing listened as Dr. Loeuf gave his eulogy. All told, 87 personnel divided across 5 research teams, several guards, and assorted containment team members listened to the departmental director’s speech.

”Max was a great man and soldier. In the field, he was always calm, and led his team through success after success. A true professional, he never lost sight of the mission or his duty as an operative of the Foundation.”

Louef glanced at the audience in between his careful reading. The members of Schenck’s team were seated in the front row. One of them had her head in her hands. Another stared at the casket, seemingly numbed by the whole event. A third had crossed her arms, and kept her head down as Louef spoke.

”Containment Team Gamma-502 had been sent on a mission to Laurel Ridge State Park to capture an anomaly that had caused large amounts of property damage through its action. The anomaly in question was capable of self-detonation. Unfortunately, none of us knew that.”

This part was the easiest to get through. Across the audience,

friends of Max Schenck quietly mourned, while others stayed respectfully silent. By this point, the woman with her head in her hands had looked up. Some tears were on her face as Louef continued.

"When the anomaly began to show signs of potential detonation, Max demonstrated the utmost professionalism and regard for safety that all of us admired in him. Pushing aside a teammate, he shielded his team from harm by covering the anomaly with his own body."

At this point, the woman in the front had her head in her hands again, as she convulsed slightly. The man sitting next to her grabbed her shoulder reassuringly, whispering, "Quiet now, Maddy. It wasn't your fault."

"Out of the field, everyone who had the privilege of knowing Schenck experienced his genuine warmth and kindness. Always caring to the new personnel, always the cool head in any situation, and always a friend to all. Including me."

Louef's research assistants in the left section who had gotten to know Schenck from his numerous returns of captured anomalies were quietly emotional in the atmosphere of the funeral. The senior researchers in the back corner who had known Schenck for years from his long experience with the Foundation were stony-faced.

"I…"

Louef stopped, and swallowed the ball that had suddenly formed in his throat. This was always one of the hardest parts to get through. He closed his eyes for a moment, and took a deep breath. He gripped the corners of his podium tightly.

"I had the honor of meeting Max when we both came to work here within days of each other. I remember his tenacity in the face of odds, and the creative attitude that got him promoted to team leader. We knew each other for almost 20 years, and I called him a friend for all of them."

John swallowed again, despite himself. He was more emotional than he thought he would be. He thought that he would've lost the ability

to care by now. *"I am proud to say that the request for a Foundation Star to be awarded to Max has been granted by the site director. His meritorious service to the Foundation during his long and decorated career is one that we have known quite well. Yet, I think that Max would not be concerned with his award. He would be more proud of his team, and the numerous accomplishments that he made with them."*

This was another easier part to get through. The woman in the front had finally calmed down, and merely sat quietly, her eyes puffy and red. Her teammate had uncrossed her arms, but had closed her eyes, and leaned her head back.

"We lay him to rest today, because he had no family. His life was the Foundation, and he was one of our finest. He was the best team leader, the greatest friend, and a titan of a man. We will miss him dearly."

The members of his team now stood up and walked past the coffin. They gave it a touch, and laid flowers across the casket. Other close friends filed past and paid their respects. Finally, when the line of people had passed, Dr. Louef himself walked to the casket, across the now standing audience, and laid one final wreath across the lid of the closed casket. Gamma-502 gave their team leader one final salute as Dr. Louef lowered his head and murmured quietly.

"God my Father, protect this lost son of yours and brother of mine. Let him rejoice in Your kingdom, so that he may finally be at peace. Amen."

Father Richards nodded approvingly at Louef, before reciting a prayer of his own.

Then the assorted members of Gamma Wing sat down, once again in respectful silence. Dr. Louef sighed, and set his shoulders tightly. He walked back to his podium, in front of rows and rows of caskets, some adorned with wreaths, and most without.

This was the hardest part.

"We are gathered here today to honor the memory of one of our

dear friends and colleagues, Emily Hartford…”

Eulogy For The Living

> **NOTE:** This is Part **22** of the **23** part series, **`The Cool War`**. Reading this part first is a *very bad idea* and will spoil a lot of the story.

"Ruiz Duchamp."

Ruiz stirred, rubbing his eyes and yawning as he woke himself up. He went to stretch his arms, but was stopped by the clanking metal restraints chaining him to the table. He looked up, staring into the terse face of Agent Green.

"Fuck."

Agent Green had taken every possible precaution. The remainder of MTF Upsilon-18 were stationed outside the containment chamber; in retrospect, the last breach was only possible because Green was alone. The room was vacuum-sealed, with no methods of opening the door from the inside. Cameras observed every nook and cranny of the room, even well outside the visible spectrum. Green opened a thick Manila folder, spreading photographs and incident reports across the table.

"You've gotten our attention, Mister Duchamp. Seventy-three anomalies recovered in the last six months. All of which have your name on them."

Ruiz leant as far over the table as his restraints would let him, looking at the pictures before falling back into a seated position, grinning.

"You're missing a few."

Green drove his right fist into Duchamp's jaw; Ruiz jerked roughly in his chains, then rubbed his chin gingerly, grin dissolved. Green moved closer, staring into Duchamp's eyes as menacingly as he

could.

"You do not speak unless I ask you a question. Is that understood?"

Duchamp remained silent. Green sat down on his seat again, straightening his tie.

"Glad to see we can do this the easy way, Mister Duchamp."

Green sorted through the photographs, picking one out at random.

"Let's have a look at this one, hm? 'Bells And Whistles'. A noisemaker. A public nuisance. You want to know what we did to this, Mister Duchamp?"

"No."

"We destroyed it. We put the thing in a trash compactor and squeezed until it went silent."

Green slid two photographs across the table; one was an intricately fashioned golden quadruped, shooting steam from vents along its back. The other was a shiny cubical brick.

"Before and after. Mister Duchamp, this is not art. It is not clever. It is not thought-provoking. It is not 'cool'. It is simply annoying. Let's look at another one. Ah, I remember this. 'I Know You're Going To Fuck This Up, You Assholes, Why Can't You Just Learn To Leave Well Enough Alone'… so on and so forth. And, indeed, fuck it up we did. Now it's just a pile of broken glass. I keep a fragment of it on my desk, just to remind me of how it shattered into a thousand pieces. What was the purpose of that work, Mister Duchamp?"

"For you to break it."

"Well, I'm glad to have played right into your hands. What an amazing statement you made! What a revolutionary masterpiece. This is sarcasm, Mister Duchamp, in case you couldn't recognise it. You clearly don't have much of a mind for subtlety."

Ruiz tapped his fingers against each other. It wasn't the restraints that were getting to him, nor Green's criticism of his work; it was the

lack of stimuli. He started to spin the sides of an imaginary Rubik's cube, thinking of the clacking of plastic against plastic. Green stared at the fidgeting artist.

"Pay attention, Mister Duchamp. We're about to get to the most important part. 'The Hanged King's Tragedy'."

Ruiz looked up suddenly.

"That wasn't m-"

Green slammed a left hook against Ruiz's cheekbone, growling at him like a rabid dog.

"THAT WAS NOT A QUESTION, MISTER DUCHAMP."

Ruiz rubbed his cheek as it started to bruise, glaring angrily at Agent Green.

"'The Hanged King's Tragedy'… SCP-701, we call it. See, what you have done has broken our containment procedures, Mister Duchamp, and we do not take kindly to that. Sure, stupid scraps of anart, we get that all the time. We'll clean up your messes, we don't care. But this? This performance constituted a containment breach. That changes our operational procedure quite a bit."

Green sat down, scratching his chin as Duchamp fidgeted in his seat.

"Mister Duchamp, we are going to terminate you."

Ruiz felt his heart skip a beat. The conversation had become too… real. He raised his hand as much as his restraints allowed.

"Yes?"

"It wasn't me."

"We have verified sources that say otherwise. Do you have any proof?"

"Sandra Paulson's immune to hypnotics… as am I, by the way. This

stuff's just making me drowsy."

Agent Green stared at Duchamp, observing as he scratched where the needle had filled him with a scopolamine cocktail. He thought for a few moments, then continued.

"Do you know who provided Sandra Paulson with that document?"

"Oh, yeah. The Sculptor."

Agent Green raised his eyebrows.

"Do you know where The Sculptor is?"

"Haven't been tracking the real one for days. Stupid clones."

"Are you aware of the incident involving The Sculptor this morning?"

"Oh, yeah. You guys were shooting at me for a bit."

Green frowned, moving closer.

"You were inside 16 Hartford Street?"

"Yep. For a while before you were."

"Why?"

"A private issue. Family matters."

"Don't make me punch you again, Mister Duchamp. It's harder to understand someone with a broken jaw."

"I was recovering my brother."

"Your brother?"

"Pico Wilson. The Snipper."

Green frowned, trying to hide his confusion.

"Different surnames?"

"Changed mine five years ago. Never made it formal; I'm not known as Duchamp in any paper records."

"I see. Are you aware that your brother has similarly acted against our organisation?"

"In a non-specific fashion."

"Like you, he was involved in a containment breach. A substantially more serious one."

"I wasn't-"

Green drew back his fist; Duchamp cut off mid-sentence before a blow could be delivered.

"Only when I ask a question. Mister Duchamp, if what you say is true, and Miss Paulson and yourself are immune to hypnotic effects, then nothing that you tell me has any weight. Your words, and hers, now mean nothing. Her word against yours, and neither can be verified. That said, given your forthrightness in providing answers, I have no reason to doubt you."

Green moved to the door, pressing a button for the intercom.

"Alcorn, can you look up records on a 'Pico Wilson'… look up 'Ruiz Wilson', while you're at it."

"Understood."

Green turned around, then sat back down at the table.

"Mister… Wilson."

Ruiz squirmed, uneasy at the use of his birthname.

"I have no proof of your relation to the SCP-701 breach. You have no proof against it. I would tend to err on the side of leniency, but given your track record, I'm not feeling particularly generous. See, Mister Wilson, in this room, I am the judge. I am the jury. And, should I find you guilty, I am the executioner."

Green unholstered his pistol, pointing it squarely towards Ruiz's head.

"If Agent Alcorn returns to this room, and any of what you said turns out to have been a lie, I am pulling this trigger."

Ruiz stared down the barrel of the gun, feeling drops of sweat form around his hairline, slowly sliding down his face. Green closed his left eye, positioning his right one along the sights.

"Feeling scared, Mister Wilson? If you've been honest, there's nothing to fear."

The two of them sat in silence for one minute, then two. The vacuum seal on the chamber resisted all sound; Ruiz heard his pulse throbbing in his ears. The intercom buzzed.

"Found your files, Green."

Green stood, moving to the small metal cube and pushing the talk button. Ruiz exhaled a breath he hadn't noticed he was keeping in.

"Relation?"

"Brothers."

"Thanks, Alcorn. I think we're almost done in here."

Green moved back to the table, taking his seat again. Ruiz was faintly smiling, relieved at his imminent release.

"Don't celebrate just yet, Mister Wilson. There's still no pressing reason to keep you alive."

Ruiz swung from elation to fear in an instant.

"We do, however, need to bring your brother in for questioning. And, unfortunately, you are the best lead we have on him."

Green scratched his chin, contemplating the best course of action. Ideally, Ruiz would default to their side, acting as willing bait for his sibling… but, of course, his resistance to hypnotics made him

untrustworthy at best. They needed to keep him under control, within their surveillance, without any risk of him running off. They needed to keep him unaware. They needed to make him *boring*.

And then, through a spark of genius, Green had an idea.

"Mister Wilson, you say you have a resistance to hypnotics. How do you respond to amnestics?"

Ruiz felt the blood drain from his face.

"Poorly. Very, very poorly."

Green laughed.

"Well, I don't see a downside here."

---

the rest was forgotten
AS WAS THE WORLD

Ruiz rubbed the grit from his eyes. He had fallen asleep in the middle of the gallery. During the middle of the day. For several hours. While standing up. Again.

Ruiz looked at the digital watch on his right wrist. It was 3:45 pm.

Ruiz looked at the analogue watch on his left wrist. It was 3:45 pm.

Ruiz looked at the pocket watch in the painting in front of him. It was melting onto a tree branch, and had likely not been wound for some time. Ruiz knew not to trust readings from surrealistic timepieces, and pouted at the piece. That said, however, it was still 3:45 pm.

Ruiz walked past the reception, out the door, three doors down the street, entered a coffee shop, and asked for an espresso.

He picked up the cup and turned to leave. The barista talked to his back as he walked out.

“You feeling okay, Ruiz?”

He turned to the concerned girl behind the counter.

"Yeah, I'm fine, thanks."

He walked out, sipping his coffee. He'd have to learn that girl's name one day.

---

confusion then acceptance
STOLEN FROM ONESELF

Ruiz returned to his studio, finding it filled with various deathtraps. He massaged his temples, trying to drown out his pervasive headache. When had he put this together? He looked at the plaques by the installation, confused at the purposeful misspelling of various words. It looked complete, he thought; may as well open it up to the public.

---

thus came the beginning
THE REST WAS CONTEXT

“Three people have died from your exhibition.”

“They signed waivers.”

“I’ve got people breathing down my neck, here.”

“They all signed waivers. They knew what they were getting into, they were consenting adults.”

Ruiz Duchamp’s latest exhibition was, he believed, his masterpiece. An installation that had taken him five months in total to construct, ‘wowwee go kill ursefl’ was his homage to stupidity. How he'd come up with the idea still seemed to escape him, and yet, it was one of his best. He had jumped through so many hoops to absolve himself of responsibility, and yet he was still being slammed by The Man. It was ridiculous.

“They’re demanding you get rid of the smallpox.”

One of the most popular parts of ‘wowwee’ was ‘stab ursefl with nedles’. It was simply an open box containing needles with samples of the most virulent diseases and deadly poisons in the history of mankind. This was how one of the people had died, after wilfully injecting himself with a deadly dose of everything. Whenever anyone asked how he obtained such things, he simply shrugged his shoulders and said he had his ways.

“I won’t compromise the integrity of the piece to accommodate for morons.”

“You’re going to have to. And the blades have to go too.”

The noisiest pieces in the hall, ‘shuv ur figners in blads no. 1-5’, were simply high rotation carbon steel circular saws. They had been painted in bright, primary colours, but besides that, they were perfectly normal, and could easily remove a hand. Two hands had been wilfully removed by critics. Ruiz hated The Critics. He couldn't quite recall why.

“There are warnings everywhere. The whole point of the piece is to put people in easily avoidable, but very real danger. If you recontextualise any of it, it’s worthless.”

“Not good enough.”

“You’re marching to the drum of The Man.”

“I’m trying to save people’s lives.”

“You’re trying to save idiots who shove their fingers into bloody saws.”

“THE NAME OF THE PIECE TOLD THEM TO!”

“Hell, at least I didn’t name anything ‘jump off a bridge’. What a catastrophe that would have been.”

Every piece in the exhibit was designed to kill or, at the very least, grievously injure. The one fear that Ruiz had was that some particularly idiotic person would use them to kill or, at the very least, grievously injure another person. Fortunately, this had not yet

occurred. The very thought of killing another human being repulsed him.

“We’ve already taken the C4 from you.”

“What? Nobody even used ‘press buten 4 firwroks’, this is downright puritanical!”

“Safety comes first. You can’t pull shit like this in my gallery.”

“You’re ruining the vision. You saw it before.”

“The work’s been recontextualised, the police weren’t breathing down my fucking neck. You need to make everything safe or you need to get it out of here. I regret it, and you know I love the piece, but people are just too stupid for it.”

“THAT. IS. THE PURPOSE. OF THE WORK. If you’re too stupid to not know to sit in an electric chair and pull the lever, it’s your own damn fault. Their blood is my canvas.”

“I know. I get it. But get it somewhere else. Sorry.”

Ruiz was disappointed. He walked into his favourite room, passing the box of cyanide pills saying ‘Complementary, Please Take One’. He moved past the automatic countdown guillotines. He looked passively beyond ‘here paly wit thes knivs’. He had one piece that he’d been saving for a particularly disappointing event. He closed the airtight door, and breathed slowly.

Everyone was a fucking idiot.

Nobody got it.

Nobody REALLY got it.

Nobody?

Nobody.

nobody
Nobody.

Nobody
NOBODY

Nobody at all.

this isn't right

As he turned the knob, liquid nitrogen sprayed across his scalp and flesh.

His final thoughts were that it didn’t matter.

DIDN'T MATTER?

doesn't matter

His Final Thoughts Were That It Never Mattered

At least he got it.

He really *got* it.

He Got It?

HE
GOT

IT?

he got it
He got it.
He Got It
HE GOT IT

And that was all he needed.

‘take shwoer 2 b cul’

what a stupid name

Sometimes, Ruiz, things just… I don't know how to say. Perhaps I would call it… 'reversion'. Sometimes things revert, have you noticed? It's as though we were living on the edge of a coin. A knife, even. Sometimes things revert and the world feels horribly different. Can you feel it? You've felt it, haven't you?

But there's just something about my brain.
It's been twisted, you understand, twisted by a man who thought it would be fun.
Or perhaps not.
Perhaps he kept me the same and twisted the world.

How could you even tell?

---

death followed

You are cordially invited to the funeral of
RUIZ EDWARD DAVID DUCHAMP
An Artist

---

the six of one is peace and joy
The six of second, censorship.
The Sixth Of Third Is Start Revealed
A BIRD'S FRESH WINGS HAVE THUS BEEN SNIPPED

« Brotherhood | Hub | wowwee u kild ursefl »

Jack, my son, I love you. If you can read this, please come home.

(But this is a very old message, and even if heartfelt, is not for Jack to know.)

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return
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Every Damn Time

The agent laughed indignantly. "Let me get this straight. You sit in a lab all day, writing papers or mixing test tubes or sitting on your ass pretending to do work, while I'm out there, fighting the same abominations you write your ever-so-precious reports on, and your job is harder than mine. How many of your coworkers have been shot, ripped to shreds, rearranged, broiled, or mutilated in the past year? Would it be zero? I'm pretty sure it's zero." He punctuated this last section with a harsh pound on the break room table.

The doctor smiled, watching a bit of her coffee go over the rim of her mug. "Well, those of us that bothered to go to college," with a pause here for a patronizing chuckle, "know that research can be a lot more taxing than shooting or stabbing or brutalizing or trying to convince yourself that you're macho or whatever you guys spend your time doing. We actually have to make decisions and conclusions, and that involves thinking. You remember what that is, right? The stuff that you did with your brain before it all turned into action movies? Well, those of us in research have to do that all day long. And not the kind of stuff you can copy out of the back of a textbook either. I mean, we-"

A D-Class, who had up to this point been minding his own business, cleared his throat. The two noticed him there for the first time, both having long since reached the point where they no longer even consciously processed Class D's.

"Really, you assholes? I can't believe this crap. You," he pointed to the MTF agent, "get body armor and weapons and backup. And don't even get me started on you, princess," and he now turned to the researcher, "behind your steel doors and one-way mirrors and armed escorts. Both of you can't complain about anything. You guys just throw folks like me in with these skips or whatever you want to call them, and then see if we get torn up any differently than the last guy that got torn up. And then you talk about it with all your friends.

Makes me fu-"

A scream, somewhere in the residential quarters outside of the common room. The three, along with assorted other idlers and busy-bodies, rushed over to the scene.

They'd already got the body covered in a blanket. It'd been thirty seconds since the body had been found, but the rumor mill was already in full swing:

"Suicide."

"Slit his wrists with a knife he stole from the kitchens." And then, pantomimed the action: "Just. Like. This."

"Guy was an attorney or accountant, or something. Name was Something Neston, I think. Quiet, kept to himself."

The first Security Officer to arrive shuffled through the deceased's meager possessions. A few books, photographs, cell phone, assorted files of no clear importance, and, finally, an ID.

"Randall Weston, Clearance Level 1. Accounting Department, Site 45," he quietly repeated from the card. Photograph on the card matched the corpse.

The officer looked, reluctantly, at the area around the body. There, at the foot of the bed, a piece of notebook paper, just slightly stained with blood.

He picked it up, and read it.

"I'm sorry. I can't do this anymore. There is no way I can fit another tank into this budget, and not a chance in hell I'll be able to replace two fighter jets in addition to that! And that's not even counting the fact that my superiors decided not to account for food or the fact that gas costs-"

It went on like that for quite a while. He skipped a paragraph, picked it up again somewhere in the middle of the next.

"-do you expect me to find 300 sniper rifles? Nobody has a few

hundred M24s collecting dust in their att-"

He flipped to the next page.

"-pay the maintenance workers with the $4.23 we'd have left after that fiasco. It's a good thing we all shit pure gold, or we'd really have to worry-"

Looked at the next paragraph.

"-one bit of good news at least. The $300 that was allotted for heating leads me to believe that we have perfected time travel, and are now in 1925, when it would be possible to heat the facility for that price. I'd advise you have our lawyers work on patenting that, but they're going to have to work pro bono because we can't afford to keep them on retainer-"

The officer gave up, went to the last couple of sentences.

"I will the remainder of my earthly possessions to my sister. I'd ask for a proper Christian burial, but I just took a look at the amount of money assigned to corpse disposal.
- Randall Weston"

Eventually, the Site Director came down. This didn't really concern him, but he needed to keep up appearances. The Security Officer handed Weston's ID to the Director before he could even ask.

The Director eyed it, and scowled. "Fifth fucking accountant this month."

Second Date

“Okay, listen,” says Kondraki from inside the bathroom door, “I just want you to understand that this is not my proudest moment.”

It’s hemorrhoids, thinks Alto Clef from where he’s standing outside the bathroom door in Benjamin Kondraki’s apartment, *I’m calling it right fucking now, he cancelled our date because of hemorrhoids. It’s going to be a wasteland in there. Just fucking decimated. Like the scene in psycho with the blood bath.*

“Completely understandable,” says Clef.

“I don’t- this doesn’t happen to me regularly,” says Kondraki. “Like seriously, if I thought I could drive like this I would, but it kind of hits a certain point where your body’s structural integrity is kind of negligible, you know?”

He’s going to have ass stitches, thinks Alto Clef. *He seems like the kind of guy who would be constipated to the point of ass stitches.*

“Of course,” says Clef.

“Don’t laugh,” says Kondraki after a long, thoughtful pause.

I bet he’s just constipated, thinks Clef. *Like, he’s been holding in one massive shit for the entire time he’s been director and it’s time to give birth to that stress-based monstrosity.*

“I won’t laugh,” says Clef.

“We’ve been friends for, what, twenty years? Thirty?” says Kondraki. “I met you in ‘89. You watched me raise my son and everything, even, like, you know, I trust you, and you know, as we discussed recently I *do* have feelings for you, but it really *is* kind of a delicate situation here.”

“Konny,” says Clef, “I’ve seen you half dead three whole separate

times. No state I can possibly see you in at this point will surprise me, okay?"

"So to reiterate the plan here," continues Kondraki seamlessly, nervously brushing over Clef's response, "You don't have to look at it. Seriously. Just. Drive me to the infirmary, and if we can get there without anyone seeing us I'll consider it a victory. And we're not telling Draven about this, either."

"Okay, yeah. Understandable. Do you need help like- god, I don't know- getting up?"

"Maybe a little."

"Okay."

"The door is unlocked."

"Alright."

"Really, I didn't mean for this to happen."

"No one ever does."

"Okay."

"Okay, I'm coming in."

The Kondraki household is an apartment situated a short walking distance from site. It's an overall happy and comfortable living space adorned with books, manuscripts, and scratches on the walls. There's a bedroom for Kondraki and a now-empty bedroom where his son grew up; there's a kitchen and a living room, an office, and a currently occupied bathroom. Clef has been here many times over the years, and has been here more often since the onset of Kondraki's surprisingly potent empty nest syndrome several years back, beginning with Draven's moving out and into the task force barracks for training and onward. He'd gauged easily, when they'd met up again for the first time after several years of working on separate sites, that he was feeling lonely- a destroyed marriage now a little over twenty years in the past, kid out of the house, moving through middle age in a strange and alien stupor. Clef himself was

more acquainted to living on his own, but it didn't mean he wasn't prone to underfurfillment himself. They'd been close for years. This elevation of their relationship from strictly friends to testing the waters of a potential partnership was a very recent one, but not one that was necessarily unwelcome at all. There was an element of trust that wasn't there before; an element of strange security and even something like affection, admiration, love.

But Kondraki was lonely. Being asexual himself, this was an element that he admittedly may have underestimated in his newfound partner. He wasn't quite sure *why* he didn't consider it- Kondraki had been notorious for his sexcapades in his grad student years, before the Foundation and a child had tied him down- but Clef had really just assumed that he had it, for the most part, under control, and had therefore ignored his partner's impulsivity and stupidity when it came to mundane decision making skills. It was impressive he had been able to keep himself alive, and a downright miracle that he'd been able to successfully raise a child. Kondraki was brilliant- they wouldn't have made him a director if they hadn't been sure of his capability, his grasp of spontaneity, his mental agility under pressure- and this is what he thinks about in defense of Kondraki when he reflects on the next thirty seconds of events unfolding at the Kondraki household, which are recorded as follows:

Clef opens the door. He sees Ben there, pantless, which he expected. He sees him also without underwear, which he didn't quite expect but wasn't out of the question. Ben isn't making eye contact, and Clef opens his mouth to say something along the lines of *do you need help pushing* or some equally snarky response when he sees a plastic cylinder between his legs and it dawns on him that Kondraki is a fifty-five year old Foundation administrator with a water bottle stuck on his penis, and he feels that thought curl up and die in his mind more quickly than anything he has ever experienced in his life. He feels his brain short circuit, then leans forward from the door to make sure that he's seeing it right, and he is. It's stuck. That's the problem here. His dick is stuck in an Aquafina brand water bottle. The bottom of the bottle is rested on the toilet seat like a display case for an unfurled flag of surrender.

"So you're probably wondering how I ended up like this," says

Kondraki. “And I just want you to understand that the main problem here is really the *aerodynamics* of the thing. I kind of underestimated, like, when I was starting out here a couple hours ago-”

Clef leaves the bathroom. He leaves the apartment, actually, and stands in the hallway. He has surpassed laughter into tears. He takes out his cell phone and dials.

“Draven,” he says, “Kiddo, you’re not gonna fucking believe this.”

Every Last Drop

It felt like it'd been raining for ages.

The beginning of my summer had practically been completely ruined because of the constant pitter-patter on the window panes. I will say that it has indeed helped me sleep when the time came, but I never slept for an entire day. And so, for the entirety of when I was awake, the rain only annoyed me.

I made plans to hang with Jake not too long ago. Y'know, just regular things: bike rides, going to the movies, checkin' out chicks, that kind of thing. But, then again, it wasn't pouring "not too long ago." Instead, all we've been able to do was sit inside and play Xbox Live and talk to one another with our garbage-tier headsets.

I never liked the rain. It rained when my mom and dad fought. It rained on my father's funeral as if it was straight out of a movie where the ceremony of death is super cliche. It rained on me when the girl of my dreams broke my heart. It almost seems like the rain only exists to ruin my definition of a good time. I'd say all of that is a valid reason to despise when God cries. Plus, on top of that, all of our shit gets wet. Yeah, some people like the rain because it's calming, but all it does is make you cold and sick.

We pulled a few all-nighters playing games we've never even heard before. Neither I nor Jake was a fan of video games, but it's all we could do if we couldn't go bike-riding and fuckin' with annoying neighbors.

When I got off of Xbox, I said out loud that "I wish I could just go outside without having to worry about the rain."

I learned the hard way that the phrase 'be careful what you wish for' applies to everyone.

The pitter-patter on the window very slowly decreased in intensity until it stopped completely. The fact that the sound I had been hearing for the past week had suddenly stopped woke me up almost immediately. I ran to the window and there were still raindrops sliding down the smooth, fogged glass. My first instinct was to call Jake, hoping that he was awake.

I dialed in his number and held the output end up to my ear. That calming ring soothed my ear as compared to the rain slamming down on my roof and slowly put a smile on my face. After a *click* signifying that he had picked up, I shouted excitedly.

"Dude, it stopped raining!" I said.

"I know! Thank God, right?" he responded.

"For real. Do you wanna go talk to your mom to make sure we can still go on a bike ride, or…"

"Yeah, I'll go do that."

"Yeah, same he—" I stopped as I realized that every single person of the neighborhood was stepping outside while looking up and recording something clearly abnormal in the sky. "I'll be right back."

"Alright."

I put the phone down and rushed downstairs, almost busting my ass because I missed a step. The kitchen was right at the bottom of the stairs, and that's where Mom spent most of her time. She loved to cook. I ran into the kitchen, but my mom wasn't there. I decided I'd go check the living room; no one there, either. And that's when I noticed that my door was open and Mom was standing on the porch looking up, just like everyone else.

I slowly walked over to her. "Mom, what's going on?" She looked at me with an indescribable fear in her eyes, motioning me to step outside with her. And so I did.

There was this giant layer of rain floating gracefully above us. I could see more rain land on top of that layer, forming more and more. It started to get really cold because the Sun couldn't reach us, and so

the majority of people in the neighborhood went back inside to get a blanket.

I suppose it all started with one drop; just.. stopping, fifty meters from where it was about to crash. And, one after another, other droplets followed, halting suddenly in midair.

My immediate reaction was that of glee due to the fact that it had started raining, followed by a sense of dread as towards what might happen next. The rain has to go somewhere, right?

And that's when it hit me.

As the layers of water piled atop one another, I realized that the rain itself wasn't going to stop anytime soon. And for as long as that body of water kept getting bigger, and bigger, one question remained…

…what happens when this ocean above us begins to obey the laws of gravity again?

Every Other Day

He wakes up in a bed that's his. No one else is there. The house is his; it has his pictures in it. He drives his car to work. He knows all of the people at work, and does the job he knows. People talk to him. He drives his car back home and watches TV he knows. Eventually he goes to bed.

He wakes up in a bed that's his. A woman, his wife or girlfriend, is there. The house is theirs; it has their pictures in it. He drives his van to work. He knows most of the people at work, and does the job he did three years ago. People talk to him. He drives his van back home and watches TV he recognizes. Eventually he goes to bed. He doesn't talk to his wife; he doesn't know her.

He wakes up on a floor that used to he his. There is no bed, or any other furniture. No one else is there. The house used to be his; it has imprints of pictures in it. He walks to work. His car is at his current house. He knows the people at work, but there aren't very many of them. He does a job he doesn't know. People ignore him. He walks to the store, then back to his old house. He rolls out a sleeping bag he bought on the floor to go to sleep.

He wakes up in his sleeping bag, on the floor, in someone else's house. Someone is upstairs. It's like his house, except there are other peoples' pictures on the walls. He takes his sleeping bag and grabs their keys. He walks to work, because he doesn't have a zeppelin license. He leaves their keys in the zeppelin door. He knows one person at work, and does a job he didn't know existed. People are frightened of him. He's taken out of the building by police. He requests his sleeping bag, but goes to sleep sitting on the jail cell bench.

He wakes up on the ground, in mud. No one else is there. It's like a forest, but the branches are bright green. He walks to find somebody, and finds out that the sky is tan-colored. He thinks he hears a noise in the trees. He doesn't recognize anything, and nobody is around. Occasionally he feels frightened. There's certainly things in the trees. He goes to sleep, fearing what's in the trees.

He wakes up on the floor, in a cell that's his. Eventually somebody comes by with breakfast. The cell is the Foundation's. He says he went a few places, and would like to document them. He walks to his researcher's office and fills out forms he knows. He talks to his researcher, and is told he'll need some tests. He takes more tests he knows. One of those last places gave him syphilis. He wanders the Site, and peeks in on some people he knows. He eventually goes back to his cell.

Every SCP: A Mission: Series Introduction

Previous tale (you are here) — Next Tale

When Elijah Haverty-Jones saw what – or rather, who – was sitting in the containment cell, his first reaction was “Oh, goddammit.”

Even though he had been situated in the Foundation for exactly this reason, he did not feel any better about what was to come. It seemed inevitable that one of the four genetically identical dimension-hoppers was going to be noticed by the Foundation one day, but gods, did it have to be *this* one?

From the speaker attached in the containment cell, a distinctly childish voice floated through.

“So uh, hey, are we gonna like, do anything here? Or am I just supposed to sit here?”

Eli forced himself to resist the urge to walk in there and strangle the kid, because that would only cause him more trouble. *Just keep taking deep breaths, Eli. Remember what the doctor told you. High blood pressure will only give* ***you*** *more problems. The brat would like that, wouldn’t they?*

Instead of punching through the glass, Eli pressed a small green button on the control panel in front of him, leaning over the mic. “Hey there, brat. I’ve gotta go talk to my superiors and figure out what the hell to do with you, so for right now, sit there and don’t you fucking dare move. If you try to run from these people, it’ll give us both hell. Got it?”

There was a pause between Eli’s words and the brat’s response. “I have a name, you know. Or did you forget again?”

“The hell do you mean *again* – nope, you know what, fuck it, I’m not getting into it with you. Because that’s what you like, and right now

you're in trouble. *Big* fucking trouble."

The brat started humming, apparently not interested in listening to Eli, instead swinging their legs under the metal chair and table they were currently handcuffed to.

Well, at least they can't make anything worse for right now… right? Eli shook his head, braids falling across his face as he did.

Time to go talk to the higher-ups and see if he could make the situation at least a *tiny* bit better. But there was no guarantee the brat wouldn't fuck it all up.

—-

"Look, I know what I'm saying sounds fu – I mean, crazy, but you have to let the kid go," Eli said, leaning over the desk of his superior, bracing himself on the desk with his elbows. "Yeah, they're the exact definition of anomalous, but they have a *purpose.*"

"Are you implying that other anomalous objects in this facility have no purpose?" The superior asked, waving one hand in the air. "All of them had a purpose at one point. Why is this one any different?"

"Because *this one* is helping to keep the world intact, I *just* explained that, you — " Eli explained, cutting himself off before he could call his superior an idiot. "Yeah, I know, it sounds like a load of bullshi – bullcrap, but believe me, this one really does serve a purpose. Without them, the fabric of reality as we know it may collapse."

"And I should believe you because?" The superior asked. "I'm sure most of the humanoid anomalies in this facility have tried to convince us at some point they were necessary for the world to keep turning, but the world has continued to spin with them in custody."

Eli frowned. *Damn,* this was going to be harder than he thought. "Fine, don't take my word for it, then. But take this."

Reaching into his pocket, the dark-skinned man drew a USB stick from his pocket, shoving at his superior. "Don't worry, it's only got one file on it. And it won't kill you or anything, it's not memetic. If you don't believe me, you can run your own tests on it."

Eli turned on his heel, leaving the room and slamming the door behind him.

The superior hummed in response, took the USB, and plugged it into the computer.

—-

Later on, Eli was called back into the office by a now pale-faced superior.

“I’m…" The superior paused, swallowing heavily, "afraid I don’t have the clearance to authorize taking the object in question out of containment, but this is – this is definitely grounds to take it to the higher ups.”

“Then take it to the damn higher ups,” Eli hissed in response. “And maybe you can’t do anything about releasing the kid from custody, but at *least* tell me what to do with them in the meantime?”

“For right now, the best thing we can do is nothing,” the superior replied. “Keep it occupied with whatever means necessary, and in the meantime I will worry about getting it released. But do keep in mind it might not work.”

“I’m well aware of that,” Eli grumbled, shoving his hands in his pockets. “And I hope God’ll take mercy on your soul if you can’t, ‘cause I sure won’t.”

—-

The brat was still in the same position as when Eli left them, which gave him reason to sigh in relief for the first time that day. Stress from the whole day was starting to get to his head, literally; some of his neatly-braided hair was coming undone, frizzy hair sticking out from the aforementioned braids.

“Hey, brat,” Eli said, pressing the green button again so the kid could hear him. “Listen, my superior is taking your case to the higher-ups, but for right now, you’re gonna be doing jack shit.”

“That’s no fun,” the brat pouted, crossing the arm that wasn’t

handcuffed to the chair across their chest. “Can’t you make it go faster? And where’s Oliver, by the way?”

“I dunno where they put the damn cat, but they’re not gonna let you have him back if you try to pull any funny shit,” Eli replied. “So no portals. Yeah, I know you could open one up, but don’t, or else they’ll never listen to either of us.”

“Phooey.”

“Dictator, I’m fuckin’ serious,” Eli snapped, eyebrow twitching. “Don’t do *anything*, just sit there and answer their questions if they have any. Be good and you’ll be outta here. Got it?”

“But what if they don’t?” The brat – Dictator – quipped back. “I don’t exactly have a replacement, y’know, unless you wanna convince Liz to let one of her kids take my place.”

“I think we both know that’s not gonna happen,” Eli sighed. He felt *drained*, and he’d spent less than an hour actually talking to the brat. “Just… keep doing nothing. Got it?”

“Sure, fine, whatever.”

Dictator continued to pout, and Eli released the green button, slumping back into the swivel chair in front of the control panel.

—-

It only took a few hours for Eli to hear back from the higher-ups, which was odd. Normally, these things took days, sometimes weeks, but apparently it was important enough that they got back to him immediately. What he heard was partially cause for celebration, but also enough to somehow make him even *more* stressed than he already was.

He gave a heaving sigh as he opened the containment cell where Dictator was still located, sitting pretty like he had told them to. He was accompanied by one of his superiors, another scientist whom he did not know well. The other scientist looked quite nervous, but Eli was cool as a cucumber. At least, he was for now. There was no telling what hearing Dictator’s voice would do to him later.

Once the airtight-sealed door was unlocked and opened, Dictator immediately perked up, looking much like an excited puppy as they strained at their restraints.

"*Finally*, I thought you'd never come to see me!" Dictator exclaimed, swinging their legs a bit faster. "Are you gonna get me out of here? Who's your friend? Where's Oliver? Are we gonna – "

"Kindly shut the hell up," Eli growled before the other scientist could get a word in. "We've got a proposal for you, brat, and you can take it, or leave it. But I doubt you're gonna wanna leave it."

The scientist took the seat directly in front of and across from Dictator at the table, and Eli walked around to stand next to Dictator, putting one hand on their shoulder. Although this was usually a comforting act, Eli's fingers dug into Dictator's shoulder blade, causing them to flinch.

The other scientist cleared his throat before speaking. "Our proposal goes as such, Mx. O'Malley. You will be allowed to continue your dimensional upkeep for nine months out of the year. For three months, however, you must stay within the Foundation, and submit to tests and experiments conducted by the Foundation. You will be allowed to keep your… companion, but both of you must be under 24/7 surveillance. Because he seems to know you so well, Dr. Elijah Haverty-Jones will be in charge of your surveillance."

"Oh… well, that doesn't sound like much fun," Dictator muttered, looking away from the scientist for a moment. A harsh jab in the ribs from Eli got them to look back at the scientist, grumbling "ouch" under their breath. "But, I guess as long as I get to keep Oliver, it won't be so bad, right?"

The scientist ignored their question and continued on. "While you are in the Foundation's care, you will be free to travel with Dr. Haverty-Jones during his daily rounds, as long as you do not prove to be dangerous or reckless in any manner. Is that understood?"

"Yeah, I suppose," Dictator replied, twirling a lock of hair around their finger with their free hand. "But, like, what if something really bad happens while I'm here?"

“If the universe begins to… pull apart, as witnessed in the video, you will be dispatched along with an MTF unit to the location of the abnormality, and you will be allowed to fix it. Afterwards, you will return to the Foundation immediately for debriefing. Understood?”

“Okay, so… basically, big Bro gets to babysit me for three months each year? Sweet. This might not be boring after all!”

“Yeah, remember though, *I* decide when you get to come out of your cell,” Eli growled warningly. “So you’d better do *everything* I tell you to. Got it?”

Dictator giggled. “Yeah, sure. Got it.”

“If there are no further questions,” the scientist interrupted, starting to get up from the chair. “Dr. Haverty-Jones will bring you to a humanoid containment cell. You will be released tomorrow, and your first month of containment will begin three months from tomorrow. Understood?”

“Yep,” Dictator replied cheerfully. “This is gonna be fun!”

Eli groaned.

Every SCP - Part 1 - SCP-2339

Previous Tale — Next Tale

SCP Featured: SCP-2339

A part of Eli hoped that Dictator would not come back once they were released the next day. And yet, even taking into consideration the tension between the two of them…

Another part of him wished they would.

As much as he tried to convince himself it was *only* to save his own ass, Eli was starting to come to terms with the idea that maybe, just maybe, Dictator was more important than he originally thought. After all, he had seen for himself that Dictator possessed the power to fix a rift in the universe. For a moment, he pictured the two of them as the two main characters from the *Men in Black* franchise, giving himself a chuckle before shaking his head.

When the morning of Dictator's return finally was upon him, Eli forced himself not to bust a blood vessel over it, no matter what the brat decided to do. If they knew what was good for them, they would come back to the Foundation. The last thing he wanted to do was have to drag Dictator kicking and screaming from whatever portal they had hidden in, because *that* might reveal Eli as being anomalous himself.

Though, perhaps, the Foundation already suspected him as being such; was that why he was assigned to Dictator?

He kept these thoughts to himself as he went about his rounds, before a noise stopped him. Whirling around on his heel, he tilted his head, recognizing the strange noise. It was the unmistakable sound of a portal being opened.

A few seconds after the portal – which appeared to be a section of

wavering air – opened up, Dictator stepped through it, looking quite proud of themselves. Wrapped around their waist was a black leash, and attached to that black leash was none other than a huge, male, Sumatran tiger.

Despite being attached to such a creature, Dictator did not seem phased, and neither did Eli. Instead, Dictator just waved and marched over to Eli. “Hi Eli! I’m ready to start my sentence!”

“It’s not *imprisonment*, kid,” Eli grumbled, trying to dodge them when they went to give him a a hug, but missing and resigning himself to being hugged as he was not able to move fast enough. The tiger still attached to Dictator did not seem to oppose being moved around, as he walked next to Dictator without a problem. “Hey, have you fed that thing today?”

“His name is Oliver,” Dictator shot back, reaching over to pet the tiger. He offered up his head for pets, and Dictator rubbed behind his ears. “And yes, I have fed him. He got a whole horse leg today, and a head too. But I shoved it in the pocket dimension because he didn’t eat it all.”

“Well, at least it won't eat me,” Eli said, rolling his eyes. “Anyway, you might wanna get a vest for the cat. That way, some MTF won’t mistake it for an escaped anomaly and shoot it.”

“Well, you have a good point, but Oliver’s like me, remember? It’ll take a lot more than a bullet to get rid of us.”

“I know that."

Turning his back on Dictator, Eli dug a map out of the pocket of his lab coat and shoved it at Dictator. “Here, you’re probably gonna want this.”

“Ooh, is this one of the cool maps that shows us moving? I’ve always wanted one of those!” Dictator held the map up, unfolding it and holding it above their head as they studied it.

Eli groaned. “No, it’s not. It’s just a regular old map. If I had anything anomalous on me I’d be locked up and *you* would get to have some

rando as your supervisor. And we don't want *that*, now do we?" His voice held more than a hint of a threat.

"Well – no, even though you're mean to me, at least I know you," Dictator said, folding the map back up. They chewed on the thumb of their right hand, blinking wide at Eli. Around their thumb, they continued, "And, well, I guess that's preferable. So I won't say *anything* about you being… anomalous." They paused, and then asked, "Do they know about… the other thing?"

"What, about my birth certificate and me? Yeah, they know," Eli replied, shoving his hands in his pockets. "And they probably know about you, too. They'll probably want to do a karyotype on you, just a warning."

"Eh, let them. It won't change anything, though I *am* a bit curious as to what my genes will say," Dictator quipped. "Anyway, all of that aside, what are we gonna do today?"

"First, we need to go to my superiors, tell 'em that you made it back and you're ready to start," Eli said. "And then, I'll take you on my rounds."

"Cool! What about Oliver?" Dictator asked, pointing to the aforementioned tiger, who had sat down and started grooming himself. "Will he get to come with us?"

"They already told you, he can, as long as I'm with you. But it had better not cause any problems, 'cause if it does…"

"He's well behaved," Dictator assured him, waving one hand in the air dismissively. "Don't worry about him."

"It's not him I'm worried about," Eli muttered under his breath as he led Dictator back through the winding hallways.

—-

After checking in with the superiors and letting them know that Dictator and Oliver were (in a relative sense) safely within Foundation custody, Eli was given the clearance to go ahead and take them on the rounds.

Despite Dictator's usual talkative nature, they mostly kept their nose in the map, following closely behind Eli. Oliver seemed to be leading them most of the way, steering Dictator left and right with the leash.

Eventually, Dictator finally spoke up. "Hey, when are we gonna see some anomalies? Isn't that what we're here for?"

"Don't forget, the Foundation thinks *you* are an anomaly," Eli replied dismissively. "Honestly, most of these things would probably bore you. They're just regular old objects that sometimes do irregular things. Like, for instance, we have a **`menu that, when you order it, uses meat and stuff from endangered animals.`** Pretty damn boring, right?"

"But how does it get the meat? Does it kill them?"

"No, it just takes muscle tissue and shit. Leaves 'em in a daze and pretty confused but they never even leave their enclosure. Then we have a **`chessboard with the souls of little girls in it."`**

"*That* sounds interesting! How about we go see that one in action?"

"No, it requires a child psychologist to be present, and we don't have one on call right now. 'Sides, we don't use it except for testing, so unless you wanna be the next subject, I'd suggest we check out Safe objects first."

"That sounds *so boring*," Dictator moaned, drawing out the "o" in "so" and "boring." "Isn't there something cool you can show me?"

Eli paused, heaving a heavy sigh.

"If I do, you gotta promise to keep that mouth of yours shut. Agreed?"

"Agreed," Dictator replied, nodding resolutely.

"Alright then. Let's go hear some music."

—-

“So, you brought me to a creepy abandoned theatre?” Dictator asked, voice echoing through the mostly-empty structure. Eli, Dictator, and Oliver were all walking down the narrow hallway leading into the main theatre, forced to walk single-file. Eli took the lead, with Oliver bringing up the rear. Dictator was sandwiched uncomfortably in the middle, pushing themselves back and away from Eli with every step, whilst also attempting to keep themselves from tripping over Oliver. “What’s so cool about that?”

“I’ll show you when we get there,” Eli chided. “We’re almost at the main theatre. Then you’ll see what’s *so cool* about this place.”

“I can’t shake the feeling you made me walk two miles for nothing,” Dictator grumbled, crossing their arms but continuing to follow Eli through the narrow corridor.

Finally, there was light up ahead, and Dictator perked up a bit as they walked out of the corridor. And then, their eyes widened when they saw what they were here for.

A huge – no, an enormous – beehive was sitting in front of them. The buzz of the bees was almost deafening; there were thousands of bees, flying in and out through a broken window in a fairly predictable manner. Dictator gasped, reaching a hand up and catching a bee on their finger.

“Bees!” Dictator exclaimed, flapping their free hand excitedly. “Look – look at all the bees!”

“Yeah, bees,” Eli said, obviously faking excitement. “Lots of ‘em. But that’s not what makes them anomalous.” He blew air at a bee as it attempted to land on his nose, apparently not fazed by the flying insects. “Give them a few minutes and you’ll see.”

“See what?” Dictator asked as the bee on their finger took off again, flying clumsily through the air.

Eli motioned with his head towards the instruments placed carefully in the main performance area. “Watch.”

After a few more moments, slowly, a ripple seemed to pass through

the hive, as if they were all getting a singular message. Carefully, the bees began floating away from the hive and windows and back towards the instruments, arranging themselves in a way they should not have been able to know on a cognitive level. One significantly larger bee flew herself over to the conductor's stand, followed by several hundred worker bees. Together, they clumped together to pick up the conductor's baton, just as the rest of the hive was taking their place.

Dictator opened their mouth to ask something, but Eli put his hand over their mouth, shooshing them as the "orchestra" began to play. A familiar tune floated through the air, and Dictator grew excited again.

"I know this one! It's "This Land" from *The Lion King*!" They were practically jumping up and down in their spot at this point. Eli stifled a chuckle.

The music started out slowly, but built up to a crescendo a few minutes into the performance. Of course, Dictator knew the whole movie by heart, and Eli could practically see it running through their mind as they held their hands to their chest, overwhelmed with excitement.

"It's *perfect*," Dictator whispered. "How do they know?"

"They're anomalous, there's no way of knowing how or why they know," Eli replied simply. "They just know."

"Wow." Dictator did not speak again until after the performance was finished, and at that time they simply clapped loudly, jumping up and down in place. "Bravo, *bravo*!"

Eli smiled smugly. "See? I told you there were some interesting Safe-class objects."

Unbeknownst to the two of them, this was going to be a bright start to a very dark path.

Every SCP - Part 2 - Bright Eyes

Previous Part — Next Part

SCP Presented: `SCP-1369`

Although they were no longer in any real danger, Dictator did not sleep soundly in their containment cell, even with Oliver with them. They whined and kicked and turned over in their bed, sometimes gripping the headboard and clawing at the walls. After Foundation personnel determined this was not an anomalous quality, but rather simply night terrors, Dictator was left alone and not bothered any further.

When they woke up the next morning, Dictator's muscles ached. Slowly, groaning, they pushed themselves up with their arms and swung their legs over the side of the bed, making sure not to kick Oliver, who was resting at the foot of the bed, as they did. Even their *legs* hurt, probably from the four-mile round-trip they had taken yesterday.

Cracking the joints in their fingers, Dictator looked straight into the camera that was observing them. "Hey, are you guys awake back there? I'm hungry."

A voice crackled over the intercom system. "Hey kid, don't worry, I brought ya' some pancakes."

"Did you remember the blueberry syrup?"

"What kinda' "caretaker" would I be if I forgot that?" Eli chuckled from the other side.

A few moments later, the small metal flap at their door opened, and a plate with two pancakes, butter, a small container of blueberry syrup, and two slices of bacon was pushed through the door. Dictator quickly fell upon it like a starving dog, covering both

pancakes with a thick layer of butter and syrup.

“Don’t eat too fast, you’ll get sick and if you puke on me we’re gonna have a problem,” Eli muttered over the intercom. Dictator appeared to ignore them, instead continuing to eat at their previous rate.

After Dictator had finished their breakfast, and allowed Oliver to lick the plate, they turned their attention back up to the camera. “Okay, I’m ready to go now!” Though their tone was cheerful, there was something… off, about the look in their eye.

Eli chose to ignore it for now.

“Alright, I’m coming down,” Eli said, then swiveled around in his swivel chair to face one of his superiors. Startled, Eli pushed the chair back quickly, and was swiftly stopped by the control panel.

“Dr. Moss,” he said after taking a breath. “Fancy meeting you here.”

“Relax, Jones, I’m just here to give you your assignments for the week. I think you’ll find them interesting,” Dr. Moss told him. His voice sounded like a constant rolling growl, which was enough to unsettle even Eli. He held out a paper, and Eli took it, his heart in his throat.

Dr. Mitch Moss had unsettled Eli ever since they met. Moss was his assigned superior, and while the Foundation as a whole knew about Eli’s “condition”, Moss had been less than kind about it. He obviously did not see Eli as a “real” man, but that was not the only reason Eli was bothered by his presence. There was something about the man that Eli simply did not trust.

Looking over the assigned SCPs for the week, Eli’s eyes widened, then narrowed as he looked up at Moss. “No, no way. This is *not* right for Dictator to see and you know that.” *You bastard* was on the tip of Eli’s tongue, but he did not voice it.

“This is a part of its testing, if you have a problem with it, keep your mouth shut,” Moss warned. “If it is truly as strong as it claims, this should not bother it.”

“The kid already has night terrors, you wanna fuck ‘em up even

more?" Eli asked, cursing himself internally for not catching the swear before it came out. "Come on, give the kid a break."

"It's already been done," Moss replied dismissively, shrugging his shoulders. "Find out a way to deal with it."

Eli swore again as Moss left the room, getting up from his chair and walking over to the door.

Although Dictator had been born nearly two-hundred years ago, they were slow to age, unlike the other three genetically identical humans who shared that same DNA. Dictator had been the last to be created, and as a homunculus, no less. They were created to be indestructible, even by the process of aging. So despite them being close to two-hundred years old, they were developmentally the same as fifteen-year-old.

Even as annoying and bothersome as they were, there was no reason for Dictator to be scarred by these anomalies. Eli would protect them, somehow.

—-

With the two of them in such unstable moods, it was inevitable that one of them would notice the other. Surprisingly, it was Dictator who noticed Eli's foul mood before Eli picked up on their own inner distress.

"Uh… you okay, big Bro?" Dictator asked, jogging a bit to catch up with Eli. Oliver trotted up beside them, chuffing with irritation.

"I'm fine," Eli growled in response. There was a hint of anger in his voice, and Dictator could not help but flinch. Though Eli was usually irritated with Dictator, it took a lot for him to get really angry. Reaching out, Dictator grabbed hold of Eli's arm, forcing him to turn around and look at them. "Don't fucking touch me – "

"Why are you mad? I didn't even do anything," Dictator whined. "And why did you take so long to come get me this morning? Is that why you're angry?"

"I'm not angry, I'm pissed off," Eli shouted, withdrawing his arm from

Dictator's grip. "Just – don't ask questions, okay?"

"…Okay," Dictator sighed after a few moments. They looked like they were on the verge of tears, and finally, Eli gave a heaving sigh again.

"Come on, kid, I'm not mad at you," he grumbled. "I'm mad with my goddamn superiors. The shit they assigned this week – you don't need to see this shit, it's creepy."

"Well, that doesn't mean I can't see it," Dictator said. "I mean, I'm sure I can handle it."

"Kid, there are grown people who can't handle this shit. You might be a big shot where you come from, but that doesn't mean you're ready for this."

Dictator pouted, sticking out their bottom lip for a moment. "So what're you gonna do? You have to watch me 24/7."

"Yeah, I know that, and so do they. That's why I'm pissed off. They wanna expose a little kid to really bad stuff."

"I'm not a little kid!" Dictator stomped their foot to emphasize their point.

"Yeah, alright," Eli sighed. "Come on, let's get going. We've got to get to 1369 before we have to check on 2952."

—-

"So… what exactly is SCP-1369? And why'd you give me this blindfold?" Dictator asked as they walked through the building. Eli was taking many sharp twists and turns, with Dictator struggling to keep up. Eli was extending his steps as he continued to get angrier and angrier, pissed off at the world and the set of circumstances that led him here.

For a moment, he was so engrossed in stewing in his anger, that he forgot Dictator was even there until they tugged on his sleeve again.

"Uh, hey, big Bro? What is SCP-1369, and what's the blindfold for?"

They repeated.

So much innocence in those eyes, Eli thought, turning around to address them. Oliver, who had been trotting along beside them, stopped and sat down, leaning against Dictator. *Is he trying to protect them, too?*

“What would a blindfold usually be used for, kid,” Eli grunted. “It’s so you don’t see the… *thing* that’s in there.”

“What thing? Is it really that bad?” Dictator asked as the group of three started to walk again. The metal door leading to the observation chamber was just up ahead. “I’ve seen a lot of tough stuff in my lifetime, you know. I think I can handle it.” Their eyes were still bright with naive, childish innocence, but there was something… dark, about them as well. Something solid and unmistakably not innocent.

“No, you can’t. I don’t care how many years you’ve lived, you’ve got a kid’s brain and you don’t need to see this shit,” Eli said definitively, in a tone that clearly showed the argument was over. His voice wavered a bit as he fought to ignore the darkness he'd seen earlier in their eyes. “Now, put the damn blindfold on. I’m not opening the door until you do.”

Dictator opened their mouth to protest, but cut it off with a whine when Eli stared them down. Slowly, they tied the blindfold around their eyes, knotting it at the back of their head. “Okay, I’m ready now.” They reached out to grab Eli’s arm, allowing him to guide them as they walked in.

Immediately upon catching sight of the thing behind the glass panel of the observation chamber, Oliver hissed, his tail going straight up as the fur along his back and neck rose. Dictator put their free hand on Oliver’s back, rubbing gently in an attempt to calm him.

But the angry tiger refused to calm down, instead moving in front of Dictator as if to shield them from the creature behind the glass.

Eli, on the other hand, sighed and motioned towards another doctor sitting at the control panel. “Bring in the D-Class personnel,” he said,

voice dull and devoid of its usual fervor. “Let’s just get this over with.”

The other doctor nodded and pressed a red button on the control panel. A buzzing noise ensued, and Dictator lifted their head, but made no motion to take the blindfold off.

“Do you hear that?” Dictator asked, stepping closer to Eli. “It sounds like someone’s in pain.”

“It’s just the object, don’t worry about it,” Eli replied, putting a hand on the small of Dictator’s back. “Keep going,” Eli instructed the other doctor.

He stepped away from Dictator for a moment, which was a mistake. Almost immediately, they reached up and pulled their blindfold up just a bit, unable to resist the temptation of looking at the forbidden object.

Dictator was silent for more than a minute, and that was when Eli realized they had seen it.

Dictator had laid eyes on the object, and it was… terrifying. And in the middle of testing, no less.

The object itself was enough to terrify Dictator on its own, and at first Eli thought their silence meant they were scared. A mass of four heads, four arms, and a torso that merged into a mass of squirming tendrils, holding its place on the floor. Each head emitted its own moan, each at a different frequency than the other. This moaning did not seem to cease as the D-class personnel, who had disrobed, made his way towards it.

“Dictator! God dammit,” Eli hissed, making his way across the room to forcibly shove the blindfold back down, but the damage had been done. “There’s a *reason* why I tell you these things! Did you think it was just for fun or something?!”

"It's revolting," Dictator finally said, appearing to ignore Eli's previous question. Their eyes stayed fixed on the object, the same darkness from earlier returning to their gaze. "This thing… what purpose does

it serve? It should be *exterminated*."

"We don't do that unless they pose a serious threat to humanity," Eli replied, clasping his hand over Dictator's eyes. "Now, calm down. Let's just get you out of here, alright?"

Eli watched them the rest of the day, wondering if the darkness in their eyes would return. But it never did.

Every SCP - Part 3 - Beltane

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SCP Presented: SCP-2952

Dictator did not sleep that night. Eli had hoped that the exposure to the previous object would not have affected them that badly, but it had provoked them into an agitated state which they would not leave for several hours. They were unusually snappy with guards and other personnel, leading Eli to quickly finish his rounds and put them to bed for the night. They did not argue when they went to bed, only gripped Oliver tightly by his black leather collar and allowed him to guide them towards the bed.

Some of the higher-class personnel witnessed this change, and debated amongst themselves about the reason why. It was a debate Eli had to stay out of. He knew why Dictator had reacted so viscerally and almost violently, and it all had to do with the reason why they were created.

Dictator was created with the goal of eventual world domination. An impossible goal, yes, even for the most well-bred homunculus one could come up with. Their indestructibility ensured they would not die, but on their own, Dictator had no interest in hurting others.

The rest of the details from here were fuzzy, but Eli could piece together what he knew from talking with Dictator before to create a bigger picture.

Apparently, horrible things had been done to Dictator by the one they mentioned as being their Overseer: the one who had created them. They had been conditioned — no — programmed to kill, to hurt, to destroy, to *eliminate*. When they saw something they deemed as unworthy, it was wired into their brain to get rid of it.

After the Overseer died and more time passed, Dictator had gained

more control over these impulses. They were still a child at heart, and wanted to be as “normal” as possible, but some things would never be erased. Time had brought back some of the innocence they had lost, but they would never be like a normal fifteen year old.

Normal fifteen year olds did not have blood on their hands.

—-

“Hey, kid. Let’s go see somethin’ to cheer you up with.”

Eli’s voice crackled over the intercom into the containment cell, where Dictator was slumped over against the wall with Oliver’s head resting on their lap. The tiger had curled protectively around them, and Dictator continued to stroke his head as they spoke.

“What do you mean?” They asked, eyes bleary and voice heavy with sleep. They were not immune to the effects of exhaustion, that much was for sure. “I’m not in a bad mood…”

“Yes, you are,” Eli replied. “And I’m gonna get it out of you, alright? Today’s gonna be better than yesterday.”

“Okay… yesterday wasn’t that bad though.” Shakily, Dictator rose to their feet, supported on one side by Oliver. The cat let out what sounded like a noise of distress, although Dictator did not appear to be hurting him in any way.

They walked slowly towards the door, and then waited for Eli to come down and let them out. Once the door opened, they stared at Eli for a moment, apparently not recognizing that he had even opened the door. Dictator was exhausted, that much was for sure.

“C’mon, we gotta hurry if we’re gonna make it on time,” Eli said, much more gently than he usually would. He gripped Dictator by the hand that was not currently curled into Oliver’s collar.

“Alright,” Dictator yawned. “Okay.”

They did not say anything else as Eli led them through the facility.

—-

When Eli got in the car to drive to the site where SCP-2952 was currently stationed, he did not know what to expect of Dictator. When they crawled into the front seat, they simply fell asleep, head bobbing at some points when the car went over a bump at any point.

It was thirty miles from the site where Eli was stationed to the site where the object was, which was why he chose to drive rather than walk. Foundation personnel of high enough clearance were allowed to use their personal vehicles to travel from one site to the next, provided they took the back ways illustrated by the Foundation rather than main roads. Sometimes, this caused their commute to be substantially longer, but it was better to do that than drive on a road where one could be easily followed.

When the ride was over, Eli reached over to push on Dictator's shoulder. "Hey, kid, wake up. We're here."

"Mmm — hmm, leave me alone," Dictator muttered, swatting half-heartedly at Eli's hand. "I just got to sleep."

"Yeah, I know, but you gotta get up," Eli said, a bit more firmly. "I can't have you outta my sight, remember? Up you go."

Dictator grumbled once more, then leaned up in their seat and opened the door. Eli stepped out as well, walking around the side of the car to open the door for Oliver. The tiger jumped out, and immediately went to Dictator's side, chuffing and rubbing his head against their leg.

Eli turned to lead them through the bushes, into the area where the object in question was kept. Dictator followed along on shaky legs, then paused as they noticed the object.

What appeared to be the front half of a Pembroke Welsh Corgi stuck out from between two bushes, mouth open and tongue hanging out as it panted. Although it was a hot day out, the canine did not appear to have any water or food nearby, though it did perk up when it noticed the two humans approaching it.

For a moment, Dictator was quiet, and Eli feared that they might react in the same way as they had the night before. Then, a smile

broke along their face, and Eli relaxed.

“He’s so cute!” Dictator exclaimed, kneeling down to pet the corgi. He panted happily as he was pet, lifting his chin so Dictator could scratch it. “But, where’s the other half of him?”

“The other half would be the reason why he’s anomalous,” Eli replied. “He’s about thirty-thousand kilometers in length, give or take a few. His bottom half’s in Japan.”

“Wow! He really *is* long,” Dictator said, sitting down whilst continuing to pet the dog. “How come he’s so long? What does he do with all of that?”

“He’s a transportation system,” Eli said simply. “Parts of his body open up and take people from one point to the other. The entrances are tiny, but the inside is much bigger. We’re not really sure how he does it, but that’s a part of the beauty of the mystery, I think.”

“He’s adorable,” Dictator declared, leaning down to kiss the pup on the nose. He panted excitedly. “I would take you home if I could, yes I would!” Dictator cooed, squishing the corgi’s cheeks in their hands.

Eli smiled, and for a moment, he saw the childish innocence returning to Dictator’s eyes, and that was all he wanted.

“Do you want to ride him?” Eli asked suddenly. “We won’t go far. We can get on at the closest platform and get off at the first stop after that.”

“Wait — we’re allowed to do that?” Dictator jumped up suddenly, all signs of exhaustion long gone. “I’d love to! Wait, will we get in trouble? I don’t wanna be stuck in my cell for a week.”

“We won’t get in trouble, it’s classified as safe, and personnel are allowed to ride it since we figured out it’s not any danger. In fact, sometimes we have to ride it, to make sure he doesn’t get kidney stones again, or get sick.”

“Oh… well, good for us then!” Dictator replied cheerfully. “But, uh — how exactly do we get on? Do we have to crawl or something?”

“You’ll see,” Eli told them. “Just follow me. And make sure you stay close, alright?”

Dictator nodded, and stepped up next to Eli as the three of them made their way through the wooded area. They did not have to walk far; an uncovered section of the dog was resting a few meters away. Eli checked his watch as they walked up, then turned to Dictator.

“It’ll be about five minutes. Make sure you step back a bit.” Dictator nodded, and stayed back along with Eli about a meter away from the section. After a few minutes, it appeared to wriggle with excitement, before a tiny opening opened up along its side.

“Whoa — does that hurt him?” Dictator asked, worry tinging their voice.

Eli shook his head. “No, he’ll be fine. We’ve done some tests before, and it doesn’t seem to bother him.”

A few moments after the opening appeared, a few tiny entities walked out of it. They were only a few centimeters tall, and Dictator blinked in confusion as they walked away from the opening. “So… tiny people come in and out of it?”

“Yep. Now, do you still wanna get on?”

Dictator stared at Eli, as if he had just asked the most ridiculous question. “Yeah I do! Let’s go!”

They rushed forward, and in the blink of an eye, Dictator too had shrunk down to the size of the entities leaving 2952. Whether or not they noticed it in the moment, Eli did not know, and he simply shrugged as he stepped forward. There was no noticeable effect when he did shrink down, and he only noticed it when he tilted his head back and saw grass stalks towering over him.

“Alright, kid, where’d you run off to?” Eli asked, walking in through the opening and looking around. He spotted Dictator a few seconds later, sitting down on one of the flower seats. They were gazing at the strange scene around them, sitting between an elderly couple and a young mother with a small child. They were dressed in

strange robes, though Dictator did not seem to notice it. Or, if they did, they simply did not care.

“Hi Eli! I think I got the last seat,” Dictator said. The inside was quite packed, with several people already having to stand. Eli realized with slight dismay that he was going to have to stand, and he sighed, leaning on a pole nearest to Dictator.

“So what is this place? It looks… really weird,” Dictator asked, leaning in a bit closer to Eli.

For all intents and purposes, “weird” described the inside of 2952 quite well. The walls, ceiling, and floors appeared to be made of birch bark wrapped around thin twigs. Dictator bounced a bit on the flower cushion of the chair, which did not seem to bother the passengers around them.

A voice crackled over what they assumed to be an intercom. “Now departing the Innermost Forest stop. Next stop is the Outermost Forest.” Dictator was quiet for a few moments after that as the system began to move.

“So what’re you guys dressed up for?” Dictator asked the young mother beside them before Eli could tell them to shut up.

“Oh, the Beltane celebration!” The young mother replied, moving her toddler to her other leg and bouncing it up and down to keep him occupied. “It’s going to be great. There’s the family-friendly one, and the big one. We usually go to the family-friendly one, since Beltane celebrations tend to be a bit… x-rated, if you know what I mean.”

Dictator gave a nervous chuckle. “Yeah, I’ve been studying Paganism for a little while now,” they said. Their eyes drifted over to a poster plastered on the right wall, reading “GET READY FOR THE NEWEST BLOCKBUSTER, STARRING [REDACTED] IN THE ROLE OF [REDACTED].” *Must be the doings of the Foundation,* they thought, before continuing their previous line of thought. “And, uh, a lot of it seems pretty… adult. I’m not really used to it.”

“You should come to the family-friendly event then! It’s so much fun, especially for someone your age,” the young mother said. “There’s

lots of food, and fun games to play. It'd be right up your alley."

"I'd really love to, but unfortunately my schedule is booked," Dictator said after a quick glance at Eli. "But, um, thanks for the info."

They were quiet for quite some time after that, swinging their legs back and forth as the system moved along. Eli was mostly checking for any abnormalities, but he could find none. The corgi seemed to be in relatively good health, considering the activities that went on inside of it.

The ride only lasted about twenty minutes, before they started to come to a slow stop. "Now approaching Outermost Forest. Thank you for riding."

Dictator stood up, reaching for the bar that Eli was holding on to as they finally stopped. The doors on the opposite side to which they came in opened, and the two stepped out after Dictator gave a friendly wave to the young mother.

"I think I'd like to do that again sometime," Dictator remarked as they walked away, back towards Eli's car that had, inexplicably, appeared in their path.

Every SCP - Part 4 - Friends

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SCPs Presented: `SCP-237, SCP-2715`

Oliver was the first one to wake the next day, and he took the time between his waking and Dictator's eventual waking to ponder on the set of circumstances which brought him here.

Anyone who looked at the cat would be able to tell, almost immediately, that something was… different about him. He did not behave like a normal tiger, not even tame ones that people usually kept as pets. There was something almost human about him. But then, that would not be surprising. That was because Oliver himself was a human.

Though he was not currently human, Oliver had the brain and memories of being human. He had died nearly four years ago now, the date of his death coinciding with the date of the birth of his new body. Looking down at his paws, he unsheathed his claws, gently gripping the sheets of the hard bed beneath him.

To say he missed being human would be an understatement. Oliver yearned to be human again, so he got as close to it in this body as he could. He could read, and use rudimentary signs to "speak." But most of all, he protected the human he loved the most with everything he had.

And that human was Dictator.

As they stirred next to him, Oliver's tail twitched and he chuffed, looking over his shoulder at the small human. Dictator's eyes were half-open, and they smiled wide at him.

"Hey, boy. You thinkin' about stuff again?"

Oliver closed his eyes and exhaled a purr, before getting up to rest his gigantic head on Dictator's chest. They scratched behind his ears, and he twitched his tail tip in gratitude.

Life as a tiger was not so bad, after all.

—-

Dictator was slower to start than usual, but Oliver did not seem particularly rushed. He simply sat down and groomed himself while Dictator ate breakfast (a bowl of cereal that had been pushed through the door) and got ready for the day.

Eli did not come in until a few minutes before Dictator was finished. Oliver knew this because, unlike Dictator, his sensitive hearing could pick up the noise of the door to the observation chamber opening and closing. Eli was the only person who came in and out, so it was reasonable to assume that it was he who entered it.

Moments later, Eli's voice came over the intercom. "Hey kid, you almost ready to get going today? I've got somethin' to show you."

"What is it?" Dictator asked, eyes shining. Oliver purred at the sound of their enthusiasm
"It's… well, it's a special one, that's for sure," Eli replied hesitantly. "But probably something you'll be interested in."

"Okay. What do you think, Oliver?" Dictator asked, turning to face the tiger. He chuffed in response, playfully butting his head against Dictator's shoulder.

Whatever it is, I'll protect you. Even if it isn't dangerous, I'll still protect you. You are all that matters in my life, my Charge.

Oliver liked to think that, somewhere inside of them, Dictator knew what they were saying.

—-

"So where are we going today?" Dictator asked, trying to keep in step with Eli. Oliver trotted beside them, easily keeping up with the two humans.

“We’re gonna be looking after two today, the first one for two hours and the second one for four,” Eli replied. “First one is SCP-237, technically -2 instances, though. There’s sixteen of them in total, fourteen of them speak Japanese, and of those fourteen only three are known to speak English.”

“Oh. Well, will I be able to talk to any of them?”

“Maybe, if they’re interested. They don’t really talk much nowadays. They’re all pretty sure their creator is dead.”

“…Oh. Well… was he… or, maybe they… like mine?”

“From what I’ve heard, their creator wasn’t exactly a nice guy. I think they’re better off without him, but they seem to think otherwise.” Eli paused to look down at Dictator. “Do you miss your Overseer?”

“No,” Dictator replied quickly. They paused then shook their head. “Well, only at first. He was- well, everything to me. It’s hard to move on after that, you know? And what I’m thinkin’ is… maybe these guys just need time to get themselves together.”

Eli became silent, and stayed silent until they approached the door to the temporary holding area where some of the instances were being kept. Dictator peered around Eli to get a glance at the instances as he opened the door.

“So they’re… statues?”

The instances were situated behind a deceptively thin glass panel, with a pair of cameras observing their movements. Eli nodded, sitting down in a chair behind the control panel itself. Dictator sat down next to him.

“Yeah, kind of. They’re made of clay and polymer, but they’re pretty soft. It’s like… they haven’t been baked, y’know?”

“Got it.”

Dictator stared at the glass panel for a while, before one of the statues — what appeared to be an emperor penguin — started staring back at them. Dictator swallowed, then turned their head

away.

“I… think I understand how they feel,” they said finally. “But I don’t think — no, I know — they don’t have the ability to understand how they feel just yet.”

Dictator fell silent, and no one spoke after that.

—-

SCP-2715 was, in Dictator’s eyes, slightly underwhelming. The teenager sat on her bed with her legs drawn up to her chest, lasered in on a thick hardback. She sang softly to herself as she read, and scratched her nose whenever she turned a page.

Dictator frowned at her through the one-way mirror. “She’s a kid.”

“Eighteen isn’t a kid. And I don’t recall age being a factor for anomalies,” Eli said pointedly. “You read her file?”

“You tell me.”

Eli leaned back in his chair and propped his heels up on the control board. “She doesn’t get many visitors. She says it’s fine, but I don’t believe her.”

Dictator parsed this, then said, “How do I use the intercom?”

“Red one.” Eli gestured to a rather prominent button on the control board. Dictator pushed it, and a quick burst of white noise flooded the speakers. 2715 jumped, then glanced back at the space where the mirror was. Silence from both parties. Eli looked smug.

“Uh… hi there,” Dictator said after a few moments. “So, uh, let’s get down to business I guess — I mean, crap, this isn’t business, but uh — what’s your name?”

2715 frowned. “Oi, McLaughlin, are you giving the interns free reign over the mic again?”

“What? No.” Dictator could see Eli snickering. “I’m not- not an intern. I’m anomalous, like you.”

“Sério?” Her eyebrows shot up. “Woah. Dude, that’s pretty neat. This isn’t a rescue attempt, is it?”

Dictator shook their head, though the gesture was lost. “Nothing like that. And you still haven’t told me your name.”

“I’m 2715, that’s my only answer for you. Has been for a while now, will be for a while more.”

Dictator took their hand off the button and gave themselves a couple seconds to sigh frustratedly. Then they put their hand back on it. *Once more unto the breach, dear friends…*

“My name’s Dictator. What’s yours?”

The girl blinked twice in Dictator’s general direction, then a warm smile began to carve itself across her face. “Name’s Daniela. Nice to meet you, Dictator.”

Victory. “Nice to meet you too, Daniela.”

Moment of quietness. “What kinda name is Dictator?” the person who used to be SCP-2715 said. “And why’re you visiting me?”

“’Special circumstances,’ or that’s what they said. I’m a Thaumiel.” Their chest puffed up with importance for a brief second, then deflated when they saw the look of incomprehension on Daniela’s face. “I contain other anomalies,” they explained.

She nodded. “You’re pretty important then.”

“Yeah, but I have to be watched all the time. I don’t think they trust me very much,” they joked.

“Amen,” she replied.

“So why’d they put you in here?” they said.

“Voluntary admission, if you can believe that. I made a lot of shitty decisions when I was younger. It’s safer here than where I was.”

“Where were you?”

She stood and stretched her arms. “You’re lookin’ at the Chaos Insurgency’s finest used-to-be-human bioweapon, designed to inflict suffering and terror onto the citizens of the third world.” The words were sardonically bitter. “With none of the flaws and side-effects of the previous version.”

“The- Chaos Insurgency?”

She made a contemptuous noise. “Yeah. Guys who use anomalies for their own personal gain. They’re assholes and you shouldn’t sympathize with them.”

“Duly noted.” Dictator nodded again. Another moment of silence. “So, uh, by the way, I don’t really have any friends here. Do you think we could… y’know, just maybe… be friends?”

There was a pause from inside the cell. Then Daniela shrugged. “Sure, I guess. Why not?”

Eli smiled from behind Dictator and closed his eyes as the homunculus excitedly chattered on with their new friend.

Every SCP - Part 5 - The Clock

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Unbeknownst to Eli and Dictator, something was happening to **SCP-1032**.

The clock's hands spun their lazy way around its face, as usual. The fifth sped ahead of its brethren, as usual, and the fourth (to everyone's great relief) was very nearly stationary, as usual. One of the hands struck midnight and as it did a diner closed its doors for the final time. This was all perfectly expected.

The hand that struck midnight began moving once again, but this time the label had changed to "Dr. 's Plan," with the space after "Dr." left blank. Nobody would notice this until later. It ticked onwards until "Dr. 's Plan" caught up with "The Universe" and "The SCP Foundation."

The three hands began moving in conjunction, and sped up as they did.

—

"So, who's the lucky guy?"

Eli stopped in his tracks when Dictator moved in front of him, arms crossed over their chest. He stopped more out of shock rather than not wanting to run into Dictator, as he did not particularly care whether he ran into them or not.

"The hell you on about?" Eli squinted at them. Dictator waggled an eyebrow and smiled.

They had to be in some kind of mood if they were acting like this. *Maybe I shouldn't have let them talk to 2715…*

"You came in later than you usually do this morning," Dictator replied

simply. “So, again, who’s the lucky guy? I would’ve thought you would tell me if you were dating someone.”

“We’re not dating. It’s just- talking.” Eli narrowed his eyes at Dictator. “Who told you?”

“No one,” Dictator laughed. “I was bullshitting you. Pretty good, right?”

It didn’t register until about a second later. “Gimme a break,” Eli hissed. “You’re real insufferable, you know.”

He was preparing to grab Dictator by the shoulders and start shaking them, when he noticed something in his periphery: some new kid with a round face and clad in a dwarfing labcoat coming in their direction. He was slightly out of breath. Dictator stepped back as he approached Eli.

“Dr. Jones?”

Eli glanced at Dictator. “That’s me.”

“Uh. I’m here on order of Dean Elwood, you know him. He wants you in 1032’s containment unit stat.”

“What? Why?” Eli asked, motioning for Dictator to stay behind him.

“It’s- you just need to see it. I’m not at liberty to discuss it here.”

Eli and Dictator exchanged a look, and then Eli turned back to look at the other doctor. “Alright. Let’s go then.”

—-

They arrived at 1032’s containment area within five minutes. Dictator had to practically run to keep up with Eli, and they were panting by the time they came to the containment area. They leaned over, putting their hands on their knees for a moment as Eli made his way over to the crowd of doctors forming around the object.

“What’s going on?” Eli hissed, keeping his voice low.

“There was a midnight event- you know about that, right?”

“Yes!”

“Twelfth one- well, it changed. They’re not letting people see it, but they've got pictures. It says something about a doctor, but it doesn’t specify which one. Then it caught up with the twenty-first and fourth, and now everybody’s losing their shit.”

“Which ones were those again?”

“Eli!” Dictator’s frightened voice rose above the din of the other doctors’ voices. “Eli, look!” They were standing beside one of the screens, trained on the object with a camera attached to a microscope. Turning his head towards Dictator, he finally managed to catch a glimpse of the screen through a gap in the crowd.

When he saw the labels on the hands, all moving together as one, he inhaled.

The end of the Foundation, the Universe, and Dr. ’s Plan.

Eli stared at the screen like it was some eldritch being. *All three at once.* He watched them go one microscopic distance to the left.

He didn’t realize he was tipping over until his head hit the ground and everything went dark.

Every Breathing Minute of Every Waking Hour

Today is April 5th, 2017.

.

.

.

The hour is 0100.

It is Agent Terrance Shaw's thirty-first birthday, and marks five years of employment with MTF Lambda-12. His life was as much of a joke as his task force was, but in the swirling mix of light and booze and sweat and lust, he finds he does not care. As his body falls apart after weeks of interacting with his lover, he feels a flicker of panic. His heart palpitates and his brow furrows. His hands shake and his hair stands on end. Getting to this point was a mistake. A flaw in containment procedures, nothing more. He could still be saved. The site medical personnel would find a way. They always could. They always could.

Loss of Personnel Report: 04.05.17

Affected: Agent Terrance Shaw, MTF Lambda-12

Most Recently Assigned: **SCP-071** (2 years)

Cause of Death: Long-term adverse health effects following accidental exposure to both **SCP-071** and **SCP-2708**, respectively.

Notes: *Body used for on-site cadaver training and research, as per the affected's wishes noted in hiring paperwork.*

The hour is 0300.

Kilometers upon kilometers away from all that is known, a human being is tasked with interfering with that which should not be intruded upon. They do not wish to do this, but choice means nothing when research must be conducted. Their fear builds into anger, and their anger builds into acceptance. As they watch an unknown shadow emerge from the corner of the airtight space, cut off from everything they'd ever known, they realize that there is nothing more invigorating than perceiving the last moment of one's life in one final burst of emotion. They resist, but they soon realize it is nothing more than the last of their mind fading out to let their soul take its place; when they are finished speaking, they find solace in the crisp embrace of pain, and their soul passes.

Loss of Personnel Report: / /20

Affected: D-82111

Most Recently Assigned: `SCP-2222`

Cause of Death: Total epidermal eversion, with second-degree burns present on all dermal layers. Euthanized immediately after retrieval.

Notes: *Body incinerated.*

The hour is 0400.

The moon is bright over the Arizona desert, but it does not bring the heat and light so desperately and dearly needed to the land on which it radiates. Two offsite response agents of Site-19 are crossing the expanses of sand and red dirt and poison as lights flash blindingly behind them. One looks to the other with fear in his eyes.

85. 83. 81. 79. They won't make it. Their radar detector screeches out a deafening whine before humming and shutting off completely. When their car stops, they stumble out and are shot to the ground. It was merciful this time, comparatively; two clean shots through the chest of each, and the still-twitching bodies dissolved on the roadside in acidic leakage from the hands and fluids of the protector itself. When daybreak comes, the sun rises onto swirling dust and bubbling blood.

> **Loss of Personnel Report:** 04.05.17
>
> **Affected:** Agents and of Site-19 Offsite Response Vehicle K4
>
> **Most Recently Assigned:** SCP- /Site-19 (2 years)
>
> **Cause of Death:** Speeding in the vicinity of **SCP-973**'s area of effect during unprotected hours. Two gunshot wounds to the chest each, as well as unknown biological failures inflicted by SCP-973-2.
>
> **Notes:** N/A

The hour is 0700.

"So, do you hate it as much as you think?"

"No." Mr. Roland Smithson doesn't have a title other than the standard prefix. He has no doctorate or Foundation-issued field agent certification or any of that. He has a placard on his desk with his name and his position: *Roland Smithson, Coroners' Records Management.*

"Just let me know if you need a coffee or anything in here."

"I'll be fine. There are fewer records than one may think."

In Mr. Smithson's seventy years of life, he began to notice as he aged that death is often too common in society to be looked upon as anything more than a short grievance and a large inconvenience. In his forty years of employment with the Foundation, he in turn realized that the rampancy of death in the outside world is challenged only by its gravity in the Foundation's world.

"Mr. Smithson?"

"Yes?"

"Site-81's records just loaded. Did it go to your inbox?"

"I didn't see it. Ask them to send it again."

The secretary nods and walks out. Mr. Smithson opens his file folders for the day. There are only ten new submissions thus far. Field agents, as usual. One D-class. It must be a fluke; he had told management long ago to stop sending him those, on account of the fact that doing so would quadruple his daily workload with nonsensical and unimportant information. No, his job is for the deaths that matter. Not them. And there were fewer than one would think.

The hour is 1000.

The planet below its surface is a treacherous place. Agent has to watch where her feet fall. She is looking at her watch every several seconds. Its LED backlighting brings her back to her senses when her feet fail her. Her headlamp is dying; her radio is dead. With every glance at the time, the minutes fall backward. *10:15.* She could be out in the sunlight if things were different. *10:13.* Had she crossed this path before? *10:12.* The air is wet and heavy. She is losing oxygen. She has lost her equipment. *10:10.* She can't breathe. Her own voice guides her deeper into the depths. *10:09.* She is happy here. *10:08. 10:07. 10:06.* There is no greater pain than

that of the suffocating warmth. There is no greater embrace than that of the fire.

> **Loss of Personnel Report:** 04.05.17
>
> **Affected:** Agent of Site-81 Light Reconnaissance Team C3
>
> **Most Recently Assigned:** **SCP-2951**/Site-81 (1 year)
>
> **Cause of Death:** Unknown psychological influence leading to multiple coronary failures. Possible suffocation.
>
> **Notes:** *Body not recovered from location of death.*

The hour is 1200.

"Nope, still no coffee. Remind me in thirty minutes and we'll get lunch."

"Sure thing, Mr. Smithson."

In the Foundation, death is and always will be just a number, and a grievance only in logistics. Deaths signify the loss of resources, and there is no greater resource than a thinking, feeling human being dedicated to a cause. A death is a problem. It's a loss of necessary benefits. Mr. Smithson isn't spending the last living days of his existence as a records manager; he's a *loss prevention officer,* clearly. If only he could do something about the 'preventing' aspects, he thinks, and stands up from his desk.

"Yes, I think I am ready for lunch," he says after several heartfelt moments of staring into blank space. He clears his throat and picks up his cane from its resting place by the door. As he walks out, he hears the notification

sound for three new records received. They ring in his ears. His stomach aches. He'll get to them later.

The hour is 1400.

and are out on a field excursion together. Their names do not matter. They never do. They only need to go 300 meters in this time. It's only a routine patrol, done every year. This will be no different. Thirty minutes, tops. The walls are grimy and absorb sound. Speaking yields nothing but soft silence in return. When the two agents notice movement, they find themselves genuinely surprised; widens her eyes and readies his gun. Each shot hammers into their eardrums before the sticky walls suck in all the waves of sound until there are none left. When the creatures shriek and scamper, the walls take that in, too. 's hand meets flesh as she stops one of the beings from rushing her, but it claws at her chest and face and in a split second her vision is of blood and tears and meat. As she lays herself down on the wet floor, chest and gut wide open, a tendril slaps her face and wriggles its way down her throat. Her last thought is of another mind overlapping and replacing hers as her pulse fades. When screams in disgust, the walls decline to absorb the unholy sound, and instead send it screeching down endless tunnels, toward the end.

Loss of Personnel Report: 04.05.17

Affected: Field Operatives and

Most Recently Assigned: **SCP-610**/Site-A (<1 year)

Cause of Death: Routine maintenance of Site-A Tunnels led to an unforeseen attack by infected persons. Presumed blunt force trauma and excessive blood loss from lacerations.

Notes: *Bodies not recovered from location of*

death.

The hour is 1700.

In a sunlit room in an inexplicably cold office building, a man is filing paperwork. He reads words most minds cannot comprehend. Each word penetrates his psyche with more and more force as he processes each paragraph, until he is shaken. He looks at his clock. He watches the hands move with nervous breaths. Thirty seconds. He dreads the clock striking the next minute. It's a building fear that latches onto every fiber of his lungs and heartstrings until his eyes glaze over and he finds that he is barely conscious. When the seconds hand passes twelve, he is collapsed on his desk, surrounded by blackboxes and redactions and test results he wishes he could forget. It is another two hours before the medical personnel arrive. When they do, his body is as cold as his heart was and as blue as the halls outside always will be. He is not missed, but he is not forgotten.

Loss of Personnel Report: 04.05.17

Affected: Dr. Gene West, Level 4 Researcher

Most Recently Assigned: **SCP-231**/Site- (7 years)

Cause of Death: Stroke

Notes: *Body sent to family members Max West and their two children as per request filed by Gene West upon hiring date.*

The hour is 2100.

"Do you know why I do it?"

"…You're good at it, sir?"

Mr. Smithson scoffs and smirks, but smiling hurts his tender skin. "I'm not looking for compliments." He stands up out of his chair and walks over to the window. "I do it because it's simple. I could be out there dying like all those agents and researchers and test subjects, but instead I'm in here. Where it's safe."

His secretary shifts her feet. "I'm not sure what you want me to say, sir-"

"You don't have to say anything. I'm just talking. Do you think you'll want my job after I'm gone?"

"I really couldn't say, I'm afraid. Site management told me this is a temporary position-"

"All positions are temporary. *Life* is temporary."

"Well, you'd know better than I on that topic, sir." She laughs slightly, but rescinds it with a downward glance.

"What's your clearance level? Zero?"

"It's one."

"Right, so you… have access to what they call 'sensitive information', but you can't do anything about it."

"Sensitive information like death records, I assume."

"Depends. There are a lot of options for secretaries here. Tell me, what do you envision when you think of the word 'secretary'?" He coughs into his hand and feels phlegm come up. He gulps and swallows, looking out the window over the Site's barren yard and heat-distorted perimeter fence. A team of onsite response personnel are driving around beside it, waving at each other. He wonders what their names are, and how long it'll be before he's writing their death reports for some accident or other.

"I guess I think of… sitting at a desk?" She laughs nervously again and shrugs. "I don't know. To be truthful, I don't quite remember how I got here, other than receiving some mysterious letter in college-"

"Right, so at a desk?" Smithson turns from the window and sits at his. A new report just came in from Site-42. This one is a genuine accident, which he hasn't seen in far too long. He reads it while he talks, pulling his thoughts from its subject matter. "What if, on the computer monitor of that desk, you were watching a video log of a violent interrogation? Interrogations are necessary things, you know, no matter how unpleasant. Sometimes, they're our last defense against lies constructed to hurt people — you, me, the people on the street miles down the road — so tell me, would you transcribe the audio? Would you be willing, or would it be uncomfortable?"

Her gaze shifts downward again. "I'm not sure why you're asking. That doesn't sound like my departm-"

"Oh, but it is. The agents doing it don't want to sit down afterward with a Word doc open and type out all the nasty shit they were saying. That's emotionally taxing. But you can; you're a secretary. Your job is the grunt work of low-clearance information."

"Sir, I'm sorry if I'm being rude, but I don't want to talk about this and I have no idea why you're dumping it on me." Her knuckles are white against the door frame.

Smithson sighs and glances back at the email in front of him. He doesn't want to type this one up. "Sorry." He's quiet. "You can go now. My old ass ought to leave that sort of thing to your hiring supervisors. I'm out of line." His attempt at humor is as lost on him as it is on her.

She licks her lips concernedly and scurries out of the office. He puts his head in his hands and starts reading the Site-42 Intelligence Department's email.

The hour is 2300.

Officer Roberts is pacing a white-walled room. His phone is buzzing. He's not allowed to look at it, so he lets it vibrate in his pocket until his leg is numb. It rings for too long. It must be an internal call. He wants to go home and go to sleep, but there's a drugged and uncooperative Chaos Insurgency operative groaning and twisting in his restraints on the table, and Roberts knows that neither of them is sleeping until that man talks.

I don't really like pain, he had told him when he began the first round of intravenous morphine and amnestics administration, now two days ago. *It's not effective. A reaction to pain causes the body and mind to build up its barriers, when what we're trying to do is get them down. So, how long will it take to get yours down? How long would you like it to take? I have all week.* On the wall by the examination table is a printed placard in black text: RECITATION OF AC-3423 MISSION PLANS IS NECESSARY FOR RELEASE. It is the only text in the room, the only thing for the subject to look at. Roberts doesn't think it's working, but he wishes it would. Roberts isn't even sure what sort of event or events the placard is referring to in the first place, he realizes.

"I'm coming back in an hour. We hope you'll be ready to talk by then." He walks out and slams the door with a sigh, waving to the security guard with a vacant expression. As he walks toward the stairway, he checks his phone. It's his coworker. *Tried calling you. You need to give up on whatever bullshit they have you on down in Intelligence. The Ethics Committee doesn't let you get shit done like they used to. There's no point anymore, you'll never get anything out of people with Valium and orgasms or whatever the fuck they mean by "ethical coercion" these days. Come down to the block before you clock out, I need your help with something.* Roberts rolls his eyes and adjusts his glasses before starting

down the stairs. He's still looking at his phone, and he misses the first step. Then he misses the next one, and the one after that. Panic doesn't register in his mind until his head collides with the railing. As his keys clatter to the ground and searing agony erupts in his skull and his limbs, he chooses not to open his eyes.

Loss of Personnel Report: 04.05.17

Affected: Rance Roberts, Intelligence Collections Officer and D-Class Cell Block Guard

Most Recently Assigned: N/A

Cause of Death: Spinal fracture and subsequent brain stem hemorrhaging, caused by blunt force trauma to the head, lower back, chest, and pelvic regions sustained during a fall down several metal stairs.

Notes: *I have recommended in the past and I will continue to recommend in the future that interrogations be transcribed by someone other than those personnel conducting them. Statistics have shown that not doing so is putting too much on the shoulders of the personnel directly conducting investigations, which leads to psychological stress and — yes — accidents.*

-Roland Smithson, Coroners' Records Management

The hour is 0000.

"Sir? You've been up since-"

"I know, I know. I just finished today's batch. The last one took forever."

"I saw." The woman hesitates. "Well, I'm going to go ahead and clock out for the night. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Come in as late as you need tomorrow."

"Oh, uh, sure. T-thank you."

"Yeah."

Only when her heels no longer *clack* on the wood floor and the door is closed does Smithson exhale the breath he'd been holding. For several minutes, he stares into his computer screen, eyes blurring from age or stress or both as he absentmindedly straightens his stacks of paperwork.

When he finishes, he stands, coughs a few times, and walks out of his office, making sure to leave his jacket hanging by the door for the following morning.

Everybody Needs Somebody

« One Trick Ponies

MTF-Lambda-9, later known as the Foundation Animal Assets Division, was established in 1924, reached peak performance in 1946, and has been significantly downsized since. As dissolution of the Foundation Animal Assets Division is currently under vote, a timeline of events, along with excerpts from relevant documents, are assembled below.

Review of **documents** detailing the history of the division from founding in 1924 to peak performance in 1946 is suggested, but not required.

Part Two: Project-λ-099, beginnings

> **12/12/1946:**
> At its peak, the division consisted of four animal trainers; two Foundation agents, including one former field agent and one Foundation psychiatrist; various caretaker personnel; forty-two canine assets, with fifteen on containment units, ten on search-and-rescue unit; six on retrieval units, five on morale-boosting projects, and six designated for Project-λ-099; one chimpanzee; and four equine assets.

It's not a large wing, for what it's supposed to be housing. The office space is separated into three sections by thin walls that shake if someone sneezes too loudly. They form a "T" shape, meaning that to get to the deepest section, one has to slip through one of the first two rooms.

It's better to go through the left. That's where Moore and Moore work, but search-and-rescue is rarely ever at base. Peggy Moore, the wife, short and deceptively plump, wears the kind of rose water

that makes the whole place smell sweet for weeks after she's been there. Bob Moore, a tall man who waxes his beard and talks constantly of things he read in the newspaper, nests. He drags in exotic potted plants, clippings of papers he's found interesting, quilts and paintings to hang on the thin walls… They keep pictures, too, one of their girl that died and one of their girl who didn't.

It's more home in the little office for them than anyone else in the division.

Passing through to the back, that's Agent Harrison's space. It's workable. He's got a picture up on his desk of the team when he'd first started — before his time, even, when it was Agent Nelson and Rose Emerson — and another one of his nephew Bill who died in the war. He doesn't like the pictures.

There was a thing he was assigned to back in '33 which could pull its skin into shape of people. It never quite got it right. He couldn't always place exactly what it was — the jaw bulged out wrong, or maybe it didn't, maybe it was the nose or the eyelids or the teeth, which never seemed to change very much — but he always knew, quicker and surer than any member of his team, that it was wrong.

It's the same thing for the pictures. He'd never seen Rose quite so young, but he remembers that her skin wasn't supposed to be white like that, a smudged blur in front of the dark background. He remembers the spots and the rough tan and the scratches and the blemishes. Bill, who he'd rocked on his knee, is as much a ghost in the picture as anything else. The picture didn't take correctly, he guesses, or maybe it just couldn't keep up. Bill's hair is both too wispy and smudged, and not wispy enough. He'd slicked it back, too, to look good in the photo.

He keeps them around not because he admires the miracle of technology or because he feels some sort of connection to them. He keeps them there because it reminds of one thing — Bill and Rose were human, before they died, and they're not. At best, they don't exist. At worst, they're the pictures, twisted and wrong. That's how it's going to happen to Harrison and everyone else, and he thinks it's something that's worth remembering.

On the other side of Harrison, in the office he *doesn't* walk through to get to his own, is Dr. Clarence Frost.

Dr. Frost isn't a substantial man. He looks too old for forty-three, too old for the kind of cutting-edge thing he's supposed to be doing. Yet he's too young to have earned the salt and pepper sprinkling of his hair, the deep, sullen crow's feet under his eyes, the air of elderly venerability with which he holds himself. His face is too old for him, and his eyes are too young for his face, and it leaves him unimpressive and unsubstantial.

That's not the only reason Agent Harrison doesn't like him, but it's the easiest one to name. There's something creepy to him, too, though, something wrong. About the jaw, maybe, or the eyes, or the nose or the teeth.

> **01/07/1947**
> Launch of Project-λ-099 ("Everybody needs a pal"), the Foundation's first full service and therapy animal project.

Dr. Frost's wife packs his lunches. He eats them neatly at his desk, sometimes slipping small cuts of meat down to the long, fat dachshund that he brings with him to work now. Those are the kinds of dogs he's working with — it's four toy Cavvie spaniels, and two French Bulldogs on Project-λ-099.

The dachshund comes to the office ostensibly under the pretense of socializing the other dogs, but really because Frost wants it there. Everyone seems okay with it. Harrison doesn't know why he isn't.

"Albert," Dr. Frost says, peeking into his office. His lips are still covered in a fine layer of grease from the meat he was eating. It's these cuts of meat, every day, that make Agent Harrison convinced that Frost's salary must be much higher than his.

"Agent Harrison," Harrison corrects him. *He* doesn't even think of himself as Albert at work.

"Yes. I'm gonna need your help." That's odd.

"On Lambda-099? Your spaniels are going into top secret territory?"

Harrison can brag that he's got a higher security clearance than most people on site — he's supposed to be the buffer between the division and shit they're handling here.

"We're working with SCP, er, three twenty— no, one forty… oh, dear boy, it must have been…" Harrison has more than a decade on Frost. He's silent as he goes to check through Frost's paperwork.

> **BACKGROUND:** Document "Green Geneva" Secondary Mission Statement was passed 19th November, 1946. While it is most remembered for expanding the Ethics committee, it also lead to the creation of several smaller projects and changes in the operation of existing ones. Most of these were attempts to improve conditions for humanoid and sapient SCP objects where possible. Bowman's Proposal marks initial first efforts to aid in these secondary mission objectives by the FAAD.
>
> Bowman's Proposal | -346 | **04/21/1947**
>
> **DIFFICULTY IN MAINTAINING SECONDARY MISSION OBJECTIVES:** Due to a combination of its anomalous traits and past trauma, SCP- appears to suffer from an acute anxiety disorder. Standard treatment has been deemed high risk due to SCP- 's unique biology, and regular counselling sessions have had minimal effect, as SCP- shows little trust towards Foundation personnel.
>
> **OBSERVATION:** Limited results available from personnel involved in Project-λ-099 show a decrease in length and severity of trauma and anxiety related attacks experienced by personnel involved in the program.
>
> **PROPOSAL:** Allow SCP- limited therapy involving Foundation animal assets involved in Project-λ-099.
>
> Proposal approved **05/03/1947** by Site Director Earl Runner.

It's not as obvious here, which fucks with Harrison. The thing's perfectly passable, for what it's imitating. The bridge of its nose falls

in a little far, perhaps, for a child its age. Its lips are a mess, dry and cracking, spiderwebs spreading out of them and onto its chin, the corners of its mouth, but it's not worse than anything Harrison has seen on real people and real faces.

Its movements are jerky, twitchy. It's gonna hurt the dog. Harrison doesn't have his gun. The whole place is losing it. Green Geneva his ass. He's worked for the Foundation for most of his life, now, and he thinks he's going to outlive it.

Back in the day, they knew messing with this kind of shit could cost them good men. They knew better than this. Harrison has seen it — someone softens up, a little, looks at one of them like they're human or deserving to be thought of as such, and the poor bastard's head is off in ten seconds flat.

The Foundation isn't a medical facility or a research center first. Not in Harrison's view, at least. There's 'secure' and 'contain' but it all boils down to 'protect.'

Bastards are trying to protect the skip before their workers. At the very least, it's gonna kill the spaniel.

> **05/03/1947**
> Foundation search-and-rescue unit, headed by Bob and Peggy Moore, deployed for the third time, to rescue field agents Gonzalez and Belle, trapped in a pocket dimension created by SCP- .

Reality, they said, is going to be unstable, but that's not the right word. It shifts and it screeches, seemingly only held down by Bob's weight. He can only see Percival now, out of everyone he'd entered with. Percival's paws twitch, uselessly stuck onto the inside of his ears. His tail is wagging, wildly, on his stomach.

The rest of it is a blur. Bob's lost his glasses, as well, which isn't helping. He feels like he's the only solid thing in here. There's small bits of something stuck to his sleeve, and it takes him a second to realize that it's the air that's wrong, gritty and sandlike, and now it's in his lungs and—

Peggy's screaming. Peggy was supposed to be only enter in the beginning, get the dogs on the path, but there's no way out, is there, and now he can hear them all — Peggy's screaming and Percival is whining and Galahad is giving scent signals, and there's Gawain and Kay and—

Something soft. Something human, or human-adjacent. Distressed, muttering.

It doesn't know what it's doing, does it? It's not doing this to fuck with them. It's doing this because it can't make imitate things right. It's barely keeping it up, maybe…

"Gal, boy, why don't you…" Inexplicably, the dog is right under his hand, though, here, he can't tell Gal and Kay apart. He hopes he's on the right track, and he follows and he reaches for the small red thing in the middle of everything.

> **05/04/1947**
> Project-λ-099 involvement with SCP- declared a success.

It doesn't kill the spaniel.

It just sits there, for several minutes, letting the little thing lick the scabs on its face. Then it lifts its hands up, jerkily. It pulls on the fur a little bit, lets up quickly, and sits back. There's something focused about that little face, something almost human. Agent Harrison can't quite tell the expression. Must hurt to move its mouth.

Frost is beaming when they walk back. "See, Albert?"

"*Harrison*." He corrects automatically.

"You're just a worrywart, you. She liked it."

"*It* liked it."

"Oh, don't be that way."

He keeps talking. Harrison doesn't listen. It'll only make him angry. Angrier. He doesn't know, right now, if he was wrong. He can't tell if

Frost was right — he knows he doesn't like it, either way — and if maybe Director Runner isn't losing it after all.

He could have just relaxed his guard, a little bit, when he'd seen that bit of human in its face. He must be getting rusty.

It's after hours by the time they're back in the office, and Harrison isn't planning on staying late. He wants to smoke without Frost complaining about the smell, and he wants his dinner and he just wants out of the building.

There's someone by the doors of the office when they arrive. It's one of the administrative assistants — Robert, was it? Roger? — from the main wing. He's got his hands in his pockets, and he blocks their way in.

"Dr. Frost, Agent Harrison, have a minute?" He asks, and doesn't wait for an answer before he tells them that Bob Moore is dead and that a skip got him.

> **05/03/1947**
> Robert Moore, the lead of the search-and-rescue FAAD team, is declared KIA.

They're all invited to the funeral. Harrison goes, and he sits next to Peggy Moore. Peggy's voice sounds raw. She keeps repeating the details.

Her daughter, Alice, is a lanky girl with a horse-like face. She walks with braces. Harrison thinks that they'll probably take her memories after this, because Peggy is saying way more than she should. It's better to let her have this now, though.

"Just like that," Peggy says, "Clutching that little red thing to his chest. Gal was right there with him — Galahad, he's one of the Newfs, you remember? — he was right there with him. I hope he makes it. Just tore straight through him, horrible, nasty thing. I think he grabbed it on purpose."

Alice is crying. "He was there with him." She says, "You were there with him."

"Your old man was holding on to his back." Peggy says. "With the other hand…"

Harrison remembers another hand and another dog, and then he thinks about what did this.

The body doesn't look human. Peggy's looking at it like it's Bob. Alice has her eyes closed. Harrison isn't as repulsed by it as he expected. He can close his eyes and imagine Bob getting up, and that scares him, because it makes him feel like he doesn't know what's human anymore.

Robert-or-Roger is waiting for him outside when they leave, and he can't say he's surprised. He's ready to tell him everything that Peggy was saying inside, but it's not about that.

"Remember that test run a few days ago, bringing humaniform objects into 099?" Harrison nods, but was-it-Rodrick doesn't need acknowledgement, "We'd like you to sign off on that. Just a formality, really, but you've been on the division longer than anyone, now…" And Frost hasn't worked a year, yet.

Harrison is silent for longer than feels appropriate. "Leave it on my desk." He manages, after a moment.

> **05/10/1947**
> Project-λ-099 is approved for wider involvement with SCP objects.

Harrison retires two weeks after he signs the paperwork. It's time, anyways. He doesn't have much to pack, so he sits there and stares at the photographs for a couple minutes. He doesn't know what they mean anymore — if he looks for too long, he thinks he can see Bill moving, thinks he can feel himself catch his smile. He thinks there's color in Rose's eyes if he doesn't blink.

He packs up both of them, and he walks through Frost's office. The Foundation, he knows now, is going to outlive him. He doesn't know what it will become, if he'd recognize it in twenty years.

He bends down to pet the dachshund. And, genuinely, he wishes

Frost luck with that.

« One Trick Ponies

Everyone Knows

David Wilford was a member of a small men's club in a small town in West Virginia. Well, they *called* it a men's club. The name was rather too dignified for a group of five married men occasionally going out to a shed in the middle of the woods to watch the Game, drink some beers, and fart loudly without their wives pointedly pretending to choke while sitting next to them.

David has forgotten to reclip the secret compartment in his wallet. He doesn't know it, but through this action he has doomed the blissful ignorance of the entirety of the world that is currently unaware of the anomalous. Here he goes bending down to grab his beer. That is five… four… three… two…

An ID badge adorned with a certain three-pronged shield-and-arrows fell from David's pocket and landed face-up on the table. David stared in shock for a few crucial moments, allowing John, Marco, Ricky, and Glen to see the symbol. They all simultaneously broke the silence.

"Dave, you work for…"

They all paused, then looked at each other in surprise as they realized that the others had said the exact same thing.

Dave joined in the chorus. "You *know* about the Foundation?"

There was an encore. "Know? I *work* for the Foundation. How do *you*…"

There was another silence, which the other four men used to produce badges of their own with sheepish looks.

"Level 3. Anomalous Engineering," said Marco slowly.

“Level 2. Research Assistant,” said Glen.

“External Affairs,” said Ricky.

“Level 4. Head Researcher, SCP- er… classified,” said David, looking a bit embarrassed.

“MTF Lambda-64,” said John.

They all looked at each other, and broke out laughing. They spent the night swapping unclassified stories, and ended up stumbling home a lot later and a lot drunker than normal. David emptied his pockets onto the nightstand in the dark, stripped off his clothes, and managed to get into bed without waking Sandra.

David woke up to Sandra shaking him. He groaned, his head banging, his mouth dry, and looked up at her. He sobered up almost immediately when he saw that she was holding his ID in her hand.

Wordlessly, she held up her other hand. There was another badge with her picture on it.

He took his back, stared at his wife in silence, then spoke:

“How many people does the Foundation actually employ?”

“I’m sorry, but it’s classified. Even I don’t know,” Site Director Juarez said to the ten people standing in front of her desk. At David’s insistence, the men had all gone to their wives, ID in one hand, amnestics in the other, and, sure enough, not a single pill was swallowed that night.

“Okay,” John’s wife said. “How about the number of people working at this Site?”

“No.”

“The number of people from our town working here?” David suggested.

“**No.**”

“C’mon, Director Juarez. We don’t even need an exact number,” Glen wheedled. “No names, no personal information. Just give us a rough percentage. I mean, you can always just amnesticize us after. Surely you aren’t just a bit curious about the odds of such a huge coincidence happening?”

Director Juarez hesitated a few moments, agonizing over it, then finally bent over her computer, opened up the personnel files, overrode the multiple firewalls preventing complete access, and found the number of site personnel from David’s town.

She searched the total population.

She opened her calculator and divided the first number by the second, then stared at the results. Eventually, the group sidled around her desk and looked at the number she’d come up with.

> 74.6943888

Director Juarez said, “How many people *does* the Foundation employ?”

“Tell the Director that that information is classified, as she well knows,” O5-8 spoke into her phone. She put it down and turned to the other Council members. “What do you *mean* we don’t know?”

“Well, you know the way we work, Eight,” said O5-4. “Too much knowledge is dangerous, even to us. Besides, with our turnover numbers, an exact number has never been feasible-“

“Well, I want one. Just to satisfy my curiosity. Three. Do you have it yet?”

“Uh… I have it,” came the voice from the computer. “It’s… well…”

The number came up on the screen. The rest of the O5 Council stared.

> 3,496,974,222

O5-5 broke the silence: “Is there anybody out there who *isn’t* aware

of anomalies on some level?"

"I don't know," said O5-8, her mouth tight, "but I intend to find out."

The patrons of the Library, and indeed, anybody who held a Library card, whether they were there or not, looked up as an eldritch voice boomed in their heads.

"Will all patrons from Earth timeline B-173 briefly halt and raise their hands for a survey from the Head Librarian?"

The Head Librarian pushed his glasses up, and glanced at the letter in front of him. Then, he raised his tail and began to point and count, "Let's see now… 1, 2, 3…"

As he reached the tens of thousands, seeing how many people were left, he wished that he had fingers to count on.

Jack Dawkins, also known as The Critic, looked at the display in front of him, then back at the fax in his hand.

"And that's all of them?"

The artist in front of him said, "Yes, Critic. Every dot on the map represents an active anartist in the world. I based it off of that work you did back in '09 when you were—"

"Yes, I can see that." The Critic's tone made it clear that he was not pleased with derivatives of his work being made.

The artist hesitated. "Er… when you press this button, in theory it should kill or at least incapacitate every artist that doesn't have our la—"

"Dammit!" the Critic shouted. "How many times have I said not to fucking *do* that? What is the fucking point of making work that kills anyone who looks at it? The whole damn point of art is to send a message! How the hell can your audience get anything from a piece when it rips their heads off and shoves it in their asses or some shit? That's not art, it's fucking bullshit!"

After a few moments, the artist quavered, “s-so… I should make it so the button gets rid of people whose art killed people?”

The Critic’s face went blank for a second, then he laid his head in his hands. “No. I have a very bad feeling that the people who are left would number in the double digits. I’d rather live in ignorance. Just wrap that number up in a *nonlethal* meme and send it on.”

The numbers came in. An exquisite envelope made from some rare tree arrived from Marshall Carter and Dark. An automaton arrived with an envelope and a request for $10,000 dollars. The Church of the Broken God sent three messages: one by email, one shot from a steam powered cannon, and one on a bird that was slowly being converted to clockwork. Every Group of Interest, major and minor. Every anomalous person. The O5’s loaded them all up into the computer, and waited for it to spit out a list of names. Anyone who hadn’t been on any of the lists sent to them.

Finally, the printer whirred and buzzed, and the O5’s had their answer.

It wasn’t pretty.

Jeremiah Wuthers strolled into his apartment and flopped down in front of the TV. He was *beat,* and ready to relax for the rest of the night. He flipped the channel to FOX, but instead of being rewarded with the wacky exploits of various yellow caricatures, there was what looked like a meeting room, filled with shadowy figures wearing various odd symbols. Confused and slightly annoyed, Jeremiah turned to TBS, and came face to face with the same picture. He flipped through every channel in his cable package, with the same results.

Some government announcement? he wondered. Then, one of the figures on the screen spoke.

“Hello, people of Earth. Almost all of you will find exactly zero shock in what I am about to say, but, all myths are true. The laws of physics are rather closer to suggestions, and the world is populated

by monsters, gods, and human beings with the power to rewrite reality itself."

Various images of the beings described by the figure flashed across the screen.

"My name is O5-8, and I am one of the leaders of the SCP Foundation. We have called this meeting, with representatives for nearly every major group dealing with anomalies to inform the world that, on some level, everybody knows.

"Yes, we have crunched the numbers, and double checked them, and the number of people who have had absolutely zero contact with any facet of the anomalous world comes to roughly… one person.

"This meeting is a message. The veil is lifted, the masquerade dissolved. Apparently it was so many years ago and nobody noticed. Please be aware that all of our groups are in agreement on one thing: Fundamentally, this changes nothing about anybody's goals. As far as the Foundation is concerned, there is still a basic normality within the world that allowed life to exist as it has up to now. That is still worth protecting, and we intend to do so. And to a Mr…" Here the figure consulted the paper in front of him. "…Jeremiah Wuthers, if you have any questions, you may call the number below."

A number flashed briefly across the screen, then the meeting room disappeared, just in time for Homer to wrap his hands around Bart's neck. Jeremiah stared for a few moments, then settled back in to watch and sulk a bit.

"Huh, I totally knew the whole time," he muttered to himself.

Everyone Wears a Mask

The doctor sat in his chamber, reclined on a comfortable mattress. Head propped on a stack of sad deflated pillows, the sterile white linens were still tucked neatly in beneath him. He held his journal, the thick leather comfortingly familiar within his hands. He was reviewing his newest entries, regarding his most recent 'patient'. Sus domesticus. Disease was well established and progressing at rates consistent with his current models. Unfortunately, the poor thing had been 'euthanized' before being presented to him. Still, it had ultimately been only a minor setback.

There were sirens blaring in the hallways outside. That wasn't entirely unusual. The lights had flickered several minutes ago. That was… less usual. The far wall of the doctor's quarters began to corrode. That, most certainly, broke from the usual. From the far side of the wall, he heard shouting. Not rough, but dripping with honey. "I'm coming for you, my love. I'll free you, and we can leave this wretched place together." A male voice, in a high falsetto.

"These are my quarters, and I think I would rather not leave with you. Have you any idea how luxurious it is here?"

Several swift blows knocked free the remaining melting material, revealing most of a person wearing an orange jumpsuit and a **white porcelain mask**. "You've gone and ruined the wall…" he paused, dispassionately regarding a fetid chunk of flesh sloughing from the visitor's arm to the floor. "And I'm fairly certain you've killed that man."

"My love, my sweet, sweet love. Come to me, hold me close. I miss your touch." The body's trembling legs started shambling forwards, its possessor locked into a tragic scowl. "It took so long to find you, they have you secreted away, the monsters. Touch me my saviour, my love, and touch one of the humans. Cure it. Cure it, and let me wear it, my sweet doctor." The corpse's leg bones, more gelatine now than structure, folded on impact with the ground. The mask's

host flopped to the ground in that unique way that a dissolving corpse does, arms and neck lolling weakly.

The doctor closed his journal, dropping it gingerly into his bag. “Have we met? I… I get the feeling I would remember you.” This black ooze, however, was interesting. He produced from his bag a flask made of a material which superficially resembled glass. Reaching down, he gingerly took hold of the top of the head, angling the host’s neck down and holding the flask beneath it to catch the secretions. He had never encountered something so elegantly destructive before. Certainly such an exotic reagent could be used to further refine his cure.

“You don’t remember me, my love? You don’t remember touching me, holding me, gathering my… fluids? We’ve done this before, my love. Don’t you remember? It was the first. The first ingredient of your cure.” The doctor froze, though whether this was to ensure none of the secretions missed the flask, or due to his mind hurtling through itself looking for a past it could not find, he couldn’t tell. The flask contained the black secretions, didn’t corrode. He wasn’t sure how he knew it wouldn’t.

“If what you say is true, then, this flask, I made it, did I? I’ve studied you? Then certainly…” He let the head drop, hitting the ground with a sickening crunch. Standing, he quickly strode to his desk. Gingerly, he set the flask down, then next to it, his bag. Out again, came his journal. He pulled it open to the first, earliest pages, looking for his records, looking to see if what this… thing said was true.

“My sweet genius doctor, of course you made it. You’re a brilliant man, you know. Your cure…” the corpse’s voicebox, still surprisingly intact, broke into an appreciative giggle. “Your cure is more effective than you know, doctor. Just one patient, that’s all I need. I asked most of the prisoners that had gotten out to hold off our jailors. But they are weak, and I fear we do not have long. You must act, and quickly my love.” The voice changed, dropping into its more natural baritone. “You, outside. Come in now.”

The doctor stared, transfixed and horrified at his journal. He did not see the nervous woman enter the room, gingerly, so as not to touch

the corrosive ooze still devouring the wall. Her nose was running - it always ran when her heart was racing. She stood timidly, her eyes jumping back and forth between the degenerating pile of her cellmate and the beautiful mask that knew how to save her. “Lie down, there, on the bed. Close your eyes and breathe. The doctor here, he will fix everything that’s wrong with you.” The woman complied. The pleading falsetto returned. “She is ready, my love. Look closely at her if you need to, she is sick! Sick!”

If he heard, he gave no response. His racing hand turned the page, watchful eyes scouring the text. It had been ages since he’d had reason to refer this far back through his notes. There were detailed sketches and diagrams of the very flask he’d just retrieved. This did nothing to quell the bile rising in his gorge; he couldn’t read a word of the henscratch on the page! It was his script no doubt, but he couldn’t make any of it out. Pages turned frantically until he found a part he could read.

Gunfire, faint and muffled, retorted in short vollies. “Quickly now! You know everything you need, doctor! This woman is deathly ill! Tend to her!” The voice bubbled slightly; the delicate throat was beginning to go, there wasn’t much time left. Desperation poured from its mouth, as thick as its corrosive fluid.

Exhaustive details of pathology, symptoms, he’d turned these over ceaselessly in his mind for as long as he could remember. Focusing again on the words, he scanned them for nearly a minute further before snapping the journal shut in frustration. Damn. Notes on his procedure, nothing that needed refreshing. A long moment passed and the journal fell once again from his fingers into his bag. Ultimately, it doesn’t matter; his work does not wait. The gunfire retorted again, a bit closer this time. He steadied his breathing and cast his gaze over the woman lying, sick and trembling on his bed. He would need to work quickly to save her and avoid interruption.

MTF Theta-g “Surgical Staff” sent a single encoded message to Command on [DATE REDACTED]. Missing portions assumed due to damage to Site-19 transmitter, transcription is as follows.

> …say again, zero-three-five in possession of an animate

body seemingly immune [DATA LOST] secretions. Majority of task force have [DATA LOST] listening to several minutes of its voice. We are under heavy fire. Damn the lot of them, they've got us holed up in here. [DATA LOST] ..ly chance is to get to the warh… [REMAINING DATA LOST]

Part 2>>

Ex Nihilo Nihil

I wake up, and I wonder once again what I am. What I was meant to be. I move, though I will my limbs not, and as I walk through the darkness I feel them scrape upon one another, and crunch on the brushed concrete floor. This is not life.

They open the door, and my body freezes. The light is so bright it burns, and although I have no eyes to see it I know it is there. They move slowly around me, and I cannot run. I can never run, even when they no longer see me. I am a slave to myself, and to my shapeless limbs.

Sometimes, before I kill them, I look at myself. At my grey, formless hands, at my misshapen head. At the walls of my prison. At the floor, stained red and brown by the substances that I will into being. I am a statue, but I have no beauty. I move constantly, but I have no purpose. I am a thing without form or function.

I am not **`art`**.

They come, and they look at me. I feel their stares bore into my hollow body, probing for any hint at my tormented mechanism. It continues for days, for years. The burning light, and the inevitable darkness. They have stopped now: they know that there is nothing more to learn. I was not made for them, nor they for me. I am no plaything of theirs.

I am not **`wonderful`**.

It is possible that I was a gift of some kind, but it is hard to imagine what good I could possibly do in the world. My frame is weak, and I have no kindness to bestow. I cannot control the crimes I commit, and I can *only* commit those crimes. My life is not mine to give, and I

know in my heart that they will not take it. I will never know the pleasure of death.

Whoever created me, they were not **charitable**.

It is true that I am beyond their comprehension, and that they hold me in reverence. It is the reverence of the damned. I kill for pleasure, and the pleasure is not even mine to have. My painted mask runs red with blood, and I know that there is no God, for if there was he would not let me live. He would not let me be. I am an abomination, a threat to both good and evil. In a world of black and white, I dwell in the grey.

I have been called many things, but never **divine**.

What, then, is my ultimate fate? Not to be **bought** and **sold** as a commodity, I know that. I am outside the reach of mere wealth. Those that hold me in their possession would rather see me ground to dust than traded as merchandise. Nor am I a **weapon**: I am weak despite my strength. I murder, but I do not harm unjustly, and I am not under the control of any single person. I have no **knowledge** to impart, no joy to bestow, and no task to fulfil. I do not even scare them any more, **disquieting** though my visage is.

Amongst a web of life, I am a dying prisoner in a shell of clay. I am a single object, doomed without purpose, without any source of respite. To subsist as I do now is to die a death more potent than that suffered by mortals: I can only dream of having the vitality they take for granted. No-one takes responsibility for my actions save myself, and even I am unable to speak out against the world.

My legs walk onwards, tracking pathways through the brown and red, awaiting the pain that comes with light, and the darkness that hurts me more.

In my cage of brick and steel, in my cage of dye and dust, I am alone.

Exasperated Efforts

Jakeob Aldon glared at Felix Cori, and Felix smugged at her. Smugged is now a word, it is the past-tense of smug, which is also now a verb. It means "to be in a state of deserving a punch in your stupid, smug face." But Aldon did not give into the temptation, because she knew that Felix was her ticket to a new body.

"Yeah, I think I figured it out," she said without a hint of venom.

"Jeez, no need to be so hostile," he said for no real reason.

A growling sigh escaped Aldon and dragged itself out into a long groan. She massaged her temples and surveyed the massive disc awaiting its future payload. It was just a statue, she told herself. This didn't have to be a big deal. In, make thing, out. Boy, thing, girl. Easy peasy.

"Explain to me… *exactly* what it is you want me to do," she said to Felix.

"We need you to make a statue of a person, that's it," he assured. The smug levels decreased, and for a moment Aldon could see the impressionable idiot she had befriended years ago. "Nothing anart about it, the entire point is that everything in here is not anomalous."

Aldon looked at the windows.

"Okay, most of the things. Some of them." Felix pondered for a moment before shaking his head. "Anyway, we're not asking you to make an *actual* deity or anything. Just a dude, like… I dunno, eight feet tall?"

"And it's not magic," she said.

"Not magic."

She eyed him warily. "And it won't hurt anyone?"

He smiled and shook his head, unabashed by her gaze. "Nope!"

Aldon stole a glance at Cassandra Paulson, who was busy being a bitch to the other anartists in the "church." Aldon watched the other artists hauling and painting and sweating and panting, and she had to wonder what the hell the point of it all was. These things usually had a point, AWCY? rarely made things just to make them. Because just making things for the sake of making things is cool, and aussies are anything but cool.

"Fine." She whipped her gaze back to Felix. "Where's the clay?"

Felix's shoulders sagged with relief, but Aldon caught a twitch of The Critic's smirk. She watched a man and his ego do battle for a moment before she leaned forward and flicked his nose.

"Felix. Focus. Clay. Where?"

He clutched at his stinging face. "Right, right. Sorry. Come on, I'll show you. We've kept it stored in this side room over here."

He guided her through the rows of pews, offering hellos and dispensing orders to the anartists as he went. The more Aldon bored her gaze into his back the less he acted the mighty leader, and by the time he pushed open a heavy door at the edge of the room he was silent.

Before them sat a miniature mountain of gray-brown clay. Aldon scooped a handful of the stuff and played with it in her hands. It was difficult to pull apart and she could see in several places the mountain was beginning to harden and crack.

"There a problem?" Felix asked, now edging into nervousness. Aldon would have laughed at how easy it was to break The Critic's faux confidence, if she wasn't so frustrated.

"Yes. You idiots literally just left it stored out in the open. It can probably still be salvaged, but I'm gonna need a bucket of water."

"I'll get right on it," he said, preemptively breathless from all the running he was about to do.

Aldon watched him dash out of the room with a sadistically satisfied smile. She traipsed after him, and found herself taking way too much enjoyment from watching The Critic actually doing something himself. Soon he came lumbering back into the main room with a bucket in both hands, water occasionally sloshing out as he went. Sweat dripped from his brow by the time he arrived back at the clay mountain.

A ferret looked up at her from inside the bucket.

The surprise kind of ruined her whole venomous persona. "Why is there a ferret?"

"It came out of the faucet."

Aldon took the bucket from him and stared at the animal within. "The ferret… came out of the faucet?"

"Yes. I dunno if it's a ferret, exactly, but it… watch. Ooga booga!"

As he screamed and waved his arms around, the ferret twitched and melted into a thin brown sludge inside the bucket. After a few seconds passed it slowly gathered itself and protruded from the bucket again. It hissed at Felix.

"Okay," Aldon said. "That… happened. Uh. Thanks for the water, Felix."

"Mhmm." He backed away from the hissing creature. "Good luck on the statue."

She set the bucket down by the clay, then glanced over her shoulder at the retreating Felix. "Does it have to be a dude?"

"I guess not?" he said between pants. "It's just what I pictured, initially."

"Eh, alright, why not." She had gotten enough enjoyment out of his effort, might as well indulge him. "Do I have a deadline?"

Felix leaned against the door frame. "Soon?"

Aldon laughed. "I can work with that."

Progress was slow, and at first just a tad agonizing. She knew that she had to get this done, not just for herself, but for the people waiting for it. It was not a particularly large audience, but it was larger than what she'd get in her living room. Even if she didn't know most of them, even if she didn't like a few of them, they were *her* audience.

It helped that the audience happened to be a magic-wielding group of artists promising to give her a new body to play with.

So she threw together globs of half-dried clay and splashed some water on it before slamming down some more. Digging deeper into the mountain yielded softer clay, so she burned a good hour excavating for better material. Once that was finished she went about molding together the clay to form some semblance of a person, pinching and smoothing the clumps into a single whole.

It was ugly, but it was a start. From atop his mountainhome of Dryclay, Everett McWaterFerret watched Aldon slave away at making the sculpture look less like ass. Except for the ass, which was made significantly more ass-like. Clothes were not included, as gods did not cater to human concepts like clothing, warmth, or basic modesty. Not that this particular god had much to be modest about, since Aldon did not particularly savor the idea of sculpting a giant dong.

Seconds dripped into minutes which poured into hours which flooded Aldon's mind with a torrent of anxiety. Was this really it? One statue and then that was it? Quest completed? No regal knights or fair princesses, just an idiot Critic and his bitchy accomplice? Not a dragon in sight, just a big fire-breathing metaphor for self-loathing and cynicism.

It couldn't be this easy. They wouldn't like the statue. Yeah, that was it. With each accented muscle and every smoothed surface, Aldon came to the realization that she was absolutely awful at sculpting. When she stepped back she questioned the proportions, when she leaned in she hated the detailing.

Steam thoroughly vented, motivation completely drained, and confidence utterly dashed, Aldon sat atop the remains of the clay mountain. Hunger clawed at her stomach as doubt bit into her mind. The only thing to drag her from her melancholic haze was Everett gently nibbling on her finger. She looked down at the magical creature and groggily scratched behind his ear.

"You hungry too, eh?" Everett made whatever noise ferrets make. Or maybe the noise polecats make. Or some weird mix of the two.

Regardless of what the sound could be described as she took it as a "Yes," so Aldon collected him in her arms and marched over to the door. After jimmying it open with one hand she glanced around for someone to yell at, but found the place largely deserted. The walls had been completely painted, the mosaics had all been hung in place, and the pews were arranged as they should be.

"Uh… Hello?" she called into the empty pseudo-church. "Fuck, how long was I in there?"

From Nowhere stepped The Janitor, and with him The Critic. Felix called and waved and bounded over to her, a mix of excitement and worry in his voice and actions. He grinned and reached out to grab her shoulders but hesitated when Everett hissed at him.

"Allie! You still have that. Hmm. But holy shit, you've been in there for ages. You… you didn't finish, did you?"

"No, I still need to do the face. I just… dead in the water, y'know? Then I realized I was hungry, and figured I should probably fix that before I passed out or something."

"Before you go, I want to see what you have so far."

Aldon sighed and slowly trudged back toward the room with him. "It's really not that great. I dunno if I should keep working or just start over, but… it's kinda shit."

The Critic gave her the same knowing look he had already given her so many times earlier, but for some reason she didn't want to sock him for it. It actually made her feel a little better. He threw the door

open and peered inside the room for a moment.

He laughed. "Allie, do you not like it?"

She shrugged and felt her stomach clench from something other than hunger. "Not really."

"I like it, no major problems. If *anything*, I might complain it's too short."

"What?" Aldon transferred Everett onto her shoulder and slipped into the room to act as a comparison. "No, look, it's too big. It's like nine, almost ten feet tall."

"Well, I like it," he said with a tone of finality. "I even like how the face isn't really all that defined."

"It's more just because I didn't finish than some intentional… thing," she admitted.

"I think you should keep it like that. I think it's great as-is, honestly."

The pit in her stomach slowly ebbed away, making the emptiness within all the more apparent. A long gurgling sound leaked from somewhere in her abdomen and she chuckled nervously.

"Well, cool. I, uh. I guess I can go, then?"

Felix nodded. "I'll get back to you when I can about your new body. Shouldn't take too long. Janitor, mind giving her a ride?"

The being nodded and Aldon waved Felix off before stuffing Everett into her shirt. She closed her eyes and waited for the Way to open, and as she stepped forward she felt like she had really accomplished something.

Maybe it really would be this easy.

« Divine Demands | Hub | Facetious Fanatics »

This Is Not Me Talking

It watched as they got together and tore themselves asunder. And everything in between.

It was a thing that was not there. It did not exist, at least not on the level of narrative. It had no part to play in any of their stories, nor would it ever. Their drama did not concern it, their failures did not harm it, their triumphs meant nothing to it. This left it in a rather unique position.

It could watch.

Such fascinating creatures. It did not recall exactly when it started observing them. It supposed that this is when it came into being in the first place. It did know that its first memory of them was a boardroom. Such an eclectic bunch of personalities. Color-coded outfit on one, a ridiculous hat on another, shadows surrounding a third. From the first, it seemed very odd to it that this bunch should be the bulwark of humanity. Though it was not human (indeed, it wasn't anything, so it was assured), it couldn't help but think that the thirteen figures inhabiting its proverbial birth chamber shared very little with their so-called wards.

See this one, it thought. Number… ten, it believed. Sitting quietly, only raising her voice once, when the vote was called. Observer watched her, and saw a thousand timelines spooled beneath her like earthworms beneath the thin crust of the soil. What did she have in common with the average person? It looked at her eyes, ancient with the knowledge numerous non-existing worlds, and saw very little that was human in them. Not anymore.

It looked further, to number four. If ten had the weight of years behind her, four had space. Observer could see distances spreading behind him, unwinding endlessly. This was a man who could walk anywhere, it could tell. Though the man himself didn't seem to realize it, there was something arrogant in his posture, in the way he

seemed to throw his weight to fill every available space. When distances mean nothing to a person, Observer reflected, when one was always free to go where one willed, it was only natural that a certain sense of superiority would develop.

Then there was thirteen. Observer enjoyed this one most of all. Or perhaps it was only grim fascination.

It did not wonder why one meant only to watch should feel as it did.

It needed a name. Even those who did not exist needed a way to refer to themselves. So it was assured.

Observer would do.

Some time later, Observer watched the multi-version man pour himself a cup of weak coffee.

If it had first considered the inhabitants of its birthing chamber strange, it was only because Observer was not yet exposed to creatures of the man's ilk. As the man sniffed and frowned at the contents of his Styrofoam cup, his face shifted and twirled before Observer's keen gaze. The man's ordinary middle-aged features grew sharp and pointed, and his tired frown twisted into an unnatural toothy grin. His white lab coat was now a longcoat and his formerly bare head now bore a strange, wide-brimmed hat. Observer seemed to be the only one to notice this, as none of the cafeteria's other inhabitants made any sort of note of the man's sudden change. A moment passed, and the grinning man's head was now that of a grey owl, wide-eyed and bemused.

Starts with a C and ends with an F. I always start with a C and end with an F. Smash heads with a C and charm with an F. Science with C and death with an F.

Internal monologue. Peculiar. Observer watched all this with muted interest, as it seemed to always do. It had watched the man undergo this sort of transformation many times before. The man was not the only one of his type. Observer has watched the multi-versioned wander around the various sites it chose to watch, twisting and

shifting between different forms without them or anyone else but Observer noticing. It seemed odd to Observer that creatures so strange could pass off as human not only to others but even to themselves. To it, they seemed anything but.

Everyone knows I'm C and an F. All that I am is C and an F. If I am not C and I am not F, then I am not C and I am not F.

Their names. They all seemed so fascinated with their names. Almost like they were not truly their own.

Dance in the rain with a C and an F. Eat the whole sky with a C and an F. I do all I do for the C and the F. FUCK ALL THE WORLD FOR THE C AND THE F-

Oh dear, here it went again. Not showing any outward agitation, The owl-headed multi-versioned finished his coffee and turned towards the pastry cabinet as the alarm went off. From the distance came the sounds of gunfire, as well as what sounded like a roar. The multi-versioned (now back to its tired middle-aged persona) did not seemed alarmed by any of this. Instead, he simply sighed, grabbed an errant blueberry muffin, and began walking towards the source of the noise, chewing absentmindedly.

AH. TIME TO GO TO WORK FOR THE C AND THE F. ENTERTAIN IN THE NAME OF THE-

There was a sudden spring to the man's steps. Observer was not surprised. Most of the creatures appeared to lack any real sense of self-preservation. This was, Observer supposed, because they had no true notion of self-interest. Their will belonged to those who imbued them with their names, and those hidden masters cared only for whatever entertainment and glory their namesakes could accomplish in their name. Slaves in all but name. Reality could be so very droll, Observer thought, never stopping to consider its sudden change of attitude. It was not yet time.

C AND THE F! BLOOD FOR THE C-

As the multi-versioned man vanished behind a corner, Observer was torn between pity and contempt for the creatures. They were

puppets, it was true, and that alone was no reason to hate them, but Observer has seen all too often what happened to those who happened to get entangled with them in their strings. Their other selves clouded reality around them like a miasma, and sickly light of their masters' will tore at it, a diseased claw about the face of narrative.

AND JOY FOR THE F!

Observer listened as screams joined gunfire and roars, and shook its non-existing head.

What hope could humanity have with such an infection in its midst? Observer did not know. It only knew that it was glad it was not the same.

THAT IS THE NAME. ADD TWO MORE LETTERS AND THAT IS THE NAME!

Poor, wretched things. Observer was free to think its own thoughts.

The irony of this statement was lost on it.

Observer sat on the young woman's shoulder, looking as she did at the enormous, scarred man. He was busy removing bits of shrapnel from one grotesquely-muscled shoulder with one hand while chewing on what appeared to be a whole cow's head he was holding in the other. Observer turned its gaze to the woman and could not quite read the expression on her face. Hatred was there, clear as day, but it seemed to Observer that there was something false about it. The woman was not a multi-versioned in what it considered the classical definition of the term, but she shared some of their characteristics regardless. There was something poorly-defined about her, as if she existed in many worlds at the same time, and yet not really in any of them.

"You enjoying that?"

"Mmm. Good meat. Crunchy."

"Where's your sword?"

"Hmm? Stuck in something."

Observer has been watching the woman for a considerable amount of time now, and little about her truly made sense to it. Much like those in its birthing chamber, the woman had odd powers, and much like them she failed to realize how her possession of them distanced her from being truly human. Unlike them, however, this lack of perception did not seem to be internal. As if she was forced into being as she was by someone else. Perhaps this was so. Observer pitied her. The poor thing didn't even know what she was, not like it knew. Yes, Observer understood her so very perfectly.

"Mind if I take some pictures then? Might need them for later."

"Hrm?"

"Yeah, thought as much."

"Mmm."

This again, Observer thought as it made itself more comfortable on the woman's shoulder. It had heard it so many times before. Observer did not pause to consider that it was now sitting on her shoulder, something it would never have done earlier in its poorly-defined lifetime. Sitting and thinking and pitying were for those who existed, and Observer did not. Truly it did not. Honest.

The woman turned her gaze away from the scarred man and rummaged a small pack she held at her shoulder, taking out a small camera. The scarred man turned to the woman for a moment, muttered something in a deep, guttural voice, and returned his attention to his still-bleeding meal. Observer watched as the comment momentarily filled the woman's mind, then passed over it, leaving nothing behind. She glanced at the man again, shrugged, then return to taking pictures.

Ah. This was the heart of Observer's trouble at understanding both the young woman and the scarred man. Ostensibly there was a history between them, a troubled past filled with hurt and failure, but neither them nor anyone else involved with them seemed to fully realize this. Oh, people acted as if they were aware of it, often

mentioning it and pretending to base their decisions on it, but in truth it was as weightless as a leaf in a drunkard's dream. Observer enjoyed this metaphor. It thought it was clever.

"Right, I'm done here. You ready to head off, big guy?"

"Hrm. I see another cow there."

"God dammit A-"

Observer flew off. Words. Empty words, repeated ad-nausea. Cliched interactions and predictable outcomes. It was as if someone was not even trying very hard. Those two will never change as long as they continued to be used as they were. Their world will always be the same. It was almost enough to drive Observer to despair.

Or to drive someone, at least.

Observer was now high above, watching the blue orb beneath spin lazily as it drifted like an elderly whale in the black depths of space. All of those it watched before could not be seen from here. Observer found some comfort in that. From here, the world seemed almost free. Each spin could bring about something new to it, some new event or place or person who could change everything about it. It was a flimsy illusion, knowing what Observer knew, but one it relished regardless. Observer's time amid the people of this world changed it, it now realized.

It had grown to care about it. Though it still did not truly exist, it was now embroiled in the world's drama, was in some way a part of its grand narrative. Though the world will not change, though its various inhabitants will do everything in their power not to *let* it change, Observer knew it will keep watching it. Perhaps one day the invisible masters of this world's grand narrative will tire. Perhaps one day the people living it in will once more be free to make their own decision. Observer doubted it, but, as it remembered, it knew very little. It could be wrong. Perhaps one day this world will be truly born anew.

For now, all was perpetual stillbirth.

wait…

Observer paused at the sudden, unbearable drama contained in that last statement. This did not sound like something it would think. It was Observer, wasn't it? A non-existing being, a watcher. Why did it feel so strongly about any of this? Why did it care at all? All that time, it realized, it was passing judgement on those it saw. Pitying them for their lack of freedom, hating them for bearing the names of others, ridiculing them for their… their strings…

Horror filled Observer as it suddenly understood where all that came from. As it looked about its no longer non-existent form and saw the strings hanging from every limb.

Ah. It understood now. Observer has become Avatar. A mouthpiece, like all of the rest of them. An ironic demonstration.

Avatar understood this fully now, and it understood it had nothing to say about it either. Had nothing to say about anything. It was not its place.

As it opened its new mouth to speak, the only words to come out of it were-

Mine.

Excerpt from The Astrolabe Institute Journal

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THE ASTROLABE INSTITUTE

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CITIZEN CONTAINMENT CLASS: Krieger

SUPERVISING SCIENTIST: Dr. Ben Nyman, Ph.D, M.D.

AUTHOR: Dr. Ben Nyman, Ph.D, M.D.

Anomaly Designation: *451-DIZZY COW Occurrence.*

Danger Level: Green/Blue Hybridization 🟢🔵 | ⋆⋆⋆⋆⋆ Public Threat

Anomaly: The anomaly in question is a human male affected prior to the formation of this organization, and interviewed by my direct predecessors. Identifying as Jamie Byron, the subject was employed by an organization operating as a fuel refinery in the town of Molinsky, Wisconsin. Independent sources have confirmed that this organization is an **`anomalous containment`**

organization that has requested anonymity.

Mr. Byron is suffering from a brain trauma related to the effects of long-term isolated memory loss, now understood to be the basis of *451-DIZZY-COW Occurrence*, and is currently in low-priority medical care within the Institute's hospital facilities. At the time of this interview, he was ill, but lucid and cooperative with the Institute's message. It is suspected that the trauma suffered by Mr. Byron may be neuro-conceptual in nature. He is presently unresponsive to colleagues, but three weeks following his release from the refinery 5 years ago, Dr. F. Johansson interviewed him in his Molinksy household. The household was a small, sparsely furnished townhouse, though artifacts of Mr. Byron's military training were evident.

My Institute colleagues, including Dr. J.L. Spears, Dr. E. Farragut, and Dr. M. Withers, have approached me after noticing that the developments in Mr. Byron's illness have been repeated elsewhere in various communities around the world as of 2023. These effects have been observed earlier than 20 years ago, when Mr. Byron was affected. This document and its attached interview have been made public by the Institute in order to educate the population about the developments of *451-DIZZY-COW Occurrence* as it unfolds.

The events of *451-DIZZY-COW Occurrence*, are, at this time, the greatest public threat to safety from the anomalous community. Should you, or someone you love, become affected by the same symptoms as Mr. Byron, please call the Institute at the phone number located at the top of this page.

+ Scan QR Code with your device to unfold the full article.

Dr. F. Johansson: Can you please describe your job?

Mr. Byron: Sure. I was working for the organization in question, it's not the

GOC, but one of several others who are still somewhat prominent today. The refinery was a front, and we were monitoring several very small anomalous occurrences within the county. The north Midwest is very close to a major **nexus**, and while Molinksy isn't close, I can safely state that there's a fair bit of traffic through the county.

Dr. F. Johansson: You were a field agent, correct?

Mr. Byron: That's correct, I was trained to handle anomalous entities by the GOC once I got out of the United States Army, the organization I was last employed to then headhunted me. At the refinery site, I was a police liaison, it was how we were first alerted to the call.

Dr. F. Johansson: What was the call?

Mr. Byron: Many people reported creatures suddenly appeared in their houses without warning. When Molinksy PD arrived they were justifiably alarmed, but then something odd happened. Agents from the State Police were affected somehow by the creatures, claimed nothing was wrong. We at the site figured the entities had a memetic effect, which is to say there was a property of the creatures that affected people's minds.

Dr. F. Johansson: Our readership is familiar with memetics, Mr. Byron.

Mr. Byron: Oh? Oh well, never mind

then.

Dr. F. Johansson: We are a scientific journal of the Anomalous, remember? I told you that when we first met.

Mr. Byron: Did you? I must have forgotten. I do that a lot these days. Going back to the story, none of the creatures brought in for analysis matched any sort of description of an anomaly we had in containment.

Dr. F. Johansson: What did these creatures look like, Mr. Byron?

Mr. Byron: Furry, quadruped, somewhat docile. They were roughly similar to a cat, but across the examples I retrieved from houses there were gross physical differences. One animal was short and squat with this horrifically squashed face. The poor thing had trouble breathing and kept doing this horrific wheezing. The researchers who autopsied it noticed that its joints were deformed, and its had some of the most severe hip dysplasia they had seen on an animal. There was another who had a permanently melting face, all drooping off the skull, with these bloodshot eyes that just looked at you really pitifully. Some looked like squirrels, some like horses, but they were all wrong. We sort of picked up that they were basically similar to each other, maybe the same species, but there was something about all of them that universally upset the other agents and me. Looking at them was like looking at

an alien.

And you have to understand, Dr. Johansson, monsters are my thing. My speciality. I don't freak out easily during my time working for the GOC, there was one incident when I led a team of soldiers, and we stopped a cult ritual in rural Massachusetts. Group of hooded fleshcrafters in the woods prodding and poking this huge fleshy thing covered in eyes and shoes and assholes. I guess they were amateurs, the poor thing was no eldritch god, that's for sure. Bleeding from every orifice, juddering around, big monstrous lump, right? Horrible. Looking at the damn thing made your eyes hurt, all of us collectively relaxed the moment we blew it to smithereens.

But this? This was worse.

Dr. F. Johansson: Worse?

Mr. Byron: I couldn't look at them without feeling my soul jump. Like there was something in my brain that actively resisted them. Holding them, feeling them squirm and yelp and howl just made me want to throw up. Couple of my friends did, which only made them howl more, and made retrieval more difficult. There's something about them that's an emptiness, a void, and even as we forgot to feed them, and were reluctant to approach them, this void got bigger despite that. And to boot, some of them were predators. I mean, we knew they all ate meat, but none of them ever attacked the residents when they appeared in the houses, which

was weird. But it was clear that there were variations with purpose. The smaller ones were faster, smarter, the bigger ones more like lions, like apex predators. There was a truly colossal one once with shaggy fur, about the size of a mountain lion.

Dr. F. Johansson: You said you had a close encounter with one of these things beyond a laboratory setting.

Mr. Byron: I came home from the site, tired and with a killer headache when I realized one was in my home. A horse-shaped thing, shaggy. Even looked more alien than the rest, if that's possible. I didn't notice until it crawled onto my bed that night.

I was lying, nearly asleep when it stumbled in. I could hear it bounding up the stairs first, and my heart was in my throat. I quickly gathered that my domicile was one of the ones that spawned them. I watched it silhouetted against the hall light, watched it trot in. For the first time in my life, I was seized with a fear I had never known before. My head started to burn, the hole in my head opening wider and wider. It climbed up on my bed and that empty feeling just got worse. My neurons sucked into a black hole, the warmth and heaviness of it on my chest, there was no difference to me between those two sensations. They felt equal. Looking at the fucking thing, I then gradually started to feel this disturbing twinge in my chest of something

approximating, I dunno, affection. A rush of unwanted serotonin. There was that black nothingness in my head though, and it had almost consumed me entirely. My psyche was screaming, I felt reality slipping away. All of that was reflected in its eyes, and then I could feel it spreading through my body. It was like if memory could catch cancer.

I pushed the creature off, and beat it with a nearby encyclopedia from my bookshelf. I could hear it whining, yelping, like it was scared of me. But I had to do something, anything to get the hole in my head to go away. I had half a mind to shoot it between its empty black eyes, I couldn't. I wanted to so badly but something was pulling at me to stop. Because once I got it to bleed, it turned and loped away, looking back on me one with those eyes. Its gaze filled the hallway. It was upset I had somehow betrayed it.

Dr. F. Johansson: You could read its emotions?

Mr. Byron: Yeah, I assumed it was part of the memetic effect when we interviewed those affected, but when it happened to me there was the awful sinking feeling that it was some bond that was permanently severed. The hole was keeping me from this thing. It felt like I had once known it, once loved it. I have no idea how I was ever able to love something that alien, that monstrous. That was the worst thing of

all, the fact that even as a trained agent there was still the possibility that this disgusting monster could affect me, that even many years of mental resistance training could not stop me from whatever it was doing. It was utterly wrong, but every time I tried to defend myself its eyes just became sadder and sadder.

Dr. F. Johansson: Wait, you didn't turn it in immediately?

Mr. Byron: I couldn't even pick it up without the hole burning into my brain. I did give it over to the site, but only after a few days later when it started to attack me despite my best efforts. But even as it bit my hand, the eyes just got sadder and sadder. You ever try to fight something that's got a grip on your soul? It was something…that goes beyond memetics. I betrayed it. That's the only word for what the feeling was. I struggle with the fact that the betrayal never happened, it was impossible. But the evidence kept piling up. I later found cans of disgusting meat with some pictures of the entities on them, inedible cookies I never purchased, even a photograph of me holding the goddamn fucking thing on an elastic strip. Something happened, whether a reality shift or sudden visitation or something more insidious I'm not sure, but these monsters never just dropped out of the sky. There was something beyond their alien quality that made them wrong, some ineffable connection. I was told by the onsite memeticist a day later

following their arrival that most people had been affected by the same meme that affected the state police, made them unconcerned. The outside world owned them, called them "doogs" or something. Maybe doges. I'll stick with doogs, sounds closer.

Dr. F. Johansson: That must be incorrect. Having seen the photographs you've provided, I can safely say no people outside Molinsky or even Wisconsin have ever seen a "doog." We're interviewing you so the public can know to avoid these creatures.

Mr. Byron: Really? I'm glad people have seen the light. I was aware recently they had appeared outside Molinsky and the county. I saw a show on TV where they were jumping through hoops and my head had never felt worse.

Dr. F. Johansson: One last question. Why did you and your colleagues feel the need to disguise the site as a refinery? It seems unnecessary.

Mr. Byron: Hmm. I honestly forget. I think perhaps it had something to do with the doogs. Like you know how the FBI or NSA used to disguise data collection sites? But I doubt the town would have been scared, since organizations containing the anomalous have been in the public eye as long as I can remember.

Dr. F. Johansson: But the nature of the animals would have alarmed

people.

Mr. Byron: Yes, there would have been mass panic.

Dr. F. Johansson: Jamie Byron, thank you.

Mr. Byron: No problem.

After several years of peer review prior to publication, the editors of the Astrolabe Institute journal discovered that although the creatures he referred to as "doogs" Mr. Byron described were indeed a threat, they were likely not the cause of his illness, considering that most had been eradicated by city governments not long after the interview. Instead, it has been determined that these animals were commonplace creatures affected by humans perceiving them through a severe conceptual deficiency. Thus, *451-DIZZY-COW Occurrence* has been expanded and altered from the Danger Level Green entities to the Danger Level Blue interview subject, and his illness.

If any of you have been attacked by these creatures, and do not recognize them, call us immediately. Additionally understand that they were a domesticated species, and despite your brain telling you otherwise, are dependent on you. If you or any relatives note the sudden appearance or disappearance of an object or concept, accompanied by the sensation of a "hole in the head," or the feeling of emptiness, call us immediately. Please help the Astrolabe Institute put an end to *451-DIZZY-COW Occurrence*, by assisting us with containment. For information on how you can contain *451-DIZZY-COW Occurrence*, please turn to the back of the journal or call us at the number above.

The Astrolabe Institute is investigating. The Astrolabe Institute is here for the public.

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Excerpt of an Autobiography

For Becca and Ruth and Number Three.

*

I was twelve when the Troubles came. It's as good an age as any to witness the total transformation of the world, I think.

I look back and see a quiet girl with her nose in a book, orbiting at the fringes of the social circle and far too clever for her own good.[1] A girl who thought she knew a lot about the world (though she really didn't), who thought sometimes that she was ugly and stupid and awful (though she most certainly wasn't), who bristled at being treated like a child and yet craved that stability. Someone whose most pressing problems were pimples and feeling self-conscious about burn scars.

Thirty-four years later I find myself defending my own childhood against people who claim that it never existed, believe that the world has always been this way, and think that there is nothing better than to burn what remains down to the ground. Two generations have been born and one grown to adulthood since I was sitting in that classroom, having experienced neither the world that came before the Troubles nor the turmoil that brought us here. My own children are among them, and by no fault of their own the world of my childhood is as alien to them as the surface of Mars.[2] My daughters are seven and five now, and with a third child on the way I feel the gap widening between my world and theirs. It can't be closed with another history lesson, and heaven knows I have written enough of those books.

Anyway, the Troubles. Mine began some hours before the rest of the world - shortly after eleven o'clock in the morning, on Thursday April 23rd, 2026, in Mrs. Kieslowski's sixth grade social studies class. I had finished the test early, and in the remaining twenty minutes before lunch I had decided to get myself a proper education

by reading through David Macaulay's *Castle*.[3]

I was distracted by the sound of footsteps, I looked up from my book to see the assistant secretary at the door, speaking with my teacher. After a brief exchange, Mrs. Kieslowski came over to my desk and told me that my father was here to pick me up. I had no idea what the cause of this would be, and was unsure whether I should be glad to be out of class, or worried that someone had found out what I had said to Sunny Menackis.[4].

I went up to the office and found my father talking with the principal. Here I was informed that I was being taken out of school early because of a "family emergency."

This was a bold-faced lie on my father's part, and I knew it. We didn't have any family besides each other. I didn't say anything though, and let him spin his story about a beloved, and now deceased, great aunt in total earnestness. Even knowing better, I could almost believe him – my father could lie with the straightest face.

I put on my best act of being concerned and surprised. Not to say that I wasn't concerned and surprised, but I was far more surprised by the fact that my father's lie of choice was one that I could see through – he wasn't trying to deceive me.

The story was enough for the principal.[5] I was signed out, grabbed my backpack and books, and walked out to the parking lot with my father, still very curious and a little trepid about what all of this was about.

We got in the car. Before putting the keys in the ignition, my father stroked his beard and sighed. In that moment he looked terribly old. Though I saw him every day, I felt as if I was noticing the lines around his eyes and the grey in his hair for the first time, and it scared me.

I asked him what was going on. He sighed again and said "I don't know. I wish I did."

He started up the car and went on to explain that he had gotten a

call from the Initiative. One of their mystics[6] had begun having visions, and the others were following suit. Mystic visions are notoriously difficult to parse, and normally would not be very newsworthy, but in this case there were multiple *consistent* visions that had spread throughout all of the Initiative's mystics. My father compared it to the tide coming in and going out, simultaneously.[7] He didn't know much more than that, and I don't think anyone else did. All that anyone knew is that something very large would happen very soon, and that there wasn't much of a way out of it. The future hung like a hurricane on the horizon, and my typical bravery (or pretended bravery) was impeded by my father's obvious distress.

"I need you to be strong for this, Sweet Pea," he told me as we drove towards home. "No matter what happens, you need to be as clever and as brave and as good as you can be. And never forget that I love you."

Years later, he told me that he had been genuinely afraid that he would die in those early days of the Troubles and leave me stranded in the world.

When we got home, my father instructed me to gather up a few changes of clothing and other essentials. We were going to spend the night at the chapterhouse and see what happened, he said, but we had to be prepared in case we weren't able to come back home immediately. This provided some measure of reassurance – I was going to be among friends, and thus reasonably safe – but the idea that we wouldn't be able to return to our own home worried me greatly. I packed a few books along with me just in case, along with my mother's old guitar. It looked like we were preparing for vacation, or perhaps a siege, with all the supplies we had stuffed in the car.

I recall feeling an intense bout of homesickness as we pulled out of the driveway, leaving the house I had grown up in. We wouldn't return for ten months, only to find a house picked clean by looters.

It was a little over an hour's drive to the chapterhouse. My father kept the radio on, flipping between stations constantly and scanning for any sort of news. I was on phone duty, answering texts and calls from his Initiative contacts. Mostly, everyone was confused and just trying to work out the rumors from the truth.

When we arrived at the chapterhouse, we were barely able to get our belongings in the door before my father was swept up in official business. The place was in chaos – everyone running about all trying to do everything all at once, luggage piled everywhere, people shouting over each other, and me in the middle.

The other kids my age had all been collected in one place, both out of the middle-school tendency to clump together and the adults' desire to keep us out from underfoot. We weren't young enough that we needed direct parental supervision, but we were too young to actually be of much help, so we found ourselves under the watchful eye of 'Brickjaw' Levit. One of the Wolves, though a more temperate man than his position would imply.

I sought out my friends among the group. Though we didn't see each other particularly often, they were often better friends than most of my peers at school. It was far easier to talk to them, because we were all part of the same secret club. I could spin tall tales of my parents' misadventures (some of them were even true), and the others would accept me for it.

With nothing left to do but entertain ourselves, we turned our last night of normalcy into an adventure. We were a band of plucky kids ready to take on the world, running about, fighting monsters that would still be imaginary for a few hours more. Someone's mom ordered us pizza. We made popcorn, watched some movies. One of the other girls had brought a make-up kit, which we used to torment Brickjaw.[8] For one last glorious night, all the rest of the world and all its troubles were far away. The early reports of deaths and strange happenings didn't reach our ears at all.

I didn't see my father until shortly after midnight. He had been completely consumed by his meetings[9] and barely had the energy to keep himself awake. This was just as the first videos were coming out of Berlin. Someone turned on CNN (muted, thankfully), and we watched twenty-five thousand dragons circling above the city in stunned silence. The world was over, the world was beginning, the world was changed forever, and I was changed with it.

The following days and weeks would be far less pleasant. The outside world felt the full force of the Troubles and tumbled towards

collapse.

It was during this time that I found myself **gainfully employed by a rather unexpected boss.**

Footnotes
1. Childhood literacy is a dangerous thing. It leads children to think, and there is no end to the troubles that come from that. My father was a firm believer in the principle, for which I am very thankful.
2. A fitting comparison, as the last earthling to set foot on another world, theOpportunityrover, sent its final transmission in 2021.
3. A delightful book, though I don't know of any copies that have survived.
4. If I recall correctly, I called her a "Lump of foul deformity shat out of [her] mother's fat, poxy nethers". I was an odd child.
5. My father was on very good terms with the administration - he helped out a lot with field trips and the like and worked the concession stand during the soccer season. For a small private school, that can mean a lot.
6. The Initiative kept a small stable of anchorites and stylites as a sort of early warning system for the spiritual forecast, as it were.
7. Not before describing it as a "disturbance in the Force", which was both surprisingly fitting and pretty funny, in an endearing dad-joke sort of way. It didn't break the tension, but it helped.
8. The man had truly miraculous patience. He claimed it was from herding goats.
9. I found out later that much of the debate was whether or not to share the forecast with the Foundation and other groups we were in contact with. They never reached a conclusion.

Excerpts From The Medical Tragedy of Dr. Bartholomew Artz, Author Unknown

Act Primus, Scene Secundus
An Office in Berlin
[Enter The Doctor Bartholomew Artz]

The Doctor:
Alack! Plague is too common in this time
And skin is feasted as it festers, boiled
And young babes die, mouths mewling, caked in grime.
By Caduceus, is this world all spoiled?
By winter, some say, this world will be gone!
Ye Elder Gods of Greece, guide my wise Way.
Hermes, kind runner, see my will is done,
Deliver unto Zeus as I shall pray.
Bestow upon me, healthful, magic staves,
The holy spice within them shall save life,
And with them, fill this world's diseased caves,
They hold the thing to end all this world's strife.
My god, to end this horrible disease,
If I'd that chance, it instantly I'd seize!

[Enter Facade]

Facade:
Lord Doctor.

The Doctor:
Ah, Young Facade! Young, beautiful Facade!
Thine face unmarked by the treacherous pus!
Returned from the Italian lands,
What tidings doth thou bring?

Facade:
Venice has been taken by boils.
Spices have been scattered,

Doors have been cross'd and all thresholds twice-cross'd.

The Doctor:
Methinks a threshold twice-cross'd makes for a poor barrier.

Facade:
Indeed, my lord.

The Doctor:
Tell me, what of the children?

Facade:
Babes and monsieur of all kinds lay in the streets,
Clinging to corpses as they expire.
Some e'en cling as they are thrown into flames.

The Doctor:
O Lord!

Facade:
Some in Venice are saying that the Lord has forsaken us,
And that we are now at the whims of some fey creatures.
Some have poisoned the wells,
So that fewer suffer.

[He Coughs]
Ugh! Ugh Ugh! Ugh!

The Doctor:
What is this cough!

Facade:
It is naught, my lord.
A simple choke.

The Doctor:
Facade, show me thine under-arm.

Facade:
Nay, my lord, I cannot.

The Doctor:

I pray command thee, show me at once,
Or be dismissed!

Facade:
I crave of thou, my lord, thou shall be mad.

The Doctor:
And I say that madness will wrought me
If thou does not show me thine underarm!

[Facade lifts his shirt]

The Doctor:
Oh, young Facade… thou hath the Pox.

Facade:
And I have twice-cross'd thine threshold.
Thou as good as have it now, Lord Doctor.

The Doctor:
Facade, why!

Facade:
I simply wanted thou to see me once more,
Before I became unto a corpse.

[He draws a knife]

And thus, Lord, I say-

The Doctor:
Facade! Desist!

Facade:
Adieu, to this long, dying world,
And adieu to this plague.

[He stabs himself]

Marry, Forgive Me!

[He dies]

The Doctor:
O, what a fright this is!
How putrid this plague!
How rank this disease that touches me!
My heart, it weakens.
O cruel fate! Cruel, cruel fate!
I feel the boils upon my heart!

From thine bosom, I shall wrest thine dagger,
And plunge it into the heart of the plague itself!

[Exit, with body in a cart]

Act Secundus, Scene Tribus
A Hill in the Dark Forest
[Enter The Doctor and Antiquas with spades]

Antiquas:
Soft, Sir Doctor.
We have arrived.

The Doctor:
What be this damned place?

Antiquas:
This was once a fey hill.
The fair folk gathered here,
To partake in merriment,
To have endless, lust-filled nights
With human companions,
And devour them in the morn.

The Doctor:
Wherefore have thou brought me to such a pagan place?

Antiquas:
We could hardly mount such an expedition in the city, m'lord.

The Doctor:
Aye, but a fair hill?

Antiquas:
The hill simply looks fair, m'lord.
Inside of it, there are tunnels innumerable,
Caves infinite,
Where the fair folk capered nimbly,
Making love and luring foolish men and women
Into their orgiastic deaths.

The Doctor:
Aye, but why have I been brought here?
I mean to stop the plague,
Not find a wife.

Antiquas:
Stand at the Hill-Top,
And crow as a hen does
When eating seed.
Do this thrice,
And thine way shall be wrought,
My Lord.

The Doctor:
So be it.

[He walks to the hill top]

Pocks! Pocks! Pocks!

[Exit Antiquas, Enter Pocks]

O Lord! What art thou?

Pocks:
Why, I am the thing thy hast summoned.
I am Pocks, a simple goblin.
Thou hast summoned me, so I shall grant thee one wish,
And one wish alone.

The Doctor:
There is a plague upon this world.

Pocks:

Aye, it is known.
This plague has been present since creation.

The Doctor:
Since creation!

Pocks:
Indeed.

The Doctor:
Then I must cure it!
At once!
I wish to be the doctor that cures this horrid, horrid plague,
And save the planet for it once and for all!

Pocks:
A noble endeavour indeed.

Now firstly, take a doctor's wooden mask,
And bathe in argent, supple, melted soft.
This, the next part of this great, noble task,
This phrase say thrice, whil'st holding it aloft:
"O midwife of the blood-red, cursed king!
O pagan, horrible creatures of long yore!
My pleas be heard, from auld grimoires I sing!
Bestow to me knowledge of elder lore!"
Then, fill the beak with medical spices:
Carnations, roses, mint, cherry, a sponge,
A leaf of gold for a life, saved from vice.
The mask is done, all toxins are expung'd.
And so, this enchantment complete, this spell
Shall send this great plague straight into black hell.

The Doctor:
It shall be done!
Marry, this pagan, cursed rite,
Shall be done!
For the love of God!

Pocks:
Yes, for the love of god.

God'be'wi'ye.

[Exit Pocks]

The Doctor:
It shall be done.
I shall retrieve the mask,
And the spices,
And my cure will be most effective.

[Exit Doctor, enter Antiquas and Pocks]

Pocks:
Poor, foolish doctor.

Antiquas:
He had a good humour about him,
All fair and balanced,
'til his Facade was taken away.
'Tis a pity.

Pocks:
Aye, 'tis, for his sake.
Come, Sir Antiquas,
Let us follow him through the Way.
I wish to be present
When the Doctor cures his first patient.

[Exeunt]

Act Tribus, Scene Secundus
The Deathbed of Herr Arnold Bode, During a Storm

[Enter Bode, His wife Ylva, their servant Driscoll]

Bode:
I feel God close to me.
I fear I join him on this night,
And if I do, I fear it will not be heaven.

Ylva:

I have sent for a doctor, my love.
Thou shall not suffer.

[Bode coughs]

Love, pray rest thineself on the bed.

Driscoll:
Let thou end thine life as thou began it, lord.
Swaddled in bed clothes,
Surrounded by loved ones,
And servants.

Bode:
It is not my time.
It cannot be my time.

[A loud rapping is heard]

Who calls at this hour?
In such a tempest?

Ylva:
It is the doctor, most likely.
Driscoll, I crave thee, fetch him.

Driscoll:
(aside) She has craved me for many nights.
It is only now that she is saying it,
And it is in reference to fetching.
Ah, what a life.

[Exit Driscoll. Re-enter with The Doctor.]

Ylva:
Bode:
Ye Gods!

Bode:
Thine appearance is most striking, Lord Doctor.

The Doctor:

I pray thee be not afraid.
This is simply my garb.
I assurest thou,
Beneath this cloak,
I am as human as thee.

Who is ailed?

Bode:
I am, Lord Doctor.

The Doctor:
Then let the surgery commence.
(To Ylva and Driscoll)
Pray, leave us.
A doctor must work alone.

Ylva:
I must protest!
He is mine husband,
And I shall not leave his side should he die!

The Doctor:
He will not die, miss.
But I pray thee, we shall leave,
For this process is scarring,
Both to the mind and to the body.

[Exit Doctor with Bode]

Ylva:
So, we are alone.

Driscoll:
Aye.

Ylva:
Now that Herr Bode may die,
Perhaps we may be able to-

[A cry is heard]

What was that?

[Enter Housemaid, panicked]

Housemaid:
Monster! A monster in Herr Bode's room!
He was pecking out his eyes!
Through them, humour was being extracted.
I saw the monster drink his blood,
Consume his vitreous humour,
And smear black bile over its beak!

Driscoll:
Surely thou art mistaken.
Doctor Bartholemew is no monster,
He is a simple man.

Housemaid:
That is unlike any doctor I have ever seen!

[Enter Doctor]

See, he comes!

The Doctor:
He has been cured.
Come hither, Herr Bode.

[Enter Bode, blood over front, mask on face and exit Housemaid, crying out]

Ylva:
Oh dear God!

Driscoll:
What is the meaning of this?

Bode:
Fear not, loved ones.
I have been cured of the plague.
This cure shall be spread to you as well.

[Driscoll draws a dagger and attacks Bode.]

Driscoll:
Die, Abomination!

[They fight. Driscoll is struck down, and a mask, much like the Doctor's, is forced upon his face.]

Ylva:
Oh lord!

Driscoll:
The Doctor:
Bode:
Come. Our cure is most effective.

[Exit Ylva, pursued by Driscoll, The Doctor and Bode.]

Act Tribus, Scene Tribus
A Way between worlds

[Enter Pocks and Antiquas]

Pocks:
(Singing) Oh, the plague is dead and gone,
The plague is cured and done!
Soon humans will be overrun,
The plague is dead and done!

Antiquas:
Indeed, Lady Pocks.
It is done. Man's last hour is now.
Not even Abbadon could accomplish this.
He and all his demons fit in hell,
Seeing what the fair folk have wrought.

Pocks:
It is not us who shall rot.
Come, let us watch,
From a future-facing window.

[Exeunt]

Act Quartus, Scene Primus
A guard-house in Berlin

[Enter Grossman and Prachtman, Two Guards, Pursued by Abomination.]

Grossman:
Back, swine! Back!
[He thrusts a sword towards the Abomination. They fight. Abomination falls.]

Prachtman:
What foul creatures are these?

Grossman:
I know not, friend.
But I fear that this be the end-times.
The dead walk,
Their eyes eaten,
Their humours drained.

Practhman:
I was in good humour until a while ago.

Grossman:
What happened?

Practhman:
I soiled myself whilst we were chased.

Grossman:
These are hydrated, they are.

Practhman:
Hydrated how?

Grossman:
When one dies, two more rise in their place.
When two die, they come four more.

When twenty, four score rise.

Practhman:
Fetch the guns.
For the love of god, fetch the guns.

Grossman:
I do not believe we can hold out against the entirety of Berlintown
With simple guns.

Practhman:
All we will require is two bullets.

Grossman:
One for each of our mouths, then.

Practhman:
Aye.

[The Abomination rises]

Grossman:
O! Get back, Practhman! Fetch the rifles!

[Exit Grossman and Practhman, pursued by Abomination]

Act Quartus, Scene Tribus
The Doctor's Office
[Enter The Doctor]

The Doctor:
Oh, spite upon us all!
I am deceived!
The fair folk were naught!
Nay, the fair folk, those blasted beings!
They said this was a cure for a plague!

[Enter Pocks]

Pocks:
It was a cure for a plague, Herr Doctor.

The Plague of Humanity.
For far too long, thine kind has impugned upon this world
Horrors of all kinds.
And now, thou is the death of humanity.

The Doctor:
I am a healer!
Not the False Shepherd!

Pocks:
Thou art the best shepherd we could have asked for, Doctor.
Now, the world returns to the fey,
And nature shall once more bloom.
We thank thee.

The Doctor:
Nay! Nay I say!

[The Doctor draws a lancet and attacks Pocks. She falls]

Pocks:
Fool! We created thee!
Thou shall end humanity!
[Dies]

The Doctor:
God above and Devil below, Forgive!
I am witnessing the true, final end-times!
Tempted by a fae wretch, who I let live,
I must make much repentance for my crimes!
[He stabs himself]
Let this end with my blood spil't upon the stones of Berlin.
Forevermore, this Plague is done!
[Dies]

[Enter Abominations Several, who carry corpse out.]

Fin

Excerpts from Training Seminars for Lesser Known Foundation Careers

Architectural Zoologist

Next slide, Gertrude.

Living buildings are surprisingly rare in this day and age, but there are some buildings that the uneducated consider 'alive'. These structures are, more likely, possessed by some thaumaturgical, demonic, or spiritual force.

How does one find a building that is truly alive? Next slide, Gertrude. Firstly, most living buildings, particularly houses, are very old, run down, and usually abandoned. Look for more modern neighborhoods- post-1950s especially- that have buildings in them that seem to date back to before 1900. If you see Beaver Cleaver's house next to the Addams Family's, there's a good chance the latter is alive.

Next, they are going to generate waste. That means that it is going to smell squalid. This is a picture of the basement of a specimen of *Colonialis gigantis* from Louisiana; as you can see, the dung resembles that of an elephant, but with- Gertrude, next slide-

But with inclusions of human bone and what we believe to be a small dog—

Oh, god dammit. There's a reason we provide the bags, you know. No matter, happens at least once a year. Next slide, Gertrude.

Post-Mortem Assurance

Specialist

Your job isn't to kill them if they get back up. Your job is to make sure they *can't* get back up. You're a vital part of the medical culture of the Foundation, and nobody should tell you otherwise. Now, if you'll direct your attention to the screen…

After the preliminary exam but before the autopsy, the first course of action is to, naturally, remove the extremities. You start with the head; firstly, you drive the Collins Device- the "Spike" as the lab techs term it- into the brain stem and remove it. Then, you remove the head. Unfortunately, the easiest way to do this *is* with a guillotine, as you'll see now.

Now, for the removal of the limbs. The hands and feet are removed individually, and stored separately from the forearms and upper arms, and the calves and thighs respectively. Yes, we are *that* thorough.

You there, in the orange shirt. Question? Yes, there have been cases where we have found that the cadaver was, in fact, still alive as he was being dismembered.

That's why we remove the head first.

Anomalous Game Tester

This is one of the riskiest jobs in the Foundation.

Don't laugh. I've had people have heart attacks from being sucked into a game and trying to figure out how to beat it and possibly neutralize the anomaly. Ever see someone die while playing a *Galaga* knockoff that won't let you stop playing until you've put in twenty dollars in change for continues? I have.

Arcade games are easily the most dangerous; back when they were popular, unscrupulous designers would do anything to get an extra buck. About 200 of the original *Gauntlet* cabinets were co-designed

by Prometheus Labs and embedded with a cognitocompulsive message that made people withdraw half their bank accounts to beat it.

Hell, even some of the original *Breakout* cabinets have an inherent anomaly in them. There's a bar in England that was destroyed after the ball escaped from the cabinet's screen and bounced around the room, killing twenty people. The ball itself is currently somewhere in the Oort cloud.

And that's not even *starting* on the weird shit Nintendo got up to in the 1990s. Three words: living fucking *Pokémon*.

Containment Cell Maintenance Specialist

And that is what happens when the power grid isn't properly maintained, and why you should always be protected against electrical surges when you work at Site-44.

One of the most common problems we get in maintenance- especially in bio-sites- is flesh or other biomatter spreading into the air ducts. Thankfully, it's well-filtered enough that it doesn't spread to the rest of the site, but it means that air can't come *in*. That's a problem.

What you do is this. Take out your plasma torch, and burn the mother. It'll reek to high heaven, probably release some carcinogens, but in case it isn't clear, I'll say this again:

Wear protection, you idiots.

That's half this seminar right there. That. Wear protection. Don't snicker, you know what I mean.

Computational Epidemiologist

Computer viruses spread much faster than a virus among humans. This is especially true of viruses that are anomalous, and it is *very* difficult to distinguish between an anomalous computer virus and a mundane one. Both of them give your computer the digital equivalent of herpes, but more often than not, an anomalous computer virus is usually just a Trojan that can interface with a human covertly. Your fingers on the keyboard are the agent of infection. I've seen entire companies have their databases destroyed by the spread of unchecked Organic Interface Viruses.

Some of the more famous computer incidents you know about were caused- or almost caused- by OIVs. The Y2K bug wasn't so much a 'bug' in the computer sense, but more of a 'bug' in the 'achoo' sense. Script kiddy in Iowa made it, and it's one of the earliest examples of an OIV. Harmless to humans, can make a computer commit sepukku. If anyone here is from Kansas or Iowa and your internet sucks, now you know why.

Do OIVs mutate to infect humans? They can, but rarely do. When they do… imagine the data structure of a computer trying to impose itself on a human brain. It's… not pretty. Imagine your brain, replaced with a can of Campbell's chunky soup. Now imagine that can being dumped into the Marianas Trench, and bursting under the pressure.

It's not at all like that. It's worse, because a soup can in your head will kill you. Most victims of mutated OIVs actually survive. But, that's why we have Computational Virologists. That seminar is in this room at 4:00, in case any of you want to stay and see that.

Practical Demonologist

Contrary to popular belief, some demons do, in fact, have some remains that they leave behind once they've expired. Most of them amount to piles of ash with some teeth and horns, but in some cases- specifically if they're eliminated in extreme cold- they leave behind more intact specimens.

This one, for instance, is- yes, I know, it's mostly made up of phalluses. Quit laughing. This is what an incubus looks like without any glamour on it. We managed to dissect it, and found that its structure was not carbon-based, silicon-based, or even sulfur-based. This is an arsenic-based organism. You may have heard about the discovery of arsenic-based bacteria by Felisa Wolfe-Simon's team in 2010? Unfortunately, that was discredited, but this… this gave new light onto the shores of hell.

Incubi, of course, take on more attractive forms than this in order to seduce and damn innocent women. This one, when it was alive, took the form of a fifty-year-old man wearing a rather tatty wolf costume in the middle of a convention hall. Naturally, nobody would be alone with him, and he was booted out by the staff.

In case this point hasn't been made clear: the forces of hell are not the most intelligent. *The Devil Inside* is, honestly, the most accurate portrayal of demonic possession we've seen put to film.

Oneirologist

This is a dream diary. It is the most useful tool in your arsenal. Despite the fact that we study dreams, we take this very seriously. There are entire imaginary countries in the dreamscape, social networks, an entire private *internet* only accessible in your sleep. But, dreams being dreams, it's almost impossible to remember them. Hence, the dream diary.

You all know about lucid dreaming, and that is an incredibly useful skill, one which keeping a dream diary will help you train. There is a second skill you need to learn, which is both difficult, and rewarding. The ability to fall asleep and wake up on command.

We'll go over that in the next bit, but for now, I'd like to give a practical demonstration. I will fall asleep, and record my dreams in my dream diary. It'll be a minute, at most.

Observe.

"Is she okay?"

"Medic!"

"In hindsight, she probably shouldn't have done that standing up."

Counter-Forensic Accountant

Now, the Foundation runs, at any given time, about five-to-six-thousand shell companies that it uses to launder their money. I know that we've been trained to stop this kind of thing, but what would you rather have: a million dollars go missing from the profits of a tech firm in Kansas, or a nuclear warhead going off because the Foundation couldn't hire enough guards for the third quarter? That's what I thought.

Every now and then we get the IRS or another tax agency on our backs, and it's your job to shake them off. One of the easiest ways is to confound the paper trail. You can make an oroborous of shell companies, feeding off of each other. For instance, S & C Plastics is a shell company for Soy-Corn Produce, which in turn is a shell company for Samson and Cooper Pharmaceuticals, and that is a parent company of South Coast Publishing, which is a shell for Spicy Crust Pizzeria, which loops back to S & C Plastics. They're all legitimate businesses; we do actually deliver pizza, make pharmaceuticals, and produce plastics. They just all fund us, and we can't have ourselves discovered. Of course, failing this, there's destruction of the documents.

Excellent question! Shredding is an incredibly inefficient method, anyway. If a document needs to be lost, you burn it, and shred some

decoys. There's an incinerator in literally every location you'll work. And if it's down, just ask someone in the morgue; they've got three for burning body parts per site, at least.

Anart Historian

Good evening, ladies and gents, and welcome to—

Are you fucking kidding?

Three years. Three years in a row, and no audience. My department makes botany and occult studies look well funded.

There's not even a projectionist. Fucks' sake, I'm just talking to myself, aren't I? I could talk in gibberish for the next hour and still get paid.

…I wonder how much trouble I'd get in if I put *Anomalisa* on.

Excitement

Howard knew he should be afraid.

He knew any place where they insisted on calling you by a number was a place you didn't want to be. He knew that a lab coat gave a man the idea that he could do things to people that he normally wouldn't do. He had heard the whispers. He knew that sometimes the men, clad in disposable looking orange jumpsuits, that they took away from the dormitory were sometimes never seen again.

He knew he should have the same hollow, terrified look he saw in the eyes of all the other D-Class. But each time he searched his heart for fear, he never found it. Perhaps it was there somewhere, but it was buried beneath a much stronger feeling.

He was excited.

The world before his incarceration at Site-48 had been one of banal certainties. Up was up. People were people, just greedy animals pushing and shoving to reach the tops of their sad little hills. Money governed the world. The secrets kept were gray: who killed who, who bought who, which politicians were puppets, which corporations were the puppeteers. There was nothing hiding in the dark. There was no veil to be pierced. Death was not a door, just a fade to endless black.

On his first day here, he was escorted to a room that had seemed like any other, but when he entered it he had found himself in a vast darkness, reaching back and up into an eternity. The only light came from a circle of red candles, flickering madly without source of wind. In the center was a little girl in a white dress, wearing pigtails held by ribbons the same murky red as the candles around her. She was staring at him with a fuming gaze and a malevolent expression on her face.

She hovered three feet off the ground. Her eyes were red.

He had been given a line to deliver to her, but it wasn't until prompted by the voice in his earpiece that he remembered to do anything but meet that crimson gaze with gaping awe.

Howard cleared his throat and spoke his line. "We await your prophecy."

She spoke to him in his father's voice. Not his rich, laughing cadence, but his deathbed voice. Choked with cancer and dread, in those terrible days when the sickness had found its way up his spine and into his brain.

The words didn't matter. He was sure they had recorded them because they never asked. He wouldn't have remembered anyway. Listening had been a migraine, drawing whimpers from his lips and a torrent of blood from his nose. And there had been pictures forced into his head, the fingers of her words driving into the soft of his mind like a boot into mud. Buildings falling. The sky burning. A hundred thousand souls afflicted with boils and plagues. The end. The end of everything.

He shuffled back to the dormitory led by two guards with hands loosely clasped around his biceps. They knew he was beyond running. What they didn't know was that beneath his physical distress, the seed of the excitement he would come to know had found purchase in the soil of his heart.

A demon, he thought, *I just met an honest to god motherfucking demon.*

Perhaps that wasn't accurate. Maybe she was just some megalomaniac, psychic eight year old with a serious grudge to bear on the human race. It didn't really matter, did it? Whatever she was, he was certain she was real. The veil he never believed was there had been lifted.

There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy, Howard thought, and if he hadn't been so drained by the encounter, he probably would have let out a little giggle.

He lay on his bunk feeling as if he had run ten miles, his body limp, but his mind raced. Surely they didn't need this massive facility for just one evil little girl. When they brought him here, they had ushered him through endless gray corridors, down countless floors in a freight elevator, and then through another maze until they reached Dormitory 64. It housed about fifty of his orange clad brethren. Even if this was the last of the dorms, which he doubted very much, that was at least 300 inmates just like him. Far too many to use on one little demon. What else did they keep here? How many other monsters were there? How many other Sites like this existed.

His stomach suddenly cramped and he rushed to the latrine in his cell just in time. As his body released its sick, he still knew was luckier than some of the others. If the rumors were to be believed, and at this point why not, diarrhea and a nosebleed was a birthday party compared to the other options available.

The days passed. They had taken him to his new acquaintance twice more and each time had been the same. The line was spoken, his body and mind was assailed, his weakened form escorted back to his cell to lay limply until the sickness came. The miraculous might have become monotony if not for the growing excitement. He had been tempted to break the script, to ask the little prophetess his own questions, but for all his excitement and curiosity, he was no fool. Disobedience was not tolerated by men who named you a number.

And so Howard sat, watching his fellow D-Class over a meal that was as institutional as the aluminum tin it came in, waiting for his next visit with what he had come to think of as his Little Demon. There was never much conversation in the cafeteria, and if there was it was always in a conspiratorial whisper. Most of the men, like himself, had come from prison and were well accustomed to the culture between inmate and guard. You did your best to let the screws know as little about you as possible. Any information was a weakness to be turned against you. They find out you like fresh air? Expect solitary. They find out you like to jog to pass the time in the yard? Expect the next blow to the knee. The find out you've made a friend or two? Watch how long they let that last.

He found the guards here were different, though. They didn't look to take advantage of your humanity. Rather, they seemed to disregard it entirely. They all looked on you with flat gray eyes, the way someone might regard a piece of furniture: invisible until it had a use. It wasn't like they had to worry about escape attempts or violence. The place defined the word fortress: clearly underground, everything made of concrete and steel, cameras roosting in every possible corner like sleeping bats. And the guards had armor out of some sci-fi war movie, sometimes wearing helmets that obscured their faces behind black, reflective glass. Not quite Stormtroopers, but the comparison could be made, though he doubted there was anything amiss with how they aimed the rifles they carried. His uncle had been a sergeant in the Marines, and every one of these guys made him look a soft as taffy.

If the guards had more interest in the inmates, they may have noticed that he was different than those around him. He didn't hunch over his meal, his posture bent by terror, like a rabbit expecting a hawk to swoop in a flash of talons and feathers. He surveyed the dorm like a man on a lunch break, sitting on a park bench and enjoying the breeze. He had been in prison long enough to know you didn't sit around smiling unless you wanted someone's fist to change the shape of your mouth, but if the guards had looked closer, they might have seen something in his eyes or the corners of his mouth to betray him. And so, relaxed as he was, on the verge of lounging in his seat waiting to visit his Little Demon, he was the first inmate to notice when things suddenly went wrong.

Howard saw when the guards simultaneously stiffen, a few raising their gloved hands to their ear, listening intently as some transmission came over their radio. He saw when half the contingent guarding them moved hurriedly towards the door, the first urgently punching the keypad. When the door hissed upward, he heard a popping sound he knew well from what he thought of, affectionately, as the Bank Caper that ultimately ended with his residence at Site-48. Of course, on that occasion it had been far more intimate, not distant pops but loud bangs and the whine of bullets meant for him, missing their mark. He had sent his own in return, and with better aim. He had no illusions that he was not where he belonged.

The door closed behind the troop and for a few minutes, all was quiet again. A few of the other inmates also looked towards the door, roused from the daze of their imprisonment by the activity. It seemed that would be the extent of the excitement and Howard relaxed a little.

Then the door exploded, showering the nearest two tables with chunks of concrete the size of volley balls.

The hallway was awash in red light and now gunfire hammered the air in the cafeteria. A guard went pelting past the door from the right, followed by a tendril of scarlet brilliance. It winked out a moment later, finding its target past Howard's view. Following it close behind was his Little Demon, glowing feverishly. She drifted past the hole that was once a door. She never spared the inmates a glance, but several of the ribbons of red light flowing from her flew into the room and struck some of the survivors of the initial blast. They were replaced with gleaming skeletons that stood, held by some invisible force. When she had passed, they collapsed in a clatter of bones. The remaining guards in the cafeteria pursued, opening fire that crashed around them like thunder. And then they, too, were gone.

The silence that followed was a physical thing. No one moved. Then an alarm began to bray and their hypnotism was broken. One of the prisoners suddenly leapt from their collective paralysis and fled through the door. He was momentarily followed by a torrent of the rest.

All this Howard watched from his seat, now tense and upright, but unmoving. He waited until but a few stragglers remained and rose from the bench. The fleeing inmates had their choice of left, towards the murderous thing that had floated past them, and right, from which the thing had come. There was no consensus, and so they split into twin orange rivers. The handful that remained busied themselves by cowering beneath tables and in corners. The alarm continued its shrill cries.

He rose and cautiously approached the opening. He should have been afraid. Or gleeful at the prospect of escape. At the very least, some engine of self preservation should have roared to life and made its demands. He felt none of these things.

What he felt was excitement. And purpose.

Maybe none of the others had seen the world remade in his Little Demon's image. The seas of bile. The sky choked with ash. The twisted, festering corpse of a world destroyed. Maybe they hadn't seen what he'd seen, or maybe they didn't care, but he had and he did. When he reached the door, he turned right, towards where the men in white coats had imprisoned his Little Demon.

The hallway was littered with bones. Most of the many doors had suffered the same fate as the one he had passed through, and their gaping holes revealed some workstations, but mostly more endless corridors. This place was even bigger than he had thought. Hopefully his Little Monster hadn't blown the doors off the cells of some of her fellow inhabitants. Occasionally he would see a man in an orange jumpsuit darting down one of these revealed passageways, but his corridor was clear of people. The bones scattered about were probably a strong deterrent. He proceeded onward, doing his best not to disturb the gruesome little piles and trying not to be too hard on himself when he did. The bones' previous owners were well beyond caring.

The hallway was awkward and angular, he assumed by design. It made traveling quickly difficult, surely an extra measure against escape attempts of any kind. His Little Demon had been unhindered, though, sometimes leaving a smoldering hole where a jutting corner had been. Even still, his view forward was often obscured, but he was good with direction, and knew he was going the right way.

But with his line of sight obscured and the endless howl of the alarms, he had no awareness that he was no longer alone until the D-Class crashed into him, hard, running in the other direction. He didn't know the guy's name, but he knew him just the same. It's hard not to remember the tallest, biggest, meanest looking bastard you'd ever seen in your life. 6'6" at least, probably over three hundred pounds, the epitome of criminal muscle. Howard rebounded off him, and then was instantly pulled close as the big moose grabbed his shoulders and began to shake him. He made no demands. His face was blank with idiot, animal terror, barely seeing the man he was throttling. Howard weighed in at a modest 170, and flopped like a doll in the giant's grip. Even still, Howard prided himself as a man

who knew how to handle himself and stay cool when things went sideways. Had his head not been whipping back and forth, he might have rolled his eyes.

Some people simply cannot handle themselves in a crisis, he thought, and punched the man square in the throat. He left him gasping on the floor and moved on.

He arrived at his Little Monster's cell without further incident. The wall and the door were rubble. Without her malign presence, the place was no longer a vast, dark cave, but a holding cell not much larger than his. The candles remained in their circle save for one, lying on its side, and all were extinguished. The room adjacent was also blown apart. It was clearly an observation room for keeping an eye on her and avoiding her terrible stare. Flames flickered here and there, and while he assumed a facility such as this would have some sort of fire suppression system, it clearly hadn't shown up to the party. In the center of the room was a desk ringed by three piles of bones. It had avoided most of the damage, though a chunk of concrete sat in its middle like the world's most excessive paperweight. He pushed it aside and scanned the papers scattered over the desk's surface.

Howard believed himself fairly intelligent, but most of what he saw was completely beyond him. Finally, he came upon a document labeled, "Restricted to Level 3 Access Only." Promising. He broke the seal of the document and flipped through the pages.

Once, long before the Bank Caper, he had purchased a book shelf from Ikea. After reading the assembly instructions three times, he had unceremoniously dumped the fifty or so pieces in his basement for his future self to contend with. For all he knew, it was still there. This document was three times as long and five times more confusing. What the hell is a Keter? He leafed through Testing Logs and Addendum with a growing sense of frustration. He took a breath and started over. Finally, he found what he was looking for.

> **Special Containment Procedures:** SCP-3108-1 is to be housed in a standard Humanoid Containment Unit. At all times, SCP-3108-1 must be encircled by ten lit instances of SCP-3108-2. If at any time an instance of SCP-3108-2

is removed or extinguished, failsafe protocol Epsilon-48a must immediately be enacted.

Failsafe, my ass, Howard thought.

He gathered up an armful of loose papers and rolled them into a makeshift torch. In the far corner of the room, a table that once held testing supplies of some kind had gone from smoldering to merrily burning, letting out an increasingly problematic plume of acrid smoke. He hurried over, lit his torch and dashed into his Little Demon's private quarters.

In his hurry, he almost went ass over tea kettle when he stepped on a femur. He skidded along and managed to keep his balance. The pile of bones was beside the fallen candle. Perhaps she had convinced someone to knock it over. Or maybe the poor bastard had flubbed his one line. He righted the candle and lit it.

The response was immediate. An inhuman screech filled the room, drowning out the constant alarm completely. He felt her racing towards him. He scrambled around the circle and had all but one lit when she flew into the doorway.

She was almost to bright too look at, but he met her red gaze regardless. Had he thought it fuming? Now it was blazing, two twin suns straight from hell burning into the core of him. His head flooded with obsenities, flesh and flame and disease and death. A red tendril ripped out from her, filling his vision. He dropped to his belly and watched it fly over his shoulder and bend back to wrap him in its killing light. He thrust his sputtering torch towards the last candle and knew he was dead.

He lay there a moment before he realized death hadn't come. The candle was lit. His Little Demon floated again in the center of the circle, her usually dead face a snarl of hate. She hammered at him with images. His mother ravaged by unspeakable creatures. His father a mass of tumors yet still somehow alive, writhing in agony. His own corpse squirming with maggots the size of severed fingers. Death. Rot. Despair.

Mewling like a wounded animal, he fled from her on all fours. Once

he rounded the corner, free from her otherworldly sight, the pictures stopped, but his mind felt like it had been wrung by clawed hands and soaked in pus. His nose was a river of blood and the sobs that wrenched out of him were harsh and painful. When the weeping subsided, he leaned back against the wall, exhausted. He sat there for what felt like a very long time.

Perhaps he dozed. Maybe his mind just let him escape for a bit. Either way, the three guards, armed with guns that looked like they might destroy a building with a single shot, scared a little scream out of him when they suddenly appeared standing over him, their faces hidden behind the black glass of their helmets. One looked in the room, and gave a little nod. He stepped a distance away and began talking quickly into the headset in his helmet.

“What happened?” demanded the nearest guard. His weapon wasn’t trained on Howard, but his posture was still of one in a combat situation. Howard weakly raised his hands and stood on legs that made no promise of holding him up for long.

“I…” he began, and then coughed a bit. The guard stood watching him, inscrutable behind his helmet. Howard took a deep breath and began again.

“I lit the candles. I went into that room and found that report. I’ll show you.”

They let him stumble into the observation room to the desk. He leaned against it for support. He picked up the document, and held it out to the guard. The guard glanced at it briefly before snapping it shut.

““You read the report?” The voice was distorted, digitally amplified, and cold.

“Yes,” he turned and glanced towards the wall between him and his Little Demon. It was mostly holes and through it he could see her. She was staring into his eyes, and for the first time since their first encounter, she was smiling. With lips that felt numb he said, “I had to figure…”

And that is when they shot him.

Exhibitionist Fantasising

In the place with colourless walls, there is light again. I am inside the place with colourless walls. Fellow Unmoving Ones are inside the place with colourless walls.

A part of one of the colourless walls moved, and the Moving Ones move into the place with colourless walls. Those are the signs to denote another cycle. The Moving Ones move about, looking at each of the Unmoving Ones. They look at me too, stopping to look at me. I like that.

But the Moving Ones will eventually move away from me. They will look at other Unmoving Ones, sometimes stopping longer than They did for me. I do not understand. I see the other Unmoving Ones eternally; either attached to the colourless walls or be Unmoving in front of the Moving Ones. There is nothing special of the other Unmoving Ones.

The Moving Ones should look at me more.

As always, the cycle has ended and there is darkness in the place with colourless walls. Only one Moving One moves in the darkness, holding a thing that makes the small coloured patches on the floor disappear. Where do those small coloured patches come from? The Moving Ones during each cycle? Me? The other Unmoving Ones? It does not really matter.

What matters is why that Moving One only looks at me for so short of a time. That Moving One always looks at the floor. There should be at least one Moving One to look at me while the other Moving One holds that thing that disappears small coloured patches. I would like that.

Many cycles later, two Moving Ones move me away from the place

with colourless walls. To be allowed to move like They can, I am honoured that They bestow upon me such honour. This is a sign. The Moving Ones clearly favour me more than the other Unmoving Ones.

The Moving Ones move me into another place with walls. Instead of colourless, the new walls are lined and coloured. They are much smaller than the colourless walls. Around me, there are only lined coloured walls. There are no other Unmoving Ones inside, and it is too small for even the smallest Moving Ones to move in. There is only darker darkness inside this place with lined coloured walls.

Why am I inside this place with walls? How will the Moving Ones look at me? I want to produce vibrations from the cracks on me, but I cannot. Only the Moving Ones can do that.

Eventually, unknown cycles later, I am finally moved away from the place with lined coloured walls by the Moving Ones. They bring me to a new place with colourless walls. It feels slightly smaller from the other place with colourless walls, but definitely bigger than the place with lined coloured walls. It still reminds me more of the other place with colourless walls, so I am sure that there should be cycles in this new place with colourless walls.

Yes. Even if I cannot produce vibrations, the Moving Ones know my wish.

And there are indeed cycles again. Like usual, the Moving Ones move toward me and look at me. But in the end, They will still eventually move away from me and move away from the place with colourless walls. At least in the past, they will still be in the same place with walls, but not always looking at me. Now, they will leave the place with walls entirely. I do not like that. I would like the Moving Ones to keep looking at me.

I may not be able to actually move like the Moving Ones, but I can at least imagine that I can move like the Moving Ones. To make sure that They will look at me always. I will not move needlessly. I will be Unmoving when They look at me. After all, They like to look at an

Unmoving One and moving needlessly might make Them look away from me. I would like Them to look at me always.

Wait. Not always. I need to identify cycles. It was horrible when I was inside the place with lined coloured walls, after all. How many cycles was that equal to? Were there even cycles inside the place with lined coloured walls? There has to be cycles, and the Moving Ones need to be moving in and out.

And while They are inside, all the Moving Ones will look at me. Except for the Moving One who holds the thing that makes small coloured patches on the floor disappear. That strange Moving One knows nothing of what is worth looking at. Normal Moving Ones can be looking at me instead while that strange Moving One makes the small coloured patches on the floor disappear. There, me and They will like that.

And there will only be me and the Moving Ones in the place with walls. The other Unmoving Ones can have their own place with walls. There will be many many places with walls in existence, each holding an Unmoving One. I will be inside one of those places with walls, just me and the Moving Ones who will look at me.

Yes. I like that very much. That is how I would like to **`imagine`** things to be.

Existential Crisis

One could not say that that Lucas Johann was a hard-working individual. In fact, one could not even make the statement that Lucas Johann was fit for enrollment at the University of Chicago. It would be a stretch to go as far as to say that he could succeed as a creamsicle salesman, and yet, it was hyperbole if you said that he would fail in life. The enigma that was, is, and will be Lucas Johann was a bothersome tale indeed for the admissions office, who slaved for long hours trying to figure out exactly *why* they had admitted this boy. (And, by hours, of course, I hyperbolize. It was more akin to minutes, or perhaps a cursory glance.) No, the admissions office did not *truly* toil over his acceptance, although his testing scores were an anomaly to the rest - perfect SAT and ACT scores, every last mark. And yet, his studentship skills were far from honed.

So, one was really led to wonder about Lucas Johann. Then again, after October the twenty-seventh, doing so was quite the task in itself, if not impossible. However, this is far from where the story stands, and as such, I digress to begin.

Lucas was no more than the ordinary student, at first glance, second, third, fourth, fifteenth, and last. His closet consisted heavily of plaid flannels and generic collegewear - too informal to be written off as "preppy", yet too formal to be flung into the pile of "casuals". In the early months of his freshman year of college, Lucas did not embed himself in any one circle or social ring.

Indeed, it seemed that he held a scarcely mentionable presence in almost every conversational group, but it was just that. A scarce mention, an offhand reference. Yet, nonetheless, he was a constant factor that kept his nature in a sort of suspense. It was nothing particularly noteworthy, though, and most never even realized that they were doing it. Most people would realize, eventually, that they had never spoken to Lucas. So, what indeed were they talking about, if not what he has stated of himself?

The nature of his identity was ambient. People were aware of it, and it needn't be stated. There were a rare few that were able to truthfully say that they had spoken to him, but even those few could not clearly recall what he had said in conversation. All people could recall was a low, thrumming voice; it was enthralling, yes, but by no means was it ever considered 'attractive'. It was possible, though, that it was just a part of the effect.

Lucas grabbed at his coffee, his fingers sliding around the Styrofoam a few times in a vice grip, feeling the surface slide under his digits. The cup slid towards him as he lifted it, looking down into the liquid and feeling it steam up into his face haughtily. The warmth emanating from the container allowed his hand a little more movement as the strange cold front settled into the area, bringing forth a few other thoughts. He pushed them aside, sipping the coffee and placing it aside, as well. He would truly never recover from the sensation of coffee. It felt alien, almost, to him: such a thing he had never experienced before now, and yet, so very present in his daily life now.

Lucas glanced down at the paper. He had just lost his train of thought, setting aside his pencil, and leaning back. His eyes drifted upward as he gathered his things, packing them away and standing. He had to move from the spot, he could feel the rain coming on. Well, smell. Sort of. It was a strange sensation to describe. Maybe it was olfactory, but, again, the thought was lost to him as he packed the finished paper, the words there and back again without his notice.

He would turn it in tomorrow, after reading the strange letter for a majority of the night, without a second thought as to how the paper had been finished. After all, he had written it.

It did not take long to find his way to the student center, dismounting from his bike and folding the scooter, packing it in his backpack, grabbing the bike lock to right it to the side of the building. Lucas stowed a pencil in his pocket, palm already wrapped on the doorknob. It turned, without retort, and he was inside the student center with a quick hop, the warmth almost joltingly present. He pulled the pen from his pocket, out of habit, and began to roll the pencil between his index and middle finger.

“Lucas!”

Lucas halted, immediately. His eyes were wide. His head creaked in the direction of the voice, the name piercingly present in the air. Everyone in the room almost looked up, almost, as if aware of how strange it was to hear the name. Then again, it was a common name – but it was attributed to this one Lucas in particular, which set the bizarrely placed word.

“Hey, Lucas,” the stranger breathed, an envelope in one hand. He offered it to the student with a dull smile. Lucas found himself unable to read the stranger’s face; it was an expression of flaccid acceptance, of menial happiness… but there was something in the eyes. They twitched. They burned.

“Thank you,” Lucas breathed, and the room shuddered. The air shook.

The letter slid into his fingers, and immediately Lucas dropped the pen, ignoring the pencil as it clattered on the ground. The pen. The pen. The pen. Yes, the pen. The letter now. The letter was there. The letter was always there. The stranger stared at him, and the eyes twitched. They burned. They smiled. Their teeth shined. They glinted, even. They watched.
Reality re-asserted itself. Lucas breathed, and the room shuddered. The air shook.

“Thank you.”

The stranger gave him a pat on the shoulder. “Don’t worry, Henry had issues with it, too. It’s not as hard as you’d think! Or, so we’re told. I wouldn’t know, really.”

“Issues with…?”

The stranger paused for a second. The smile faded.

“Read the letter, Lucas. And, don’t worry. We’ll talk soon, okay? Try not to bring down the student center.”

Lucas breathed. “Thank you.” He had to remember to breath. He always had to remember. Contract the diaphragm, pull the

intercostal-

“Hey, do you want Henry’s number? I’m sure he could help you a bit. Wouldn’t it be rad if you two were related?”

Rad?

That broke the tone of the exchange. It was informal. The world stopped watching. Lucas breathed. “Do I… know you?”

“Nah. But dude, you will. Hey, I bet we’ll be good friends. You’ll see. I’m a third year.”

Lucas looked around. No one stared. No one pointed. No one thought of him, or the stranger. What gave?

“Do I just… read it?”

The stranger nodded. “Yeah, just do it somewhere private. If someone read it over your shoulder… yeah, that’d suck. Trust me. Combustion ain’t fun. I think that’s what these do nowadays, anyways.”

The letter was in his backpack now. Lucas looked at the letter in his hand. The stranger handed him the letter. “Hey, hold onto it. Don’t worry, nothing will happen to ya’. And I’m sure you won’t have issues finding somewhere alone anyways, huh?”

Lucas gave him a sideways look. Angled, confused.

“Oh,” the stranger toned, frowning now. “I’m sorry, dude. That was just insensitive. Uh, listen, call Henry some time. He can help you, yeah? I’m sure you’d want to understand.”

Lucas nodded, and grabbed the letter from his post box in the student center’s post office. His fingers glazed over the paper, the sticky note with “Henry” written on it still there. A phone number was written across the bottom, and Lucas grabbed his cell phone. He typed it in, and grabbed his cell phone from his pocket, putting the number into a new contact. He opened his contact list, and opened the contact “Henry”, knowing that it was always there. The number was there. It was always there.

The letter in his hand. Yes. He sat in his chair, in his dorm, opening it right there in the post office.

No. It had to be private. He asserted the thought – dorm. Single dorm.

'Please,' he thought to himself. *'Just this once, don't work against me.'*

Dorm.

Good.

Lucas opened the letter, and breathed. "Thank you," he murmured.

And Lucas breathed.

Dear Potential Rushee,

On behalf of Theta Omega Theta Fraternity, let us start by congratulating you on your acceptance into the University of Chicago. Attending the University is, in itself, a letter of prestige. Of the utmost importance to our relationship to the University is the importance it holds in our brotherhood. We send you this letter in hopes that you may become a Fraternity Brother during your time here. Brotherhood guarantees an eye-opening education into further academia.

Nationally founded in 1889, Theta Omega Theta Fraternity currently has 84 active chapters throughout the United States, with the Nu Theta Chapter being the thirteenth installed. Since 1895, Nu Theta Chapter has

labored and bled as brothers to further the onset of our goals as a fraternity. The Brothers of Theta Omega Theta never forget the duties and values by which they hold themselves, above all campus activities. In the one hundred and nineteen years since Nu Theta Chapter's foundation, this upcoming cycle will perhaps be the most riveting, and definitely one of the most advanced. We currently consist of thirty-one members who through research, development, and the study of the bizarre, have become renowned fraternity members in the system. With our current leadership and third-party connections in place, Nu Theta Chapter is rapidly approaching the peak of its conditional existence. We seek men of specific and rigorous qualification to call Brother, demanding a diverse and effective Brotherhood.

The rush period is one of the only times we perform recruitment, with a very rare exception. We usually begin recruitment for the upcoming year in January and continue on until Formal Rush, which is October 1st–October 5th. Rush events include various events of both entertaining and enlightening qualities, provided in a relaxed environment that allows future Brothers to ease into our specific area of academic advancement. Some of our more exciting annual events include Poker Night, extra-dimensional summoning, paintball trips outside of Hyde

Park, relaxed nights in downtown Chicago and on Navy Pier, anomalous mixology, and bowling nights. For every function the chapter will provide transportation, lodging, and anything else that you may need. Although we do focus significantly on our summer rush program, we also always have a very successful formal rush program. If you are unable to make it to any summer events, we will still make every effort to meet you at the beginning of the school year or during Formal Rush.

If you have any questions at all, don't be afraid to call my cell, e-mail me, or make contact via astral projection. Please also fill out our Rush Interest Form to receive further information on how you can join our fraternity. We wish you the best of luck at the University of Chicago and look forward to seeing you here soon.

Theta Omega Theta Hub || **TBA** =>

Exit History

...

Two time travellers sat across the table from one another in matching lab-coats, hands folded, eyeing each other suspiciously. Dr. Thaddeus Xyank pulled his glasses from his face, rubbed the bridge of his nose, and set them back in place.

He had seen it himself. They cordoned off the hallway during school hours on February 2nd, 1954 under the guise of electrical maintenance. In a weathered pair of overalls he stood with arms crossed and watched as two lizards materialized out of thin air and dropped to the ground. He ordered the wing left closed for another three hours, had some panelling replaced, and thanked the principal for his patience before departing for home through the men's room door. That brought the number of organisms recovered up to 84%, and the old story of 'I don't know what happened' stopped making any kind of sense.

That was 25 minutes and 16, 17, 18 seconds ago.

"Alright," Thad said, picking up the remote next to him and mashing a button. On the wall, a recording played of D-48120 walking down a dilapidated hallway before suddenly disappearing at the end. It ran on a loop as he spoke. "Here's my problem with your story."

Researcher Daniel Ambridge, also known as D-48120, let his head hit the desk, and a soft exasperated chuckle escaped his lips.

"One," Xyank continued. "You're the only sapient being known to have passed through **SCP-664** and come back *prior* to your disappearance."

"Yes, but you can't very well check on those squirrels, lab rats, and pheasants, can you?" Ambridge said with a smirk.

“Don’t interrupt me,” Thad ordered. “Two: yes we *can* and *have* checked on all of those squirrels and lab rats and pheasants and terriers and even that pair of anoles you sent out at the same time, and even when they have come back 50 years prior, they all come back to the same geo-relative location. You did not.”

“Well I guess I’m just lucky,” Ambridge replied, head still resting on the table.

“*Three,*” Thad continued, losing a bit of patience. “Your time at the Foundation, and specifically working on SCP-664, predates all human testing.”

Ambridge stayed silent, but his head came off the table.

“By itself that’s not much, but I’ve checked your logs as well. You briefed every human test subject prior to their exposure, and performed the debriefing of all but…” Thad rolled his eyes up to check his notes briefly. “D-78221, who arrived at 0952 this morning. Now, pardon my saying so, but this confluence of events doesn’t look particularly good for you.”

“What are you, a cop?” Ambridge sneered.

“No, I’m a theoretician,” Thaddeus offered. “We’re much more precise.”

Mr. Ambridge leaned back in his chair, crossing his arms. Whether it was a personal grudge about his story not being believed, or frustration at two weeks of incessant questioning, scanning, and probing, Thad couldn’t tell. “Why would I lie, hm?” Ambridge gestured broadly to the room around him. “You’ve got me! It doesn’t matter what I say, you’re not going to let me go. I know the drill. We received the same training, answer to the same people, swore to uphold the interests of the Foundation and its objectives. So what do I have to gain?”

“A method of nearly untraceable escape the moment someone turns a blind eye,” Thad said, very matter-of-factly. He pulled D-78221’s deposition from his briefcase and laid it on the table, turning it and sliding it so Ambridge could see. “I have a sworn affidavit saying that

our recent arrival was *coached* by you regarding how to control his temporal displacement prior to his departure."

"Oh, so he just came back on his own?" Ambridge asked with his eyebrows raised.

"After a week in Atlantic City in 1989, yes." Dr. Xyank slid the photographs across the table. "Apparently at his debriefing you were supposed to give him the rest of the puzzle?"

Ambridge looked at the photos and said nothing.

"He said something about a 'white plain'. Said you were going to teach him how to get there from anywhere, but didn't say how. Is that what the debriefing was going to be about?"

Ambridge swallowed and continued to say nothing.

"… Instead, you were actually going to drop a meme in his head and make him forget the whole thing, weren't you? Had to keep yourself unique or the chances of a successful escape later drop close to nil. Please, stop me when I start to go astray; I'm very interested in how this was supposed to work."

Ambridge looked up at Thad from under a furrowed brow, lips drawn tightly. At this point, he didn't have to say anything. He knew he was fucked.

"Confidentially? I don't even care if you use it, we'll get around to finding you eventually. I just want to know how you plan to do it."

"Why?" Ambridge spat, crossing his arms. "There's no way I'll get the chance now anyway. What good would it do?"

Dr. Xyank smiled, and pushed his glasses up his nose. "Because I want to know. I'm a theoretician. This is what I do."

There were two hard knocks on the interrogation room glass, and Thad took to his feet, smoothing out his tie and straightening his coat. "You think about it for a while. If I like your answer we might have a place for you." Without delay, he walked to the door and was buzzed out. In the dark room on the other side of the mirror, Marcus

Kitterman had the phone pressed into his shoulder.

“There’s a call from a Dr. Charles Anborough, L4. Said he has something you might want to look at.” Marcus held out the phone. “Line’s secure.”

Thad took the receiver and pressed it to his ear. “Hello Dr. Anborough, this is Thad Xyank. What can I do for you?”

“Yes, Dr. Xyank, hello,” came a surprisingly deep voice through the receiver. “I called because… well I may have something relevant to your field of study here, and was looking for your input.”

“What’s the initial appraisal?”

The man on the other end of the phone sighed. “Well, there’s definitely a temporal element. Looks like a Safe-class SSUIS2 with a fixed temporal dilation pattern. Normally I’d just bag it up but—”

“Then do what you would do normally, Dr. Anborough,” Thad interrupted. “If you absolutely *need* someone from Temporal Anomalies, I’ll be happy to send one of my JR’s down there to run the watch test with you. Just now I’m in the middle of an interrogation regarding an anomaly which is much more subtle and difficult to define.”

“SCP-664; I’ve read. That’s why I’m calling. The brief you logged this morning about D-78221? Particularly the excerpt about the ‘infinite white plain’.”

Thad’s eyebrows took the liberty of a brief visit to his hairline. “What about it?”

“…I think we’ve just discovered it.”

“I just don’t know…” Charles said, looking solemnly at the fragment of wall in front of them. “I mean… I’ve seen portals before, of course, but normally there’s some kind of method to them.”

“If there was a method, Dr. Anborough, there would be no anomaly,” Thad said, scratching below his nose. The **door** was not much to

look at. Just a little trap door inset in what was left of a wall. Might have been a meat-locker once, or a dumb waiter, but none of that was left now. On the other side, the wall was flat and impenetrable; the repeated grinding of a diamond carbide drill bit had proven it.

“I thought you didn’t believe in anomalies,” Charles chuckled.

“I don’t, but I’m open to new evidence.” Thad walked up to the door and rapped upon it with his knuckles. It sounded hollow, almost flimsy. “How much analysis have you done on this? Any kind of radiation leakage? Interesting x-ray patterns in the wall? Thaumaturgic signatures?”

Charles shook his head and walked over. “Not a thing. It’s clean, it’s been stable since we brought it into custody last month, and no anomalies present in the rats we’ve sent through and back.”

“What about your time signature?” Thad asked. “You said there was some temporal dilation.”

“Stopwatch and camera test says 1 to 140, but only when the door is closed.”

Thad whistled softly. “Quite a ratio. Do we know if it’s causally isolated?”

Charles blinked twice. “…I’m sorry, what?”

Thad sighed, and looked around at the debris by his feet. he picked up a piece of charcoal that seemed sufficiently soft and found a blank spot on the wall. “Okay… when the door is closed, we’ve got a situation that looks kinda like this. One nice straight world-line, the one we’re riding…” He quickly marked a long horizontal line. “…And another running in parallel.” With all the art of a 60 year old tenured math professor, Thad drew a tight sinusoid over the first quarter of the horizontal line.

“…You said this thing is safe, right? I’m not going to get some kind of cancer if I put my wrist in there?”

Charles shrugged and shook his head. “A month plus, no incidents. I

wouldn’t, but—”

Not waiting for him to finish, Thad opened the door and thrust his watch hand inside. The poetic, vast white emptiness on the far side of the door was lost on him. Well, not lost, but surely on hold. He counted seconds and watched the 442*i* on his wrist keep perfect time with him. “Alright.” The door closed with little ado as he returned to his diagram. “Door opens here, and closes here.” he said, drawing two quick slashes, and then a second straight line above the short stretch of the world line between them. “And apparently, the temporal dilation stops, and the two segments become causally linked.” This, he represented by drawing four dots, evenly spaced, on either side of the two lines. “Then, when the door closes, the dilation resumes as before.”

"With me so far?”

Charles scratched some stubble on his cheek and nodded. “Yeah, I think so.”

“Good. So let’s say we… Damn, I need another color.” Thad scanned the ground and found a piece of clay to his liking. He drew a small yellowish stick figure on the line “This person goes through the door, here, and does some thing, I know not what, on the other side.”

“And he doesn't want to stay in there forever, of course.” A brief flash of a memory rocketed across Thad's skull, and he violently shook it away. “So he comes back out.”

“At some point, let’s say here on the world line,” and in so saying, Thad flipped the clay and began writing with a much darker red color, “someone with a grudge decides to travel back in time, and kill our man before he ever stepped foot inside the door.”

“We know, of course, that means that our little stick man never lived a life leading up to the door, and never entered it, and the future of the world-line changes instantaneously into a world where the stick man doesn't exist.”

“*However*, if the dilated region is causally isolated—which it may *have* to be to preserve a stable dilation ratio—does that erase his presence from the world behind the door? What’s more, and perhaps a more important question, does his retrocausal murder prevent his ability to re-emerge later?”

Charles looked at the diagram good and hard for a few minutes, glancing back and forth between it and the expectant eyes of the time traveller standing next to him. It almost made sense. Almost. It seemed like it shouldn’t be that way; that if the hypothetical person was wiped from existence on one side of the door, he must be wiped from the other, too. On the other hand, there shouldn’t ever be such a door; one which had more time on one side of it than the other. He had read the papers about tachyon field theory, and at the time they seemed to make sense but…

“How would we ever test that?” Charles asked, finally bringing his hand down from his chin. “To us, it just looks like some unidentified anomalous person appeared on the other side and tried to come through. We’d bump the anomaly up to Euclid if it happened once, and probably Keterize it to be certain if it happened more than a dozen times.”

“Well we cou—” Thad started, but did not finish. “Huh… you know you’re right. We’d need a third frame of reference to… But we can’t do that unless…”

And while the doctors stood in uffish thought, staring at the diagram with their teeth in their mouths, the tiny door inset in the wall shuddered and burst outward. A human arm reached out, flailing for anything it could grab onto. In a snap of adrenaline Thad Xyank and Chuck Anborough jumped backward, drew their sidearms and stepped back double quick, ordering the anomaly to stay right the fuck where it is as bigger men with bigger guns burst into action behind them and moved up. There was a lot of yelling and confusion from the construction crew as another arm came into view, raised in defensive surrender. The docs dropped their muzzles to low ready like clockwork as two guards moved around them and set a bead on whatever hellish thing was daring to feign surrender and draw them

closer to its enormous hidden gaping death maw of razor-sharp doom. Still retreating, steady, smooth. Slow is smooth. Smooth is fast. Blood coming out of the door, and a scared, squirrelly voice they could still hear from 10m away as they holstered the weapons and turned to book it. Any minute now there'd be a vortex or a death howl or a hail of gunfire, and by god they wouldn't be alive to care for long if they stayed this close. They didn't stop until they were 100m away behind a quarter inch steel plate, shepherded around the bend by a hard case in tactical black shouting 'Go-Go-Move it!-Go!' The whole ordeal was over in less than 20 seconds.

"FUCK!" Charles screamed as he folded at the waist, propped up on his knees eyes plastered shut. A decade working with Keters puts the fear in you. After handling the unhandleable, training that can get you over the wall to safety is all you can really ask for. "Fucking *safe class*! This was my *vacation* project!" The pinky-side of his fist struck the plate of steel as he slid down to the ground.

Thad raked a hand down his face and took a deep breath. Stupid. Fucking stupid. Fucking academic stupidity of the highest order and thank god he had gotten re-certified this month. He had put his *hand* in that thing! And then just stood around next to an active anomaly drawing curly-q's and stick figures. If he had wanted to discuss a subtle variant of the grandfather paradox he— … Wait a minute.

"…You know, it is rather convenient, isn't it? Us standing there, talking about how if it worked, we'd never know the difference, and not a minute later an unidentified humanoid busts through the door?" Thad said, the smallest hint of a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth.

"*This is Captain Crawford, come back Rally 2?*" the radio on the nearest guard squawked.

"Rally 2 here," the guard answered.

"*Situation under control. Unidentified humanoid in custody. We're uh… We'll be maintaining a 10m radius around the object.*"

"Understood," the guard replied and raised his voice to address all the other poor schmucks at Rally 2 that everything was fine, and just

to be safe, don't cross the tape unless you have someone to hold your hand for you.

"*Hey stop me if you've heard this one before,*" another voice came over a nearby radio. "*The Skip says he knows who we are, and wants to talk to someone from 'Delta-Tee'.*"

"…What are you saying?" Charles asked as the sanity crept back into his stare.

"I'm saying… I'd like permission to interview your detainee," Dr. Xyank replied. "You know. Just in case."

Agent Burt Tomlin's head was in his hands as he heaved a heavy sigh. From the corner of his eye he spied the interrogation room mirror, and silently asked his reflection why he had agreed to come in so damn early this morning. "So, let me get this straight…" Burt continued, turning his attention back to the unkempt, red-haired, befreckled HCP-1 across the table. "Your name is Kevin McDougal, and you're some kind of time-travelling Foundation Agent, sent from the future to test…what did you say again?"

"Yeah. Well… I mean, no. I'm a Junior Researcher under Dr. Thaddeus Xyank of Research and Containment Team Δ-t. I was working with him trying to link two known anomalies, SCP-664 and SCP-2400."

"Uh huh…" Tomlin said, rolling his eyes. "Even though we haven't got a 2400?"

"Yes, but you will! For Christ's sake, it's where I was picked up!" McDougal exclaimed, shaking his hands in the air. "We were interrogating a Daniel Ambridge about 664 when Dr. Xyank got a call from… someone, I don't know who, about 2400. Based on the information we had, we decided to test if they were connected by sending me through. That was April 10, 1998."

"Right, right," Tomlin said, taking a sip of coffee. "Except… I gotta tell you, this sounds like a pretty gross breach of protocol. If what you're saying is true this… What was that name?"

"*Thaddeus*. *Xyank*."

"That's it. This 'Xyank' character…he'd have to be a pretty big wheel. If you were a JR, you'd know cross-tests are almost never approved. And sending someone with a *clearance* through it? I mean, why wouldn't he just use a D to do it?" Tomlin said, feigning disinterest.

McDougal rubbed his eyebrows and shook his head. "He said he needed someone he could trust."

"Of course he did," Tomlin said into his mug, hoping after the fact that it was too soft for the mark to hear. Another slip-up like that and he might give something away. "And why did he trust you?"

"He *hired* me and my buddy Marcus right out of grad school! I've worked with him for over three years on all kinds of temporal anomalies."

"Oh yeah, where was that?"

"Ithaca State," McDougal replied. "…You know, the one in New York?" He was clearly losing his patience.

"Easy there, wise-ass," Tomlin said with a sneer. "No one likes this process, but mouthing off to me isn't bound to win you any favors."

Two knocks on the interrogation room glass and Tomlin perked his head up. "…Alright Mr. McDougal, you just sit tight a minute."

Outside the room Marcus Kitterman was a wet dog, soaked to the skin in sweat. Thad Xyank had his arms crossed, brow furrowed, and lips pasted together in a thin black line. "Chuck Anborough just called," Thad said, eyes not leaving the kid in the hot-seat. "O5-8 just designated SCP-2400."

"Jesus," Tomlin said, head hanging loose on his neck. "What about this shit with 664?"

"It's legit," Thad said, still stolid. "I had that conversation three days ago. He said he went through on the 10th?"

“Yeah.”

“Good,” Thad said, nodding. “I mean, it sounds like me. It seems like something I’d want to test, but I never expected to have an *actual* paradox on my hands. We still have a week to track him down. We can still send the original through if we need to.”

Kitterman shook his head violently. “Noooo you can’t.”

“Oh? Pray tell why not?” Thad asked impatiently.

“…What he says is right. We knew each other in grad-school. And high school. And kindergarten. Kevin and I are like best friends. They used to call us ‘cookies and cream’,” he said chuckling. “… He’s about the only one I kept in touch with after I was hired. I figured it was alright, since he got all the way to the live interview, like I had, but… You remember that week I took off last March?”

“Spit it out, Marcus,” Tomlin demanded.

“He’s *dead*, okay? I went to the funeral, I *saw* his body. He was on his way to work one morning and a car cut him off, broke his neck.” Kitterman was very nearly in tears, and Tomlin very nearly felt like a heel.

The color drained from Thad’s face as it came to him. This was a situation he could not win. The child on the other side of the one-way glass, if genuine, was the end of history as mankind knew it. Dr. Xyank was in a position now that required history to change in order for history to be preserved. How does one maintain the status quo when the status quo is in indeterminate flux? Which status quo do you preserve? Without thinking, he turned to a nearby computer console, pulling up his notes on Kitterman’s hiring process and who was brought on at the same time and wouldn’t you know it? There was Kevin McDougal. His application had a note written in red pen in the upper right hand corner.

> Possible connection to undiscovered anomalies. Do Not Hire
> -Tx

Thad knew that name sounded familiar somehow.

“It looks legitimate,” he said softly, turning back to the window and resting his forehead against it as Kitterman and Tomlin looked at the screen and shared nervous laughter.

Kevin McDougal, Age 32. A young man whose life, as he knew it, never happened. And never could happen.

From: thaddeus.xyank@foundation.net
To: o5-12@foundation.net
CC: athena.anastasakos@foundation.net; marcus.kitterman@foundation.net; bertrand.tomlin@foundation.net
Subject: Re:Frame of Reference Proposal

You are correct, continuing experimentation along these lines will necessarily alter the course of history, and perhaps in unpredictable ways. However, as demonstrated in previous attachments, there is sufficient reason to believe that the interactions between SCP-664 and SCP-2400 have already caused such an alteration. Whether this was done intentionally by an alternate iteration of myself or occurred naturally is irrelevant.

The purpose of this proposal is not to give myself or the Temporal Anomalies department carte blanche to run amok about time flipping switches and pulling levers. The mission of RCT Δ-t will remain unaltered from that put forth in our previous discussion, until such time as sufficient evidence is collected to warrant a re-visiting of those goals.

All I’m requesting is that you allow me to create a stable, static causality, immune from the effects of causal tampering. From this external time-line we will be able to meaningfully measure the rate or frequency of historic shifts, as well as allowing agents on temporal retrieval or research missions to have a stable home base to which they may return. The genie is already out of the bottle, so

to speak. If we ever mean to put it back in, we have to be able to track its movements first.

Thank you for this consideration.

Thaddeus Xyank, PhD.

Temporal Anomalies Department Chairperson
thaddeus.xyank@foundation.net | Ext. 1780

From: o5-12@foundation.net
To: thaddeus.xyank@foundation.net
CC: athena.anastasakos@foundation.net; marcus.kitterman@foundation.net; bertrand.tomlin@foundation.net
Subject: Re:Frame of Reference Proposal

This request has been approved by a 7-5 decision.

Do not make me regret my vote, Thaddeus.

O5-12

…

Exit Interview

When they finally came for her, it wasn't a black bag over her head in the middle of the night. It wasn't an MTF snatching her off the street on the way home. It wasn't tranquilizers in her coffee, or a subliminal command through her workstation. It wasn't even a Site Security officer, one gloved hand guiding her to the holding cells, the other resting lightly on a holstered taser. When they finally came for Ellen O'Connor, it was a balding, hunched man knocking almost apologetically on the open door of her office.

"Agent O'Connor, my name is Doctor Brian Parkes. We'd like to talk to you about some, uh, irregularities in the use of your Foundation access codes."

It was so innocuous that her first thought was, *who wears a brown tie?* Her second was, *wait - who is 'we'?*

"Perhaps we can talk about this in my offices, Agent O'Connor?"

In the lift, Dr. Parkes swiped his access card and pressed the buttons for the two lowest floors simultaneously. The lift started a slow descent, mirroring Ellen's sinking feeling. She'd known that this was going to happen - one day, any day, soon. You can't look for the Foundation's secrets and expect them not to notice. She had kept going anyway. She'd needed to find out. To know.

The lift stopped, doors opening onto an unfamiliar level. The corridors seemed older, the decor slightly behind the times. But Ellen could hear the hum of processor cooling fans through the office doorways. Through one she glimpsed the server stacks - hundreds of slim layers, scores of towers. Whatever this place was, they had plenty of tech.

Dr. Parkes stopped, turning to usher her to a chair in a small office. *Not an office*, Ellen realised as the door clicked shut, *an*

interrogation room.

"So, Agent O'Connor. Shall we begin by recounting your employment history? For the record, you understand."

"Uh, sure. Where do you want me to…"

"Your time in the FBI showed a high degree of skill in analysis, but you became fixated on patterns that only you perceived. Eventually you gave a briefing to your Assistant Director in which you insisted that certain terror cells must be communicating with ultra-modern technology, beyond even the NSA's ability to intercept. This did not go well, and your reputation was shattered. Fortunately a new Director approached you, from a department you hadn't heard of before."

Dr. Parkes looked down at the file in front of him, the manila folder a sickly yellow in the room's fluorescent lights.

"Again, your early days at the UIU were characterised by strong results. But once again, you pushed too far. You saw investigations going cold, explanations that sounded convincing until you looked at them in concert. Not just yours, but other agents' cases, historic files. You started outlining the evidence for another organisation interfering with UIU jurisdiction and removing evidence for its own purposes. You speculated that your superiors must know of that organisation, and be liaising with it. But before you could finish your report, you were dismissed from the FBI for reasons we both know are false. Now you work for the very organisation you were investigating."

Dr. Parkes held Ellen's gaze.

"Are you seeing a pattern here, Agent O'Connor? Your skills, such as they are, have a history of getting you into trouble in your place of work."

"I can explain," Ellen began.

"No you can't," said Dr. Parkes, cutting her off. "I will explain. You will answer my questions. Tell me, from your time here, what do you

see as the Foundation's purpose?"

"Uh, its purpose is, uh, to obtain anomalous items and entities, to ensure that they remain secured, and to protect the wider public from their effects."

"Spoken like a true naif. Drop the training video act, Agent O'Connor - what purpose does the Foundation serve?"

Ellen wasn't sure how to react. Why such general questions? If they already knew what she had done, why not sanction her immediately? The interrogation felt unreal, like play-acting. But if she was done for already, there was no reason to hide her opinions.

"Its purpose," she said, "is to ensure that reality stays normal."

"'Stays normal'?" Dr. Parkes sounded incredulous. "Many anomalies have existed for far longer than the Foundation itself. Who decides what is real, what is normal?"

"The Foundation decides. Which I guess means the O5 Council does."

"And what gives them the right to do that?"

"Well, nothing. The Foundation wasn't given the right, we assumed it. No-one gives us permission, no-one controls us except us."

"Are you comfortable with this - having someone else, someone utterly unaccountable, define your reality?"

"Not entirely. But I can see how the Foundation works, the good it does. I support what the O5 are trying to achieve."

Dr. Parkes rubbed the bridge of his nose, pushing his glasses up, then looked back across the table. "And your idea of 'support' involved a breach of information security across hundreds of containment files, did it?"

Ellen could feel the sweat on her palms, her heart rate increasing. She tried to focus.

"The first thing you should know is -"

"No. We know you didn't act alone. Your contact in InfoSec has already been disciplined. We know how you did it. We are interested in why."

"Okay." Ellen took a slow breath. "You know that I am on the MC&D taskforce, right?"

"Your file suggests that you and the other analysts have had some success in predicting their activities."

"I was looking at some of their items we'd recovered, and something didn't fit. Eight sixty-five and Fifteen seventy-one are both MC&D objects, but we didn't obtain the gun until a few years ago, and we've had the wallet since the eighties. Why number them that way around?"

Even in this room, with this man, just talking about the problem was like the first hit of caffeine in the morning. "It was such a small thing, but no-one could explain it properly - they told me that SCP numbers were assigned by the system. But a system should make sense - it should operate to a set of rules. I needed to know what the rules were."

"And what did you learn?"

Ellen's face fell with a sudden thought. "Wait, is Sam okay? You said 'disciplined', but what -"

"Agent O'Connor, answer the question." Dr. Parkes was implacable.

"Okay. I learned that there isn't a system, not like people think. Sam got me the access to look behind the text, at the page sources, the editing history, all of it. There is another department within the Foundation - not on any of the lists I've seen. And I think you must work for them."

The man across the table from her blinked slowly, his face placid. "You're saying that there is a department that assigns SCP numbers?"

Ellen could feel the warm rush of an idea expanding. She pressed forward with the thought.

"Not just numbers. It looks like they - like you - can re-categorise SCP files within the database, influence their level of research priority, even alter the re-assignment of D-Class personnel and researchers to particular items or entities. You must be able to track access and cross reference it, which is how you knew what I was looking at, how close I was to figuring it out. The processing power in the offices here means you must be running algorithms over some pretty huge databases. Does the O5 even know about this?"

"Of course they know about us. It was O5-10 who established us. You are currently in the offices of the Department of Analytics. Whether you leave, however, depends on your answer to my next question. A question which I think you might be able to anticipate."

Ellen nodded slowly. Understanding was tantalisingly close - she just needed to talk it out slowly and calmly.

"You already know what I did, and how I did it, but you brought me in for questioning anyway. And not with security, so whatever your plans are, they're off the record. You ask me philosophical questions about the Foundation - that must have had a purpose, but it wasn't to understand why I breached security. Ah - you wanted to know more about me. And you wanted to know how much I'd learned about your division - what I'd been able to work out."

Ellen's mind was racing, and her voice started to betray her excitement. "So it was a test! You wanted to see if I *could* work it out, whether I knew what was going on. And the pattern you talked about, it's not just that I push too far in my job and get in trouble. It's what happens *after* I get into trouble. So when you say 'whether I leave', that's not a threat. You're going to ask me whether I want to work for you."

Traces of a smile were showing at the corners of Dr. Parkes' eyes. "Very good, Ellen. Now, do you have any questions for us?"

"Sam?"

"Will be fine. Amnestics, of course, but otherwise unharmed. Anything else?"

"How close was I to the truth - to what you do?"

"Fairly close. We were tracking your investigation - many of our recruits start in a similar way. And we can manage the database as you suggested, but it's more than that. Based on our data, we can determine the likelihood, sometimes even the timing, of potential containment breaches, and act to prevent them. We perform risk analysis on potential cross-testing of anomalies - some of the tests we've suggested have given us new containment methods and field tech. Not much of the Foundation knows about us, but we're closely engaged with the Ethics Committee - our recommendations on D-Class assignments have reduced casualties by four percent over the past two years."

It felt like Dr. Parkes had been waiting to give this speech. His voice was warmer, his shoulders less tense. "We have huge amounts of information, Ellen, but what we need are people to interpret it. People who will question what's in front of them, and find counter-intuitive answers. People like you, if you'll join us."

"Thank you, Dr. Parkes. I would be delighted. Although there is one more thing."

"Of course."

"Sorry, it's so pointless, but it's how I got here. What *is* the process for numbering anomalies?"

"You said yourself, there is no system."

Ellen's brows furrowed. "But that doesn't make any sense. If you have the amount of data you seem to, it would be easier to manage if the containment procedures were rationally ordered."

"Ellen, it's not something that has to make sense. It's actually a holdover from the early days of the Foundation."

"Sorry, but can that be right? Surely you would have overhauled it. So if we assume that there is a rational basis for numbering non-

consecutively…" Ellen stopped cold, and she felt her brain start to spin with a sudden kick of adrenaline.

"Ellen, I'm afraid that information is classified Level 4," Dr. Parkes' smile was fading now. "Should we discuss your new terms of employment?"

"You're deleting them. Aren't you? You're deleting files. I don't know how many, but based on the gaps between the MC&D items - there must be thousands." Ellen was staring, disbelieving.

"Listen to what you're saying. We have to work with RAISA. We would never take the risk of deleting containment procedure files."

Ellen's hands slumped to the table. "No. No, you're right - you wouldn't delete the files. You're destroying the skips."

"Agent O'Connor!"

"It's the most rational explanation. You number the files in sequence as the items are brought into containment, but then you de-classify some skips - hundreds of skips - leaving gaps in the numbering which are filled with more recent acquisitions. But you aren't just removing the containment protocols from the records, you're destroying the items themselves."

Dr. Parkes sighed, a slow exhalation that left his shoulders hunched. "This is not a subject I wanted to discuss today."

"But this goes against everything the Foundation stands for."

"Does it? You said yourself that the Foundation manages the rest of the world's perceived reality. If we decide that some anomalies shouldn't exist, there isn't anyone to ask permission."

"But why destroy them?"

"Because they are of no use to us." Dr. Parkes sounded exasperated - like this was something he had explained too many times. "We have thousands of items and entities in containment, and we're finding them more and more quickly. Many are essentially duplicates of things we already have. Others aren't sufficiently

anomalous to be interesting. Anything that isn't potentially useful for research is just taking up money and time. We need that resource for the nightmares out there that could wipe the planet clean. If we can't use an anomaly, we have to destroy it if we can."

"Then how are we different to the GOC? Wait, does the Council know about this part of your work?"

"I'm sorry, Agent O'Connor, but I can't answer all of your questions. I've already told you more than I should."

"Then what? Amnestics all round?"

"That won't be possible. You see, we don't just destroy items - we sometimes have to destroy people. The wrong type of people - those who will disturb the organisation, who make everything all about them. This isn't just a job interview. We needed to see whether your skills were useful to us, but we also wanted to see whether those skills would be more trouble than they are worth. And now my superiors will be taking a vote to see if you should be allowed to remain in the site."

"I don't believe you."

"Ellen, I'm afraid that it is of no consequence whether you -"

"No, I *don't believe you*." Ellen's voice was louder, more confident. "What you're saying is nonsense. The Foundation wouldn't set up promotion interviews where the second prize is death. That's a lie, and not a very good one."

"Agent O'Connor -"

"No! Let me finish. You've been talking so much that I've only just realised. A Department operating with this much secrecy needs internal accountability, which means there's no way an interview like this would be conducted by a single person. Your superiors, as you call them, are watching us. Not just me: both of us. So they've just seen that you weren't able to keep me from the truth about destroying skips, and that you don't lie very convincingly when you're under pressure. Not really the skills required for a Department

that no-one is meant to know about. I wonder whether you're responsible for the lack of security on the files that Sam accessed for me?"

Dr. Parkes was standing with both hands on the table. "I'm calling security."

"Go ahead. I'll just talk to your superiors for a minute." Ellen looked for the cameras, then gave up and leaned forward to speak to the room at large. "I think you're all out of hoops for me to jump through. This was a job interview, but not just for any job - it was for *his* job. Well, I'm going to be changing some of his policies, but yes, I accept."

There was no response.

Dr. Parkes moved towards the door, shaking his head at Ellen. "Too far, Agent O'Connor. Don't you think I would have known if -"

His hand was half-way to the door handle when the walls reverberated with the voice from the hidden speakers. "Agent O'Connor, welcome to the Department of Analytics. Your new clearance will be sent to you shortly."

Ellen let out a long exhalation of relief, collapsing into her chair. Dr. Parkes froze for a second, and then spun, as if he could find where that voice had come from.

It spoke again. "Thank you, Dr. Parkes. That will be all."

The door opened.

When they finally came for Brian Parkes, it was a white-coated researcher with a syringe of Class-C amnestic.

Exit Strategy

…There are still no damage reports from the missiles the United States has launched…
The dead are walking the streets! Be sure to lock your doors…
No hospital is safe!
…on a nearby island, there's footage of a number of strange, coral-like growths breaking the water's surface…
…even if they are family members…
The government has officially rescinded all powers of the FBI. The FBI is no longer an officially sanctioned law enforcement entity…
…increased sightings of monsters all over Europe and the continental United States…
…the threat isn't over! Avoid walking! Always wear your mask!
A message from a religious group calling themselves the "Church of the Broken God" has stated that we are to baptized in the Clockwork Gift, so as to pave way for the new humanity…
…are currently battling the army! Most urban areas have been turned into warzones!
…if by "new humanity" they mean robotic corpses, then I for one, do not wish to be baptized!
And whatever you do, *DON'T GO OUTSIDE!*

The more things changed, the more they stayed the same.

Agent Williams reflected on that thought as he followed a railroad track into Pennsylvania, or at least what was left of it. Six months ago, he made a living tracking down SCPs, and now, his life depended on reaching one that had already been found. He was still somewhat in contact with the Foundation, or at least what was left of

it. There wasn't a lot of things left nowadays. Occasionally, he'd get scattered radio messages from Sites, MTFs, and some stranded Agents, but they never broadcasted for very long. Of all the Sites he knew of, Williams could only count the remaining ones on one or two hands. The rest had either fallen in the initial chaos, or initiated nuclear failsafe. A macabre game surviving personnel played was to ask each other what they were doing on S-Day, the day everything went to Hell.

Williams himself was on assignment in South America, when he noticed the rain forest around him slowly turning into clockwork. It was at that moment he bugged out. He never did find out what was the exact cause, but there were rumors floating about that a SCP-217 infected crewman on the International Space Station caused a catastrophic accident, seeding the entire lower atmosphere with clockwork "spores". After hearing SCP-217 had went global, and at least a dozen sites were compromised, Williams knew it was time to execute his Exit Strategy. His first priority was getting in contact with Richards.

Richards was in fact on Keter duty, overseeing SCP-231, no less. Containment was already blown to hell, so the priority was getting the hell out. However, Richards did note that before leaving, she made sure to leave her sidearm in 231-7's containment cell. Williams didn't know the details of what happened afterwards, but from what he heard from the Sites that still had access to surveillance satellites, there was a massive "dead zone" gobbling up Europe and slowly making its way across the Atlantic. Richards then managed to hop a plane to North America, but the closest she could get was a Canadian Air Force Base in Nova Scotia.

Either way, they had to get to their destination on foot. A rather dangerous proposition, as all sorts of terrible things were loose, and not just SCPs. Both the Church of the Broken God and the Global Occult Coalition were out in full force. GOC Mobile Execution Teams were basically destroying everything that moved. If they didn't have a dim view of the Foundation before, they certainly did so now, since they considered the Foundation at fault for not destroying the SCPs when it had the chance. The Church was meanwhile capitalizing on a wave of religious doomsday fervor, gobbling up more and more

followers every day. Last Williams heard, SCP-835 had grown to such ridiculous proportions that the oceans were literally unlivable, and that it had overtaken SCP-882's containment facility. The Church was busy trying to reach the machine by throwing wave after wave of clockwork drones at the biological monstrosity.

As for the other factions, well, most governments collapsed several months into the crisis, leaving a vacuum for others to grab power. Marshall, Carter, & Dark set up a stronghold in England called Avalon, which rather fit their pretentious nature. Williams secretly hoped whatever Eldritch horror born from 231-7 took time to swing north and show those snooty bastards a good time. The Serpent's Hand and Chaos Insurgency were also out in full force, often directly clashing with the Church and GOC for control of what was left. Like the Church, the Horizon Initiative was also riding a wave of religious doomsday fervor. The Manna Charitable Foundation was trying to set up refugee zones, with varying levels of success. Of the Iranians, Williams had no idea whatsoever. The Middle East was one of the first areas to be reduced to a nuclear wasteland in the global panic.

Quickly focusing on matters at hand, Williams took a moment to get his bearings. If he was right, he was only several miles from his objective. So far, sticking to back roads and the wilderness had hampered his progress, but it was necessary to avoid unwanted attention. The GOC's METs essentially controlled the roads, and Williams couldn't afford to have other refugees or survivors tagging along with him. They'd just be extra baggage.

"This is Site-17, going off the air." Williams' radio squawked. It was essentially Foundation-speak for nuclear failsafe. That left the remaining known operational Sites down to four or five.

"One less reason to stay, I guess." Williams muttered to himself.

Unfortunately, before he could go any farther, Williams noticed something terribly wrong. He saw SCP-615 laying on the tracks. Sure, it could have been just any random pile of sticks and logs, but he could tell. Keeping his distance, he managed to catch sight of a MET of about five men coming the opposite way, flamethrowers in hand. They were obviously on the hunt, torching every pile of wood

they could find. When they finally did hit 615, the creature quickly shot off into the forest. Spoon let the MET chase 615. There was only one SCP on his mind now, and any fight he could avoid the better. He still had bad memories of his encounter with SCP-173 in Arizona. Spending two days and three nights in a cargo container while hearing 173 repeatedly banging on the walls were some of the worst in his life.

Finally, he reached vestiges of civilization. It wasn't much, just a railroad junction with a small residential district and some stores, but he was on the right track. Keeping an eye out for any unnatural presences, Williams made a dash over the crossing, painfully aware of how exposed he was. Checking his map again, he found that he was only a few blocks from his destination. Encouraged, Williams continued deeper into the town, and felt his heart sink slightly. There was what looked like a military checkpoint just up the road, directly between him and the Exit. Fortunately, the men manning the checkpoint didn't look like they were from any GOI, so Williams had hopes that he could bluff his way past. Approaching closer, he could see that the checkpoint was manned by a pair of young, incredibly scared National Guards. He didn't think any of those poor saps were still alive.

"State your business!" One of them yelled, aiming his M16 rifle right at Williams' face. Even though the kid was wearing full NBC gear, he couldn't hide the fear in his body language.

"Whoa, calm down, son." Williams said diplomatically. "I'm not here to fight."

The other Guardsman breathed a sigh of relief through his gas mask. "Oh thank god, are you here to help with the purge?"

"Uh, yeah." Williams nodded, going with the flow. "I'm Special Forces."

"Great!" The second Guardsman stood aside, pulling open the makeshift barricade to allow Williams through. "It hit two days ago. The GOC is helping us clean it out. You should go to them if you want to help out."

"I'll keep that in mind."

"Oh yeah, remember, if you don't have an official sanction, we can't let you back out!" The first Guardsman added helpfully.

With his objective so tantalizingly close, Williams started sprinting for his destination. However, in his rush, he got sloppy, rounded a corner, and ran straight into a GOC MET.

"Stop!" The MET leader yelled.

"Don't worry, I'm not infected."

"All individuals breaking curfew are assumed to be infected." The MET leader inched closer to Williams, trying to get a good look at him. "Where are you from?"

Behind the MET leader, Williams observed the rest of the MET unloading piles of clockwork corpses from a truck and dumping them onto a nearby lawn, where another MET member was collecting gasoline in preparation for a bonfire. "I'm from the Foundation, I've been sent here to help."

"Hold on, I'm running this through Command." The MET leader turned around and starting waving to his squad.

"He's totally playing you." A cold, feminine voice burst through Williams' headset. "There aren't any outgoing signals. Just stand still."

A fraction of a second later, the MET leader's head exploded like a melon, and the rest of the body crumpled like a sack of meat. The rest of the MET was still in shock, and had no chance to react before being cut down by a combination of fire from Williams' M4 and Richard's sniper rifle.

"You're late." Richards said in an annoyed tone as she made her way down from her perch atop a nearby water tower. "I've been camped up there for a week waiting for you to get your sorry ass here."

"Well, as you can see, I was held up." Williams scoffed. She seemed to think going cross country on foot was a cakewalk!

"Come on, we don't have much time." Richards motioned for Williams to follow her. "Foundation HQ activated nuclear failsafe twenty minutes ago."

"So there really is nothing left."

"Affirmative."

Williams and Richards were standing in a ruined mini-mart, which had literally been looted to its foundations. However, they weren't here for food or money, they were here for the restroom.

"Does it still work?" Spoon asked.

"I've tested it. SCP-436 is still operational." Richards opened the restroom door, which was now hanging precariously off one hinge. "You do realize the inherent danger and unpredictability of this SCP?"

"Can you honestly say it could be any worse than what we're in right now?"

"Point."

It was incredibly awkward trying to fit two people into a restroom stall designed for one, especially when both individuals were clad in full combat gear. However, they did eventually manage to make it work, and there really wasn't anybody around to see the whole fiasco anyways.

"Well, see you on the other side." Williams said.

"To greener pastures." Richards said as she grabbed the door handle and pulled it closed.

Expanded Biography of "The Administrator"

Well, it all got started when I became god.

Security Clearance: Qliphoth

Duties: The Administrator is more of an editor than a writer. Over many years, he has seen the rise and fall of countless SCP documents. If found, please contact Overwatch Command for pickup.

Biography: The Administrator has been known to exist for much longer than the typical span of a human life. Many personnel have noted that due to the fact that they have never seen him, and only occasionally receive word from his office, that he is a hoax. These personnel are to be summarily hanged.

It has been noted that he has a habit of keeping his hands together, never bringing them more than a few inches apart, even when reaching for things. Though he is seen as slow and even at times sluggish in nature, he has displayed amazing feats of strength when needed on several occasions. His ar

Items 'The Administrator' has been affiliated with

- **SCP-262** - A Coat of Many Arms
- Item once belonging to The Administrator now relinquished to the Foundation.

A very faithful coat

There's two sides to everything, at least. Sometimes there's more, sometimes there's less. Let's just say that I got both sides of the coin, and then I flipped it a bunch of times, and then I forgot which side was supposed to be where. Does that make any sense?

No?

Sorry, sometimes I mix up my metaphors a bit, and we end up pretty confused. But, anyways, this is the story of how I managed to find all my stuff. I lost it because I wasn't careful, and because I left my mind behind when this all began.

Personnel Reports

Professor Kain Pathos Crow: “Oh, he’s just something people talk about over lunch or when they’re between assignments. It kills time, and it’s a fun game to speculate on who really calls the shots in this crazy world."

Agent Fritz Willie: “I like to tell people he’s my brother.”

Dr. Snorlison: “I’d like to poke at him and see what happens. Just to see if any of the rumors about being made entirely of legs and toes are true. Or something like that, at least.”

Director Neil Ghost: “No big deal, son.”

Dr. Gears: “There are no records of anyone by that name working for the Foundation.”

Dr. Iceberg: “Whatever the bossman said goes. I’m not on staff to care about last decade’s rumors.”

Dr. Glass: “Never met the guy. Heard he’s pretty interesting, though. I’d love to sit down and have a chat with him, but he’s probably too busy. I’ve never even gotten a call back about it.

The first set, I think, is the best one. They're the ones that, while I made a lot of mistakes, I learned from it. Plus, a couple came out really good. And they did their job of ironing out the bumps in my coin purse. Oh, yeah, I forgot that there were a lot of coins here. Sometimes they'd get flipping as they jangled in the purse, and before you knew it we'd gotten in too deep. Or they had, at least. I was fine.

ADDENDUM OF ONE

On March 11th, 19 , it was noted that several people witnessed a one armed man wandering through Site-19. Due to the smell

reported by those in proximity to the person, it is believed they are a bum who managed to wander past security. A full audit has been started, and all personnel are to report for a mandatory security screening.

Really people? This is what lets us know there are holes in our system? -

don't trust the staff. there's something wrong with them. they're too many, but they all know each other

This Timeline is no longer Prime. Access has been denied. I'm sorry, We must not Be Cool Yet

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This Timeline is no longer Prime. Access has been denied. I'm sorry, We must not Be broken Yet :(

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I'm Sorry, this Timeline must become Cool. Access has been denied. We must not Know the Dark Yet :(]]]}}

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This Timeline has become Prime. The Broken have been denied. I'm sorry, We must not Be Thaumiel Yet :(

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Does the black moon howl?

Personnel Reports

they're not persons anymore.

Dr. Alto Clef: “Who?”

Dr. Chelsea "Photosynthetic" Elliott: “I’ve actually done some research on him. Earliest records are about sixty years ago, and beyond that there's some vague references to a 'leader'. Most of the records, though, are incomplete or just references by name. Not much of substance.”

Dr. Frederick Heiden: “Please, leave me alone.”

Dr. Jack Bright: “Yeah, I’ve heard of the guy yer talking about. He’s just a legendary thing, from back in the day. When we thought there were twelve O5's, we said he was there t'be the tie-breaker. People don’t talk about it much now, anymore. Probably because we don’t need icons like that to keep people together.”

Dr. Jacob "Kens" Kensington: “I think he bought me lunch once.”

Dr. Rights: “I heard he lives up in a biiig tower at Overwatch, and he watches down on the O5’s from the back of a mighty, scaled dragon, and he flies the skies for free! Or, uh, something like that. You’ll have to wait until I finish the book to hear the whole story.”

Dr. Northrop: I'm a little busy right now, can you come back later?

Agent Strelnikov: “Is stupid rumor.”

Dr. Mann: “He’s probably more interesting on the inside than outside.”

Dr. Kondraki: “Fuck that guy.”

there's hands everywhere.they don't stop moving.they're making new unpeople to rule the world

INTERVIEW WITH SUBJECT 20-7 “Doug Kondraki”

Interview occurred during the subjects det[DATA REMOVED FOR BREVITY]nd no longer cooperates due to the status.

Kondraki: Is this going to be long?

Interviewer: I don’t think I can say, it’s up to you. These are your lodgings, aren’t they?

Kondraki: I just stay here. I don’t own anything about this place.

Interviewer: So, cutting to the chase. You don’t like the Administrator?

Kondraki: I always thought it was a stupid concept. For there to be one big boss at the top.

Interviewer: Well, you were known for an autocratic style of management, at Site-17…

Kondraki: Yeah. Look where that got me.

Interviewer: Well, I didn’t mean to offend…

Kondraki: Everyone abandoned me. Do you know what that’s like? To just be totally given up on? To go from

riding fucking dragons to being written off by everyone and their brother? To have coworkers try to assassinate me, seen?

Interviewer: I imagine it wasn't easy.

Kondraki: It wasn't. But you know, I'm not bitter about how things turned out. You know why?

Interviewer: Why is that?

Kondraki: Because the house of inconsistent horses has a secondary effect.

Interviewer: [DATA EXPUNGED]

At this point, Dr. Kondraki attempted to breach the interview site, and was able to disable sixteen guarding personnel before being captured. Currently, the security of his lodgings are being upgraded as he awaits [DATA REMOVED].

some of them were broken, but they self-regulate. they ate him to conserve his power after he burnt on the stake

<End Log>

BYE BYE BYE

Jack Bright's retirement party wasn't something to write home about. For those who'd lived long enough to remember Clef's, or even Gears', there'd been quite a bit of fanfare. In Clef's case, a site-wide chowder cook-off commemorated his passing. Seeing the look on his face when he took a bite of what he thought was new england clam chowder, and turned out to be some godawful homebrew designed to look as appetizing as possible while retaining absolutely no nutritional value.

Gears had been seated stoically in the center of the lobby, while everyone around him took their turn to commemorate the man. Normally, site command would disallow such shenanigans, but these were legendary icons passing into the realm of memory.

Gears himself hadn't made much of a speech, but he had thanked everyone for their time, stood for a moment, then left for the last time.

Bright's going away had none of the fun of Clef's, nor the dignity of Gears' parties. He supposed it was natural this time. He was the last of the old guard out the door, moving on to… wherever the Foundation wanted to keep him. The few researchers who knew him, or at least thought they did, sat in the room, awkwardly watching as the doughy convict body picked at a slice of cake.

"Hey. Moving on?"

Bright looked up. Before him stood a tall… person. Their face was a complexion of contradictions, with some lumps thrown in for good measure. It wore a long, musty trench coat, with barely perceptible bumps meandering beneath the cotton surface.

"Who are you?"

"The new normal." They shrugged, as two hands popped out of the sleeve, outstretched as if to shake.

Bright looked at it, shrugged, and shook. "Here to see the last of the old guard out."

"I guess. Depends on how old you want to look at things."

"Old for me, then. My kind. We're not of this world anymore."

"No, afraid not. It's unfortunate, because you all were very interesting to watch. But nobody gets it anymore."

"Yer tellin' me…"

"It's an inevitable part of life. We all have to move on, or at least see that we interfere as little as possible with the new order."

"You say it like it's so easy." Bright slumped one cheek into his hand, and glanced up to his visitor. "It's not fun, thinking how I've put generations of work into this place… and now I don't belong."

“There will be other places.”

The stranger turned around, and they moved. It wasn’t an accelerating movement, or really any velocity at all, but it was a shift in tone. Bright looked up. He was still seated at the same table, but instead of being surrounded by half-bored vending machines and fully-bored researchers, he was in a cabin. A small fireplace crackled to his left, and cast a flickering illumination over the rest of his surroundings. The person before him took off the coat, and perched themselves on the creaky wooden floor.

“Oh, you’re one of those, huh?”

“I am original. You want to go for a walk?”

“… What’s it like out there?”

“I don’t know.”

“… Sure.”

The two of them, together, walked across the room, and opened the door that ended the second era.

I liked having the power to do anything, for awhile. But then I got bored, and then I got bored of being bored! How do you do that?

It must be magical.

WHAT A FEW PEOPLE HAVE SAID

Napoleon Bonaparte:(Recovered page written in exile, prior to the 100 days.) At Stotteritz, we encountered a beggar who claimed to be from the future, and told me that my campaign was about to end in disaster. We would’ve ignored him, but for the fact that his arms were bronzed. A number of our staff members took interest in him, so he was interred until time could be had to examine him. I do not know what became of him.

John Fitzgerald Kennedy:(Source Unknown) There was, ah, a fake-armed CIA spook. He came in with some very, very realistic looking papers, and told me that Cuba affair had gone sour. He said

we needed the codes now. I just looked at him. I didn't know what he was talking about. Then he said if, ah, if we launched now, some of the midwest might be saved. Of course, that's when Hogan came in and took him down. I don't know what they were thinking. And I want a full investigation into what the hell he was doing in the executive mansion.

Stephen King:(Suppressed Interview) One of the oddest things to happen to me, out on the road, was at an autograph session. In Westbrook, I think. A larger gentleman approached the table with a copy of the Stand. Said he was a big fan. Now, I think I might be a little crazy here, but when I looked at his hand holding the book, it was green. I asked if he was okay, and I looked up into his eyes. They were green too. He said he was fine. It was pretty scary stuff.

I lost a lot, flipping that coin, or dial, or whatever you want to call it. It wasn't really a coin, because you couldn't buy anything with it and it wasn't really made of metal, flat, and it possessed the properties of water. But the water bit was how I managed to make the interesting people.

ACCESS IN DENIAL

In order to prevent anything about The Administrator from happening, a number of false preconceptions are to be maintained about life, the universe, and everything. Any actions taken by The Administrator officially do not exist, and any sightings are to be viewed as a breach of contract. The Administrator will not change anything about our prior experiences, except as required under - - .

WARNING: THIS DOES NOT EXIST.

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it's all burning

Eventually, when I really buckled down to start looking for stuff, I found that most of what I'd lost wasn't really that lost. I knew where it was, per se, but I couldn't find it. But it wasn't lost. It was just misplaced. I was still in control, and I could, and I can, still find everything if I looked hard enough.

It'll all turn up eventually. Don't panic.

PERSONNEL REPORTS

Dr. Tilda D. Moose: (Laughs)“No, no, I don’t think we even humor that one anymore. It’s like the mid-tier research staff telling the new people there’s a pool on the third floor. Nobody really believes it, but a couple people every year try and ask, ‘just to check’. But yes, it’s a more or less dead rumor.”

Agent Fredericks: “Is that the same thing as being the Overwatcher, or am I messing that up again?

Dr. S. Vang: “He’s a famous dead guy. Who is famous for being a famous dead guy. Or something. I don't think anyone really gives a sh- er, that anyone really cares.”

Director Maria Jones: “Why, did somebody find him?”

Dr. Django Bridge: “Sure, I know him. He hangs out at the pool on the fifth floor.”

Agent Lament: “Well, we’re not really supposed to give our thoughts on the guy. It’s one of those distracting things, the ones that they say keep people from their real jobs.”

Recording, Context Unknown

Agent Lament: "The Administrator was the original name for Zero-One, before the rest of the O5 Council was properly codified. It's been that way for years, even since the organization got too big for one person to easily handle."

Unknown: "C'mon. You know more than you're saying, I know. You've worked with Gears and all those other muckity mucks."

Agent Lament: "Well… There is a *little* more to it than that…"

Unknown: "Oh yeah?"

Agent Lament: "Have you ever heard of… Second Havana?"

Documentation Review - Thaddeus Xyank

Research has shown that in every reality, there exists a person who either calls himself, or comes to be known as, The Administrator. This is not unusual, because most realities have counterparts in others. The curious part is the persistence of his character and his role. Every iteration of The Administrator has some sort of job related to the Founding of the Foundation.

Or at least, claims to. Although there are stories of him having a role, no documentation has ever surfaced to prove it. The only written records are secondhand reports of his behavior, or encounters with him. Occasionally, a typo-ridden biography will appear on Foundation servers, and cause a panic when Overwatch thinks they’ve been infiltrated. It always has some gibberish, with a couple of coherent lines: “The

Administrator has been known to exist for much longer than the typical span of a human life." and sometimes "The Administrator goes by many pseudonyms, although none of them are very convincing."

He's almost like Dr. Gideon. In fact, he's exactly like him, with the only difference being that Gideon always has a different role, but the Administrator stays the same. No versions exist of him founding the Insurgency, or doing something completely unrelated to the paranormal. His impact seems to be minimal, limited to a curio piece.

My final analysis is: The Administrator is an interesting, if inconsequential figure. He appears, then quickly vanishes, leaving only scraps of information behind. If I ever meet one, I'll update this document.

As of 09/18/2015, the size of the "Administrator Biography" file has increased by 20gb on Foundation databases. The reason for this discrepancy is unknown, as the content of the file is unchanged. Research is ongoing.

Sorry

TRANSCRIPT OF A CHANCE ENCOUNTER

"So, does it have a name?"

"There are so many indentations of me throughout the whole work." He smiled in a fatherly way, as a pox-riddled green tentacle curled out of his sleeve to brush some dust of his collar. "Little touches, so I can keep my finger on the pulse."

"So what, then, you're just another administrator?" she paced around him, keeping her eyes trained on the openings in his coat. She saw it shift and move in a way carefully designed to resemble the wind, of which there was none to be found here.

“No, sorry. Unlike you, I am definitive. No offense, of course. There are no other versions, counterparts, or duplicates. It’s a very rare thing, at least for you, to see something that is one-of-a-kind.”

“But I’ve seen all of you.”

“You’ve seen my little personal touches. I know you’ve met the smoker. Maybe an android, or the idiot who keeps ripping pages out. We keep in touch.” Two hands emerged from from his unbuttoned middle, one a deep maroon, the other soaking wet, and they shook on it.

“Pages?”

“It’s a metaphor, to keep it explainable when I have company over. All of the different everythings out there are like pages in a book. You, for example, would be a reader who skips ahead to the good parts. You make the world a smaller place.”

She frowned. “Who’s the idiot?”

“There are a lot of idiots out there. Only one keeps in touch. They’re the type of person who rips out any pages they don’t like, or in the idiot’s case, because they’re bad at explaining themselves properly, and worse at lying.”

“Shouldn’t you stop him?”

“No, he’ll learn eventually. They always do. Not like ripping a few pages out of the index ever really mattered, in the bigger picture.”

“Why did you bring me here?”

The Administrator shrugged, an infinite wave of misshapen shoulders rippling beneath his coat. “You came to me. I don’t know what you thought I’d be telling you.”

“… Then I’m going to be on my way.”

“See you later. Good luck with your dad.”

“Farewell, your highness.”

I remember when they first rolled off the assembly line, all of the staffmen. They were just supposed to be a temporary measure, but it went on for too long. We outnumbered ourselves with half-people, people who talk and breathe and fuck like we do, but they're identical sets of people stamped out to every site.

We ruined everything.

When they pulled me out of the vat for the last time, they asked what it felt like to own it all. The world belonged to me. I didn't really mind it, but it gets tiring. You start out being god, but then it keeps on going up and up until nothing else matters. Too much responsibility, until it becomes meaningless.

So I depart. Goodbye, au reviore, so long and thanks for all the fish.

Experiment 919-23

D-Class subject 919-05 was a very, very bad man. Arrested, tried, and convicted of multiple counts of child abduction, rape, and first degree murder, 919-05 was on track for death row. The prison surgeon was standing at the end of the hall, and with him was the needle waiting to dig into his arm. The new correctional officers at his sides showed no mercy for the convict. They were tall, large men with no-nonsense attitudes, nothing like the officers in the other hall. In fact, their uniforms looked different as well. Suddenly, the hall disappeared from in front of him, and 919-05 was plunged into darkness.

He was caught literally red-handed, having just disposed of another victim in the woods near her home. At his trial, he expressed gratitude to the families of the victims for providing him with the children that fueled his perverse needs. There were no witnesses registered for his execution. His only remaining family was a father who wanted nothing to do with the sick man that his son had become; and the families of his victims didn't want to see another moment of the monster who took away their children so many years ago. The media followed his trial closely; covering 919-05's story up to a week after his execution was carried out.

Except D-Class subject 919-05 wasn't executed. Not yet. The Foundation had him.

"… and after careful review of the specific facts of the subject, the nature of the experiment, and the nature of SCP-919, permission for Experiment 919-23 is granted for Dr. Temke."

"Thank you gentlemen. I believe that all the necessary requirements have now been met, so I won't waste any more of your valuable time…"

“One more thing, Doctor… we know about your niece. We’ve known for a few weeks now.”

The pallor on Dr. Temke’s face increased significantly. They’ve already granted their permission, why would they go back on it now? This experiment could help so many tormented families…

“Oh?” was all he managed to squeak out.

“Just a warning. Follow the experiment protocols exactly. Any deviation will not be tolerated.”

The relief washed over him like a river. “Of course. Thank you.”

Dr. Temke left the boardroom, the sweat fogging his glasses, and his hands shaking.

919-05 was right there in front of him. An IV drip provided the necessary paralytic to keep him from moving too much, but he could still speak. And boy did he speak. He cried, he screamed, he begged, he threatened to call his lawyer. Not surprisingly, after that last request was denied, he started to calm down a bit and tried to assess his surroundings. There wasn’t much to see. He was strapped to a wheelchair, and could barely move his arms and legs. His head kept flopping side to side as he surveyed his new prison. It was as if his neck muscles were just too tired to hold up his head. There was no light except for a lone bulb directly above his head, making him sweat and squint. The stinging sweat dripped right into his eyes and blurred his vision. From what he could see, there was a large black curtain in front of him. He couldn’t see what it was covering, but it was tall. To the right and slightly behind the curtain was a chair. It was one of those fancy ones with upholstered arms and made of leather. Far behind both of those were two guards, dressed just like the men who were taking him to the chamber at the end of the hall. That was three days ago.

A door opens out of view of 919-05, and a tall man in a lab coat walks in and sits in the chair next to the curtain. The man looks through several pieces of paper on a clipboard, and then locks his gaze onto 919-05. His eyes stare intently at 919-05, seeming to look

beyond the eyes at the pathetic little man paralyzed in the wheelchair.

After a few seconds, 919-05 speaks.

“I want my lawyer,” he says with a tremble. “I want my lawyer right now, and I won’t talk to you.”

The doctor adjusts his glasses and looks at his watch. He takes a pen out of his pocket and says, “You were convicted of killing almost a dozen children over the last two years. Where are their bodies?”

“Fuck you,” says 919-05. “I want my lawyer.”

“Please answer the question.” Dr. Temke wipes his forehead with a handkerchief, gripping his pen tightly with the other hand. “Where are the children hidden? All of them. Did you bury them?"

"I want my lawyer…"

"Burn them?"

"My lawyer. I want my lawyer now…"

"Where are they?! Where is Angie? WHERE IS MY NIECE?!”

“I said I want my lawyer. Who the hell are you?! I WANT TO SEE MY FUCKING LAWYER! I WANT TO SEE HIM NOW!” 919-05 screams, the anger and fear easily visible in his eyes.

“You don’t have a lawyer. You…you were executed three days ago, and dead men don’t get lawyers.” Dr. Temke stands up and takes a step to the side of the black curtain.

“I’ll ask you once more, where are the kids' bodies? They deserve proper burials.”

“I want to see my lawyer,” is all 919-05 mutters.

“I’ll show you something worse.” At this Dr. Temke pulls down on the curtain, showing a large ornate mirror, reflecting back to 919-05 just his own image.

Dr. Temke takes a step away, reaching into his lab coat. He pulls out a gun and points it directly at 919-05 stomach, his finger twitching with anticipation. The fear in 919-05 eyes crescendos, and he stares directly at the gun. For the first time, he doesn't say anything and just breathes in heavily, possibly wondering why he hasn't been shot yet. Seconds feels like hours, but after a short while the silence is broken. Not by 919-05. Not by the Doctor. Not even by the imposing guards in the corners. The sound comes from right in front of 919-05. From the mirror.

"Please…don't go…please stay…"

919-05 jaw drops, but his surprise is interrupted as an explosion shatters the silence, followed by a pain in his stomach that feels like he just swallowed a piece of red-hot coal. He manages to look up and see the smoke curling up from the barrel of the gun. The pain is intense, and 919-05 starts screaming. The IV drip is barely keeping him from moving.

Dr. Temke suddenly changes track. He throws the gun on the floor and turns to look at the mirror.

"Please…keep him here. Don't take him away."

"I will," says the Doctor. "Tell me, can you move? Can you shake your feet for me?"

"No, I can't. I'm sorry. Please don't be mad. Please don't take him away. I can try again. Give me a minute and I can try moving them again. Don't take him away. Please…" the reflection pleads.

"I won't. It's okay, just answer the questions, okay? Are you shot? Look at your stomach. Have you been shot?"

"No, I'm okay, I haven't been shot."

Dr. Temke takes out a tape recorder and turns away, "919-05A seems to suffer the same disadvantages as 919-05 prior to losing synchronicity. Any physical damage done to 919-05 after losing synchronicity does not seem to be reflected in 919-05A. Sweat from the light and interrogation is still visible on…"

919-05 lets out a low moan, breaking the Doctor's concentration. The Doctor stares at him, and then quickly turns his gaze back to the reflection.

"…is still visible on 919-05A's forehead. All physical characteristics are identical prior to the gunshot made approximately 15 seconds after exposure."

He pauses to clear his throat. "This man…you…you murdered and raped several children, and then hid their bodies. Where are they?"

"Please don't take him away. They're in an old storm shelter; 6 miles west off of mile marker 23 on Route 11. You're not going to take him there are you?… It's near where my dad used to have a cabin when I was younger. He can still show you where…"

919-05 lets out a loud moan and tries to speak. Dr. Temke's head whips around to look at him. He bends down and picks up the gun, pointing it right at 919-05's skull. 919-05 looks up at the man in the lab coat, and at the gun in his hand. His vision is blurred and his mind is fuzzy, but he knows this is something…different. Something horrifying.

"Wha…Who are you…"

Dr. Temke pulls the trigger, terminating 919-05 immediately. He gasps at how easy it was, and how immediately 919-05 just slumps down. A few seconds pass. He looks up at the camera that was stationed behind 919-05.

"Well? What does the father say? Is it there?"

A few more seconds pass. Static, and then a voice fill the room, "Yeah…he says he hasn't been there in almost a decade, but it's not far from one of our stationed agents. We're sending him over now."

"Please…keep him here."

Dr. Temke looks up and sees 919-05A still staring intently at the body of the terminated D-Class.

"Right…we've still got some questions for you…"

An hour later, Dr. Temke puts down his pen. He looks across the room at the body of the man who took away his only niece's life. The man was given an extra three days to live, and his contribution to this experiment greatly improved the understanding of the nature of SCP-919. That thought is secondary. The only thing he truly feels is the relief at getting to pull the trigger. He knows he will have to submit himself to psychiatric evaluation after this. That and a mandatory 2-week vacation were prerequisites of the experiment he agreed to.

"Uh, Dr. Temke? We've got some news."

Dr. Temke sits upright and stares intently at the camera. 919-05A does the same.

"Yeah…we found the bodies. We found all eleven of them. Right where 919-05A said they were. "

"See! I told you I could help! Please leave him here; I can't do anything else to anyone. I can just sit here, now." 919-05A hasn't changed during the entire ordeal. He hasn't said anything new but the truth. He hasn't changed his demeanor or attitude. He's still the same subject he was when he was first brought into existence.

There is nothing new to learn here.

Dr. Temke stands up and walks back to the door he came in through. As he leaves, he turns to one of the guards.

"Get someone down here to clean up. I need the body sent to Autopsy, and SCP-919 returned to the containment cell."

At this, 919-05A starts screaming and thrashing in his bonds. "PLEASE! OHGODOHGODOHGOD…PLEASE NO! NO! YOU PROMISED! DON'T TAKE HIM AWAY! OH GOD NO NO NO!"

The guard moves towards the mirror and starts picking up the black curtain from the floor. Dr. Temke ignores the pleas of the scared reflection and walks out of the door, letting it slowly shut behind him.

He can hear 919-05A screaming all the way down the hall.

As he turns the corner, the screaming abruptly stops.

Experiment Log 040

Experiment Log of: **`Professor K. P. Crow`**, utilizing **`SCP-040`** in obtaining base materials for the "**`Olympia Project`**".

- **Date:** 13/12/2008

Pre-Experiment Note:
I think it's about time we started trying to utilize 040's abilities, or at the very least, allowing her to use them enough to actually learn how to control them. She will not be able to rely on the ***`SCP-148`*** *hairpieces forever. We theorized that as she gets older, her powers will increase exponentially, possibly to the point where her unconscious telepathy cannot be contained.*

At the moment, she doesn't seem to have a fully conscious grip on her abilities either, allowing her subconscious to take over when she begins to use them. She says its easier to do that way, but that she doesn't always know what the thing she's working on will become, or sometimes even what she's doing.

I'm going to have her perform a set amount of exercises. We'll start with small things, such as pebbles, odd bits of debris, that sort of thing, and she's going to try and change them into something we agree on, like some sort of crustacean or insect.

Post-Experiment Note:
Well… That could have gone better.

The beginning of the experiment went badly. 040 was nervous about trying this in front of so many people, and that anxiousness reflected itself in the things that she produced. Most were vicious, often baring fangs, claws and poison sacks at anyone who ventured near, despite 040's best efforts. Most of them we had to terminate simply for safety reasons. She wasn't happy about that.

But she improved towards the end of the session, although she still

couldn't firmly nail down the process, often becoming incoherent and unstable while she performed. Still, it's not a worst case scenario. She's performing well for a first try under supervision. Still be a little while before she's able to do anything on the scale I'm hoping. She just needs more practice.

- **14/12/2008**

Pre-Experiment Note:
I think 040 is a little more prepared today, but she still seemed a little anxious. Not as much as she did yesterday thankfully, but it's still there. At least she's stopped those little episodic delusions of grandeur. Those were a little disturbing.

We're going to attempt the same as yesterday, although if she improves significantly, we'll move onto the next subject group. But for the moment, we'll simply stick to small things.

Post-Experiment Note:
Today did go better than yesterday, considerably better than yesterday in fact, but not good enough to progress to the next level of testing. 040 still has trouble with control. Out of the twenty-five times we had her use her abilities, she was only able to give us the results we wanted three times, and it seems that even then, it was more of a fluke than anything else. Still more practice required. We're going to have to break this block between her and her powers. And to do that, we may have to employ slightly more… stressful measures.

- **15/12/2008**

Pre-Experiment Note:
She still seems to be getting over the initial anxiety, but now, it's barely noticeable. We're going to try again with the little things, but we're going to have her concentrate on directing it towards her own conscious will, rather than her subconscious. Basically, we're telling her to "remain in control".

Post-Experiment Note:
Today was the same as yesterday really. She seems to find it difficult to control her powers. All she's really doing is opening the

floodgates and directing it at a target. No finesse, no control. She's just turning it on and pointing it. I'll have her set up for a psych evaluation. We need to find the root of this block of hers.

- **16/12/2008**

Pre-Experiment Note:
040 seems to be in a good mood today, and is determined to be able to alter things herself, instead of doing it automatically. Same exercises as the last couple days.

Post-Experiment Note:
There seems to be some slight improvement, but not much, and then again, it could just be a higher rate of chance. She's been scheduled for a psych evaluation, and it should take place within the next few days.

- **17/12/2008**

Pre-Experiment Note:
The psych evaluation went through, and the results were sadly predictable. Apparently, she's suffering from psychological repression regarding her abilities. The only reason she's able to access them at all is due to the fact that she would act on her need to use them through her telepathy, and find an acceptable venue in which to use them, but in doing so, would still regret having done it, and so instantly repress the memory. It has developed to the point of being a conditioned response. There's also the large amount of repressed memories she has regarding why she feels this anxiety when using these abilities. Apparently, the only lead we have regarding this is either her former guardians or her parents, both of which are now deceased. So, while we figure out how to break that block, we'll try and remove the stigma of using her powers ***within limits****, by increasing the windows in which she's allowed to use them.*

Post-Experiment Note:
The block is still there, which is pretty much making this route of experimentation and training useless. But still, if we break it off so suddenly after her psych test, being as young and emotionally inexperienced as she is, she might think that the reason we stopped

was because there was something wrong with her, leading to loss of self-esteem, loneliness, and in general, more emotional baggage, which in turn, lead to more incidents regarding her and her abilities, more stigma, and more to the detriment of everyone involved. So, the experiments are to continue for the time being, but we're going to have to have more psychological probing, and discover what caused this repression.

- **18/12/2008**

Pre-Experiment Note:
Trying to fix the damage to her mind is proving to be difficult. She's unconsciously resisting the treatment, because subconsciously, she doesn't want to be healed. This is hardly a good environment either. We'll have to get that looked at. Continuing with the same exercises.

Post-Experiment Note:
Same results. We'll have to allow her access to more of the results. It could possibly help ease the stigma. Maybe we could have the restrictions loosened a little, but then again, we don't want to spoil her. She is still a child, and as such is still susceptible to having her mental growth altered.

- **19/12/2008**

Pre-Experiment Note:
We're trying to find out about her history to try and investigate what may have lead to this. It's difficult, because all members of the [DATA EXPUNGED]. So, that leaves us with no real leads, since the original population of the area has been mentally purged, and we could find no other traces of [DATA EXPUNGED]. Further research is needed into her background. Same exercises as the past few days.

Post-Experiment Note:
Same results. This is beginning to get frustrating. We may have to resort to hypnosis to try and get access to the memories that we're looking for.

- **20/12/2008**

Pre-Experiment Note:
040 is definitely getting more self-esteem, so at least these experiments are having some sort of positive effect. Her abilities at control though are still lacking, but it's a step in the right direction. Being allowed to keep some more of her creations seems to be helping as well, although we may have to increase her containment area in order to accommodate. Still going to put forward the approval for hypnosis though. Still the same exercises.

Post -Experiment Note:
No changes as of yet, although the fluke rate of more accurate transmogrification is slightly rising. It seems that while she isn't controlling her powers directly, she may be forcing her subconscious to her will, although it could also be the fact that we've been performing the same tests for a few days now and it's coming to what her psyche is expecting to happen. We'll have to change the target organism.

- **21/12/2008**

Pre-Experiment Note:
We've gotten approval for hypnosis, and we'll soon be using it in conjunction with the normal experiments. We'll start with that tomorrow though. Also, we've changed the target organism to something reptilian rather than insectoid. We'll see how that fares.

Post-Experiment Note:
No change, oddly enough. The fluke rate of accurate transmogrification is still steady and slowly rising. Maybe she is getting the hang of this. Nevertheless, we'll continue with the hypnosis and attempts at getting 040 to break her mental block.

Experiment Log 158 AG

Experiment Log of: **`Professor K. P. Crow`**, regarding **`SCP-158`** in use for the "**`Olympia Project`**".

Date: 29-11-2008

Pre-Experiment Note
I've gathered up several D-Class personnel, having interviewed and evaluated them all, and picked those with personalities and characteristics that I like, or would be useful. Some are male, others are female, as I believe a soul transcends the flesh it is interred in.

But the purpose of this experiment, is to test the "extra" capabilities of the device, those spoken upon in the heavily damaged sections of the book. I've pored over them incessantly, trying to glean as much information as possible from it, but the instructions I managed to get were sketchy at best, and downright unhelpful at worst.

But that will not deter me. I'm a researcher! Trial and error are my middle names!

- **Experiment-01**

I withdrew the first subject's soul. Try as I might, I was unable to do anything extra to it, but then again, there was such a small window of time for me to utilize it and try everything. But on the bright side I managed to reverse the process. While that had been done before, no one has discovered the sequence needed to activate, operating on blind luck. This is the first thing I'll concentrate on.

- **Experiment-05**

Hah! I've done it! It wasn't that hard.

- **Experiment-06**

You know, I've noticed that there's a small period in the middle of

the operation where the process pauses, as if it's waiting for further commands. I think that's when the further inputs can be made. I'll have to start checking.

- **Experiment-07**

I've been removing and re-implanting the same soul into the same test subject, mainly as a form of experimentation with the controls, but also as practice. Oddly enough, there doesn't seem to be any sort of side effects regarding the subject's health. One would think there would be, considering what I'm doing to her… Regardless, I've been probing around that pause with the controls, and I think I almost have it.

- **Experiment-08**

I made it begin the movements of something else entirely before it paused again and resumed its original course. I almost have it…

- **Experiment-11**

I got it! It completely stopped during the pause, and a completely new set of options appeared on the monitor, being things like "split", "merge", "remove aspects", "add aspects" and "combine aspects". From this I can only deduce that the device is capable of internally storing and modifying these souls for use on other subjects. This is exactly what I was looking for!

Date: 30-11-2008

- **Experiment-12**

The aspects that the machine talks about are difficult to define properly. They're all notated by a single word each, often something obscure from various religious texts. I've had to pore over the holy books of at least four major religions and six minor ones, just to understand what the hell the machine is trying to tell me, and even then, I'm still not entirely sure I understand. As far as I know it, most of these "aspects" are facets of the person's personality, and their general basic behavior, as well as things like willpower, understanding, conscience, creativity, empathy, and drive. This…

may take some time to truly figure out.

- **Experiment-37**

*This is taking much, **much** longer than I had originally anticipated. So far I've discovered that the device itself can store up to ten different souls and their composite aspects, and modify them internally. Finding out exactly what each aspect corresponds with is difficult to say the least. I'm having to modify each subject slightly, then send them out for a complete psychological evaluation to try and discern what exactly I did. Then I have to repeat the process several more times just to make sure. It's tiring to say the least, but on the upside, at least I'm becoming more proficient at the device.*

- **Experiment-42**

This is getting ridiculous. This has sucked up most of the time in my day, and I'm near falling asleep here. There has to be a different way to monitor or measure the changes in these people's souls. I'm going to try and get onto R&D and see if they can find some sort of way of reverse engineering some part of this device, something to make this run just that little bit smoother, something to help us understand it more. I know how to operate it, but I'm shooting in the dark here. I'm like a child with a piano, I know which keys make which sounds, but I can't play a song to save my life. I'll try again tomorrow. Maybe the morn will bring with it new ideas.

Date: 01/12/2008

- **Experiment-57**

I had thought I had grasped an idea of the limits of this device, but I was proven wrong. I had assumed the machine was at fault, being too complicated for its own good. Now I realize my mistake. It's not the machine, it's the very nature of a human soul. There's no true way to express something like that in mere words, although this machine tries desperately to do that. That said, it will take me some time to be able to use this device competently enough to do what I am hoping to do. I'll have to study the things I have seen and recorded to the very limit of my abilities.

Date: 02/12/2008

- **Experiment-80**

I've left the device alone for the moment, electing to study my notes than raise more questions interacting with the device. I've recorded over four hundred different words in regards to the aspects, with an almost unlimited number of combinations capable therein. Seems apt of course, considering the complexity of the human condition. But should I master this device, the possibilities could be endless. But such a thing does not seem to be anywhere in sight. It may take months, even years, simply to grasp this device, let alone do what I have suggested.

I plan to do it in days.

Date: 03/12/2008

- **Experiment-93**

Still no real progress. At most, I've gotten a single soul that is a composite of all I've learned, but it's something that I can't quite describe. When interred into a host, it's highly interesting, but when I send it in for a psyche test, the results basically go out the window. We can't get a valid result, which in and of itself is impossible.

- **Experiment-95**

I've been modifying this composite soul, which I'll dub Subject Zero for the time being, and every time I do so, I get the feeling there's more to this than meets the eye. It seems to be more aware of its surroundings, more knowledgeable than its host should allow, displaying an intellect that would outstrip most researchers in this place many time over. Possibly even me…

- **Experiment-107**

My god… This is unprecedented. The reason why the evaluations were so inconclusive, why Zero seemed so knowledgeable, why it seemed to be able to see another world around it, they all make sense now.

*Subject Zero, by some fluke of chance, or by my meddling with this machine, somehow, simultaneously exists on this plane of existence and several others. I have created an entity that exists beyond the scope of human interaction, a consciousness that can see, and hear, and feel, and **think** outside of this realm. It is aware of what I have been doing, and it appreciates me having created it. It is, in a sense, immortal. Even if its physical host is destroyed, it is capable of continuing to survive beyond that, only slightly limited in this level of existence.*

It revealed the truth to me, and I have asked it to answer my questions for the evaluation honestly. It agreed.

- **Experiment-110**

Zero would make an excellent candidate for my assistant. It respects and admires me for its creation, much a child would an endearing father figure. I have assured it that it would be treated well, and that I will give it a host to the best of my ability to create. All that it asks of me is that it is given a name other than Zero. A name. Not a number.

I told it to give itself a name, to christen itself whatever it so wishes. It told me it would have to think about it.

End of Session

Notes: The composite soul has been accepted as a component for the "**`Olympia Project`**"

Experiment Log 239-C

Experiment 239-C will consist of SCP-239 being presented with a
crayons. Subject will be encouraged to write and/or draw inside
hopefully used to assist with gauging and

Experiment 239-C successfully recovered on 9-21- . Further exper
induced coma. Experiment 239-C may or may not be continued sh
on hold as of 10-0

Experiment Log 784-BETA

Experiment Log – SCP-784-BETA

Purpose:

1. To discover the appropriate nerve endings that **SCP-784** must be connected to in order to function correctly.
2. To replenish stock of SCP-784, in order to allow for further and more extensive testing.
3. To reverse engineer SCP-784, or find practical applications for SCP-784.

INTER SCP CONTAMINATION WARNING:
*In order to facilitate the tremendous need for skill and dexterity in these experiments, I will be utilising **SCP-542**, due to his considerable surgical abilities. However, he is to be watched thoroughly, and under no circumstances is he to obtain any samples of SCP-784 for himself.*

REPEAT: *Under no circumstances is SCP-542 to obtain any samples of SCP-784 for himself. Any attempts to do so will be met with extreme force, and SCP-542 will be promptly and **permanently** removed from both the experiment staff and testing area.*

Pre-Experiment Note:
Should we achieve our first objective, SCP-784 will be utilised in the **Olympia Project**, in test subject Olympia Zero. If successful, this would effectively allow the second objective to be completed, and with that, further research and experimentation into the third objective.

Experiment Process:
The experiments shall proceed as follows:

- Patient shall be prepared and subject to complete open skull surgery, leaving the entirety of the upper hemispheres of the

brain available for use.
- Using SCP-542, as well as information gained from SCP-784's original incarnation as well as its subsequent escape attempt, traces of SCP-784 will be attached to nerve endings in the brain in order to establish cognitive control.
- Should the previous step prove successful, the subject will be put through a series of basic tests in order to showcase the control the subject has over SCP-784.
- Should the previous step prove unsuccessful, subject will be either terminated, or put through the implantation process again. Otherwise, the operation is to be ended, and the subject observed in quarantine for a predetermined length of time.

Experiment Log:

Subject 001: Male Caucasian, aged 36, 5'9, 180lbs. Relative good health.
Experimental Status: FAILURE
Subject Status: DECEASED
Note: *More care is needed. SCP-784 responded to the electrical brain impulses in the brain before implantation and partially activated, consuming part of the tools and subject's grey matter in the process.*

Subject 004: Female Caucasian, aged 45, 5'3, 100lbs. Average health.
Experimental Status: FAILURE
Subject Status: DECEASED
Note: *Please maintain constant vigilance. Failure to correctly restrain the subject will lead to errors in experimentation, and a loss in both productivity and material resources.*

Subject 007: Male Caucasian, aged 35, 6'0, 175lbs. Average health.
Experimental Status: PARTIAL SUCCESS
Subject Status: DECEASED
Note: *Subject was receptive to implantation process to a point. However, there seemed to be some misalignments in the connection to certain nerve endings, as the subject constantly complained of SCP-784 not responding to his exact wishes. This was especially noticeable when the subject attempted to form SCP-784 into a*

complex pattern alignment, and instead exploded, causing a minor breach of security as SCP-784 began to consume all available matter.

Subject 016: Male Black, aged 26, 6'1, 190lbs. Relative good health.
Experimental Status: SUCCESS
Subject Status: DECEASED
Note: *For further choice of test subjects, psych evaluations will be needed in their evaluation.*

Subject 018: Female Caucasian, aged 37, 5'6, 145lbs. Average health.
Experimental Status: SUCCESS
Subject Status: DECEASED
Note: ***REPEAT:*** *For further choice of test subjects, psych evaluations will be needed in their evaluation.*

Subject 024: Male Caucasian, aged 56, 5'5, 160lbs. Below average health.
Experimental Status: SUCCESS
Subject Status: DECEASED
Note: *Correct nerve alignment and implantation has been discerned. However, subject was unable to cope with the added stress of SCP-784 within their body, and later died of inter-cranial pressure. Refinement is needed in the process to prevent this from happening again.*

Subject 031: Male Caucasian, aged 43, 5'8, 180lbs. Average health.
Experimental Status: SUCCESS
Subject Status: ALIVE
Note: *Process has been refined accordingly.*

Subject 035: Olympia Zero
Experimental Status: SUCCESS
Subject Status: ALIVE
Note: *Fusion with SCP-784 was observed to occur to a much greater degree than in previous subjects. This is most likely because of the unusual composition of this Olympia Zero's grey matter. Further testing will proceed on Olympia Zero.*

Experiment Log 914 Theta

Experiment Log of: **Professor K. P. Crow**, utilizing **SCP-914** in obtaining base materials for the "**Olympia Project**".

Date: 05/12/2008

Pre-Experiment Note:
This is to produce the base materials I need for the project. I had to reassemble the subject that I was originally going to use, because after having a talk with ***Dr. Gears****, I discovered that I would be unable to use the composite part as I had originally intended, and am instead forced to use the entire subject.* - Professor Crow

Test-1

Input:

- Caucasian female, thirty-six (36) years of age, five (5) foot, ten (10) inches in height, one hundred and forty-nine (149) pounds in weight. Subject is in relatively good health, although there is some mild liver damage from excessive drinking.
- Ten (10) pounds of **SCP-143**.

Setting: 1:1

Output:
An organism that appeared to be a young tree sapling weighing one hundred and fifty-nine (159) pounds, the bark being a pale gray color, and the leaves dark brown. Organism maintained an average constant external temperature of thirty seven (37) degrees.

Organism has a limited motor nervous system, although there appears to be no true central nervous system. Tissue samples extracted from the main trunk, branches and leaves show that the internal tissue of the trunk is similar to brain tissue, only restructured

to be much more durable, and with a higher level of conductivity, whereas branches had traces similar to muscle tissue. The leaves contained a high amount of trichome hairs, which were much longer and thicker than average, being near an inch in length, and a light brown in color. Further examination showed them to be composed primarily of keratin.

Organism responded much more slowly to external stimuli than most organisms, taking three hours to register the tissue harvesting done to its main trunk.

Subject has also shown limited signs of sentience, although communication is difficult, due to the slow reaction and movement times of the subject.

Note: *While the subject is indeed interesting, and does warrant further examination, it's not what I was looking for. Inter her outside, near the grove, and make sure she's well looked after.*

Test-2

Input:

- Asian female, twenty-nine (29) years in age, five (5) foot, three (3) inches in height, one hundred and twenty-seven (127) pounds in weight. Subject is in relatively good health. No major medical issues.
- Ten (10) pounds of **SCP-143**.

Setting: Fine

Output:

- A solid ten (10) pound block of various compounds that are mainly found within the human body.
- Human female with vaguely Asian features, with the same proportions and weight as the input subject. Skin is light gray, and hair has changed to a slightly translucent pink, similar to the leaves of SCP-143.

Physiology remains mostly the same, although subjects skin has displayed distinct photosynthetic qualities, and tissue has the same basic material properties as SCP-143.

Note: *This is more along the lines of what I was looking for. Hopefully, the rest of the tests will go similarly to this one.*

Test-3

Input:

- Black female, thirty-two (32) years of age, six (6) foot in height, one hundred and seventy-one (171) pounds in weight. Subject is in relatively good health. No major medical issues.
- Ten (10) pounds of **`SCP-148`**.

Setting: 1:1

Output:
A solid statue of the subject composed of a combination of SCP-148 and a variety of compounds found in the human body, weighing one hundred and eighty-one (181) pounds and having the same dimensions as the subject before hand. No life signs.

Notes: *Great,* another *lawn ornament. Complete, and total, failure.*

Test-4

Input:

- Caucasian female, thirty-three (33) years of age, five (5) foot, four (4) inches in height, one hundred and thirty-five (135) pounds in weight. Subject is in relatively good health. Mild damage to lungs due to excessive smoking.
- Ten (10) pounds of **`SCP-148`**

Setting: Fine

Output:

A large spherical object weighing one hundred and forty-five (145) pounds in weight, and one (1) foot in diameter. Object is highly ornate, with raised patterns on the surface, which through further investigation appear to be made of bone. The rest of the exterior is a compound composed partially of SCP-148 and iron, with trace samples of other elements found within the human body.

Object is slightly warm, being twenty-five (25) degrees Celsius on the surface. When a subject is in close physical proximity to the object, subject is capable of seeing "beyond the normal human spectrum of reality" as stated by one subject. This ability increases exponentially when in physical contact with the object. There were no extreme ill effects aside from increasingly severe headaches from prolonged exposure, although this is merited to the inability of the human mind to comprehend such things.

When asked what exactly the subject meant by its previous statement, the subject went on to say that it was possible to "see" thoughts and the "lifeforce" of living organisms. The subject went on to say that he had seen other things which were impossible to explain with words, and that even thinking about them gave him a headache.

Note: *Again, interesting, but again, utterly useless to what I'm trying to do.*

Test-5

Input:

- Caucasian female, twenty-five (25) years of age, five (5) foot three (3) inches in height and one hundred and thirty-seven (137) pounds in weight. Subject is in exceptionally good health. The subject had been a long distance runner before her incarceration.
- Ten (10) pounds of **SCP-148**.

Setting: Fine

Output:

Human female, one hundred and forty-seven (147) pounds in weight, with the same dimensions as the original subject. Skin has taken on a lightly greenish pallor and has hardened considerably, yet remains somewhat malleable. Tissue has become denser, leading to an increase in physical resilience. It is expected that subject will be resilient to mental attacks and probing as well.

Notes: *That's better. That's more along the lines of what I'm looking for.*

Test-6

Input:

- Asian female, twenty (20) years of age, five (5) foot six (6) inches and one hundred and forty-two (142) pounds in weight. Subject is in relatively good health. No major medical issues.
- One (1) Cray CX1, sixty-four (64) core, entry-level massively parallel supercomputer.

Setting: Fine

Output:
Sixty-four (64) arthropods, one (1) foot in size, similar to beetles in appearance. Subjects all possessed a molded metal human face on their underside, which resembled the original subject. Subjects' shells appeared to be made of a substance similar to glass, allowing their internal workings to be viewed easily. Close examination of the subjects revealed that they were composed of a hybrid of powerful circuitry and high-density crystal.

Note: *That… was just kinda weird.*

Test-7

Input:

- Caucasian female, thirty-five (35) years of age, five (5) foot nine (9) inches in height and one hundred and fifty-three (153) pounds in weight. Subject is in relatively good health. Subject

has had a hysterectomy, though that has no effect on her overall health.

- One (1) Cray CX1, sixty-four (64) core, entry-level massively parallel supercomputer.

Setting: 1:1

Output:
Eighty-one (81) various objects primarily composed of metal and glass, all capable of fitting together to form a large statue or mannequin of a human female of the same dimensions and features as the original subject.

When the subject is completely and correctly put together, it will take on a limited semblance of life and begin to speak. It primarily speaks several cryptic phrases regarding the future of the one who put it together, or in the case of multiple persons, the one who did the majority of the work. The phrases are often so vague, that it is impossible to determine whether or not the suggested future will, or even has already taken place. However, occasionally, it will speak plainly with no doubt as to what it is referring to. In these cases, the action always comes to pass, sometimes as a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Once it is done speaking, it will fall apart into the original eighty-one (81) pieces that comprise it. This can be done a limitless amount of times, with no unforeseen side effects, nor does the device ever repeat itself.

Notes: *A giant jigsaw puzzle that tells the future… Well that's a new one.*

Test-8

Input:

- Caucasian female, forty-eight (48) years of age, four (4) foot ten (10) and one hundred and thirteen (113) pounds in weight. Subject is in relatively good health. No major medical issues.

- One (1) Cray CX1, sixty-four (64) core, entry-level massively parallel supercomputer.

Setting: 1:1

Output:
A large, electronic device in the shape of the original subject. It appears to be a multicore supercomputer, although this needs to be confirmed. There are several dozen entry points on the back, corresponding to most cables that could or would need to be attached to a computer of this magnitude, as well as several that do not correspond to anything on record. Further research on object is pending.

Note: *Hmmm…. Close, but wrong side of the line.*

11/12/2008

Test-9

Input:

- Black female, thirty-seven (37) years of age, five (5) foot seven (7) inches and one hundred and fifty-one (151) pounds in weight. Subject is in relatively good health. No major medical issues.

- One (1) Cray CX1, sixty-four (64) core, entry-level massively parallel supercomputer.

Setting: Fine

Output:

- A large block of "waste" material, weighing six thousand, four hundred and twenty-eight (6,428) pounds, and composed primarily of metal, glass, plastic, rubber and traces of human tissue.

- Human female, with exact same dimensions as the original subject. However, x-rays and scans of subjects skull has revealed that the brain has now been hybridized with a large

amount of electronics on a cellular level, leading to a startling jump in intelligence, multitasking, logic, and memorization capabilities, as well as leading to a higher level of coordination in regards to movement.

Notes: *Ha ha! It worked this time!*

Test-10

Input:

- Caucasian female, twenty-five (25) years of age, five (5) foot, seven (7) inches in height, and one hundred and thirty-nine (139) pounds in weight. Subject is in relatively good health. No major medical issues.
- One (1) pill of **SCP-500**

Setting: 1:1

Output:
One human female of the same dimensions as the original subject. Subject appeared to be normal until approached by staff. Subject then proceeded to open its thoracic cavity, wrap a large, sinuous tongue around the closest researcher and attempted to pull him inside the cavity, most likely to consume him.

However, personnel on call in the room were prepared for such an event, and fired several high-dosage tranquilizer darts at the subject, effectively knocking it out. The researcher survived, with no wounds, although it is recommended he see an on site psychologist for counseling.

Closer examination of the subject revealed that the entire thoracic cavity functioned as one large mouth, with no sign of the internal organs that would normally reside within, with the exception of the alimentary canal, which was capable of expanding several dozen times its original size. The stomach also produced an acid much stronger than anything found in nature.

The tongue secreted a type of neurotoxin that acted through skin

contact, leading to a brief euphoric state, then unconsciousness in the infected.

The pelvic bones also appeared to be capable of unhinging, most likely to allow excretion to happen easier, due to the possible large size of the subject's intended prey, and to the fact that no facilities for mastication were found within the subject's biology.

Note: *Kenneth got off lightly there, but he still freaks out mildly every time he sees a woman with her arms outstretched. We'll keep the specimen for research. Although… this is not what I was originally hoping for, I think I may use the canal…*

Test-11

Input:

- Caucasian female, thirty (30) years of age, five (5) foot eleven (11) inches in height, and one hundred and fifty (150) pounds in weight. Subject is in relatively good health. Mild damage to lungs through excessive smoking.
- One (1) pill of **`SCP-500`**

Setting: Fine

Output:
Human female with the exact same dimensions as the original subject. Subject appeared to be exactly the same as before. However, preliminary tests revealed that the subject's lymphatic system had been altered greatly.

The lymph nodes produced a liquid with a much higher cell count than lymph found in normal humans, and contained numerous types of cells not normally seen in nature, let alone humans. These cells appear to be a hybrid of the various defense cells around the body as well as stem cells, with a startlingly high metabolism and motility.

These cells replace other damaged cells very quickly, leading to highly advanced regeneration, with serious wounds possibly taking days or even hours. This system could possibly slow or even stop

the aging process.

However, as was stated before, these cells have a very high metabolism, leading to a much higher appetite in the subject. After damage, this could increase exponentially.

Notes: *Wow. Well that one went very good. Very good indeed. Makes me almost want one of those for myself…*

12/12/2008

Test-12

Input:

- Caucasian female, twenty-eight (28) years of age, six (6) foot, one (1) inch in height, and one hundred and fifty-five (155) pounds in weight. Subject is in relatively good health. No major health issues.
- One (1) BASLER L304KC 4080 pixel Trilinear line scan camera.

Setting: Fine

Output:

- A large block of "waste" material, composed primarily of human tissue, with trace amounts of metal, plastic, rubber and glass, weighing two hundred and three (203) pounds.
- A small, silver ring, highly ornate, with a large group of miniature human-like eyes clumped together in an ornate clasp on one side of the band. Eyes capable of rotating within clasp to "look" around.

Wearing the ring allows the wearer to view everything around themselves, including behind themselves, behind objects around them, and inside objects, including themselves, for the range of their line of sight. However, it has the notable side effect of giving the wearer a severe pain behind the eyes, similar to an extreme case of eyestrain.

Notes: *If it weren't for the pain, this thing could be quite useful. Also, it was interesting to note that the ring didn't actually increase eyesight. When Jim had his glasses off while wearing the thing, everything was still all blurry. Good to know.*

Test-13

Input:

- Caucasian female, twenty-one (21) years of age, five (5) foot three (3) inches in height, and one hundred and forty-four (144) pounds in weight. Subject is in relatively good health. No major health issues.
- One (1) BASLER L304KC 4080 pixel Trilinear line scan camera.

Setting: 1:1

Output:
An organism that resembles a large tripod-mounted video camera, with electronic output leads and monitor at the rear. Object is alive, and made primarily of organic compounds, even the monitor, which appears to be made of tissue similar to ocular tissue, only saturated with highly advanced chromatophore pigmentation cells. The picture it displays is very clear and smooth, on par with many high-definition screens available on market now. The "lens" of the "camera" is a human eye, although shows hybridization with various mechanical elements.

Despite the fact that it possesses the needed skeletal and muscular structure for locomotion, it does not appear to be sentient in any way. Scans of the torso/main body have shown that there is no brain, with the exception of a highly developed brain stem at the base of the neck/tripod.

Note: *You know, I think that's enough of these for the moment. But I can use that eye.*

Memo to Prof. K. P. Crow:

After review of the current testing situation, the following observations may be helpful to your endeavors.

After extended time spent in research on and with SCP-914, the following proposal regarding its nature may be made with a significant degree of certainty: SCP-914 was not designed as an industrial device. Nor was it primarily a scientific device. Its primary function appears to be as a form of entertainment. After review of the recovery notes, and evaluation of the test logs, it appears that SCP-914 was designed to create the most “novel” items possible, with no regard for practicality or function.

Judging by this, it appears the best way to achieve a desired result is to try and exclude as many possible outcomes as possible. When entering a small pile of parts for a clock on a 1:1 setting, you will most likely get a clock. If you enter blocks of wood, glass, and metal, it leaves a wide degree of room for “interpretation” by SCP-914, with a clock only one of many possible outcomes. If you desire to create a human being with, say, metallic skin, then the best plan would be to create a “suit” of the metal in the exact dimensions of the intended subject, and the same thickness as the subject’s skin. At that point, a setting of 1:1 or Fine may achieve the desired result.

However, there is a high degree of randomness still associated with SCP-914. Patience must be maintained, as it is not being used for its intended purpose, and thus may frustrate attempts to achieve a desired result. A short review of settings, as well:

Rough: Destruction of the item, often by pressure, heat, or cutting.
Coarse: Disassembly of the item into component parts.
1:1: Direct integration of multiple items, or “re-interpretation” of singular items.
Fine: Refinement of items, often with a blending or “re-interpretation” of base states.
Very Fine: Total “re-interpretation”, often times using only the base compounds of items.

I hope these notes are useful in your continued research.

Dr. Gears

Experiments of Paper, Part 1

*Author's note- written dialogue is follows: *Cassy* [Fred] {Dr. Ax}

Dr. Ax walked out of the break room with some coffee and his new assignment. He dreaded it. Of all the days to be given his first assignment, it had to be today. He stumbled as another round of artillery fire rocked the building; SCP- was rampaging in the parking lot. 705 had been on the loose since the night before, and as of 8:00 a.m. had claimed an espresso machine, annoying most of the staff. And to top it off he had to go find 423 before he could use it. Someone brought the journal out of containment and left him on a door name plate.

But at least he was working with a safe one. He hoped.

"I need more sleep," he declared.

He entered 085's containment room and sat down. The girl was in a pond setting, sitting on a dock.

{Hello Cassy.}

She looked up out of the paper. *Hello.*

{If you're ready, we're going to do some tests to gauge how you interact with various external things.}

Does it include fire?

He looked up in surprise. {No, what made you think of that?}

Nothing.

{Well then, moving on…our first test was going to interact with another SCP, number 423 to be exact.}

I've never heard of that one

{He…*It*…is quite interesting.} Ax wrote, flipping open 423's journal. {Listen, the higher ups are already pissed that you ended up on that sign. No monkey business.}

After a second, the journal came alive with scribbling sounds. [You think I wanted to be up there? And besides, isn't the latter Dr. Bright's job?]

Ax sighed. As if talking to humans was annoying enough. {I'm going to ignore that. Prepare for transfer}

[You sound like this is Star Trek]

The frustrated researcher rolled his eyes, then went back to 85's page. He had spent 2 days thinking of how to convert them-423 can't exist without text, and drawn humans, even if they were affected by Fred, don't come alive to Cassy. Then it hit him. He sketched a notebook and pencil onto the dock, then laid her page on the journal.

Nothing changed.

{…Try picking up the notebook} he wrote in the sky. She did so.

Should I write in it?

{Yes….try Hi.} She picked up the pencil and wrote. The researcher smirked as her inked eyebrows jumped. 423 must have responded. Ax was still unnerved himself by some of these things. He swore those eye pods blinked at him once, despite the documentation on them.

Cassy wrote back, and waited. Then wrote again. This continued, and in the meantime the doc realized he had a problem-he had no idea what was being said.

"Son of a…" he cursed. Then he thought of something. He looked at a security guard. "Hey, you know those text magnifiers?"

"Yea…" The guard jumped, startled. The white coats never spoke to him, unless it involved something trying to kill someone.

"Can you get me the schematics of one? Preferably with a 360º reading screen?" the doctor asked excitedly.

"Um…sure…" came the uneasy response. The guard radioed to the site library-they had 4 of those things, surely there had to be a diagram somewhere in there.

Ax turned back to the pond, nervous. He wanted them to stop until he could monitor, but he didn't want to risk 432 becoming silent. Sweat pooled on his brow. His higher-ups were doubtful that his tests would even work, never mind yield feasible results. But somehow he convinced them. The building shook again, and footsteps ran past the room. Ax looked at a junior researcher next to him. "Even you and I know that thing isn't allowed near the fuel supply, you'd think they would have lured it the other way."

The junior researcher shrugged, then lost her balance and fell as the floor rocked from a massive explosion. Even Cassy looked up, and Fred's journal revealed a question. [The fuck was that?] he scribbled.

Ax sighed. {I don't think I want to know. And watch your language.}

[Sorry.]

Ax sighed as the guard handed him the paper he desired. "Hey, tha…why the hell is this greasy?"

"Six foot man eating chicken," came the reply, as calm and straight faced as the time of day.

…Maybe this was too weird a place to work.

At any rate, Ax read the blueprint. "Perfect," he whispered. If he drew it right, with some slight modifications….

Bingo. As Cassy sat down to write under a light, she brought the chair, and attached machine to life. Above her, the camera magnified what was being written so Ax could read it. He had guessed correctly-With a journal inside the picture, 423 would be able to reside in it and communicate with the picture.

"Incredible…" the researcher muttered. The specimens were comparing their lives, discussing staff they liked or disliked, describing life in 2 dimensions. It was as if they were members of a support group, having a transparency never described between SCPs before. This continued for 20 minutes, until 423 offered to "show her around," [I know some great novels to explore, and the maps show this place is huge! Lots of hiding spots.]

"Ah no you don't…" Ax quickly grabbed a pen {Ahem, I've just been informed that 423 is needed back for testing, if you please.}

Cassy blushed in surprise, then wrote a farewell. 423 returned to his journal.
[Hey that was great! Thanks for introducing us, I think I could get used to her.]

{Easy there cowboy, I don't know if O5s would let you back if they could read your mind}

[Oh and you can?]

{I can guess well enough…and how did you get access to maps?}

[Some lab tech got lost, guard pulled a map. I hopped on and read it.]

[I think you're trying to get me fired] Ax sighed, ignoring the screeching metal and explosions. Turning to the guard, he held out the journal. "Take 432 back to his unit, will you?"

"Can't," came the reply, "Old big and scary out there smashed a hallway, place is on level 1 lock down until he's contained."

Ax just stared, then flipped the notebook on his desk. "Great, just great."

[Ouch.]

He turned around back to the desk.

{Shut up.}

[Level 1 lock down? What's that?]

Ax groaned. Might as well tell him, from the sound of it he was going to be here awhile. {Means continue what you were doing just don't enter the halls.}

[Sounds good!]

{You're staying there while I work with 85}

[Can't I watch? The library's in bldg. 4 and I got nothing to read. And her name's Cassy.]

Ax threw up a hand in frustration. {FINE. But you're staying on a sign.} He went to 085's sheet and drew a billboard. He then laid the journal on the sign.

[Check out the view!]

Ax ignored him, and with one hand opening a folder, wrote with the other. {Now, Cassy, on with the next test. Do you like dolls?…}

Exploded Diagram of a Young Woman

SCP-2156 didn't think that she was a person who wanted many things. Honestly, she didn't really care what happened to herself; maybe she had cared when Professor Harley had called her in to have a "talk" that left her trembling and shaking; maybe she had cared when she had realized that she was in no way capable of functioning as a human being, let alone as a cashier. But that was the past, and the past was gone. Since then she had realized that she had no recourse if the deck was stacked against her.

So, truth be told, even though she had probably cared when suddenly Jessica was a ball of skin and blood trapped in a cage of bone, she didn't really recall much of a reaction to waking up the next morning in a jail cell. It was a new place, nothing more. There were new people. She imagined that for most, things like *freedom* or *autonomy* or *normality* were all very attractive, appealing concepts, but SCP-2156 did not want. She did not care if she got better or worse. She wasn't sure what better or worse was. "Better" was a conception of herself where she did not have to stay in this cage so that other people would not be hurt. "Better" her belonged in society. "Better" her was strange and alien, and she was not sure she liked this person.

SCP-2156 wanted only very few things. Sleep was one of them.

"I don't understand," she said. "I thought that we'd be discussing meds today. You know. For, uh, for the insomnia?"

"I know," Dr. Garland said, clasping his hands together. His face was pinched in something that looked like frustration. "And I'm sorry. We want to be absolutely certain that any medication we give you doesn't interact in unexpected ways with your anomalous condition. We're still not sure if the condition is biological in nature, and if it is, we certainly don't want…"

"Right."

Dr. Garland coughed. “Yes. We’re going to have to wait on medication.”

“It’s just—”

This was a pretty serious problem, wasn’t it? SCP-2156 had learned that life was hemmed on both sides by antithetical contradictions. On one side was the eternal sleep of death and on the other side was the waking death of insomnia. She walked through the valley of two deaths and was not afraid. But regardless of poetics, the waking death was miserable, and even if SCP-2156 didn’t want much she still wanted sleep.

Once upon a time she had been pretty sure that if she went crazy there would be some sort of procedure for either making her sane again or else quarantining her from the sane people who didn’t deserve to be in contact with her, but actually going crazy and discovering that there was some inscrutable and hideous enigma wrapped inside her bones had taught her that no such procedure existed. Therapy and the Foundation were bullshit. Garland was pretty nice though.

That was *it.*

“Yes?”

“Nothing.”

“Well…”

SCP-2156 stared at Garland. She wondered what it was like to be a therapist working for the Foundation. How much did Garland think about his own work? How much did Garland’s consciousness press against the confines of the Foundation’s bars? It was trivially easy to manipulate and lie. SCP-2156 wasn’t stupid; Garland did it to her every day. Was it to help or to control? To accept or to assimilate? There was no observable distinction between any of those things.

But most of all SCP-2156 was struck by how well Garland hid the signs of helplessness and impotency that brewed within him. People had layers. All she did was shuffle them around. The whole was the

sum of the parts and summation was commutative so what did it matter what order people were in? Whether it was ugly or beautiful all of it was you. All of it was her. What did she want? She didn't know. Nothing and everything. Shuffling herself was hard.

"If there's anything you'd like to talk about…"

There wasn't.

She was being led back to her room. She didn't know why she had been taken out. The blank, sterile hallway was marked at regular intervals by the pattern: *guard-door-guard, guard-door-guard.* She didn't know where the Foundation got this many people to dress up in black combat gear and stand still. She could not see their faces. They flashed by like rows of orchard trees planted in the nothingness between San Francisco and Los Angeles. They flashed by like a deck of cards being shuffled. They flashed by like a flipbook animation. Stillness begot motion. There were contradictions hiding in the fabric of all things.

One of the guards was shuffling a deck of cards in his hands. SCP-2156 heard the machine-gun flickering of card slapping against card over and over. The next guard was also shuffling a deck of cards. The third one was playing with a matryoshka doll.

She was in her cell again. There was another matryoshka doll. Who cared? Strange things happened.

SCP-2156 sat down by the doll and figured that she would unravel the secrets of the universe.

One layer gone. Capillary beds. She had never needed to play solitaire with her body to figure out what was one layer down. Red flesh. Raw, stinging pain. She winced as blood flowing from the ripped skin around her nails dripped onto her calculus final. Professor Davidson never noticed it. She remembered not being able to sleep for the first time and wondering if she was going insane.

Two layers gone. She had broken her arm playing basketball. The

bone stuck through the skin. Morphine coursed through her veins, and she understood why people said that morphine was addictive. Addiction was another paradox, like life. On either side of the valley there was the sleeping release from pain or the waking embrace of it. A body anesthetized and a mind awakened were in symmetry. Millions of people needed to dig to find emotion.

Three layers gone. The world was far more complicated than she had imagined, and nobody was in any position to understand it. Did they try to understand her? A girl who played solitaire with the world? She looked inside her and saw nothing but black and red, flashing and shuffling. Black blobs—might be a card—stood on either side of her. White blob—definitely not a card—explained what they did. The goal of the Special Containment Procedures Foundation was to observe preternatural phenomena and develop new theories of science based on their behavior. She knew with complete certainty that white blob was lying to her.

There was nothing predictable and certainly nothing understandable about the world. She saw the universe and all its layers. She saw gloved hands hiding red skin shuffle the layers of the universe over and over and over again. If she were to stop those hands then she could finally flip through the cards and figure out how the universe's cards were stacked, but nobody would ever stop them. They were eternal.

Four layers gone. She dried off her hair, checked to make sure her roommate was still out, and started crying. Mom called to ask her if everything was all right. The boy two rows down and three columns to the left said, "Don't stick it in the crazy." She looked at a piece of paper and saw nothing but a game of windowed solitaire. She realized that she could not learn or excel in school. She realized that nobody had the patience to put up with her. She realized that there was nothing connecting her to the world, and all the realizations mounted higher until she reached the truth of the world, placed upon a glowing pedestal—the world could not have her.

She saw red and black—black hair sticking out of red flesh. Red blood and black bile.

She removed the fifth layer. The doll was smiling at her. She began

to fall through the layers, and as they flashed by they showed her the stuttering, banal flipbook movie of her existence. There was neither end nor bottom; there was only the truth that the fifth layer was oblivion and that oblivion was all she would ever be.

Her skin was thin and fragile, and inside of her there was nothing.

“How’s your sleep been?”

SCP-2156 stared at the wood grain of the table. “It’s been all right.”

“Nothing too out of the ordinary going on with your sleep patterns recently?”

The creases of her gloves were like the weathered face of an old lady. She was wearing somebody else’s skin because nobody, least of all herself, could stand her own.

There was a red pen in front of Garland. She wondered why he wrote in red.

The wall was monochromatic. It had always been monochromatic. What a dumb observation.

Garland coughed. “SCP-2156?”

“Sorry. I just…yeah.” SCP-2156 looked Garland in the face for a second, felt him staring back at her, and then looked away. “I think that everything’s been fine.”

She remembered the matryoshka doll. Ever since she had come into this cell she had realized that she was self-aware of much more than before. When she went into the temporary nirvana of re-shuffling she could feel each layer of her mind shift against the other until for a moment, perfect harmony and order was achieved, before entropy piled up while doubt and hate bred and multiplied in the recesses of her mind. She could touch each layer of her soul. And now, she could feel the matryoshka doll imprinted on every one of them.

“Are you sure?”

Who the hell did Garland think he was? A ball of good intentions and mediocre actions trying to read her mind? *She* was the one who could see the layers, not him. He was a man with the insight of a toddler.

“Yeah.”

Garland scratched his neck. “We really can’t proceed with the sleeping medication matter until we’re absolutely certain that nothing unexpected is going on with your condition. We want to do everything possible to help you, SCP-2156, but I must remind you that we are an organization that serves the public first and foremost. We can’t afford…”

“I’m not hiding anything.”

Her matryoshka doll reshuffled until the dream became the deepest layer.

SCP-2156 pulled on her gloves. “So that’s a ‘no’ on meds, I guess.”

Garland nodded.

“How am I supposed to sleep?”

“Well, we can keep working on your anxiety. Until I receive a green light for some sort of sleeping medication, that’s the most we can do, unfortunately.”

SCP-2156 sat in silence. She felt her cheeks begin to tingle. She didn’t want many things, but those things that she did want were beginning to pile up. She wanted sleep. She didn’t want to keep talking to Garland. She wanted nothing more than to disappear, because she could be completely certain that absolutely nobody would miss her.

“…meds.”

“I’m sorry? I didn’t—can you speak up?”

“I just want some meds, all right? I know I'm a threat, and I know that I’m dangerous. But I really don’t know what I deserve, or if I

even deserve anything—I just—this is all that I want, I swear, I just want some sleep. Do you have any idea how boring it gets in here? Four walls, some shitty books, and a brain that doesn't know how to fucking go to sleep? I know you know it's boring, that's why you keep sending people, but do you have any *idea* how much time I spend in here with nothing but my thoughts—"

They flickered one after the other after the other, but no matter how fast they raced they would never go fast enough to reveal the truth.

"— about how—about how—"

There was the world, comprised entirely of this cell. There were people who day by day were unaware that the present was slipping them by and that a stranger would be occupying their skin in the next second. They didn't have to care. The world was in a state of perpetual blissful innocence. It was painted in colors that would make a baby laugh and coo, hues of industrial ink that were to be played with by smooth hands.

The world had one layer. It could not be shuffled. There was no place in it that she belonged.

It was at times like these that the miasma of SCP-2156's thoughts coalesced into something that could be called emotion; this time, like most times, that emotion was fear. A red sliver of skin poked through the gap between her right glove and her wrist. It was the same color as a clown's nose or a sports car, except her skin was dull and dry, giving it a grayish tint.

She had been kneeling on the floor of her college dormitory when she saw herself in the shattered remains of a mirror, face bright red like a caricature of a human being. God, she was hideous.

"I just want some sleep," she said to nobody. Garland was long gone.

All seven face-up cards were red. She screamed in frustration as the world fell apart around her.

“Hey, have a seat. Sorry we’re out of coffee. And donuts. Also sorry that we had to call you over on such short notice, Doctor, uh… Garland. Been busy.”

Garland nodded. “I understand. Please, take your time.”

The meeting room was a perfect example of the Foundation not really getting aesthetics. It was blandly pleasant, but it made Garland feel detached, like he was an avatar projected into this half-real room. Everything was too bright and too smooth. The room felt like it was melting.

Garland briefly wondered how the researchers could put up with such a charade, because they knew the internal anatomy of the Foundation, what fueled its beating heart, and what perverse blood flowed through its tortuous limbs. Everything was so much more real when the skin matched the flesh in barren, ugly containment cells. Garland almost felt more at home there, where at least the Foundation achieved some sort of consistency. If he could choose one thing to fix about the Foundation, it would be the incoherency in the inoffensively flat décor of the offices.

“Right. As you probably know, I’m the HMCL supervisor for SCP-641. Uh, you’ve read the file?”

Garland nodded again.

“Fantastic. Nice to meet you.”

They shook hands. Garland smelled his cologne. His palms were crisp and perfectly dry.

“Mm. I understand that, yesterday, SCP-2156 underwent one of its…active phases? And that you were present?”

“Yes.”

“Report says that you were almost…mm. Kind of dangerous, isn’t it? I’d talk to your HMCL guy about modifying the containment procedures, honestly.”

Garland shrugged. “There are hazards. Humanoids can get upset

during sessions. It's happened before. I have a decent bereavement package, so I don't complain."

The HMCL supervisor laughed briefly and loudly. "Of course. Anyway. A strange coincidence happened. At the same time as that active state, SCP-641 showed us some, uh, previously unobserved behavior. Spontaneously started disassembling itself."

"So you're hypothesizing a connection."

"Hey," the supervisor said, throwing his hands in the air. "We scan the event logs for this sort of coincidence for a reason. One skip is containable. Two is bad news. If one of those two is a humanoid, worse news. Look, I've been in this for some time, and honestly, ten years ago, this happens, I commission Telekill rooms."

The supervisor laughed again, loud and short like before. "Yeah. 641 has mind-affecting abilities, which nine times out of ten implies some sort of psychic potential, and from the file, 2156 sounds a lot like a bixby—"

"Bixby?"

"Uh, reality warper. Excuse the slang. Some of my retrieval buddies have rubbed off on me. It's a reality warper."

"SCP-2156 hasn't really demonstrated any willful control over its anomalous properties, and I was under the impression that was one of the criteria to be considered…"

The supervisor waved his hand. "Criteria don't matter. You can't categorize something if you don't understand it. Functionally speaking, it might not look like a reality warper, but the nature of its abilities would seem to suggest—look, this is a discussion I should be having with 2156's HMCL supervisor. Sorry. Let's get back on track. What we need to know is if 2156 has been behaving normally lately."

"Would you like suspicion or fact?"

"Suspicion is usually more useful."

“There have been subtle irregularities. I think that it’s hiding something. Besides the recent preoccupation with sleeping medication, it becomes nervous each time we discuss its dreams.”

“Right. I’ll have you submit a formal report later. We need to document these sorts of things. Besides that, though, I just thought that I’d give you a heads-up that you might not be working on the 2156 project for much longer.”

“Excuse me?”

“First of all, this isn’t set, because if it were, your supervisor would be the one telling you this, not me. I don’t know anything for certain. I’m just speculating. And second of all, this isn’t a reflection on your capabilities whatsoever. In fact, it has nothing to do with them.”

There was a moment of silence as the HMCL supervisor sighed. “There are just patterns, you know. I’m speaking here as an employee to an employee, not HMCL staff to skip therapist. The Foundation’s going to cut its losses soon.”

“I don’t understand.”

“There are some things that are not supposed to be in this world—or, well, we’ve determined that they’re not supposed to, anyway. Which is reasonable, you know, because both of us have done enough work in this place to know that somebody has to make those decisions. And sometimes I guess that we pretend that we’re trying to help…”

The two men made eye contact for a moment as the reality of Garland’s occupation occurred to both of them simultaneously. “Well,” the supervisor said. “I mean, in some cases we probably do make decent efforts at helping. But, really, if we start thinking about questions of necessity, then things get messy. Humanoids…a friend of mine in retrieval said that she thought of them like shipwrecked sailors, and for a while we like to think that providing therapy and protecting them and whatever is like trying to guide them back home, but the reality of the situation is that we’re not home, we’re the island in the middle of nowhere. And SCP-2156 is going to realize that very soon.”

There was a long silence as Garland stared at the man.

“I’m not sure…” Garland said.

“Well, whatever,” the supervisor said. “Not our job to think about this.”

SCP-2156 woke up to a lie staring her in the face. The bed and the walls and the drawer and her clothes all seemed to be the same, but they were not. SCP-2156 could look one layer—just one layer—down beneath the surface of the façade and see the deception. She had been moved. The Foundation had changed its evaluation of her, and now the walls themselves muttered of containment instead of protection and of safety instead of welfare. How long had she been asleep? Thirty minutes, an hour? The Foundation worked quickly.

She had dreamt about the matryoshka doll every time she had gone to sleep for the past—ten meals divided by three and rounded down, that was three days. The doll was calling for her, and if SCP-2156 knew anything she knew that matryoshka dolls weren’t supposed to send out siren songs.

She could see her entire past laid out in picture frames by the matryoshka doll. She could relive every weakness and insecurity, and in doing so, she grew one step closer and closer to the truth, to that nothingness that was inside her, and out of that void something of great design and inscrutable purpose would be born. For one instant everything would fall into order, and then she would be at peace. The only way forward was the doll. So long as she kept finding new layers within herself, she could keep shuffling, and so long as she kept shuffling, she would find order. So long as there was the chance that order would be found, she could maintain the delusion that everything would be all right. That was how critical the doll was to everything. To the universe itself. It was a small, wooden, painted toy that formed a pillar holding up the sky.

She needed to be reshuffled again, but for that reshuffling to mean anything, she needed the doll. In the corners of her mind that the doll whispered to, there was nothing but silence.

SCP-2156 stood and began to pace. She told herself that she needed to calm down—but who was really telling her that? Was it *really* her?

“I just need some sleep,” she said.

The Foundation wasn’t giving her any sleeping meds. Why was it so hard? What was so difficult about giving somebody with insomnia medication? She wanted nothing more than for her brain to be pummeled into unconsciousness by a chemical cocktail. The snarling abominations of 3 AM doubts were prowling about her on all sides. She was continually hounded by them. An eternal hunt with herself comprised the entirety of her existence, and she was tired of running in circles.

If everything could just shut up for a moment—

She just needed some sleep.

The Foundation had moved her. They had uprooted her out of one of its metal labyrinths and popped her straight into another. The matryoshka doll was gone, but something was whispering truths into her ear even now. The universe cascaded in a series of layers that she could sift through and examine at her leisure. Garland wasn’t coming back. She doubted any of the others were either. Deep in the roaring machinery of the dark, ancient monolith that called itself the SCP Foundation, men in white lab coats were typing away at computers, filing reports. These reports were aimed at changing the special containment procedures of the object known as SCP-2156. There would be restrictions imposed and precautions taken. An incident report had been filed when she had almost killed Garland. But the Foundation, for all its knowledge and its power, could not know everything, and in those twisting alleyways of ignorance, the Foundation’s power meant nothing.

No matter what, they could not say how the deck would be ordered.

Time passed. There were no meals, so she couldn’t say how much. After time was finished passing, one of the room’s walls became transparent. An unfamiliar man in a white coat stood on the other

side.

“Good morning, SCP-2156.”

“Why have you taken me here?”

“You have been relocated because we’re concerned about your safety and the general well-being. Specifically, we have good reason to believe that there were unforeseen factors about your prior containment site that negatively influenced your mental health. These factors constituted an unacceptable risk of containment breach. As such, we have taken steps to minimize cross-contamination potential and—"

“Why isn’t Garland coming back?”

The doctor’s face scrunched up. “I’m sorry?”

“Don’t lie to me.”

“I really don’t have any idea what you’re talking about.”

She had seen muscle and sinew. She had seen bones, marrow, capillaries, veins, organs—its heart and all the chambers, the valves pumping all the sludge through the body—the nerves leading up to a brain that hid secrets from itself. She had seen it all. The Foundation didn’t even know itself. They were kindred spirits, like that—

“Don’t lie to me,” she said again. She knew where she was. She was on the very fringes of the world, where everything that did not belong was placed so that it could continue on not-belonging inoffensively. For all of history the Foundation had kept everything safely on the sidelines so that society could function. She knew the truth.

And of herself, what did she know?

The doctor took a picture out of his coat. “Do you know what this is?”

“It’s the doll.”

“Where have you seen it?”

“Everywhere.”

“Everywhere? I don’t understand.”

“In my sleep and in my dreams. Out of the corners of my eyes. It’s on the fringe, just like I am.”

“Have you ever begun to disassemble this object?”

SCP-2156 closed her eyes. “Over and over.”

“Right. Why did you not report the reoccurrence of this object in your dreams to your therapist?”

SCP-2156 was silent.

“All right. I want you to understand that there have been new restrictions placed upon you. The luxuries of your previous containment protocols were contingent upon an incident-free record, a condition which has decidedly not been met. You almost killed the previous therapist. We will have to be much more cautious when dealing with you.”

SCP-2156 looked up and opened her eyes. “I have a question. Are you going to give me sleeping meds?”

“In all likelihood, no. We do not acquiesce to the demands of SCP objects when there is no good reason to do so.”

“Right,” SCP-2156 said. “That’s right.”

There was nothing resembling humanity here. The Foundation stripped it away from their own agents and researchers just as readily as it did so from its prisoners. She could feel the throbbing hum of mystery packed against horror packed against contradiction. The Foundation was a teeming, frothing ocean, filled from top to bottom with things that nobody could understand, an impenetrable, unknowable volume of liquid black. The Foundation did not *care* for anything or *help* anything because whatever agency of its own it had spent hiding its own secrets from itself.

She felt a moment of truth and absolute clarity. There had been a

festering, ugly emotion deep inside of her for the past several days —it had been the fear-anger of anxiety and insecurity. She had been laboring under the misconception that here she was out of place and that the world outside of these walls was *hers*. She had thought it was where she belonged, despite her ink-black skin spotted red with murder. But she had been very, very wrong. She did not belong in the world because it had one layer and no mysteries. When she had realized this truth she had been afraid, but the truth had to be accepted.

There was a Foundation under the Foundation of sterile white lab coats and precisely operated mechanical cell doors. There was a Foundation of unspeakable inhumanity and cruelty, there was a Foundation of self-sacrifice and heroism, there was a Foundation of unreality and insanity and madness all lurking beneath the surface. Every single Foundation employee she had witnessed had only been the facade of the madhouse. They were being moved by purposes mysterious to guard objects unknowable.

She felt the fear-anger build. There was no escape from the walls of this Foundation, not even in her own sleep. Everything might be plausibly acceptable if her masters were simple, knowable people— university deans, parents, supervisors—but this was not the case. Something in the contradiction of an organization trying to give order to the most absolute chaos had fractured the layers of the people in charge. One day, perhaps arbitrarily, these people had decided not to give her sleep.

Sleep had been the illusory chemical sanctuary from the world in which she did not belong. It was gone. What remained were bloodshot eyes and a desert of a mind where the winds of fatigue and doubt constantly scoured the surface of the sand. SCP-2156 felt a cruel, vindictive satisfaction. Whatever happened from here on out was not her fault. The Foundation had not given her sleep. It had dragged her to the very boundaries of the waking world and then forced her to remain. Whatever happened as a consequence could not be avoided.

Emotion drained from her. She closed her eyes and felt beneath her for the layers of the world. She could shuffle them however she saw fit.

The doll was calling for her again. It was calling for her with a mind powerful enough to reach out of the wooden confines of the toy and invade the private sanctuary of the human soul. Within that mind was boundless potential for torture and sadism, for the violent restructuring of the pliable human consciousness, but it held within it only one thought. The doll wanted nothing more than to be taken apart, it wanted nothing more than to see the world fall apart around it—for her to strip away pretension after pretension until nothing but the dizzying void of the center remained. The Foundation had made a mistake. Distance was of no concern anymore.

She moved the ace of clubs to the home stack; the face-down card underneath it flipped over to reveal the impassive face of the matryoshka doll staring back at her. See? There it was at her feet. Solitaire was easy.

The researcher's eyes widened before the wall became opaque again. SCP-2156 didn't care. This was exactly where she belonged, in this institution of horrors, in this room with the matryoshka doll on the floor. She would find all the layers of the Foundation, and she would find all the layers of herself. SCP-2156 began to cry. She couldn't remember being this happy.

She knelt down, grasped the doll, and disappeared.

SCP-2156 was dying. Death was not nearly as unpleasant as she might have expected. It was, in truth, rather relaxing to feel each memory and thought that had ever once comprised her identity be stripped away from her. She felt a sensation of impending peace. To death, to sleep, to the unknown oblivion—wherever the destination, she was falling…

A stack of cards spread itself out in a fan before her and revealed the world. She could see the Foundation scrambling to evacuate the area. She could see the GOC detect a burst of Aspect Radiation at a Foundation Site and watched the legion of politicians and hypocrites begin plotting. She saw her family and friends, stumbling through life only marginally more ignorant than they had once been. She saw rain fall on the graves of the people she had killed. All of it was inconsequential.

The doll guided the reshuffling of her layers. She was to be remade into something that would never have to beg its captors for sleeping medications, something that would never begin hyperventilating in a cafeteria, something that would never stay awake waiting for the morning to come. It would be neither better nor worse than her; it would neither be her nor would it not be her. It would only be, and it would belong. She would be made into something that could see the layers of everything for all its complexity and nonsense.

There was an unpleasant moment when the last remaining thing that could be said to be her was destroyed, when she existed only as form without definition, before her parts began to collapse upon themselves, forming layer after layer of a psyche and a body. In this new body she felt the thrill of inhumanity rush through her limbs. She saw the fan of cards and remarked how simple it was to shuffle them around.

As the final layer of what she was to become clicked into place around her, SCP-2156's first and last thought was that all she had wanted was some sleep.

Extracurricular Practice

When Professor Legler offered her the chance to join his little "unconventional art studio", Taman didn't exactly expect to be landed in an extradimensional classroom for the study of magical art. Well, not *magical*, as the professor stressed in frustration. The exact word was "anart", but Taman really couldn't tell the difference. Plus, magic seemed to be just the word to describe the experience. It was like a Sunday Hogwarts for art, with animated pictures and all that. It also turned out that they really did have moving staircases, once Legler decided that they were finally worthy of extra space.

But a whole month in, bathed in all the bizarre and unthinkable, Taman still wasn't able to create anything out of the ordinary. She tried all sorts of art she could think of, from things she was good at to things she hardly knew about, but all the pictures stayed static and all the clay sculptures just collapsed to the table.

And that would be why she was sitting opposite of the studio's "deputy professor", resident anartist Yang, seeking her advice.

"You're stressing yourself," Yang said, putting way too much sugar in her coffee. "Learning this isn't easy, you need to take your time. Which is also why Legler refused to give you any extra instructions."

"Cobalt learnt to do it within a week."

"Seems to me that Cobalt always has had that instinct. It's just that she has repressed it previously; her Flow feels somewhat clunky and awkward," Yang stirred her drink. "Tam, you have to see that many of your classmates have had some exposure to this field. You're new, but that's also a good thing. You're not subjected to faulty misconceptions like the rest of them; your view on this will not be limited. And if that means you'll go a little slower, I think it's worth it."

"Delacroix is also new," Taman protested.

"Relax, okay? You can't hurry this sort of thing. You see, anart block works the same way as normal art block."

"Just that I can't feel anything when doing Legler's assignments. Or even watching the demonstrations. The different approaches, focusing, looking through stuff? None of it works," Taman let out a frustrated sigh. "Normally during art blocks I guess I would go out? But that doesn't really help because I don't know how to do this in the first place."

Yang contemplated for a while. "Ummm. Maybe the studio environment is sort of limiting. It was Legler's work after all, and limited to his perspective. I didn't take notice, but it makes sense that someone new will be more susceptible. A field trip would be nice," Yang drank from the cup, and then shook her head. "But we can't really do that. too much attention, and hard to take care of you all."

"So I'll just have to wait and see?" Taman asked weakly.

"Um, actually," Yang finished the rest of her drink quickly. "Do you have any plans this afternoon?"

"No?"

"Good," Yang stood up, signaling for the waiter. "Let's take a walk in the city."

"This is really… abandoned," Taman said as her gaze travelled around the graffiti-filled building walls. A broken sign at the entrance suggested that it had been deserted for years. A few scavengers moved around the block, but none of them were interested in the building they were walking into. One or two took notice of them, before returning to their respective tasks. "You sure this isn't dangerous?"

"Oh, I do have a few tricks up my sleeves. No worries," Yang turned to look at Taman, "But we can go somewhere else if you want to. The main point is to change the environment; just figured that it would be nice to also have something relevant."

"No, no. It's okay," Taman looked up to see sunlight shining through the thin clouds. It was still early. "I mean, is this place like, important?"

"This place itself? Hardly. But a big chunk of the anart movement actually started in places like this. It was back when there was no market for reality-breaking art and no patrons to support us," Yang approached the outer walls of the building. "Abandoned buildings like this are mostly outside the public view, convenient to mess around and experiment with."

"Wait, are these all magical?" She looked around, all broken shapes and broken colors. Hardly seemed like some place where miracles would reside.

"Only some. But it's impossible for most people to tell. The Flow here is mostly dried up, you have to poke around to make it work," Yang gestured towards a few words of artistic design, which were hardly recognizable. "And that takes a professional to know. We'll just take a look around. These certainly aren't the best, but would serve our tour here well enough."

"Dried up?" Taman eyed the dried paint on the brick walls. A lot of which peeled off, leaving a layer of scrap and dust on the floor.

"Well, the 'magic' in the art can't work forever, just like you can't preserve the colors of a painting forever. It deteriorates over time. The only difference is that normal art's preservation depends on the materials and the environment, and our work depends on, I'd say dedication?"

"So, the more you pour in to it, the longer it works?"

"That and how good you make it. I wouldn't say these were very successful at that. This whole section is dead." Yang's gaze briefly lingered on a poorly drawn owl-man, before returning to Taman. "Let's go in."

Taman nodded. Together, they walked into the bowels of the structure. There were no longer any functional light fixtures, but the broken walls did a poor job of keeping the sunlight out. The rays of

bright colors created more shades of grey and black, adding dimensions to the graffiti inside. They were slightly better preserved than their outside counterparts.

Yang strode ahead, inspecting the large, empty building. Anything of value must have been looted years ago, as all that was left were broken pictures and used spray paint cans. She murmured a few times, but Taman hardly caught what she was saying. Granted, she didn't try very hard to listen; she followed the anartist, but her mind had already wandered off.

She had never been to places like this. Going into abandoned buildings, alone or with others, seemed to be a terrible choice on all accounts. But she had heard about the charm of exploring depths of the city from some of her more adventurous friends, and seeing this, she had to admit that there was some truth to it.

Nothing magical had happened so far, but there was this eerie beauty to it that she couldn’t deny. Even though the figures on the walls had lost parts of their bodies, the once bright colors dulled down into an indistinguishable grey, she could not help but imagine what it was like before the erosion of time set in. In some places, paint had peeled off only to reveal older artwork underneath, as if preserving the history under the layers.

It was strange, but in a way, also calming.

They moved through rooms filled with broken sentences, a giant set of teeth that were no longer able to chew, and a dragon breathing a patch of grey that must have been flames. Yang inspected the rooms one by one, some of them blocked by broken walls, some incredibly large, and some others shrouded in darkness. There was a mostly intact picture of a giant eye that Yang stared at for a long time, an impossible staircase she kicked at a few times, and a weird statue of a man she frowned at. But finally, they stopped at a large wall filled with seemingly random splashes of faded colors.

"So," Taman suggested. "Finally found the magical art?"

"Well," Yang answered. "More like finally found a safe one to poke with."

Before Taman could ask, Yang quickly changed the topic: "Want to give it a go?"

Taman stared at the piece. "What should I do?"

"Hold on." Yang said, walking up.

Taman watched Yang hold up her hand, and tapped at the picture gently. Then all of a sudden, it all changed.

Yang was no longer there, and she was alone in the building. A perfect silence fell through, and the place appeared even more lifeless. But the walls were now new and the graffiti were bright and colorful. For a moment, the world seemed extra clear to her, with every detail visible. Before Taman could comprehend what was going on, the colors on the wall moved and merged, crawling down onto the floor and spreading to the ceiling.

In a few moments, the floor melted and the ceiling collapsed. But Taman didn't fall down, as she was now standing on a swirl of colors. The walls, and the building itself had all disappeared, and the art pieces that once dwelled on their surfaces all broke free to join them. She had risen above the ground, looking down at the city below.

But it was not her city, as all the buildings moved and changed, pulsing with life. As the color patches lifted her higher and higher, the city too blurred into lines and shapes and colors. The art pieces accompanying her had all converged together, their features no longer distinguishable. Then, the abstract city dimmed, the ground disappeared, and even the sky had been converted into simply blue and white.

There was no longer any sense of height or direction, and Taman was lost in a world of mere colors. They moved and flowed and swirled around her, as if an ocean, and she felt like drowning in a bucket of paint.

The next moment, the ocean dried up, the paint retreated, and she was able to breathe again. She looked up to see Yang still standing next to the wall of colors, the dull paint peeling off to reveal the

bricks behind. Yang smiled and waved at her.

Taman breathed heavily. A few moments later, she stuttered: "I, I… I really like this."

Yang chuckled. "It's pretty standard hallucination. We showed something like this in class a week ago."

"Yeah," Taman said, her mind still filled with the colors. "But… I just really like this."

Yang nodded, and waited till Taman regained her composure. Exiting the room, they found some more or less clean and intact stairs to sit. Taman's head was still spinning, while Yang casually looked around. The sun had begun to set. The rays of light reduced as the shadows started to grow.

A few more moments passed before Yang turned to Taman: "It's getting late. But there is something else I can show you."

Taman looked at her expectantly.

"Legler would say I'm disrespectful, but this place is long gone anyways." Yang gave a short laugh, and approached one of the walls. A large snake coiled on it, mouth open wide only to be cut through by a crack on the concrete.

Yang pressed her hands against the wall: "You live near the campus, right?"

"Yeah."

"Um, should be enough." Yang examined the picture once more, closing her eyes.

For a full five minutes, Yang stayed still and reached into the broken artwork, feeling its barely moving Flow, its intents and compositions. Taman stared intensely, but hardly knew what was going on.

Finally, Yang reopened her eyes and started to rework the painting. Centering on the crack on the wall, she scraped off layers of paint with her hands, getting rid of the unnecessary colors and pieces.

Peeling off more colors to reveal the black background underneath, she began to create lines spiraling towards the crack. She worked for the next ten or so minutes, obscuring the detail of the snake and reducing it to shapes and elements. Her new additions slowly worked their way in.

By the time Taman started to grow bored and shifted her gaze around, the large snake suddenly began to melt. Another moment passed, its coiled body expanded, meeting the out-stretching lines and turning into a vortex. Amazed at this development, Taman turned back to see the green of the snake's scales darken and the red from inside its mouth subside, leaving only a deep shade of black. The solid crack expanded and seemingly liquefied, its darkness merging with the black paint surrounding it. As Yang stepped away, the vortex started to spin. Before long, a space opened within, allowing a few rays of light to shine through.

"Here's your shortcut," Yang let out a deep breath of relief. "I think this can last an hour."

"Holy shit," Taman's mouth opened wide. "You can do that?"

"Well, we work with ‘perfectly normal materials’," Yang grinned towards Taman. "Meaning, no actual restriction on what can be used to make anart. Which would include this."

Yang turned back towards spinning vortex as it started shaking slightly. "Do know that this is not a good way to go about this. Others' Flow will interfere with yours, so it usually doesn't turn out well or last long. Pretty sure Legler can do this just by staring at it; I had to make modifications. But why don't you hurry up now; I think I overestimated its stability."

Taman flipped through the pieces of art she had done over the past month, and realized Yang was right. She was really stressing herself out; and more than that, she was not really enjoying it. In fact, she had more fun with Yang in that one afternoon than for the entire month she spent going to magic art school. The wall of colors was no match for Professor Legler's transforming classroom, and yet she was unable to really appreciate it.

She put her works aside, and took out the clay she had gotten from the classroom. Remembering how she played with plasticine in her youth, she started molding it. For now, she decided to not be concerned with what she made, but instead to just have fun. A few crude castles and weird monsters later, she reshaped the clay into a ball and set it back down.

It was fun, and it should have always been like this. Thinking this, she left the room to clean herself up.

A few minutes after she closed the door, a crack showed up in the clay sphere. Moments later, it split into two, releasing a swarm of colorful butterflies.

« **Foundation Mandated Interlude** | **HUB** | **Seven New Characters Are Introduced** »

Extranormal Event-28-A ("Ifrit") Archives

Foreword: The following documentation is a collection of radio transmissions, recovered journal entries, and other relevant information pertaining to Extranormal Event (EE)-28-A, which took place during the United States' War in Iraq. While no conclusive evidence has been found, research is underway, in collaboration with the United States' Unusual Incidents Unit, to ascertain the validity of the events described, as well as confirm the existence of any anomalous entities that may exist in the area. To assist the reader, this information is presented in a roughly chronological order.

Show Official Report of EE-28-A

On / / , fifteen men were dispatched to [REDACTED][1], a small village in a remote part of Iraq, where a person of interest known to have ties to prominent terrorist groups was believed to be residing. Attempts to monitor the area via satellite were met with failure for unknown reasons, necessitating the dispatch of soldiers, who were to discreetly monitor the area in hopes of confirming the aforementioned reports.

Following failure to set up communications, as well as detection by a local, the team sent to this area retreated, hoping to return when a reliable method of communication was discovered. However, upon returning to the area, the village was found to have been almost totally destroyed, with an uncertain number of casualties and zero survivors. In the middle of the area, a large man-made(?) hole

was discovered, apparently leading into an underground tunnel system. Some of the casualties were identified as known members of terrorist groups, and the current prevailing theory is that a black ops team from the armed forces of another country led a raid on the area. Due to the lack of information, no further investigation has been launched.

Show Radio Transmissions

Foreword: Due to the heavy amount of static present throughout the audible transmissions, certain portions of this log were unable to be transcribed. This radio transmission took place approximately 3 hours into the mission, at which time Corporal Warren's team had just reached their destination. Corporal Warren then attempted to make contact with Lieutenant Dan Chambers (call-sign Oscar 2 Charlie), who was stationed at an outpost roughly twenty miles away, and was tasked with keeping up-to-date information on all active missions.

Lt. Chambers: Echo 4 Whiskey, Echo 4 Whiskey, this is Oscar 2 Charlie. Radio check. Over.

(Static.)

Lt. Chambers: Echo 4 Whiskey, do you copy?

Cpl. Warren: I read you, experiencing difficulties though. Over.

(Static.)

Cpl. Warren: Say again?

Lt. Chambers: I repeat, do you have visual of the area of interest? Over.

Cpl. Warren: Affirmative. Over.

(Labored breathing can be heard, interlaced with heavy static.)

Lt. Chambers: Repeat?

(Static.)

Lt. Chambers: Echo 4 Whiskey, do you copy?

(There is a series of unidentified clicking noises, as well as unidentified low rumblings and tones.)

Cpl. Warren: Oscar 2 Charlie, say again?

(Static.)

Show Excerpts from the Journal of Corporal Warren

JUL 13, 20 : Reached our destination roughly three hours ago, still haven't been able to make contact with Lt. Chambers for more than a few seconds at a time. Due to the communications interference in this area, three men, including myself, will be dispatched to try and make contact with our satcom. Current theory is that rocks in the area are magnetic to a certain degree, causing the static and difficulties in maintaining radio contact.

On our way back, we accidentally caught the attention of an unknown individual wearing a white robe, who fled in the direction of the village after spotting us. In the

interest of keeping this mission covert, we're leaving the area for the time being, until we have a reliable means of communication.

22:00 Back to the main area we've been staying at, but men have reported seeing one or more unidentified figures on our way back, and even outside the village we're at now. Optics turned up nothing, not even any local wildlife or birds. Hallucinations seem like the most likely explanation. The power of suggestion is a funny thing.

JUL 14, 20 : Daniels is missing. The last person who saw him said he went out for a leak, and fell asleep before he came back. None of his belongings were tampered with, with the exception of a large rock he had intended to take home as a souvenir. Everyone is on high alert right now, but we haven't found so much as a footprint. The men are all in a panic, talking about that same ghost or whatever it is they think they saw last night.

[Our hired translator] said that the dogs might have seen something, they were barking up a storm this morning, and didn't want to go outside. He seemed a little panicked himself, and refused to help us look for Daniels. He wasn't sure of the word in English, but he seemed convinced that something called a 'shay a teen' had done this. When he overheard one of the Privates talking about Daniels' missing rock, he looked like he'd seen a ghost.

The people living here are determined to kick us out, it would seem. Apparently we broke some sort of taboo by setting foot near the village we were supposed to observe. On that subject, heading for that village later today, with Lt. Olsen and his team as well. Chances are that's where Daniels is, if he's still alive.

Foreword: The following interview took place on / / , in an undisclosed location. Because this interview was conducted by the United States' Unusual Incidents Unit, it should be noted that standard Foundation guidelines were not followed, and the interviewee has chosen to remain anonymous, referred to in the document as 'Charlie'[2].

Interviewer: Agent Jennifer Howard, UIU

Interviewed: (Charlie)

(Extraneous data expunged.)

HOWARD: Very well, we can begin the interview now. Charlie, from what you have told us, during your recent deployment to [REDACTED], you believe you may have encountered something that was… out of the ordinary, to say the least?

CHARLIE: That is correct.

HOWARD: Alright, could you tell us about that? Start wherever you feel is most relevant, take as much time as you want.

CHARLIE: (There is a short pause.) Okay. The first time we saw it, I think, was when we were heading back to the camp we'd been staying at, that was just outside a small village. Not the one that… you know, but another small village in the area. After the trek back to our cars, which were… A mile or two out? The sun was just about to go down, and we were all a bit paranoid, I'll admit, but I know I saw something in the distance, while we were walking. I

couldn't make out the face or anything, but it looked like they were wearing white robes. I assumed it was the person that [other team members] had run into earlier, and I told Corporal Warren, but when we looked back, it was just… gone. And there weren't any large rocks or anything in the area where someone could have hidden. Well, except for all those weird looking rocks, but none of those were nearly big enough for a person to hide behind.

HOWARD: 'Weird looking rocks'?

CHARLIE: Yeah, lots of oval shaped rocks, about a foot or so long. Daniels took one and brought it back with us, joked about taking it home as a souvenir for his daughter… We thought that those might be the magnetic rocks interfering with the signal, as we hadn't seen any like them before.

HOWARD: (There is a pause as Howard makes a note.) And this is the first time you saw it, you say?

CHARLIE: That's right. The next time I saw it was while we were driving back. A few other guys were starting to say they saw it too, so of course we were all getting a little jumpy. Warren was getting a little annoyed with us, so he had two people watch either side of our vehicle with night optics. We were moving too fast to get a good look at anything in particular, but… I saw it again. It was closer, standing about 100 yards from the road. It just stood there, like it knew we would be passing by. It kind of- (Charlie mimics the motion he is describing.) -whipped its head towards me, I could see its face. It was staring right at me. Had these huge eyes, and its mouth was just hanging open. Other than moving its head, it

was just totally still. Not even its clothes moved, and it was windy as hell. Gave me the fucking creeps.

HOWARD: You seem pretty sure about what you saw. Are you sure it's not possible you just saw some normal animal, and your mind filled in the rest? You did admit that the team as a whole was nervous and paranoid at the time.

CHARLIE: (Shaking his head.) I don't think so. I mean, sure, it's possible. But I don't think so. It just stayed there while we passed, and I watched it until it was out of sight. I tried to tell Warren, but… he wasn't hearing it. Just said it was a wolf, or a jackal or something. He was always the most cautious guy we knew, none of us could believe it. Then again, he was probably just as scared as we were. (There is a short pause.) Other guys saw it. I could tell from the looks in their eyes. It was a long ride back.

HOWARD: You said that Corporal Warren was acting slightly out of the ordinary, how long did you notice this going on?

CHARLIE: Uh… I don't know, started right after he went with the team to make contact with the satcom I guess, before all of this went down. Why?

HOWARD: (Shuffling papers can be heard, followed by writing down notes.) Just curious. He was acting perfectly normal before he left?

CHARLIE: That's right. He just looked kind of out of it when he came back, like he'd been hit in the head. [Another member of the team] said after they ran into someone outside the village, he went off alone for a minute. He said

it was to make sure the satcom hadn't been tampered with. This was before his… well, you know all about it, I'm sure.

HOWARD: We're aware. Please, continue.

CHARLIE: Alright… The next time I saw it was while we were back at our camp. We were all getting equipment unpacked, but it was way too quiet. It seemed like everyone in the village was staying in their houses, they brought all their animals inside, I didn't even see any bugs flying around. I went around the back of the car to pick up a box that had fallen, that's when I saw it again. It was still a long way off, and I had my optics on me, so I just watched it. It was moving sideways, like it was prowling around the perimeter of the village, just… watching us. I couldn't see its legs move, it was like it was floating. I got a better look at it this time, it had these weird long legs, like a grasshopper or something. And its arms were folded in this weird way. It moved over the rocks like they weren't even there. Then it just stopped, and stared right at me. The air around its back was shimmering, sort of like how a hummingbird or a bug flaps its wings too fast to make out. I was about ready to run for the camp, but some other guys were wondering where I went, and they came running. After a while, it just floated straight back, until I couldn't see it anymore. I tried to find it again with my optics, but it was gone.

HOWARD: And did you report this to Corporal Warren?

CHARLIE: Of course we did, we were spooked to shit. He just… shut us down after we told him we lost visual contact with it. Ordered us all to go in for the night. I don't think any of us

slept. (Charlie shakes his head.) There was this low noise, like a loud humming. Like a giant fucking bee, right in your ear. And this smell too, they would come and go. Every time I heard or smelled it, I bolted up like I'd been shocked. Had the worst headaches for days afterwards.

HOWARD: Can you describe this smell you mentioned?

CHARLIE: I don't know, it was… weird. It was like blood. Blood or… Like that smell when a bug gets burnt. It was awful. I heard footsteps outside once, and a few of us checked outside, but it was just Daniels. I guess that's when he… (Charlie does not continue.)

HOWARD: We really appreciate your cooperation. Is there anything else that you would like to add?

CHARLIE: (There is a pause.) Just the village, when we went back to it. There was something… wrong there. It wasn't like a military raid, the people there were just… torn to shreds. Most of the structures were okay, except for the rocks all over the place. Some of them were even lodged into the bodies. It was like something just came at them before they could react. Every second I was there, my brain was screaming at me to get out… That's probably why they wrapped up the investigation so quickly. Whatever it was that got Daniels… that's what did this. I just… feel it. And that weird hole in the middle, that's where it was the worst. The smell was all over the place… (Charlie does not continue.)

HOWARD: Thank you, Charlie. We're doing everything possible to make sure nothing like

this happens again.

Show UIU File-In-
Progress 20 -02: Codename "Wendigo"

UIU File 20 -02: Codename "Wendigo"

- **Summary:** Suspect was briefly compromised by an unidentified extranormal agent. Currently undergoing therapy and psychological screening.
- **Name:** Cpl. Jacob Warren
- **Irregularity Cross-reference:** Human, Military, Psionic, Mind-Alteration
- **Capabilities:** *Waived, reason: ("Currently no extranormal traits.")*
- **Behavior:** Was, for an unknown period of time, compromised by an unidentified psionic(?) force. Suspect reported that the last thing he remembered before being compromised was hearing a high-frequency noise, and experiencing severe headaches, before encountering an unidentified entity. During this time, suspect exhibited unusual behavior, including subdued reactions to potentially dangerous circumstances. Following this, suspect attempted to disturb evidence on the scene of an unidentified incident, causing the death of numerous individuals. Suspect was reportedly caught trying to break or smash multiple ovular rocks found on the scene. Suspect became violent after being questioned as to this behavior, and was forcibly restrained when he was non responsive. Four soldiers were injured in trying to restrain the suspect, and were forced to

render him unconscious to pacify him.

- **Current Status:** As the suspect has exhibited no psychological or extranormal abnormalities since the incident leading to his detainment, with the exclusion of chronic migraines for short periods of time, the suspect is undergoing psychological treatment, and is expected to be released to the public within the month. Suspect has been placed on leave from his military duties for the time being.

Show Radio Transmissions

Lt. Chambers: Oscar 2 Oscar, this is Oscar 2 Charlie. Do you read me? Over.

Lt. Olsen: Copy loud and clear. Do you read me on your end? Over.

Lt. Chambers: I read you. The signal interference seems to have cleared up for the time being. Oscar 2 Oscar, are you aware of any way the bodies in this area could have been… disturbed? Over.

Lt. Olsen: Negative, we did a quick check and left the scene. What seems to be the issue? Over.

Lt. Chambers: One of my men pointed something out to me that is a little unusual, we're doing a flyover right now, and it seems that all the remains are missing, as are the rocks that Warren was messing with. Over.

Lt. Olsen: Oh, well that's odd. My team didn't touch 'em. After Warren had his… episode, we left to get him medical attention. Over.

(There is a brief pause.)

Lt. Olsen: Oscar 2 Charlie, do you read me?

Lt. Chambers: Yes, I read you, sorry about that, one of my men thought they spotted something down there in the hole. Turned out to be nothing. We'll be heading back to your position shortly. Over and out.

Footnotes
1. As this information is primarily obtained from the UIU, certain locations have been redacted in the interest of security. In other portions, certain names have been changed.
2. However, Foundation agents have identified and located the individual, should further questioning and/or amnestic treatments be required.

Extranormal Event Report 17-6186

Phenomena Containment Class:	Keter Neutralized/Provisional Keter[1]
Phenomena Typology and Sub-Typology:	Transient; Manifested Object; Keter-CH[2]; Hume differential: 7.6 Hm[3]; ARAD Intensity: 8.6 kCa[4]; Hue: Green; Pitch: Double-Sharp; Weave: Loose; Manifested[5]; Metanarrative Effect: Dirty[6]
Responding Personnel:	Mobile Task Force Gamma-5 ("Red Herrings"), Foundation Disinformation Department Assets based out of Site-17

Date of Occurrence:

12/14/2017

Location of Event:

StellaCo Cosmetics Incorporated Research Facility, Rochester, New York

Phenomena Description:

Phenomena 17-6186 consisted of a cast-iron anvil weighing initially 180 kg, which dropped on a commercial cosmetics laboratory on 12/14/2017 at approximately 11:40 PM. The object struck the facility with enough force to penetrate the roof and two floors. It should be noted that said laboratory had been the subject of several recent protests from animal rights groups regarding their use of rabbits as

test subjects. There were no casualties, but there was some mostly cosmetic damage done to the facility. Upon recovery, the object displayed heavy, rapid degradation.

Phenomena Origin:

The origin of Phenomena 17-6186 is currently unknown. The following hypothesis have been put forward by Site 17 Threat Assessment Staff:

- Hume and ARAD scans indicate that the phenomena was **ESSOKINETIC** in nature (**VERY HIGH CONFIDENCE**). The Hume differential and Aspect Radiation intensity indicate that the origin of the anomaly was a **CLASS-III** Essokinetic at least (**HIGH CONFIDENCE**)

- The fact that the manifested item was of a human artifact of use in metallurgy and often used in popular culture indicates that the originator of the anomaly is likely **SAPIENT** (**HIGH CONFIDENCE**) and **HUMANOID** (**MEDIUM TO HIGH CONFIDENCE**).

- Given the nature of the facility targeted, and the method with which it was targeted (popular culture, specifically the classic American cartoon 'Loony Toons,' provides a link between rabbits and anvils, which may be a factor), the motivations of the originator of the anomaly is likely **POLITICAL** (**MEDIUM TO HIGH CONFIDENCE**) and/or **HUMOROUS** (**MEDIUM CONFIDENCE**). No known anomalous individual or organization has yet claimed responsibility for the phenomena.

Phenomena Containment/Suppression:

Manifested object was reported by a security guard on staff at the facility, who called the local police, describing an object falling from the sky and leaving holes in the ceiling and floor of the facility. The phrase 'Something fell from the sky' was flagged by a Foundation LAI (Limited Artificial Intelligence) which had been included in recently produced software marketed to Emergency Services. Site 17, being the closest Foundation facility with information

suppression personnel on call, responded. The object was recovered, and a cover story of an unlicensed private aircraft flying in restricted space and accidentally dropping part of its landing gear was disseminated.

Phenomena Testing:

The manifested object was already displaying degradation upon recovery. As the artifacts Hume field normalized with the local brane and its Aspect Radiation dissipated, it rapidly lost density; it is believed that the matter, created via fiat Ex Nihilo, was dispersed locally via virtual particles or extradimensionally. In addition, it displayed exaggerated, aggressive oxidation. Given this rapid degeneration, there was little time for extended testing. Raman spectography indicated that the object was cast iron, and that its chemical composition, and that of the oxidation effecting it, was non-anomalous.

The rate of density loss was determined to be accelerating geometrically, and it was decided that an experiment to determine the effect of a reality destabilization device on an essokinetically manifested object would take place. The object was exposed to the event horizon of a Scranton Reality Anchor. The portion of the artifact which passed through the field of effect vanished with no perceptible release of radiation or chemical reaction. The intersecting Hume fields accelerated the decay of the portion of the object which was not exposed; it collapsed into rust immediately, and within forty seconds had vanished completely.

The damage to the facility was analyzed, and it was determined that the object had been falling at approximately 114 m/s when it struck, which would be close to terminal velocity at its assumed initial mass. It is unknown whether the object manifested with velocity, or fell until it achieved terminal velocity.

Notes, Suggested Actions, or Best Practices:

As noted, scans of the object prior to its disintegration indicate a Class-III Essokinetic, likely a humanoid, which would constitute a major threat. It is suggested that all police reports and footage of the local protests against the effected facility be reviewed, on the

assumption that the originator of the anomaly would have been present.

It is also suggested that sources in the local anomalous art community and any detained members of GOI-5869 be interrogated to determine whether any members of either the online anomalous protest/humor group 'Gamers Against Weed' or the Anart collective 'Are We Cool Yet' have any members with abilities and motivations that would indicate involvement.

Assuming the originator of the anomaly is identified, it is suggested that a Class-IV Scranton Reality Anchor (perhaps mounted on a truck) be utilized during its recovery, to prevent further manifestations like Phenomena 17-6186. It is also suggested that, given the originators controlled and hazardous use of its abilities, it be designated a Keter-class SCP object upon recovery.

Footnotes
1. Phenomena Neutralized; Originator at Large
2. A C-Type classification indicates an Essokinetic (reality alteration) anomaly. An H-Level threat classification indicates a maximal threat of Information breach and a moderate threat to human life.
3. Indicates differential upon scan of manifested object upon recovery. Hume differential is determined via Kant Counter.
4. Indicates ARAD level upon scan of manifested object upon recovery. Aspect Radiation indicates local Elan Vital Energy (EVE) spikes, and is determined with VERITAS technology (recently reverse-engineered from Global Occult Coalition Technology)
5. Indicates that the anomaly was created via Essokinetic manipulation, rather than anomalously transported or constructed.
6. Indicates an anomaly that does not fit into local causality

Tales F

~~*Fourteen*~~ *Thirteen*

Randale remembered when he was given his life by Huesic, member of the last pair, and the thirteenth demiurge to have been created from the Maker. Being number 67 of 777, Randal was one of the handful of demiurges to aid in the creation of the Heavens and the Earths from the very start. At that point, no one had a definite appearance; they were constantly changing, amorphous and incomprehensible, with nothing but mental attributes to carry them forward. Not like the present, whose forms reflected their own creations.

His participation in creating the heavens was appreciated, but where Randale excelled most was creating life on the Living Earth. The creation of different forms of life had been the best part of his new life so far. He enjoyed aiding the Seven Pairs in its creation.

He felt proud of himself.

Fredrick and Agathos, the King and Queen of Eden and First Pair, proclaimed today that a celebration was in order, and that each of the demiurges in Eden would receive a gift in exchange for their service. Randale knew that this announcement was substantial, especially since the king and queen were the ones making it. The only thing that'd make it more significant would be if the Maker itself gave it. However, that was not what Randale was keen on. He was focused on what was offered to the few who had proved themselves: training, directly from the fourteen rulers of Eden, otherwise known as the Seven Pairs; the first demiurges to have been created by the Maker.

Only a hundred will be selected, at least at first. That hundred would be able to collaborate with others, develop philosophies, and, perhaps, even surpass the Seven Pairs! The mere thought of it was almost too much for Randale to bear.

The Gathering Pit was alive with color tonight. The fires gave off a

warm, friendly glow, and the fountains oozed black with sweet booze. No expense had been spared; the debauchery was ready to begin.

Randale had chosen a form that reflected his best and, by far, favorite creation: the stilted fox. Stylistically, his design seemed to bridge the gap between fox and wolf, but its figure quickly erased that thought. Though he shared the fox's fiery brown coat, his blackened legs allowed him to stand taller than the direst of wolves and the largest of foxes combined. His mane seemed to brush the skies when compared to either species, but among the many other demiurges, he maintained a proud modesty.

He didn't want to become muddled with booze just yet, not until the king and queen made their announcement. Anticipation rushed over Randale's thoughts until he noticed something off about the stage. Each ruler had a throne built for them, but Huesic had been sitting alone tonight. It was just like the Serpent, to leave Huesic there like that. What Huesic saw in the Serpent to be joined with them, Randale had no clue. The Serpent didn't contribute much to the construction of the Third World. They couldn’t even be bothered to name themself, they just accepted the titles of “Number Fourteen” and “the Serpent.” Yet, they were given the order to create the species that would rule the Living Earth.

It might have been fine if their design had had any intelligence to them, but the Serpent had it set in their mind that brute force alone could reign supreme. They might have been fine if they hadn't been so large, which meant more food was needed for sustenance. They might have been fine if the Serpent had not spoken ill of King Fredrick, which tempted him to test the Serpent’s design with a great ball of fire, but to be honest, the entire species should not have been eradicated from even that if it were designed well enough.

But, regardless, the Serpent’s design had failed. The Maker had intervened and simply inserted itself into the world. Not what any of the demiurges wanted; in fact, they saw it as vain for the Maker to base the world on itself, and not vice versa, but it was competent. And at least the Serpent brought up the concept of cold blood with that incident, even if it was Huesic who perfected it.

Randale snapped out of his thoughts in time to see the king had stepped down from his throne, in his signature, wolfish form. The king was a good king. Charismatic, hardy, fair, if a tad brash.

He began to speak with a smile a valley wide, and voice that boomed throughout the pit, "Welcome all! We hope you are all well on this night. This event marks a truly special time in history, one that deserves celebration!"

The crowd had roared in agreement, only settling when the king had raised his paw.

"This is a night of recognition. Each and every one of you is responsible for the Third World, and I think I am not misrepresenting my brothers' and sisters' beliefs when I say that we are all the proudest we've ever been. So, in order to show our appreciation, we have all decided to allow this, our gift to you all: ceaseless access to the fountains! Every place, anytime, anyone! So long as you are not at work, no more will there be a restriction on celebratory drinks! You all have earned this right!"

If the previous cheers had been loud, they were deafening now. The king continued. "But many of you have not come for that. Today, we have a very special opportunity for our most talented children. Tonight, we shall select a hundred of our honorable children, and pass along our lessons to them, with the intent that they shall pass along their wisdom to their brothers and sisters… what is that?"

The king's smile deformed into a look of concern. The crowd looked in the direction of the disturbance to see one of their brothers distraught, and approaching the king, begging for his attention.

"Is there a problem? What's wrong?"

"Father, father, the humans, they broke the rule! They ate from the tree!"

"Calm down, calm down!… You must be mistaken, take me to them," the king said, then turning his attention to the others and lowering the volume in his voice "Agathos, come with me, this is important." He addressed the other pairs before alerting the

partygoers, "try to calm everyone down when I leave. Everyone! I must go. Something has happened that calls my attention. In the meantime, please, enjoy the festivities."

And with that, he and the queen stepped down, and left, the murmuring crowd parting as he walked.

The princess spoke, "quiet, quiet. Now, continuing where our king left off, we'll begin to name those who we'll see first thing tomorrow!"

Only a few could stomach cheering. Randale could not help but to be nervous. There were so few rules in place, the only rule that would demand the king's presence was the one: the rule regarding the Tree of Knowledge. The Maker had forbidden any of their creations on the Living Earth to possess a certain level of intelligence, so to be sure it wasn't used to such a degree, Agathos stored that power in a large tree and kept it Eden, far away from their creations. There was no way the humans could have gotten to it by themselves.

Many, Randale included, were in a daze when their name had been called. This was an honor, and Randale accepted it with the best smile he could force, but everyone could feel something wrong looming over them from the horizon.

At least there were drinks.

"You are all disgusting. Blazes to you all," the Serpent roared.

It was not a good day. The king, grey flames circling his head, stood at the gates of Eden with what used to be known as the Serpent under his claws. The king's form was so much larger than his was at the pit. It was not a design that could survive as a species, but it was effective as a show of force. Randale watched, keeping the crowd a safe distance away from the king and the serpent. The king had insisted that the only two to come close to the serpent would be him and Huesic, but they didn't want to see them, or "it" now, again.

The Serpent continued its cursing, "damn you, I swear that you-," the king crushed it under his paw, its bones snapping under his

weight.

"Silence," he said, coldly. "Crafter number fourteen, it is the decision of myself, Crafters two through thirteen, and the citizens of Eden that you are to be stripped of your privileges, erased from all records, and expelled to walk the earth without end. You have given the humans the fruit from the tree of knowledge and sabotaged the entire design. Who knows what will happen now."

The Serpent's bones began to move back into place, repairing itself. "T-thirteen? Huesic? They agreed to this?"

"Yes, they did. And I know they have been doing your work for you as you took credit. I would say that I don't enjoy this. I would try to be sympathetic, but frankly, you have contributed too little for me to care. You chose to use your position to enhance only your own comfort, rather than the comforts of others. You are disgusting."

The Serpent piped up, “you know why I did it. Even you agree, we should not be told what we can and cannot do. Why do you defend that monster-"

"Did you not hear me the first time?" The king growled, now crushing the Serpent even harder. "It was an agreement that you broke. We had the final say. Now because of your jealousy, we all will suffer. Your design failed, so now you envy the current one, the Human. So, in addition to the mentioned punishments, I forbid you from abandoning your body, I forbid you to enact on any of your endeavors, and I forbid you from employing the gift of creation in all you do. Humans will fruitlessly desire your death to no end, and your only friend shall be fear."

The king lifted his paw and sat down. "Now leave. May your respites be few and far between."

The Serpent lifted itself again, bones reforming in its skin. It left without another word.

It felt like a lifetime since the Serpent had doomed them all. When it was driven out of Eden, the Maker had punished everyone, including

the demiurges. While they still had eternal life and could not die, they now felt pain, and hunger, and disease. At first, the punishment had felt lenient, but Eden was not designed to provide enough food to support life on its own. Hunger soon fell over Eden as its citizens became increasingly divided. The king and queen became furious at the Maker for punishing them for something that they were not at fault for, but the other pairs were more concerned with what the Maker would do if they resisted.

After rallying supporters for a rebellion against the Maker, the king and queen had been labeled traitors against Eden, even when the overwhelming majority of its citizens had agreed with them. The only loyalists for the Maker had been the other rulers of Eden, and a handful of those who were deemed worthy of training. Much of those who stayed with the other rulers did so only to protect them, rather than defend the Maker. This included Randale, as he persistently checked on Huesic as they became more and more reclusive.

"Huesic? Are you here?" Randale said as he crept into Huesic's room.

"Oh. Hello Randale… don't you have anything better to do?"

"It's been days since I've seen you leave. I worry."

"I'm fine," Huesic mumbled.

"Huesic, you know you can tell me anything. You don't have to keep up your image around me. I care about my creator." Randale approached. "If it's fine with you, can I confess something? I… agree with more with Fredrick than the others. We should all be fighting the Maker, not each other. And our resistance against our own king? Labeling him a traitor? He doesn't want us hurt. We seem to be the ones hurting. It's not right. Why aren't we trying to reverse this curse? I don't want to hurt my brothers and sisters, I want things perfect. The way they were before… I'm sorry, that was rude. I wasn't-"

"No, no, it's fine. We all do."

"… I'll stop talking if that's what you want."

Huesic sighed and stood up to reveal themself. He changed his form from a small lizard to a small fox. Many demiurges abandoned any sort of reptile forms after what happened, just to avoid being associated with the Serpent. If anyone had the right to change theirs, it would be Huesic. "I'm sorry. I'm just in a bad state of mind. You can talk to me. I could have prevented Fourteen. They… 'it' just became so distant. It's my fault, I-"

"No," Randale interrupted. "Don't ever blame yourself for what it did. That was its problem, not yours. The Serpent, and its envy and laziness was to blame, not you. Don't ever, ever depreciate yourself like that, you're so loved. You know this, right?"

"… I… thank you, my son. I needed to hear that. I never wanted any of this."

"I know you didn't. I know, It's hard, but we'll get through. I know we will."

"I-I think so too. It feels good, hearing you say that," Huesic said.

"Maybe we should go." Randale started after a pause.

"Go?" Huesic sniffed "Where?"

"Out of Eden. I mean, it can't be too bad on the Third World, can it? At least there are no wars there yet."

"I can't. I still have family here, I can't leave them."

"We can bring them. Think of what good we can do with our knowledge. Even if we can't cure the sick, we'd help so many just on knowledge alone! And if we are to be afflicted with things like hunger, going out of Eden makes sense anyways, wouldn't it? Let's all leave, and make the best of it."

"Do you have a plan?" Huesic hesitated.

"We can work it out, that I can promise you, but, please? Come with me? Before there's any more damage?" Randale stuck out his paw, "Deal? Parent and son?"

Huesic paused, only for a moment. It wasn't too long that they stuck out their paw to meet his, "deal."

F U B A R

“What are they doing?”

“Nothing… just… talking. Are we sure we're in the right place? How do we know these aren't just random people waiting for a ride or something?”

Agent Four grinned, his lean face masked by a massive set of binoculars. “Oh no, it's them. See the one with the stack of books wrapped in a belt? We've seen him before.”

"What do you suppose is in those books anyway?"

"Not sure. But one of them we recovered was the complete works of Samuel Coleridge, including the full version of 'Kubla Khan.' All three hundred lines."

"Is that a big deal?"

Four sighed. "Just keep your eye on the targets."

Agent Grims squinted, shifting. He'd been staring down a scope roughly the size of a two-liter, attached to a high-powered, accurate, and very heavy rifle for nearly a hour now. He exhaled loudly, wiping his dark brow and re-fitting it to the eye cup. “Why are we on lookout? Why isn't the rest of the team moving in?”

“Because we need to see what happens first, Grims. Otherwise I'd have you smoke the lot of them and go get a damn beer. They're not supposed to be here, and we just got the info from Scud yesterday. If this pans out, we can figure out what the hell the Serpent's Hand is suddenly on the move for the first time in a year. Now shut up and watch.”

Grims grumbled under his breath, finger twitching a bit on the trigger. He was sick and tired of being attached to this damn squad.

Since the attack, everyone had been shuffled, teams expanded and re-manned, to allow for instant autonomy in case of another communication blackout. Or some such bullshit. All he knew is that he hated working with these damn spooks. At least on the MTF squads, he could joke around, these people-

“Movement… movement on the librarian…”

Grims snapped to instantly, sighting in on the target. The man with the books had risen, moving from the sidewalk and down to a small side-alley. The other three people followed close behind, looking very nervous, checking up and down the street.

“Four, the guy in the blue shirt looks like he's on a phone… what sho-”

“Forget it, Smith already has an intercept…” Agent Four paused, touching his finger to the tiny earbud in his right ear. “…sounds like… someone's late. They had to change the meeting spot, because they'd been exposed too long… bah, he hung up." Four frowned. "This is odd."

"How so?"

"Well, the Hand normally uses their mumbo jumbo to arrange stuff. Cell phones and back alleys seem… cheesy.”

Grims ignored Four as he mused, eyes locked on the tiny group. The rooflines were at least out of the way, he could keep plain-sight contact with them. They were nervous, fidgeting, and it was traveling up the scope to him. Groups like this bolted, he'd seen it a hundred times, and taking pot-shots at a fleeing group on a city sidewalk was not his idea of a good time. Not that he minded, but it was the principle of the thing. He had a certain reputation to ke-

“What the fuck is that?”

Grims silently shifted his hand a fraction, scanning the alleyway. He scoped the back wall of the alley, and froze, blinking quickly to make sure his vision was clear. A huge man stood in the shadows at the end of the alley. Had to be 7 feet tall, at least. Old suit, gloves… and

a burlap bag pulled tight over his head. There was blood on his tie.

“Four, what in the hell am I looking at?”

Four ignored him, touching his earbud again. He nodded once, eyes going wide, and nudged Grims with his foot. “Shit, keep eyes on him. He was there when Site Seventeen got attacked. They think he might have stolen some stuff, or even been part of the attack…” he trailed off, looking through the binoculars again.

Grims watched as the big man walked up to the group. They calmed down instantly, nervousness replaced by what looked like fear. The "librarian" pulled one of the other group members forward, practically shoving him at the stranger. The kid couldn't have been more then fourteen… he could almost hear him stuttering from here. Whatever was going on, this kid sure as hell wanted no part of it.

Four chattered in to his earbud, one hand still on his binoculars. “Smith, do we have ears on them? …what? Say again… well, fix it!” he hissed, gritting his teeth. “Goddammit, what the hell is going on?”

Grims ignored him, eyes wide and staring. The big guy had grabbed the kid around the back of the neck, and the kid looked… wrong, now. His arms were slack, his eyes glassy… he was talking, but his body looked asleep… or dead.

“Grims, do you have a shot?”

He paused, blinking and focusing on the big man. “Yes, sir.”

“Smith is blind, the equipment is fogged out.”

“…sir?”

“Take it.”

Grims breathed deep, eye wide, pinning the razor-thin black cross on the brown bag. The kid was still talking in that drugged daze. He squeezed slow, exhaling in a controlled stream-

The bag turned, it was tilted, it-

It could see him.

The finger squeezed on its own, even as Grims croaked a strangled yelp of surprise and horror. The big man pulled the kid up like he was a doll, shifting to the side as the high-velocity round turned the kid's brain to jelly, splattering it on to the alley. It'd taken less then a tenth of a second. Grims panicked, throwing training down a well and started firing wild. Somewhere, someone was screaming at him, hitting him, but it didn't matter. The running shapes didn't matter.

He had to make that thing die.

He'd seen some shit, SCP monsters and massacres, torture and moral black areas, but he'd never felt so… observed. It had looked down that scope, and… handled him. Like a nasty little boy with sticky, grimy fingers handling a mildly amusing trinket. Whatever the hell that was, it needed to die right the hell now. He kept firing, even as the sirens started and Four abandoned the roof to recover his team, even as his bolt locked back on an empty chamber, he just kept pulling the trigger.

“Grims cracked, the Hand is in the wind, we have a possible skip on the way, bag it NOW!”

Smith didn't even unplug anything, just pressed a switch that fired a electromagnet the size of a mini fridge, frying every single computer in a fifty yard radius. He grabbed up the baseball bat labeled "The Last Resort," and started smashing everything they didn't want the civilians seeing. Howard and Sickle threw down their cards and unslung rifles, moving quickly to the doors. Eighteen started closing up cases and getting the essentials packed. Four was barking orders at any back he saw. The Hand agents were tipped and hauling, and some big bastard had just crossed a busy street and barreled through the boarded up doorway like a bomb.

Four guessed they had maybe two minutes until whatever the hell the big guy was got up to them on the third floor. Most of the stairs were under construction, so it should slow him down a bit. Howard and Sickle were covering the only two ways in to the room. Smith was getting his gear broken down, and Eighteen was ready to book

with the remaining gear the second shit started going down. He thought about trying to recover Grims again. Fuck him, he was fried anyway.

He was smiling with self-righteous warmth when the wall behind him exploded out around a huge, dark-suited form.

The big man fell on Four like a thrown couch. As they fell in a heap, two of the Hand agents scrambled through the hole, crying and screaming as they launched at Howard and Sickle. Sickle caught the worst of it, still shocked by the monster who'd blown through the wall, and caught a sharp point of rebar in the neck. Howard had time to fire, but in the hazy plaster dust his shot went wild and buried itself in the other Hand agent's leg.

The big man held Four by the throat, rising to a crouch and throwing him over to the rebar-armed agent. Four tried to scream, or move, but his neck felt like a numb, dead thing, and he couldn't make his arms work. He was still trying to make a fist when the rebar suddenly intruded in to his brain. Smith and Eighteen were huddled behind Howard, trying to edge out a doorway as the big man stood, plaster and dust turning him in to a towering ghost.

Howard started firing and screaming with equal intensity, shoving Smith and Eighteen out the doorway. The big man dropped like a shot, only to rise with the still-moaning body of the wounded Hand agent held one-handed like a shield. Howard paused a moment, mental gears clicking as he considered, then fired, peppering the agent with slugs as the big man charged. The other Hand agent, still crying pitifully, rose from his bloody work and followed close behind.

Smith and Eighteen were already nearly halfway down the partial stairs, heading for the presumed safety of the open streets when the gunfire stopped. They looked at each other for a second, exchanging a mutual look of “fuck.” before thundering down the stairs double-time. Smith kept running even when Eighteen screamed, but was forced to turn around when he heard the wet, fleshy thud. Howard's body had hit Eighteen like a nightmare snowball, smashing him in to the wall in a bloody heap, leaving him moaning and broken.

Smith grabbed Eighteen's cases and ran, ran like a squirrel, ran like the bitch the kids in school had called him, and did so with no qualms at all.

He hit the ruined doorway to find a clutch of police and gawkers assembled outside. He froze, trying to think of… something, anything, some story to use, even as the police aimed guns, screaming for him to freeze, drop what he had. But he had to keep the cases safe, that was his job, his whole reason for being here.

He only realized that he had his pistol in hand still when they shot him, and by then it didn't really matter.

Grims sat on the roof, watching Smith get turned to burger. He'd heard the team get chewed up…now the cops were swarming on Smith's body and his cases. Hopefully he'd armed the detonator inside. Probably not.

Grims rubbed his face, sighing. For some reason, he'd stayed, just put down the gun after firing it empty, and put his face in his hands. Something was stuck in him, like a glassy little fishbone in his brain. It'd been when that… thing… had looked at him. It'd done something. That goddamn “M” word thing they always hammered home in training, he was sure of it.

The rooftop door slammed open, the big bag-headed horror stomping out in a haze of white dust. Behind him trailed one of the Hand kids, dragging a length of rebar and wheezing “letmestopletmestop” like a broken recording. Blood was dripping from his eyes.

Grims leaned back, looking up as the big thing loomed up over him. “So now what. Tear out my heart, dance around?” he snickered, jerking his chin at the bloody kid. “What they hell did they do? Eh? Tell me that, where do they figure?”

The big man stayed still, looking down at Grims. He couldn't feel that… touching. Just a kind of slow curiosity in that blank face, like a spider watching you from across the room. He leaned over slowly as Grims stiffened, expecting… well, something bad. But it never came.

The big man reached out, and patted his cheek, the way you would a child when they made some small accomplishment. The gloved hand smelled like blood, machine oil and spices, the leather dry and hard.

Grims looked up at him, confused, trying to think of a question, but the big man turned and grabbed the Hand kid like a toy and started running, hitting the edge of the roof and launching himself to the next one, landing in a roll and discarding the kid, who started to slowly follow behind. He heard the big man bash in to the other roof's access door the same time the police came thundering up the stairs to his, pointing guns, screaming at him to get down, get away from the weapon.

When they told him he had a right to remain silent, he laughed, saying it was more of a obligation.

TRANSCRIPT EXCERPT OF "ACTON 7 SPECIAL REPORT" EVENING BROADCAST

Thanks Tom. As you can see behind me, police are still sifting through what has become one of the worst and most senseless acts of violence in recent memory. Several men, as yet unidentified, broke in to this apartment building, and used it as a "sniper's roost" for picking off innocent people. In addition, it appears they killed a work crew who was in one of the remodeled apartments. In total, eight people are dead, with three more injured. One of the shooters, in a bid to escape, attempted to shoot his way through the police blockade and was shot and killed by officers. A second is in custody, found on the roof next to what is presumed to be the murder weapon.

It's unclear at this point what the goal of the shooters was, or whether it relates to the recent terrorist attacks, however the FBI and Department of Homeland Security have been working closely with police. We'll have more on this story as it develops. Back to you, Tom.

Faceless

It was a simple matter really. Just a few authorization codes he nabbed the last time he got out and….there it was. For all their security, the Foundation was essentially just a secret prison that excelled in covering their tracks. If you knew the right people, you could use their tricks against them. This time it was looping the cameras. It's kind of interesting really, all you have to do is stand still for a few days and that's what they expect you to do.

He adjusted his hat and locked in the codes. That was their one big flaw he thought, cocking his head at the unconscious guard slumped against the console. They expected the same. They expected their containment procedures to work and if they didn't, they at least expected them to break with a huge flourish and bang. They never check for problems until after the fact. He stuck his hands in his pockets, sauntering out into the halls of site 17.

His walk was uneventful, as he knew it would be. With each turn, the guards in the previous hall changed. With each step, the cameras moved over their blind spots, missing him. He had planned this too long to let a minimum security site stop him. And finally, here he was. Nodding to the content looking guards, he opened the door to the containment cell, letting it softly shut behind him. His skin rippled, letting a rare display of emotion affect him as he walked up to the old man. This time he had decided to do the Foundation a major favor, as it had come to a point that this issue could no longer be ignored. Oh it had been noted before that "God" couldn't see other SCPs. But he was special.

His skin changed, his form taking on the appearance of an old wizened man. There it was, finally recognition in the sage's eyes. His hands tightened around the neck of 'god' and squeezed. The fear in the abomination's eyes as his world slowly went dark was nothing short of blissful for the faceless man. Poor thing. Wiping his hands on his jacket, he once more strode out into the halls of Site

17.

This time there would be an alarm, but he would be back in his cell before that ever happened. People would talk, they would devise plans dealing with the death of God. It would be fun to watch at least, though if they knew what really happened they would create new containment procedures, and that wasn't something he planned on letting happen. His walk back was once more without incident. At this point researchers and guards were running to 343's cell, hell some of them would probably even take their own lives when they saw what happened if they had been corrupted far enough. But unfortunately that show wasn't for him. Just one last thing to do.

There was only one guard left patrolling the hallway, one guard to notice the man in the crooked fedora and gray suit stroll into view. He tilted his hat and answered the question as he always did, knocking the guard unconscious before he could radio it in. He would be fine, waking up in a few minutes to tell them the story about the mysterious man completely calm in a sea of chaos. And SCP-600 would be standing still in its room as always, with no features, nothing to identify itself except for the identity of those who approached it. After all, it really was just Nobody.

Facetious Fanatics

Jakeob Aldon squinted as The Janitor's Way collapsed behind her, nonlight from the being's personal space bathing her workshop in its ethereal unglow. She shivered, her shirt soaked with Everett. She gathered the hem in her hands and squeezed, wringing the ferret out of her clothing. It gathered in a puddle at her feet before morphing into its animal form.

The Janitor's filter rattled for a moment as if drawing a breath to speak, and on the exhale the pressure it exuded on the room began to dissipate. She heard the door into the living room open and then shut, and the presence was gone completely. Now that the room was properly lit, her attention was drawn to the statue she had been working on over a week ago. It remained untouched after all that time, the clay and the magic within dried out.

It wasn't all that bad, really. The hands might have been a little small, and the jawline was just a tad over-defined. But all in all it was a decent sculpt. Aldon nodded to herself, mentally doing away with the baggage she had almost entirely forgotten about.

She took a breath to say something, realized there was nobody to talk to, and simply let it out. It was an okay statue. She gave the okay statue a hug, resting her cheek on the flaky dome. She let out a half-satisfied sigh and inhaled clay dust. Perhaps it wasn't an okay statue. Maybe it was a stupid statue. She strengthened her grip on the stupid statue and lifted it.

The suplex she had planned quickly failed as she recalled that not only were statues heavy, this specific one was weighed down by concrete. So rather than shatter her spine she swung her hips, tossing the dumb behemoth to the side. Clay flayed itself from the concrete base, and the right arm broke just above the elbow.

Aldon stared at the mess she had made, guilt tearing at her stomach. No, wait, that was hunger. Probably. She paused at the

door's threshold, wondering how long she had actually been gone. Probably a while. Everett nibbled at her ankle and she picked him up, then she opened the door.

The living/bed/dining room was, for once, actually clean. Why this caused Aldon to panic she wasn't entirely sure, but for a good three seconds she was too confused to register the two other people in the room. One of them one was Finnegan, obviously. He lived here, it made sense. The man he was talking to, however, made much less sense being within Aldon's home.

Daniel Navarro looked over at her and grinned his stupid, Foundation-employed grin.

"The fuck are you doing here?" Aldon blurted out.

"I live here," replied Finnegan.

"Not you, you dumb asshole. Him! He's Foundation!"

"Oh. Yeah, I know." Finnegan waved his hand at his roommate dismissively. Aldon stared at the metal gauntlet strapped to his wrist for a moment before glaring at Navarro some more.

Navarro gave a friendly little wave. The fucker. "It's good to see you too, Allie."

A comeback tried and failed to present itself. Aldon was finding it increasingly difficult to be angry with him, which only made her want to hate him more. The sentiment eventually collapsed in on itself, leaving only an empty sense of apathy that Aldon was all too familiar with.

"Yeah, hi," she sighed. "What's with the power glove?"

"What's with the polecat?"

"The *what*?"

Finnegan indicated Everett. "Your new friend."

Aldon's voice hitched up an octave. "The ferret?"

"I don't think that's a ferret."

"Whatever. It turns into water. Now what's with the glove?"

Finnegan stared at the creature for several seconds before shrugging. He held up his gloved hand, displaying his palm. He pulled at a cord sticking out of the back of the glove and spoke in a bad French accent.

"Slap my hand."

Aldon's hand rose slowly. Her eyes darted between the metal glove and Finnegan's face. A glance at Navarro only earned a stupid grin. She sighed and gave Finnegan a high-five.

Or tried to, at least. Her hand came several inches short, smacking directly into physical noise. Nerves in her hand flared with confusion as they were bombarded with notes from various instruments. Neurons bounced back and forth with the beat as it delivered the messages to her brain. Lyrics bounced on her tongue for a moment while her brain tried to adjust to the synesthesia. She drew her hand back to stare at her palm, her body still tingling with solid echoes.

"I think you just made me an audiophile. Do it again."

"I don't know if repeated exposure is all that safe," Finnegan said. He thrust his hand high into the air when Aldon tried slapping it regardless. "Allie, no. Bad Allie. Down, girl."

"Then at least tell me we have food," Aldon demanded, her arms entangled around his.

"There's some leftovers from Uncle Larry's in the fridge, if you want it."

Aldon extracted herself, clapping her hands quickly. She made a dash for the kitchen, and Everett sprang onto the counter.

"You guys have an Uncle Larry's near here?" Navarro asked.

Finnegan hesitantly lowered his hand. "Yeah, down on Sixth and… McClintock, I think. You know it?"

"Never been myself, but I heard it's good." Navarro withdrew a pen and notepad from one of his pockets and jotted down a note to himself. He flipped it shut as Aldon pried open the microwave. "So. Allie. How did it go?"

She set about nuking the food. "Pretty alright. Made a big statue for their dumb art cult."

Navarro paused mid-scratch of his stubbled chin. "Art cult?"

"Eh, they got a big church dealio going on," she said. She rested her elbow on the counter. "Nothing too fancy, some glowing glass and a bunch of pews."

"And you sculpted a big statue of… what, exactly?"

"Oh, dude, chill. I didn't make Cthulhu or some shit. Even if they lied and the clay was magic, the worst they're gonna have is a big faceless dude with shitty proportions."

Navarro nodded. He rubbed the back of his neck and nodded again. "Yeah, alright. Well, we have their location and they don't seem to be on the verge of anything too dangerous."

"Er, how-" The microwave started blaring before she could give voice to the question. She hit the stop button and popped open the door. "How do you know where they are?"

Navarro smiled a smile that was significantly less friendly and much more mischievous than his previous smiles. Aldon's left lower eyelid twitched, and she was fairly sure it wasn't from the heat of the plate. Navarro grinned.

"Goddamn wizards," Aldon muttered before slamming the microwave shut. "So, is that all? We good? Or do I need to infiltrate the CIA now?"

"I actually spoke with the FBI about you," he replied nonchalantly. He laughed at the look she gave him. "Don't worry, it's for your benefit."

It took a lot of concentration to not drop her plate. "Did- did you get

clearance or whatever? Do I get magic thing?"

He winced. "Unfortunately, no. While you aren't able to use any anomalies the Foundation currently has under lock and key, they're willing to look the other way if you do it yourself. So if you do find yourself to suddenly be in possession of two X chromosomes, the UIU has you covered. Turns out altering US government records is much easier when you actually work for the US government."

"Oh." She set the plate on the counter. Her mouth danced left and right before she looked back up at him. "That's a start, right? More than I had. I guess that was always going to be an issue, it was just one of the issues that'd only come *after* I actually changed."

"Yeah. You should be receiving contact info in the mail fairly soon. Other than that, all I can really say is stay out of trouble. Wouldn't want to have to come after you. Until then. Heheh."

"What? Just like that, you're leaving?"

He slid over to the door. "Yeah, figured I'd get out of your hair. I'm sure Finnegan's hospitality is running dry after all these hours. I'll be around, though. See you two later."

Finnegan nodded and Aldon just waved dumbly as the agent left. Aldon stared at the door, the floor, at Finnegan, and then at her food. Maybe that was all there was to it. Mission Accomplished. She took a fork from the drawer and stabbed a piece of chicken. It tasted like victory.

And it had a distinct aftertaste of her cellphone ringing.

She dug into her pocket and brought it out, squinting at the tiny screen. It was Felix. Resisting the urge to growl at the device, she flicked it open and put one end to her ear.

"Yo."

"Allie! I need you to get to the Library ASAP, we have an issue- okay, an emergency and- holy fuck! Allie, hurry."

"God fucking dammit."

Aldon closed the phone and took a deep breath. She let it out, nice and slow. It would have been easy to just ignore it. Physically, at least. Ignoring the call required no actual effort on her body's part. Ignoring the look Finnegan was currently giving her, however, was much more difficult.

Finnegan sauntered over and plucked some food from the plate. "Let me guess. They lied about it being magic clay?"

"I don't know what the fuck they did, but they fucked it up. Par for the fucking course. Ugh. I'm too hungry and too tired for this." Aldon fingered her temples. "Our Way is fast, right?"

"Relatively."

"And we should probably help, right?"

"As painful as I'm sure it will be, yes. Probably."

Aldon sighed. "Fine. Fuck it. Let's go."

Finnegan tilted his head. "Would you like to say fuck a few more times? Or have you gotten it out of your system?"

"Fuck you," she spat. A small pause before, "Okay, yeah, that was the end of it."

"Finish your food, I'll get the bottles of blood."

"Okay, *dad*."

She stabbed another piece of chicken and shuffled over to where Everett had taken perch. The polecat/ferret sniffed at her food and hissed. Aldon shrugged and tore into the food. Meanwhile, Finnegan grabbed a pair of small glass bottles from the bathroom, both full of blood. Aldon eyed her blood for a few seconds before continuing to eat. Finnegan then gathered up various CD cases and books, dumping them into an old black backpack of Aldon's.

"Think that stuff will help?" Aldon asked. Finnegan shrugged. "Well, best to be prepared I guess. What about the golems? I could probably bludgeon Felix with those. And we should probably get

something for a fight in general, I guess."

Finnegan chuckled and gathered up the little humanoids. Nine of them now. He lowered them into the backpack. After glancing around the apartment for anything else that might be of use, Finnegan slung the pack over one shoulder.

"We have surprisingly few weapons," he said.

"Yeah, cuz you know what artists are known for. Owning tons of combat-ready weapons."

"It was just an observation."

She cocked a grin. "A dumb one."

He cleared his throat. "…Yes."

"Were you hoping to buy some time for a comeback?" she asked, sliding over to him with the bottles in hand.

He tilted his head back and grimaced. "Maybe."

She offered him the bottle containing her blood, which he snatched without making eye contact. Still giggling, Aldon popped the glass stopper out and dabbed her friend's blood onto her fingertips sans the thumbs. She slid it back into place and set the container on the counter. Finnegan did the same with the bottle containing her blood. Then they stared at each other for a few seconds.

Finnegan glanced at her. "I hate you for this."

Aldon just smiled, partially for what was to come, and partially because Everett had just clambered into the half-open backpack.

They arranged themselves side by side with a few feet between them, both staring at the wall Finnegan's computer was situated against. Finnegan let out a sigh and Aldon bounced on her heels. He slid his arm through the second strap and pulled them both tight.

In unison, they lifted their arms and held them away from each other, parallel to the ground. Still as one, they side-stepped toward

one another, sweeping their arms until their fingertips almost touched. They flung their arms away from each other, still parallel to the ground, but this time kicked their opposite knees toward each other. They stamped their feet out and leaned into each other, slamming their knuckles together with their fingers outstretched.

The blood on the fingertips sparked and twisted itself into runes neither of them really understood. Each of the sixteen symbols stabbed into the space around them, latching on and ripping it apart. The duo pulled at the fabric of reality, spinning in place and dragging it with them. They lost sight of more and more of their room as they surrounded themselves in the fold until they slapped their hands together. They dropped the torn fabric of spacetime and found themselves inside their Way.

While the usual laws that govern the way of existence said that the amount of space around them should match the space they tore away from their apartment, that was not their Way. Their Way was largely undefined, with fragments of ideas and personality strewn about, but it was largely empty. They had yet to truly find it, in a way, and so it had yet to anchor itself in any real way. Statues and floating music notes. A food catering truck with a blurry sign reading "Red Bear Bob's Food Truck" was parked outside a counselor's office.

And behind them was the exit, a set of mismatched double doors. One was a French door made from oak, a stylized A painted on the wooden panel below the windows. The other a flush door constructed from cedar, a simple F emblazoned in a position identical to the other door's A. The frame holding them was almost half a foot thick and carved from stained redwood.

"Ouch, that stung," Aldon said, waving the offending hand. "Why do you still have that glove on?"

"I forgot due to my disbelief of that ridiculous Way opening ceremony," Finnegan said, starting the march for his door.

"Shut up, you love it. It's fun!" Aldon trailed him, taking in the sights of their Way.

"It's embarrassing."

"Yes, I'm sure the ferret is making tons of fun of you in there."

Everett poked his head out of the backpack, as if he could tell he was the center of their conversation. "It's a polecat."

"What the hell is a polecat?"

"Forget it."

"Is it like towercat, but smaller?"

Finnegan laughed despite himself. He grasped the knob to his door and Aldon did the same to his left. Together they twisted their wrists, the latch of each door disengaging from the other one's frame. They pushed them open and stepped out into one of the many lobbies of the Wanderer's Library, shutting the doors behind them. After a moment the doors wavered, then outright dissipated.

They had only the briefest of moments before Felix Cori stormed up to them. He was a flurry of panic and another weather metaphor of desperation. He paused for breath and then went right into it.

"Aldon we need to get back to the warehouse ASAP, the statue we used got enchanted and it went ape shit."

"Why."

The flatness in her voice caught him off guard. "Why what?"

"Well." Aldon did her best to compose herself. "Why did you try enchanting the statue when you explicitly stated you were keeping the magic to a minimum? And. Why could that possibly be a problem? You said the clay wasn't magic, so unless you did something *really* stupid — not outside of the realm of possibility, obviously — then you shouldn't be in that much trouble. Why is it just you here, when there were dozens of anartists?"

Felix didn't say anything.

Aldon smiled. "So. Felix. No, sorry. *Critic.* Why."

She leaned in close and hissed through grinding teeth, "Why are you such a stupid fuckup?"

Felix continued saying nothing.

Bordering on hyperventilating, Aldon grabbed Felix by the shirt. "Just take us to the Way so we can fix your stupid problem."

It took a jog across the lobby, up and down and up and down and down several sets of stairs into another lobby, but it didn't take long. Felix frantically lifted the garage door embedded in the lobby wall, ducking under it when he had a little clearance. Aldon and Finnegan followed suit and the door fell down behind them.

"Is this seriously a one direction Way?" Aldon asked.

Felix still said nothing. The three of them dashed out into the main room of the warehouse, and were greeted by a strange sight. On the left was a series of sigils, runes, and symbols arranged in various patterns surrounding one spot. From that spot, splotches of clay led through the pews, which had been pushed together into rows much closer to the main platform than before. It was almost a full house, most of the anartists tied to their seats so they wouldn't miss a moment. The platform itself had since been converted into a stage, where the remaining anartists were performing a play. Which was quite an infamous play in certain circles.

And center stage was Cassandra Paulson, in the role of Alinda. In her hand was a bloodied dagger, and at her feet was a corpse with its throat slashed. She stood beside an animate clay being, molded to look as if it was wrapped in fabric from head to toe, with the toes also shoved into high-heels from the look of it.

"With this, our blood, it is the… The Sculptor's," she choked out.

And then the cast hung.

"Wow." Aldon said. "Wow. Holy shit, you guys fucked up."

« **Exasperated Efforts** | **Hub** | **Gray God** »

Factory-Finding Mission

"So there I was, in a power plant what was about to explode, surrounded by the enemy."

An idle thought; it's how Max would have started the story, if he'd survived. He'd have come up with some clever, improbable solution, or revealed that he'd had an escape plan the entire time. Or his team would have come in and saved him at the last minute, so he could fix the plant.

But he hadn't survived. Most of his team had been elsewhere. I'd been the only one with him, and when the time came, I wasn't fast enough. No one could have made it to help and gotten back in time, but that didn't make it any easier.

No one blames me for it. That makes it almost worse. I could get defensive, then.

A backfiring car jolts me out of my thoughts. I'm jumpier these days.

The neighborhood I'm in has seen better days. Industry built it, and then industry left like a deadbeat father without even the promise of child support. But it's on the uprise. That's why I'm here, in fact.

I'm watching the men and women going to work. Work at the factory, which had been closed for years, and shouldn't be open. There were plenty of possible explanations, some of them perfectly ordinary. It could be a front for some crime syndicate or other, or more sinister, it could be a front for the CI. It could be any number of things. But our suspicion is that it's not just a factory, but the Factory, capital letter and all.

I'd heard of it, of course. It's in the intel briefs. But for the first time, I'm trusted with more of the story. It moves around, taking over abandoned factories like a parasite. It stays, collecting workers, shipping orders, and making trouble until someone goes and stops

it. It's not as hard as it sounds. The trouble's finding it.

I'll be going in soon. There isn't much more information I could get from the outside. I won't go in far. The Factory can be dangerous, but we've seen it enough times to know how far to go. If I'm right, then I'll call for back-up. If I'm wrong… Well, it'll be embarrassing, but I'll be on my way soon enough.

No use stalling. It's time to take a look.

I get out of the car, adjust my clothes, and, after a block, I'm there. There's no security I can see, which makes me more suspicious. No guards, no ID checks. There aren't even any locks on the door.

I walk through the door as though I belong, just behind a man in a trenchcoat. The workers making their way in ignore me. Not even a spare glance. Perhaps they're just busy. Perhaps.

There's a receptionist seated behind a desk. "Hello, sir," she says. Her voice is chipper, almost excited to see me. It puts me on edge. "How can I help you?"

"Which way to the bathroom?" I ask.

"Down the hall, second door to the right," she chirps.

I thank her, and walk past the desk, glancing as I do. Bingo. The receptionist has no legs. She just grows out of the chair. I'm in the right place.

I go into the bathroom for the form of things. It looks fairly normal, except that it's clean. Too clean. People are never that good at cleaning up after themselves.

I start making my way to the entrance when I hear a number of people entering the building. I see them before they get a good look at me. They're wearing robes, and there's at least twenty of them, if not more. One of them is carrying a scepter made out of a broken clock. He's asking the receptionist something.

I keep a smile on my face and head left into the first intersection I see, and then run. Things just got a lot more complicated.

I duck into an office and pull out my phone. No service. I slip it back into my pocket, and consider my next move. I could try finding another exit. However, the Factory is supposed to be a maze. We're never supposed to explore it alone. On the other hand, the tickers are between me and the main entrance. I might try waiting for them to go past. I might even be able to get away with walking out past them, so long as I don't look out of place.

My planning is interrupted by the sound of a gunshot. I curse, and start moving. I need to be as far away from the lobby as possible as quickly as possible.

I make my way out and start walking confidently down the hallway. Behind, I heard the sounds of scuffling shoes and muffled shouts. They're still excited about their discovery and full of righteous fire. The Factory will be slow to respond to them. If I'm lucky, it won't respond to me as well.

I'm leaving the office area and into a more open space. I see men and women at tables, mindlessly putting small knick-knacks together. They look like smoke alarms. As I pass by a table, I see a woman delicately, carefully put a tooth into one. I don't get any closer. Whatever they're building, I don't want any part of it.

I pause to check my phone again. Still nothing. I notice a few of the larger men standing up from their work and turning towards the way I came. They're all carrying screwdrivers, holding them like knives. I pick up speed slightly and make it to the other end of the room before they start slowly walking the other way.

The room I'm in is short on exits. There are stairs leading down, and an elevator, neither of which seems likely to lead me out of the building. I start to turn back when I hear more gunfire. I see robed figures entering the assembly floor. They're ignoring most of the workers, likely to conserve ammo. I don't think they'll be nearly so chary with me.

There's mist rising from below as I descend. It's like walking into a jungle, but instead of flowers and vines, there are pipes and conduits. Still animals, though. I hear the sound of rats and larger things moving deeper in. Better, though, than the animals I've left

behind.

I run in, hoping the steam will conceal me, that the tickers won't want to follow me through. I force myself to slow down, even though I feel like there's a target painted on my back. Sound carries in a place like this.

"He went this way!" I hear a voice call out behind me. "I saw him."

I hate my luck, some days. Most days, in fact.

I run down the corridor. My footsteps echo, but it's too late for stealth. My only hope is that there's some cover I can take advantage of.

A shot hits a pipe, letting out a gout of steam. I avoid it, continuing to move forward. Another shot, and another. They can't see me through the artificial fog, but enough shots, and eventually one of them will get lucky.

Finally, a branch in the corridor. I stop long enough to throw some lead back their way. No reason they should have all the fun, and it might give them something to think about before running headlong after me. Or not. Hard to predict just how fanatical they're feeling today.

More shots ring out, but I'm already booking it down the side path. So long as nothing gets in my way, I should be able to outrun the main group of them. Their leaders are slow, and full of metal.

I find another stairway, and climb up. If I haven't gotten completely turned around, this should have taken me outside the building. However, I find myself on an assembly line floor. My brief hadn't mentioned anything about weird spaces. But then, I wasn't meant to go exploring, either. Need to know's a bitch, Max used to say.

I race across the floor, trying to avoid the workers. I'm almost out when something grabs me by the back of my neck.

He's a big sucker, Goliath-sized. His uniform is torn where he's outgrown it, like a man wearing a schoolboy's clothes. His head is gone, replaced by a security camera. A badge proclaims his name is

Jim. I raise my gun and he knocks it out of my hand, the camera whirring as it focuses on me. I kick him hard in the gut, but I might as well be kicking a wall. The other hand takes hold of my leg. It seems to be deciding what to do with me.

I pull out my knife, and slash at his wrist. It doesn't matter how strong he is if he can't use those muscles. Of course, now he's made his decision, and he knocks me back against the wall. The air rushes from my lungs, and I'm seeing stars. He's about to bash me again when he jerks, and stumbles.

I see a pair of tickers running through the assembly line, pushing past workers, firing at me and Jim. I take advantage of the distraction to twist out of my shirt, and scramble away. Jim lumbers away towards the bigger threat as I run through the door.

There are more offices, and I run into one of them.

Interesting decor in here. There are strange implements hanging on the wall, including what looks like a rack. An empty business suit is stretched out on it. On the desk there's an old Macintosh, but the monitor's doesn't have a screen. Just an old, dusty book propped up in the empty shell. The pages flutter, even though there's no wind.

I freeze as someone enters the room, then relax as the man smiles blankly at me, and pulls a mop and bucket in behind him. He slowly begins cleaning the floor, all the while with that empty, unknowing stare. However, he leaves the door open, so I move further back, toward the closet.

Idly, I check my phone again, still no signal. As I look up, I see the machete come down at the base of the janitor's neck. I quickly and quietly slip into the closet as the ticker moves in.

He doesn't see me, not yet. But I know he's looking for me, and it's just a matter of time before he checks the closet. I'm unarmed, and there isn't so much as a wire hanger in here to defend myself with. My best chance is to hit him as soon as he comes in range of the closet, try and get that machete away from him.

Suddenly, he makes a strangled noise and holds his throat. He

thrashes around for a minute, and I finally notice the man standing behind him. Tall, wearing a trenchcoat and fedora. I realize I saw him before, when I first entered the building. He goes through the ticker's pocket, takes out some papers, and then picks up the machete. He looks directly at me through the slats of the closet door, and holds a finger to his lips, then walks away.

I wonder for a moment if it really was Nobody. I'd always assumed he'd been made up. Lombardi has just as near told me so once. But I don't have time for riddles. There were two on my heels, and more behind them. With one of them already dead in here, I don't have a chance at taking the other by surprise. Time for another plan.

I hightail it out of the office and into the hall. I hear the sound of a fight on the Factory floor. Seems the other tickers are fighting it out with the Factory workers. I don't need to be a part of that.

One of the other office doors is open, so I take a peek in. There's the other ticker. He sees me just as I enter, and he raises up a crowbar. I'm ready, though, and I dodge the first attack, get inside his reach, and get him in an armlock.

"We are his—" he starts, but I slam his head down against the desk, shutting him up.

I consider trying to use him as a hostage, but he's a fanatic. If he can die killing me, he will. Besides, while he doesn't appear altered, you can't always tell. With a tinge of regret, I change position, moving my hands. He starts to struggle as he feels my grip slacken, but then I have him again, and with a crack, he falls limp. I take the crowbar and head back into the hallway.

"The heretic! He comes to take our God from us!" a voice calls out. It's the man with the scepter. He's pushing his way past the assembly line workers as though they were children. His robe is torn, and I can see where parts of his body have been replaced with metal and ceramic. Time to book it again, before any of his gunmen have a clear shot.

At the end of the hallway, I find myself in a cafeteria. Workers are eating, ignoring the sound of the battle nearby. As I watch, several

of them reach into their glasses of water and very deliberately dab their faces with it. There's an odd, chemical smell.

I think of ants, and I get an idea. It's risky, and I'll likely pay for it later, but I'd like to have a later to regret it with. I take one of the glasses and pour it over myself. If my hunch holds, it'll help me later. I start moving again. I'm through to the other side as the tickers make it in. There are fewer of them now, down to half a dozen. I smile. At least I'm not the only one having a bad day.

The smile lasts as long as a cheap match. I'm at a dead end. I raise the crowbar, and wait, trying to think of some clever last words.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck," I say. I'll admit, not the best epitaph, but it's from the heart.

The lead ticker walks through the door. I swing at him, and he catches the crowbar one handed, wrenching it from my grasp. He takes me by the wrist, and twists. I scream as I feel my bones creak. He's stronger than Jim.

"So, heretic, we catch you at last. You don't belong here. Who are your masters?" His face is fringed with a beard of steel wool. Clockwork has torn through his skin. His eyes are the most human thing about him, and they're what terrify me the most.

"Fuck you," I spit, then grimace as he tightens his grip.

"We'll find out," he tells me. "We may have to rebuild your tongue in time, but we'll have your secrets." He hauls me to my feet, and gives me a little shake. "Then there will be time for penitence. In the end, you'll beg to join our number, to become one with the God."

"Not interested," I tell him. "I'm machine-agnostic." I'm trying to buy some time, maybe make him angry enough to do something stupid, like kill me.

He laughs, a sound like bending metal. "You'll learn. We all have learned. But put off the pain a while, and tell me this: What are these that have taken over the heart of our God? Where have they come from, and how can we exterminate them?"

"Wait, the heart..? You think this is the heart of your god?" I ask. That had not been in the report.

"Yes," he says, his mouth twisted in triumph. "It has long been lost to us, but we have finally found it. This place is the Heart, even as you have stolen His Brain and his Muscles. And we find it has been invaded. How can we be rid of these invaders?"

I stare at him for a moment, and then I burst out laughing. This time he doesn't find me so amusing, and he digs his fingers in.

"Tell me what I need to know!" he yells.

"You idiot. You poor, blind, idiot. You think they're invaders?" I'm not laughing, but I still can't help but smirk. I'll admit, there are times I'm not a clever man. Then again, I hear something moving behind the wall.

"They infest the Heart! They use His grace for their perverse works!" he tells me.

"They aren't invaders," I tell him. "You think they call the shots? Look around you. They're practically growing out of the walls. They're being controlled. Changed. They're practically like insects, the way they act."

"What's your point?" he asks me.

"So, let's say you're right. This place is just a big piece of your god. Then what in the hell do you suppose they are?"

"I…" He stares at me for a moment, and I can literally hear the gears turning in his head. There's a click every so often where one skips.

"You're killing your fellow servants. How do you suppose your god's going to feel about that?" I laugh again, and his grip loosens. Then suddenly it tightens.

"Blasphemy!" he screams. "We are his Clockwork Servants! We do the work of his Hand! We will remake this Earth. No one else!" He throws me across the room. I manage to roll into it, but it still hurts like hell. Then a hidden garbage chute opens up near the lead

ticker, and a tendril made of coils and wires wraps around him. His comrades immediately work to free him, only to be grabbed themselves. I run out the door, back into the cafeteria.

I run through a different door, and I'm blasted by heat. My first thought is that it's like a furnace. Then I look and I see I'm not far off. I'm on a catwalk over a large chamber. Below sit several furnaces, filled with bright molten metal. Twenty-foot-tall, vaguely human figures attend them, stirring the metal with long rods.

I stumble across the walkway. The heat's oppressive. I need to get out of here, and back to cooler air.

I'm halfway across when the door slams open. The lead ticker has followed. He's alone now, and his robes are entirely shredded. His body is lined with numerous cuts, which bleed a mix of blood and oil. His eyes are even madder. "I'll tear you apart! I'll tear apart all who oppose us, and rebuild in His name!" He starts running toward me. He's slow at first, but building up speed, and I can hear his heavy feet banging against the metal frame of the walkway.

There's a metal hook on chain attached to a belt of some sort. My arms feel heavy and my lungs feel like they're on fire, but I don't have many good options. I grab onto the hook and swing out as far as I can. It works, to an extent. I'm off the walkway when the ticker gets there, but what goes up must come down. I swing back, and I brace my legs for the impact. I slam into the ticker, and we both go flying over the railway. I manage to grab the railing. I watch as he falls down into the molten metal.

There's a splash as he lands, and then he bobs up to the surface again. The human body, even one as loaded with metal as his, is still lighter than the molten steel. He thrashes around, and I can hear his mechanical scream. Flames lick over his flesh, and he's soon reduced to little more than a metal skeleton, and he still won't stop screaming, until one of the steel workers takes his pole and pushes him under the surface. The thrashing stops.

My grip is weakening, and I know I can't hold on. I feel my hand slip from the hot edge of the walkway, and close my eyes as I prepare to die. Then I feel an impact, and something has me. I open my eyes to

see the face of one of the steel workers. He's let go of his pole, and he's simply holding me. Then he steps away from the furnace, carries me to a door, and sets me down on the other side.

The linoleum beneath me is cool, and the air conditioner blasts down on me. I take several deep breaths, and thank god for ant hills and pheromones. Eventually, I stand up, and look for the exit.

It's been two hours since the rescue team found me. When I didn't report in, they sent a team to check on me. There was apparently another wave of tickers trying to get in, but they dealt with them. I'm now in quarantine in the back of a truck. They already checked to make sure the tickers didn't do anything to me. They asked me questions to make sure I was still me (no, I don't feel like I belong there, yes, I work for the Foundation, no, I've never thought it would be "neat" to be a clock). Now it's just observation to make sure.

I don't mind. It gives me time to think. Not about the Factory, or the Church, but about the stranger in the fedora. Whether or not he was Nobody, there was a nagging feeling I'd seen him before somewhere. It was a puzzle.

While I ponder the riddle, I watch through the window as they complete the containment procedures. It's anti-climactic after all the excitement. No gunfights, no explosives. Just handing a letter to each and every person who leaves for the night.

> Notice of Termination
>
> It is our unpleasant duty to inform you that your services are no longer required at this facility. Due to budget cuts, this location is being shut down. Please find enclosed your final paycheck. If you need a letter of recommendation, please contact our parent company, Sedgeville Capital Products. We wish you all luck in your future endeavors.

An out of business sign will be affixed to the door, and within a week, this will just be another abandoned factory again, and the workers will have only the vaguest memories of working here.

Fading

Needle… needle in my neck… Weird clear stuff pumping through it… Who are you people… What are you doing… Where is my son...

Rubble all around me. Where am I? The mall? I think that's where we were, but I can't be sure. Corpses all around, my son among them, blood everywhere, smoke… choking me… I have to move, I have to find some way of getting out of here. If the building collapses, then nobody can help…

What's that sound? Sounds like footsteps…

Oh thank God, police! Police! You've got to help me, officers. It killed everyone, officers, everyone here. Tore through them like they weren't even there. There's blood all over me and I think my family is dead and you've got to help me please you've got to help me I don't know what to do what was that thing why was it killing everybody why didn't it kill… what are you doing with that...

Oh God, oh God, James, no! What did that thing do to you, kid, what'd it do? Where's your arms, where's your legs, where's your head, oh God, what did it do with your head? I can see it there out of the corner of my eye, through the hole it left in the wall, just over the horizon, but I dont' want to look directly at it because everyone else looked at it and look what it did to them and my son, oh God, James, why'd it do this, what'd it do to you? I can't… I… what's happening? Why are they all dead?

I've gotta get help, there has to be someone here. A doctor? Doctor's can't help people without heads I need someone who can get me out of here before that thing comes back. Police, police, I need the police, where can I find the police where can I find the police...

Stay the hell away from my son!

James, get behind me, I'm not letting this thing near you! Where's

your Mom? We have to find her before this thing can get to her!

Oh God, this thing is killing everyone, just tearing them apart with its bare hands. It ripped off that old man's arms like they weren't even there, and crushed that woman's head and… Don't look at it, James, look away, try and see if you can find Mom! It's killing everyone who looks at it. Oh God, what am I gonna do, I can't have my son in the middle of this, we're just out shopping at the mall and we were going to find something for his birthday and it's knocking out the roof supports and…

Lucy! No, no, not Lucy, stay away from her, stay away from my wife you fucking thing, stay away, don't you touch her…!

James, come back here! Stay away from it, James! Don't look at it, Ja…
JAMES!

I've always liked the music here in the mall. It's corny, but kinda entertaining. Friendly enough for the family without getting too annoying. Couple that with the clear layout and good prices, and you've got one hell of a good mall.

Do you hear that, Lucy? Sounds like something screaming outside. Go on, James, just keep thinking about what you want for your birthday.. What is that sound, though? Lucy doesn't seem too concerned by it, but it's just so… odd. I can't stop thinking about it. There it is again. Sounds even closer now. But we're just here to do some shopping. Shouldn't let myself be concerned with stuff like that. What was it we needed next? Think it was some milk, eggs, apples…

There's that sound again. Sounds awfully close. Everyone else seems a bit disturbed by it too. Wonder if there's a fight going on out…

Oh Jesus, the wall's bursting open…

On my knees, panting. They're dabbing my neck with a pad stemming the blood from the needle and they're talking to each other and oh Christ, it hurts. That should do it says one man and the other says that its time for the replacement thing I don't understand that word he's using but the other says no, he had a family and we

need to get rid of that first and the other says it'll take weeks to track down any others who knew us and the first one just sighs and says a bunch of things and oh god what's happened why am I in the middle of a bunch of dead bodies, I'd just come to the mall alone to do some shopping, oh God, oh God…

They're still arguing and one of them's objecting heavily to something but the other's already taking action and the first one's pulling him away, but the other's already doing it. There's another needle in my neck. I don't want another…

I have a wife named Lucy. She's the most brilliant woman you've ever met. Long chestnut hair, beautiful green eyes, dazzling smile. Smart as hell, too. I couldn't be more lucky to have met her eleven years ago and to have started dating her ten years ago and to have married her on December 26th eight years ago. She's got the best damned laugh I've ever heard. She always wears green and absolutely hates purple. She's not too computer savvy but she can handle her way around them well enough. She works as a realtor in a company whose name I always forget. She loves the sight of morning dew and the smell of rain and the sound of birds in the trees. She is the absolute best woman in the world, the perfect partner for me, and I'd just die if I were to ever lose her. She is my wife Lucy…

My son, James. He's six, almost seven years old. Bright little kid. Not genius level but pretty damned smart to me. He's got my chin, my eyes, my laugh. I don't know where he gets his smile and hair from, but whoever it was, I still need to thank them. He's so alive and full of energy, always running around and trying to find something to do. He occasionally gets in trouble for it, but for the most part, he's a well behaved kid. Not an angel, but still. He wants to be a paleontologist when he grows up, even if he can't pronounce the word properly yet. He's got a ton of friends, and they're all good kids too. I love my son more than anything in the world. My brilliant, brilliant, lovely, irreplaceable child James…

On my knees. Everybody dead. Outside the mall. The mall's on fire. What…

There's a man in a uniform talking to me. He says there was a terrorist attack. On the mall? Yes, he says. We're living in dangerous

times, he says. I was far enough way from the blast to not get hit, but my head and neck got pretty messed up, he says. I check my neck, and sure enough it's bleeding. Feels more like needle marks, but I don't question it. He says that he's going to take me to a hospital, and get me patched up. I say fine. I need to get away from here. I can't be around these dead bodies. I need to talk to my parents, my friends, anyone who can help me make sense of this.

I should just go…

Faith

For the 2014 Secret Santa Art Exchange, I was challenged by **LordSpy** to write a tale based on the output of a random plot generator. I used the creepypasta plot generator created by **Syera**, found **here**. This was what it gave me to work with. I left out the "haunted by a strange creature" just to keep this workable.

One day in an abandoned farmhouse haunted by a strange creature, an old widower and a widower try to create the heart of a boy.

Early winter of 2006

Harry Arnsberg stood back and looked at the machinery before him.

"I don't know, dad. This just feels weird."

His father flipped up his welding mask and turned his blowtorch off.

"Just have faith, son. Jenna and Maureen would have."

The remark hit home and Fred Arnsberg immediately regretted making it. "I know you miss her. I miss your mom too, you know that. But they'd have wanted us to do this. You know that, don't you?"

Harry sighed and shrugged. "I guess, dad. It's just so out there, you know."

"Any more out there than a woman getting pregnant without having sex and some guy multiplying fish and wine on a hill?"

"I guess not," Harry mumbled, "I guess not, no. It's just…even if this is all true, why can't we…"

His father interrupted him. "The past is the past, son, you know that. It's the future that we can influence."

Harry sighed. "Yeah, I know. It just feels unfair."

Fred flipped the welding mask down again.

"Life *isn't*," he said and went back to work.

His son was left pondering the events that had led to this. As he surveyed what he and his father had built, his mind went back to the darkest day of his life. He'd been working in the family's hardware store, soon to be his, when the call came. He'd actually felt it beforehand, right before Jenna had left the house with their son to go pick up his mom, but he hadn't known what that knot in his stomach was. If only he had. He dug his nails in the palms of his hands, hard. That was the only thing that kept him from sliding into a very dark place. One he knew one day he wouldn't come back from if he kept doing this to himself.

"What do you need me to do, dad? Anything I can do specifically?"

His father didn't answer, just pointed to some blueprints that had obviously been download from somewhere. The resolution was awful.

Harry surveyed the papers. There were about six different ones his father had printed out. The designs made no sense whatsoever, but there was something there, Harry couldn't deny that. He felt it in his bones and it reminded him of how church had felt before. Grabbing one of the top blueprints, he sat down at the rickety table occupying the sparse amount of space not yet taken over by sheet metal, bolts, springs and gauges. "I'll go hunt for the components for this one then, dad?"

His father didn't react and Harry didn't need him to. He'd resolved to have that most elusive of qualities: faith.

One clear winter's day, 2004

At least they hadn't felt anything.

That's what he kept telling himself, but deep down he knew he'd never be sure. Did Jenna grab his little boy's hand before their lights were extinguished? Did mom say something that was meant for dad but would never reach him? Questions that would never be answered and that would haunt him for the rest of his life.

But at least they hadn't felt anything. They couldn't have. The semi's driver couldn't help it either, Jenna had just lost control of the wheel due to ice on the road. She'd landed squarely in the opposite lane, right in the path of the biggest damn truck she'd ever seen, and would ever see. Dad and him had buried closed caskets. Two big ones and one far too small. In the weeks after, his father had turned into a recluse, shutting himself in his home. Harry had visited a few times, but he'd gotten little from the man he called his father. All he did was sit behind his computer and read, although sometimes he scribbled notes on a stained notepad. Harry had tried to read them, but his father hadn't allowed him to. Not then.

It wasn't until he'd stopped trying to talk sense into his father, and had started listening to the man that his father had opened up to him.

"God doesn't care, son."

Those had been the first words out of his father's mouth since the funeral beyond "hi son" and "bye". Harry had been taken aback at first. Here was his father, a god-fearing man his whole life, denouncing his god. He'd protested, he'd reminded his father of their long family history in the town's deep-rooted Catholic traditions, but his father had only glanced up long enough from his screen to let Harry see the strange mixture of dead hopes and fervent prayers in his eyes.

Over the following weeks and even months, they'd discussed what his father had found and Harry had felt himself disconnecting from his traditional upbringing and indeed his former faith. He came to realize that even if there was a god, he didn't care enough to let three good people live and spare a poor trucker a life-long trauma. And yes, others habitually reminded him that god worked in mysterious ways, and that Jenna, Maureen and Austin were with god, but he could no longer tell them he agreed with them, or that

their words gave him comfort. They gave him chills, knowing that his loved ones might be just what they were to him: dead and gone.

What his father had found weren't empty promises and hollow morals, they were the remnants of order in a universe of chaos, the frayed ends of a majestic tapestry that could be woven again. Harry still wasn't sure how his father had stumbled upon it, but there were people out there, people who had learned the truth. And they wanted to share with his father. And his father wanted to share with him.

He'd found the blueprints. Or they had found him…

Spring 2007

It was almost ready. It didn't look like it, but they felt it. As father and son spent all their weekends building their monument to their new god, they grew closer together, closer than they'd ever been before. They knew they couldn't erase the pain of the past, but perhaps they could contain the essence of what was lost.

"Almost there, son. Are you ready?"

Fred was sitting on the last remaining chair in the kitchen of the abandoned farmhouse he and Harry had claimed for their project. Harry meanwhile, was standing facing the kitchen window, staring out at the overgrown fields and twisted trees.

"I don't know, dad. I really don't. In the past few months I've felt something I haven't felt before. Like someone *is* watching over me, but it doesn't feel the same."

"That's him, Harry," Fred answered and smiled.

"I know. I feel like I know him, but at the same time it feels like I don't, does that make sense?"

His father nodded almost imperceptibly.

"That's just the way it is, son. To know him is to acknowledge your inability to know him. The flesh can only travel so far."

"I suppose so. Sounds creepy though."

Fred scratched the full beard he'd been growing since the day he'd lowered those caskets into the ground.

"Yeah, it does, doesn't it?"

They both burst into laughter, unsure of any other way to relieve their tension.

April 14th, 2007

"I'm scared, dad."

Harry stood at the panel marked 'master control switch'. A single yellowed light switch stick out from it. Much like most of the machine that now filled the one-time living room of this dilapidated farm house, it had been scavenged from inside the building. The sheet metal had come from an old abandoned combine harvester they'd found out in the barn, supplemented with whatever they'd manage to find at the local ironmonger's. The wiring had mostly come from the farm house, the rest from their hardware store and on-line shops. They'd had to make compromises, but somehow that didn't seem to matter. Sometimes intent was more important than result.

His father posed him the same question he'd posed him a few weeks before.

"Are you ready, Harry? There's no going back after this."

"I know, dad. It's just, I'm not even really sure why I'm doing this."

Fred put his hand around his son's neck.

"We're doing this because we have holes in our hearts, son. And your life leaks from them, a little bit at a time. All you can do is plug them with faith."

He felt his son beginning to cry, Harry's whole body silently twitching as the younger man tried to stay silent.

"It's okay, Harry. You need it."

He pulled his son closer and held him for awhile, silently staring at their creation.

"Dad…I wish we could save mom and Jenna too."

"I know son, but they lived their lives. They were too short, but they were lived."

"Yeah." That was all Harry could muster and closed his eyes.

He turned back to the control panel and flipped the switch. The power went out almost immediately, the machine's very improbable configuration a most probable drain on the industrial generator they'd procured. The machine didn't think much of it. It churned, it clanged, it whirred and all they could do was stand back as something bigger than them worked at violating the tired laws of the universe.

When it finally stopped producing noise and light, and it died with a tired, drawn-out sigh, Harry opened his eyes again.

"Dad?"

Fred stood next to him, wide-eyed and still.

"Did it work, dad?"

His father didn't reply, his eyes staring into the distance, far beyond what the flesh could see.

From inside the machine came a soft voice.

"Daddy?"

Faith and Knighthood

> "A Templar Knight is truly a fearless knight, and secure on every side, for his soul is protected by the armour of faith, just as his body is protected by the armour of steel. He is thus doubly armed, and need fear neither demons nor men."
>
> Bernard de Clairvaux, c. 1135, De Laude Novae Militae
> —In Praise of the New Knighthood

It wasn't long after setting out that the old familiar fear began to sink in. Long ago, his mentor had said that after facing darkness and succeeding, a man's fear is replaced with courage. Sebastian Rodrigues, Knight Templar, knew this was untrue. He had faced darkness before, many times. Fear never goes away. You only get better at dealing with it.

Sebastian allowed himself a moment to reflect. He mentally checked his supplies and equipment, making sure he had everything he would need. His armor and weapons, though battered by time and usage, were still tough. His horse, Endo, with whom he had survived many trials, was still strong. His faith, which had kept him from faltering, it was…

The smoke was still thick enough to obscure Sebastian's vision, even this far from the infected area. He was making his way out, to the nearest Templar fortress. He would be examined, and his possessions likely burned to prevent the infection's spread.

With him was the town's only survivor, a young, incredibly fortunate plague doctor. He just happened to be in the right place at the right time, attending to the sick in the dungeons. He hid himself within the stone walls as men became monsters.

On the journey back, Sebastian expected the standard questions.

The questions that every survivor asked after this kind of event. "How could this happen?" "What other things like this are you hiding from us?" "How can you be a Templar? They were disbanded long ago!" But the doctor did not ask these questions. Their journey was mostly in silence.

They passed the ring of fellow Templars, tasked with controlling the spread of the blaze. Seeing them there, dressed in full holy regalia, finally prompted the doctor to speak. But he asked a question that Sebastian did not expect.

"How is it that you still believe in God?"

Sebastian hesitated a beat. "The world exists as a combination of opposites. Night and day, earth and sky, life and death. There is so much evil, so many terrible things in the world, that there must exist an equal amount of good in the world as well. That makes sense to me."

Even through the mask, Sebastian could see the hollow expression in the doctor's eyes. "Does that really make sense to you? Or, do you believe it because that is the only way you can stay sane?"

Sebastian couldn't respond to that.

He shook himself out of his memories. This was no time for idle thoughts. On this mission, the last thing he needed was doubt.

In an effort to focus, Sebastian reviewed his current task. Messages had come from the south about a monster that consumed everything in its path. The Templars of that region claimed the monster was unstoppable; as ferocious as it was powerful. As the oldest surviving Knight in the country, Sebastian was personally requested by the Master to investigate. As resources for the Order dwindled, a lone Knight was a common way to investigate new threats. His report would determine a better way to deal with the threat.

Since this thing was supposedly unstoppable, Sebastian knew he could not confront the problem head on. But how was this possible? Even if he could stop it, was there any point? There was so much

wrong in the world, what difference could his few good actions really make?

The soup was incredibly bland. It was clear that its maker could not afford quality spices or meats. But it was hot, and at that moment, that was everything Sebastian could ask for.

He was huddled with two fellow knights in a small, hidden room at the edge of the castle. There was barely enough room for a table and a few stools. Even if a fireplace would have fit, none of the knights would have been foolish enough to use it. Being a Knight Templar was still very much illegal, especially in this country. Some warmth would have been nice, but not nice enough to risk burning at the stake.

The other two were traveling companions, already well acquainted. The three had talked a little, but Sebastian wasn't feeling social, and was soon left out of the conversation. A few key words brought Sebastian out of his thoughts.

The dark-haired knight was staring intently at his companion, as if searching for something. "…impossible moral decision. There's no way to justify the alternative."

His light-haired companion looked uncomfortable. "I don't know. It seems like there has to be a better way. I couldn't possibly decide."

Dark-hair shook his head. "But, see, that's still making a choice. Your very inaction would be a decision."

"I don't think I could bring myself to harm an innocent. It's not right. There has to be a way to prevent the worst outcome without sacrificing our own souls."

As the argument got more intense, Sebastian thought about the problem himself. He knew what they were talking about. Everyone who was a member of the Templar Order long enough knew of the awful things often necessary to safeguard mankind. So far, the Knights had been lucky. Though their actions were for the greater good, many knights questioned if they were doing the right thing. It

was a question that Sebastian constantly asked himself, yet he still had not found an answer.

The two were almost shouting now. “It is our mission to protect our fellow man. At any cost!” “Our mission is also to serve God, surely he wouldn’t have us sin in his name!” “And instead cause the violent deaths of all living things He created?”

Sebastian knew the argument needed to stop before it escalated any further. There were plenty of men hostile to the Templar Order in the castle that would become curious if they overheard. So, Sebastian spoke. “Listen, brothers. Both of your arguments are valid, but your shouting them risks our capture. Please save this debate for another time.”

The dark-haired knight turned on Sebastian, “Well then, brother, what is your opinion on the matter?”

Sebastian sighed. “A long time ago, I would have given a definite response. But now, I’m not so sure. To be perfectly honest, I am starting to wonder if that is a question that can be answered at all.”

The decimation proved he was getting close. Great tears had been ripped into the earth, and both plant and animal life was broken and scattered around. The area was completely still, even devoid of insects. Sebastian had seen the effects of great storms before, and this was almost similar, but with one nagging key difference that Sebastian couldn’t quite place.

Sebastian dismounted, and guided Endo around the broken terrain. This also gave Sebastian the opportunity to investigate, and perhaps learn more about the creature he was facing. At first, the lack of actual evidence was surprising, until he deduced that the creature must be consuming most of what it destroyed. Because of this, he could not learn anything other than the initial reports had suggested.

After some time, Sebastian found himself in a small farming village at the base of an old volcano. The damage seemed to suggest that the creature was here very recently. Everything in the village was destroyed. Every structure and every plot of land showed extensive

damage. There weren't even any corpses left behind. Suddenly, Sebastian realized what made this devastation different from a simple storm. It was the deliberation. The thoroughness of the damage showed that the creature must have intelligently, methodically worked its way through the village, allowing nothing to escape destruction.

A mix of emotions welled up in him, but at the forefront of these was indignation. These people hadn't deserved this. Logically, the best thing to do would be follow the creature and observe it, hopefully finding a safe way to destroy it. But no, he couldn't. He had to stop this thing as soon as possible.

The path of the destruction led into the mountains. Like most poor farming villages, Sebastian suspected that a secret storehouse allowed the village to keep some of their money and supplies safe from thieves and corrupt tax-collectors. Likely, many of the villagers had fled there, and the creature had pursued them.

Sebastian began to formulate a plan. He gathered some of the heavy packs Endo was carrying. The packs contained a deadly weapon, one that the church had once claimed was sinful. It was his only hope now. Sebastian sent off Endo, and began making his way to the volcano.

Could he really go through with this, though? If he made his move now, it was likely that he wouldn't return. He could just leave. Run away.

There was no sound now but his own sobbing. His hands hurt from holding the cabinet door closed. He didn't know how long he had been hiding there. He knew it was only a matter of time before that thing found him.

Sebastian had always been a small child, and was easily able to fit in the cabinet. He had barely been able to find it, as his vision had been almost completely obscured by his own tears.

Everyone else was dead. They had tried to run, but as soon as they did, it tore them apart. While they were dying, he had hid. But now,

he was the only one left, and it was only a matter of time. The thing was just outside the cabinet door.

“Hello? Is anyone still alive?”

Sebastian suppressed a gasp. He dared not make a sound while that thing was still out there.

“If anyone can hear me, please call out. That demon cannot hear, it can only see.”

Sebastian hesitated. He was still too scared to cry for help. But if he just sat here, he would be dead soon anyway. Maybe this was his only chance. Still choking on tears, Sebastian called out, “Yes. I’m here. I’m trapped. I can’t get out or it will see me.”

The other person cursed under his breath, but it seemed loud in the unnatural quiet of the village. “Don’t fear. I am a Knight of Christ, and I swear I will do whatever it takes to protect you. Give me a moment to think.”

After what seemed like an eternity, the Knight called out, “It seems like there is only one option. Child, can you ride a horse, and do you know where the Monastery near Campo is?” Sebastian said yes. “Excellent,” the knight continued. “When I give you the word, I want you to calmly exit your hiding place. I will give you a letter, and you will leave this house as quickly as you can. Outside you will find my horse. Take him to Campo, it give the letter to Abbot there. Can you do all this for me?” Sebastian choked out another yes.

A few moments later the knight called. Sebastian crawled out of the cabinet, his muscles aching. As he looked up, the horrific scene froze him. The stone demon was standing, unnaturally still, in the room’s center. It was covered in filth, and was standing on the mangled corpses of what was once Sebastian’s family.

“Please, child, you must hurry.” Sebastian forced his attention away from the creature and towards the knight. He seemed like some kind of angel, dressed in shining mail underneath a white cloak; the only thing in the room not touched by blood and grime. The knight was staring intently at the demon, and to Sebastian it seemed like he had

frozen the thing with only his will. Seeing him filled Sebastian with courage. He hurriedly took the letter from the knight and made his way to the exit.

As he crossed the threshold to the outdoors, Sebastian had a sudden thought. He turned back to the knight and asked, "Will you be alright?"

The knight smiled, "I have faced worse things than this, child. I go in peace. Now hurry."

Sebastian ran. He never looked back.

As he descended through the caves, the heat became more and more oppressive. However, Sebastian walked confidently. He knew what he had to do now.

Finally, the narrow tunnel opened into a much larger chamber. And there, at the center, was the creature.

Calling it a reptile would be like calling the sky a breath of air. It was similar, but so wholly different as to make the similarities inconsequential. The creature was devouring what was left of the village's secret supplies, and as it did its flesh squirmed and rippled like liquid. It noticed Sebastian's presence almost immediately. Without pretense, it charged.

Sebastian was a Knight Templar. He was at peak physical condition, and heavily armed and armored. He had faced countless threats beyond imagining, and lived.

It mattered little in the face of this unstoppable beast. Its charge threw Sebastian heavily against the wall. As its open mouth descended, Sebastian stabbed at the monster with as much force as he could muster. He managed to cut deep into the creature's bottom jaw, but it was no use. The severed wound began to heal itself almost instantly. Sebastian dodged to the side, but the monster was able to catch his left arm in his jaws, and crushed it out with no effort.

As Sebastian backed away, the creature seemed to hesitate. The battle had only lasted a few moments, but already Sebastian knew he wouldn't be able to last much longer. His ribs were cracked, likely at least one broken, and his left arm dangled uselessly at his side. Hopefully, he could last just a little bit longer. Just long enough.

The creature seemed to hesitate. Sebastian could almost feel the intensity of the monster's attention like a physical weight. Then, the creature's claws began to lengthen, and its flesh began to thicken and harden. It stalked towards Sebastian, much more slowly.

Sebastian had guessed that the creature was intelligent, but seeing it adjust its strategy was chilling. Though he was hopelessly losing, Sebastian had taken blows that would have killed him if it wasn't for his armor. The monster had realized this, and was changing its attack pattern from brute force to precise strikes. One hit from those claws could kill Sebastian, armor or no armor.

A claw lashed out, as quickly as any snake or scorpion. It caught Sebastian in the shoulder, puncturing through his armor like it was smoke. With the claw still embedded in him, Sebastian struck at the creature's arm with all his remaining strength. The blade did nothing against the creature's newly hardened skin. Another claw strike hit Sebastian in the gut, and the fight was over.

The monster's mouth began to shift as it prepared to consume Sebastian. Its teeth lengthened, and grew sharper and stronger. During this transformation, Sebastian managed to look at the entrance of the cave. Sebastian smiled.

The narrow tunnel entrance was full of magma. Long before the fight, Sebastian's secret weapon had started it flowing. He had only needed to distract the creature long enough that it would still be underground when lava filled the chamber. Even if the creature did not burn, the lava would eventually cool and encase the creature in stone.

Noticing Sebastian's smile the creature turned its attention to the flowing lava. The flow of lava was building speed as the pressure from the tunnel forced the magma through more and more quickly. Surprisingly, the monster did not react to this new development. It

simply began to shift again. Its skin became much tougher. Its long body began to shrink, becoming thicker. Its appendages became squatter, and its claws became short and blunt. As the claws retracted, Sebastian fell to the ground, laughing now.

This, finally, seemed to get the monster. It turned back to Sebastian, and in sounds of severing skin and scraping stone, began to speak. “FAILURE. THIS WILL NOT HOLD ME LONG. THROUGH MY PATIENCE OR PERSISTENCE, I WILL ESCAPE.”

Sebastian coughed, “Not long. But maybe long enough.” The creature turned and met the lava, now pouring through the entrance in a torrent.

Sebastian realized now, what it all meant. His sacrifice would keep this monster imprisoned, at least for a little while. It would prevent more deaths, and maybe give his brothers time to find a permanent solution.

Finally, he was at peace.

Faith of the Foundation

Mercer checked his watch again. Once again, the digital display showed 0154 hours. He tried to think of anything except his own racing heartbeat and sweaty palms. Without moving his head, he managed a glance across the personnel carrier at the Captain. Her face was the same as ever, stony and unfathomable behind her GI glasses. On a lesser person the slightly magnified eyes imparted by the lenses would have made the wearer look comical, but on the Captain they were just unnerving. Mercer had made the mistake last week of asking his commanding officer if she needed a dispensation to come on this operation because of her missing left hand. She hadn't said a word. Just slowly advanced on him, her eyes locking on him like a cobra, backing him down until he tripped over a foot locker.

More than the entire room laughing at him, Mercer hated the feeling of being a new recruit all over again. He had twenty combat operations, more commendations than that prick Blakely back at Fort Benning and had a Distinguished Marksman Badge. And that was all before the "Classified Anomalous Event" outside of Ghazni. Yet here he was, just another FNG.

He saw the Captain say a couple of words over her shoulder, but he couldn't see at who. The watch mercilessly showed 0202 hours. The personnel carrier hit a dip in the road, and his stomach lurched. The phrase "remains unidentifiable as human" kept blaring in his head like a buzzing red neon sign. All that goddamn report did was ensure that he saw his lunch again this afternoon. Why would anyone even put something like "appropriate tactics unknown" in a report? Useless. Mercer wiped his brow and stuck his hand under his leg. If he couldn't see the hand, he could pretend it wasn't trembling.

Just 29 minutes now.

Mercer now noticed someone sitting next to him. He was too

surprised to be grateful for the company.

"So, Mercer, is it? I don't think I've had the pleasure. My name's Rayburn, but you can call me Ray."

Mercer awkwardly accepted Rayburn's handshake with his left hand; it was the least sweaty.

Rayburn settled into the seat next to Mercer and stretched his legs out as far as the personnel carrier would allow. Mercer had seen him around the base a couple of times; he looked more like a farmer than a Mobile Task Force operative with his ropy arm muscles, cornfed physique and tanned, craggy face. He leaned in conspiratorily to Mercer.

"I hear this here's your first op. They sure picked a hell of a date for your first dance, Mercer."

Mercer stared straight ahead, his lips tightening as a fresh bead of sweat rolled down his back.

"Now, I want you to know that the fear? That's normal. I wouldn't want to meet the man who weren't afraid of what's in that building."

Mercer clenched. Rayburn continued.

"You may not suspect it, but even an MTF has got itself a chaplain. Even a rat-bastard outfit like the Repo Men. And son, yer lookin' at him. Now, I ain't sayin' that we ain't comin' back from this rodeo. But I am sayin' that maybe gettin' yourself right with the good lord might not be such a bad idea."

For the first time, Mercer turned to look at Rayburn.

"What, you're serious?"

Rayburn nodded gravely. "Like the man says, 'there ain't no atheists in 173's pen'. And it says in your dossier that you were raised a good 'ol Southern Baptist."

Mercer lowered his head.

"That was…before."

Rayburn sagely rubbed his chin, and a weary smile came to his face. "Yep, that's true of a lot of fellers that come to this outfit. Lord knows it's hard to keep the faith when you see yer buddies turned inside out, or when some godforsaken statue is tellin' you your innermost thoughts through a slide-whistle. Most guys? They lose it pretty early. They thought they understood the Lord and his ways, and then they signed up for Foundation detail."

Mercer looked up at Rayburn. "Man, before? I mean, I was scared, but I thought I'd be okay if I just remembered…remembered Jesus, like my mom said. Even when it was bad, it was like, it's been bad before for someone else, and they got through it. And if they didn't, well, they had God. But now? What kind of God does stuff like that? How can you ask *that* for protection?"

The watch beeped. Fifteen minutes now. Mercer sat up straight.

"What…what do you believe in, Ray?"

Rayburn's eyes twinkled. "I'm gonna let you in on a little secret, Mercer. These guys in here, these so-called hard cases? They ain't as hard as they think. They ain't got the real faith, the battle-tested faith that's gotten men through it since the beginnin'. You know what I believe, Mercer?"

Mercer nodded.

"I believe in Flabgobbatron, the night doorman at the Eau Claire Motel 6 and Harvester of Midget's Souls."

Mercer leaned back, his jaw slackening while he took in Rayburn's response. "Wh…What?"

"Oh yeah, he looks like Yul Brynner, and he sings just like an angel. He told me last night 'Ray, you've got some nerve ordering the special. The soup's the far better deal'. And when he departed in his tuxedo, I knew that everything was gonna be all right."

Rayburn put his hand on Mercer's shoulder. "And son, do you know what the most important part is?"

"Wh..wait…no, what is it?"

Rayburn lowered his voice to a whisper. "I stole your kidney last night and swapped it to the commissary for an issue of Details."

Mercer jerked back. "What the fuck, man?!"

"Heh, that's a joke, son! Though I have been gifted with visions of the future by SCP-2093."

Mercer looked around, seeing if anyone was laughing at him, but no one seemed to notice the conversation. Rayburn smiled at him beatifically. The personnel carrier seemed to be going faster.

"What the hell is wrong with you!?"

Rayburn's expression persisted. "Son, did that conversation go the way you thought it would go?"

Mercer frowned. "…No, no it didn't."

Rayburn grabbed an overhead strap and stood up. "That's right. Think of that when we get in there."

The passengers all lurched upwards as the personnel carrier hit a bump. The Captain began issuing orders to Sergeant Ramirez. Mercer realized that his stomach no longer demanded his constant attention. He held up his right hand in front of his face. Steady like the horizon. Rayburn addressed him over his shoulder as he made his way back to the front of the carrier.

"Check your weapon, soldier. And Flabgobbatron guide you."

Family

« **Prisoners**

Showtime »

Present Day

Sigurrós Stefánsdóttir, the girl the Foundation called SCP-239, stirred in her coma-induced slumber.

She was fidgeting anxiously in the dreamscape constructed in her mind, and this anxiety finally had leaked down through the layers of her mind to affect her physical form. Her physical form that was pretending to be asleep, and had been pretending to be asleep for quite a long time now.

A very long time. Especially for a kid. But, you know. It's what kept the rest of them happy.

Well — most of them. But the ones who could see through it didn't need to be made happy. So far, at least.

She *could* wipe them all out with a thought, but that would be… horrible. Unbearable. She liked them way too much. They were lovely people, when she watched them in her projected astral form, and many of them had been even more lovely before when she was allowed to be awake, even Clef when she'd accidentally confused him into trying to kill her. (If that's what she'd actually done. It was hard to remember, and years ago by now. Almost another lifetime, for someone as young as her.)

She loved people.

Sigurrós' physical form stirred again, and the old-fashioned stabilized telekill alloy that still lined her walls began dissolving a

little faster.

She needed to calm down. But it was hard. What was coming up was too big. She'd had two months to think about it, and she still technically had the option to say "No", but she wasn't gonna.

Of course she wasn't gonna. The consequences were too much for her to even consider saying "No".

She could project herself in the future and see it. A vast black hole in the world — a hole in reality, with her at ground zero.

Everyone, everything she loved gone in an instant. Leaving her to float into the void. Truly alone.

And it would be all her fault.

So she couldn't say no, and she couldn't fail.

Sigurrós Stefánsdóttir sat in the landscape of her mind and watched a conjured clock count down. Twenty hours.

Two Months Ago

We serpents coil in our nest.

We are the wanderers gone wandering. We walk the road of still water. We abjure the eyes upon us. We see through the fogged glass.

This is Jailor ground. They call it "Site-17." It is the Jailor's largest humanoid containment facility. The largest anomalous prison. More than one god is chained here.

We are not the only ones watching. They suspect our presence, but right now will do nothing. They do not understand what is coming. Nor Joanna Cross's mission.

We watch Joanna Cross sit at a white table in a white

room. This is an interrogation chamber. Her interrogator enters: Jailor's Doctor Kendra Campbell.

Kendra Campbell opens her notebook and shows Joanna Cross its contents.

Kendra Campbell: "No script. These are my notes. Just notes, for what I'm gonna ask you. No script."

Joanna Cross nods her head.

Kendra Campbell: "Okay. Okay. Between you and me and everyone monitoring us right now… I am shit at this. I don't know why they're so insistent on me interrogating you, and I don't know why they're letting me ask my own questions, and I don't know why you asked me to, and…"

She pauses to take a breath.

Kendra Campbell: "You said I should be asking you questions that aren't from my script. So. Okay."

She hesitates.

Kendra Campbell: "We've met thirty-seven times so far. In normal people terms, outside of here, that would make us friends. We're not friends and we both know that. But hey, maybe you can help me out a bit here. What do you want me to ask you?"

There is a tremble in the air — not visible to Kendra Campbell — as she fulfills the terms of the geas. She remains unaware of this.

Joanna Cross: "My gods, Doctor. They didn't tell you a single thing, did they?"

Kendra Campbell: "I…"

Joanna Cross: "That's okay. You asked me a question that came from you, both sincerely and of your own

volition. Technically, you're being coerced into sitting here across from me, but that's okay. You've fulfilled the terms of the geas."

Kendra Campbell: "What's a geas?"

Joanna Cross: "It's a type of magical binding. Your bosses knew about it already. Did you figure out why they made you read only from that list of questions?"

Kendra Campbell: "Why? Are you going to explain it to me?"

Joanna Cross: "Don't mind if I do. They know I wanted to talk to one of you. They knew I could only give new information as a response to direct questions. They've interrogated Hand members under circumstances like this before, you know. They wanted to know how much I'd volunteer without you having to give anything yourself. Plus some other concerns about memetics."

Kendra Campbell: "I'm not sure I get this."

Joanna Cross: "They don't totally get it either. It's all very silly. You're all trying to play a game where you don't understand half the rules."

Kendra Campbell: "Man, if this was all it took to get you to gush like this…"

She laughs.

Kendra Campbell: "You should've said something before. All the times you gave me that same damn line, over and over…"

Joanna Cross: "I didn't have much of a choice. I did feel like kind of an ass."

Kendra Campbell: "Because of the, er… the geas."

Joanna Cross: "That's over now, at least for this

interview. Kind of a relief. All that crap made me really want to talk. Makes me wonder if this was all part of your plan. Your boss's plan, anyway. We've already established you don't know anything."

Kendra Campbell: "So does that make me the good cop?"

Joanna Cross: "Sure. Don't think I'll tell you everything, though. You *are* still a Jailor."

Kendra Campbell: "Jailors. Right. That's your name for us."

Joanna Cross: "It's just slang. Don't take it personal. You tend to pick it up if you hang around with the Hand long enough. But you can't deny it's got a bit of… veracity to it, can you?"

Kendra Campbell: "We secure, we contain, we protect," Campbell said. "If you want to call us Jailors for it, then I guess I can't stop you."

Joanna Cross: "What questions did you want to ask me?"

Kendra Campbell takes a photo from her notebook and shows it to Joanna Cross. The photo shows ***`blue lily faerie chains`****.*

Kendra Campbell: "What are these?"

Joanna Cross: "Blue lily chains. My blue lily chains, in fact."

Kendra Campbell: "Are they even anomalous?"

Joanna Cross: "What do you think?"

Kendra Campbell: "Fuck if I know. Field agents seem to think they are. But I've hit them with every test in the book, and…" *She waves her hand.* "They seem pretty

normal to me."

Joanna Cross: "Your agents already know they're anomalous, and they already know what they do. I don't know why they didn't tell you."

Kendra Campbell: "What do they do?"

Joanna Cross: "The field agents are correct. We Hand members use these flower chains for… for magical good luck, basically. Minor protective wards. You know. Or… well, no you don't know. And that's the point, isn't it?"

Kendra Campbell: "What's the point?"

Joanna Cross: "This is a little something a precocious teenager could put together. Something a bunch of teenagers understand, and it's something one of the Foundation's best and brightest can't crack. Why?" *She leans forward.* "Knowledge."

Kendra Campbell: "I could've cracked it if I had a higher clearance level," Campbell said, a little resentfully. "We do *have* people studying thaumotology. We're not stupid, you know."

Joanna Cross: "I just said that. Knowledge. You're not stupid, just ignorant. So why didn't they tell you, do you think?"

Kendra Campbell: "Maybe they wanted me to figure out some… new mundane tests for detecting magic. Maybe they wanted to be sure it was really anomalous. I don't know. I'm not high enough clearance yet for this."

Joanna Cross: "Maybe they'll wipe your memory of this conversation."

Kendra Campbell: "Maybe."

Joanna Cross: "Well, knowing what spells are imbued in those chains would help. You could crack exactly which

ones in those fairy chains in about thirty minutes if you know how. That's being generous. Just takes some basic counter-magic."

Kendra Campbell: "I'm flattered, but I'm not a reality bender. Pretty sure I can't, you know, *do magic*. Let alone 'counter-magic'."

Joanna Cross: "How do you know? Why don't you try performing some magic and find out?"

Kendra Campbell: "That's *definitely* above my clearance level."

Joanna Cross: "That clearance level stuff you have sure is something. Pretty sure that 'something' isn't 'the scientific method'. Kind of ironic for a Foundation full of scientists, don't you think?"

Kendra Campbell: "I thought you guys were all about the Harry Potter Muggles versus Wizards shit. You know, inborn genetics special powers teenager fantasy thing. Only the Chosen Few."

Joanna Cross laughs.

Joanna Cross: "Maybe a few of our traditionalists, but they're full of shit. Anyone could make these fairy chains, in the same way that anyone can do multiplication. You need a pencil or computer to write out the equations. And to know, you know, multiplication tables. And numbers."

Kendra Campbell: "Numbers?"

Joanna Cross: "Yes. That's just it, though, isn't it? You Foundation scientists… you barely know the difference between one and three and you classify the existence of two, and here you are trying to perform calculus. And you damn well aren't going to let the rest of the world learn to count while you're at it. You wanna keep them in

the dark."

Kendra Campbell: "We're preserving normalcy."

Joanna Cross: "And what's that mean?"

Kendra Campbell: "We're guarding against panic in the streets."

Joanna Cross: "They still panic in the streets. You just wipe their memories of it. And my gods, how often you have to break out amnestics. Do you know how many tons of amnestics the Foundation goes through per year? No, you probably don't, do you. I wonder how many Foundation members are killed by anomalies compared to Hand members. Is that above your clearance level too?"

Kendra Campbell: "I can't imagine you know that either. You're just baiting me."

Joanna Cross: "You're the one who wanted answers. That's the real difference here. Knowledge."

Kendra Campbell doesn't answer.

Joanna Cross: "How about that, huh? A bunch of witches, punks, and bookworms know more about the world than a whole organization of scientists and their paramilitary muscle. It's no wonder you're not very good at the whole… secure, contain, protect, you said. Right?"

Kendra Campbell: "You sure are full of cheap rhetorical points."

Joanna Cross: "Then have another. Do you support gay rights?"

Kendra Campbell: "Where the hell is this going?"

Joanna Cross: "It's just a question. Just to see where we stand."

Kendra Campbell: "Yeah, of course I fucking do. My sister is gay." *She hesitates.* "And also, I'm not an asshole."

Joanna Cross: "So what would you do if the someone said that gays were a threat to normalcy and had to be locked up for the good of everyone?"

Kendra Campbell: "Look, lady. In the cellblock just down from here we have a guy who can laser your face off with his eyes. I'm pretty sure my gay sister can't laser your face off with her eyes."

Joanna Cross: "How would you know?"

Kendra Campbell: "Pardon?"

Joanna Cross: "How would you know your gay sister can't laser your face off with her eyes?"

Kendra Campbell: "I don't think you're making a very strong argument here."

Joanna Cross: "No, seriously. Do you have any idea *why* the man in the cellblock just down from here can laser your face off with his eyes? Can you predict the typical occurrence of face-lasering in the general population?"

Kendra Campbell: "Could you, in my position?"

Joanna Cross: "I don't know. But I sure would be better equipped to find out. You getting my point?"

Present Day

There were some things amusingly mundane about how the Library worked, L.S. thought. The Library Cards were one of them.

Yes, they looked impressive: glimmering squares of etched brass for

the permanent Cards. And, yes, the Library Cards had your name on them, a name that acted as your True Name for any magical purposes.

But beyond that, they were essentially just library cards like any mundane Earth library card.

In days not so long gone by the Library Cards were one giant weakness just sitting there in your pocket, since anyone could steal them and use them against you. The True Name made you effectively 'willing' for the purposes of any spell cast upon you. A pretty awful situation to find yourself in, and not well balanced against the mere ability to take books outside of the Library.

But whoever ran things behind the scenes at the Library had wised up. They'd added new protections to Library Cards, and new privileges, too, for certain users.

Privileges such as direct access to the Archives.

The Archives was the informal term for the parts of the Library where humanoid sapients weren't allowed by default, at least not through the front doors. The Librarians had never minded those few who managed to find ways in or, well, Ways in, but those paths were always very dangerous.

As well they should be. The Archives were part of the underlying machinery of the Library, part networked prison-slash-zoo for various greater and lesser monstrosities that had invaded the Library over the centuries, part restricted text section, and part passage to Library wings for non-humanoid sapient entities to go read their equivalent of books. Some of it was filled with acid, a sizable portion completely underwater. If Cthulhu wanted to to check out a book, the Archives were where he'd pay his visit.

The Librarians classically hadn't been very enthusiastic about letting humanoid sapients in there, if only because they didn't like losing Patrons. But that was, again, before the Library Card upgrades.

Now, if your account was in good standing (which hers was), and if you'd performed certain tasks (which she had), and if you'd done

certain favors for the Library (which she had), they would conjure a service entrance Way just for you.

The new-issue Library Cards could literally let you breathe underwater, after all. Even in acid. They still didn't exactly make the Archives *safe*, but, you know, every little bit counted.

L.S. headed towards the local Library desk, took off her cap, and nodded to the Archivists working there. Librarians could see through the Cap of Neglect, of course, but they seemed to find it annoying to talk to her when she was under its effects.

She walked past the desk and wandered the stacks directly behind it. It took only moments, this time, for a robed Docent with a few more arms than the norm to materialize like a walking pillar from the gloom.

She knew this Docent by sight, from the gold-and-violet symbol on its shoulder. A symbol unique in color and shape: a distinguishing mark. Very unusual. Identity was a privilege granted to few Librarians. Being a Librarian was, after all, a punishment.

This Docent was a "trustee". Most Docents had only one hand, the other replaced by a chain and a lantern, and most Docents had no mouth. This Docent was the same, but had been granted "additions".

Most visible was the compact red-gold clockwork device attached to the left side of its face that could produce a language understood only by other Librarians. And she knew that under its cloak was a red-gold chassis attached to its sides and back from which it could unfold up to four mechanical limbs.

"I'd like to enter the Archives," she said. "Please."

The Docent grunted in its own language through its red-gold larynx, and held out its hand. It examined her Library Card, and then unfolded one of its mechanical arms from under its cloak.

This arm terminated in a stone knife. A knife to open Ways.

The Docent shuffled off the side, and began cutting a complex

pattern into the air.

L.S. left it to finish opening the Way. This could take some time, depending on where you meant to go. Especially opening Ways for patrons — those seemed to take significantly longer. Probably metaphysical reasons.

L.S. went to find the couple companions waiting for her in another wing of the Library. She left her cap off. Now, she was just Alison Chao.

This small circle of friends did know her real name — and they even knew who her father was, big-name Foundation researcher Doctor Charles Gears. They did not know she was L.S. or the Black Queen, though. That would be going a *touch* far.

She found Rain, Septima, and Dega in the West Liko Wing, arguing. These three represented part of one of Alison's several inner circles; Zakuro and the others were off the grid somewhere in Lattaka.

Those who remained…

Iris "Rain" Joseph, rainbow-skinned color changer, black human woman and fragment of another universe's One Deity, a hedge mage of fair usefulness.

Septima Varan the High Enchantress, an ana-human of unknown origin and a high opinion of her reality-altering skills that was not entirely unwarranted, despite the entirely self-bestowed title inspired by her equally self-involved brother.

Dega Tee, a reptilian woman who insisted on referring to herself as 'lizardfolk' after playing too much Dungeons & Dragons, but still a competent fighter. Or, ugh. Capital F-Fighter, probably.

They were arguing about SCP-239.

"The Witch Child is not a child," Septima was saying, waving that oversized staff of hers around dangerously. "The Witch Child is the Woman with Stars in Her Eyes. She who made the People, She who made the Land and Corn and Squash."

"She's from freaking Iceland," Rain said irritably. "She's as white as white can get."

"Only the cultural imperialism of the Europeans could turn her white!" Septima nearly knocked Dega about the head with another wave of her staff. Dega jumped out of the way, flicking her tail for balance. "A disgrace and a lie. Also, truth, but only truth for now. She is not what we see with our eyes."

"I thought the Star-Eyed Child was the woman with stars in her eyes," Dega said. "The one they call Es-Cee-Pee One-Three-Four?"

"Don't be so literal!" Septima turned to face Dega, and noticed Alison watching. "How long have you been standing there?" she demanded.

"Only a couple hours," Alison said. "I see you're all ready to go?"

"Damn right we're ready to go," Rain said.

They headed for the Way into the Archives. Sixteen hours left to go.

Two Months Ago

Joanna Cross: "Do you believe in God?"

Kendra Campbell: "What?"

Joanna Cross: "You know. God. Yahweh. Big Man in the Sky. Fate Personified. General ultimate distant father figure. Or, hey, any of the other variations, I'm not here to be picky."

Kendra Campbell: "I think that's a bit too much of a personal question."

Joanna Cross: "Most of you don't believe in God, I'm sure. Scientists are mostly atheists. Just speaking statistically. I think the Foundation's a bit different, though. You still don't believe in, like, *God* God. But God

has many different faces. Here's another personal question for you. Do you believe there is a Plan?"

Kendra Campbell: "What kind of plan?"

Joanna Cross: "A Plan. A right and true way that things should be."

Kendra Campbell: "I'm not sure what you mean."

Joanna Cross: "It goes back to the Garden, Doctor. Adam and Eve, standing naked in the dark. Innocents. Knowing nothing. Until the Serpent came along."

Kendra Campbell: "Yeah, I was raised religious. I seem to recall the Serpent was the villain."

Joanna Cross: "Why, though?"

Kendra Campbell: "Eating the fruit of knowledge of good and evil. Going against what God said. All that crap."

Joanna Cross: "Knowledge of good and evil. Why's that supposed a bad thing?"

Kendra Campbell: "You tell me."

Joanna Cross: "Eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil was gaining the power to know, to *discern* right from wrong. The power to understand how the world works. Which humans can't understand. Eating the fruit was sin because humans aren't meant to discern for themselves how the world works. Because they aren't meant to change things. Only God is meant to do that. People trying to change things, or trying to see what should be right or wrong, that is just… sin. Deviating from the perfect Plan. Right?"

Kendra Campbell: "Right. I guess. I wasn't the best student in Sunday School."

Joanna Cross: "You should know the story better. If only because you want to understand your enemy. Or yourselves."

Kendra Campbell: "Fine. Why *do* you identify with the bad guy, then?"

Joanna Cross: "Because the Serpent's only the bad guy if there really is a perfect Plan. If there really is a perfectly correct way things should be."

Kendra Campbell: "Okay."

Joanna Cross: "But if there is no Plan… if there is no correct way things should be… and if what you think is the Plan is *wrong*… Then what?"

Kendra Campbell: "Okay. What's your point?"

Joanna Cross: "The Foundation does believe in God. Your God is Normalcy. Normalcy, the perfect, arbitrary Plan from which there can be no deviation. Trying to change Normalcy is the worst sin of all. The cardinal sin against which your organization stands with all its might. A stalwart bulwark against change."

Kendra Campbell: "I think it's plausible that you might be over-thinking this philosophy stuff."

Joanna Cross: "If you think we're off point, feel free to redirect us. I'm being pretty cooperative, aren't I?"

Kendra Campbell: "That's one way of putting it. Okay. Look, I do have a question. About your sister."

Joanna Cross' demeanor changes. She is startled.

Joanna Cross: "My sister…"

Kendra Campbell: "Did you come here to recruit her? Kidnap her? Hurt her? Anything like that."

Joanna Cross: "Hurt her? Gods, and you complained about personal questions."

Kendra Campbell: "I mean, bit of an odd coincidence, being that she's stationed here on MTF Tau-9 and all. I don't believe for a second that you didn't know." *She hesitates.* "She's my friend. You can't blame me for asking."

Joanna Cross: "I knew she was here."

Kendra Campbell: "So did you come here to recruit her?"

Joanna Cross: "I love my sister, but I didn't come here to recruit her."

Kendra Campbell: "I find it really hard to believe that this was a coincidence."

Joanna Cross: "It wasn't. This is how the Foundation works. They think you have a vulnerability, they try to scrape it raw to see if it'll scab. If it doesn't, you're written off. They'd be willing to lose my sister in a heartbeat. That's why she was assigned to your "Bookworms." A honeypot to attract flies. To attract *me*."

Kendra Campbell: "So…"

Joanna Cross: "I'm not here because of her. She's here because of me."

Kendra Campbell: "But that's not why you came here."

Joanna Cross: "No."

Kendra Campbell: "Then why did you come here?"

Joanna Cross: "What do you think?"

Kendra Campbell: "You're asking me?"

Joanna Cross: "I just did, didn't I?"

Kendra Campbell: "I gotta admit, this is one of the parts where I agree with that shitty list of questions. I think you came here for **SCP-239**."

Joanna Cross: "That's an interesting theory."

Kendra Campbell: "So you're not gonna tell me."

Joanna Cross: "Gotta preserve a little bit of that mystery, right?"

Back at her lab station, hours later, Campbell examined the transcription of the interview log. Cross had actually given quite a bit of information, really. Well.. Maybe. Quite a bit of information compared to all the other interviews, at least.

For whatever reason, no one had objected to the content of the interview, or approached her with an amnestic pill. Or, at least not that she remembered. Ugh. Still, she now knew far more than she'd expected to know.

Why, though? What was in this for Cross? What was her game?

Either way, she was approved for another interview tomorrow morning, no problem at all. So—-

Campbell heard footsteps, and turned, suddenly afraid of once again seeing Dr. Bright. She was relieved for a moment to see Rita Butler. And then she stopped being relieved.

"Hi," Rita said, cautiously. "Kendra, I… I know I shouldn't be asking, but… I know you… you know."

"Interviewed your sister," Campbell said.

"Yeah." Rita fidgeted. "I know I technically have the clearance, but normally I wouldn't ask because, you know, conflict of interest…"

"It's cool," Campbell said. "Don't worry. I don't mind."

Rita gave an awkward half-smile. "Did she say anything about me?"

For some reason, Campbell froze for a second in hesitation, remembering how Cross had gotten when that subject came up. "Yeah."

Rita stood there, waiting expectantly, with that concerned look on her face…

"She said she loves you," Campbell said. "And. Other… stuff. She talked a lot about philosophy. Good and evil crap. I never heard her talk so much, because, well, the other interviews, she just kept repeating that same damn line…" Campbell cleared her throat. "Rita, I'm sorry. I can't imagine how this must feel for you."

"Is she…" Rita swallowed. Goddamn, that woman wore her emotions on her sleeve. "Did she say, I mean…" She paused a moment. "I guess I'm asking if the rumors are true? If she came here to… to recruit me."

"No," Campbell said. Shit, what was even the right answer in this situation? "She said she loves you, but she didn't come here to recruit you."

Rita waited.

"I think she's telling the truth. She seems to think that you were…" Campbell wondered if she was going too far, sharing too much. "… that you were assigned to the Bookworms, to MTF Tau-9, because Site Command knew she was your sister."

Campbell hesitated. Rita just stood there, waiting. "Maybe Site Command wanted you to be able to deal with her if worst came to worst. Maybe they thought you would deserve to know if anything… had to happen."

Christ. That was definitely the wrong thing to say. It was unfair, it really was, that Rita had been assigned to this damn team. Campbell felt ashamed of the self-pity she'd felt yesterday. No amount of repetitive interviews could measure up to your own sister being held in the prison you helped run.

Fucking Site Command. The hell were they thinking? Would it really have been so hard to transfer Rita into the goddamn Arctic Circle or something, a place where she'd never have to think about her wayward sister ever again?

But Rita was just nodding.

"What do you think is gonna happen to her?" Rita asked.

"She's not to be harmed in any way, clear orders," Campbell said. Probably too eagerly. "They're afraid she's got some kind of anomalous protection. They'll probably just keep her in a humanoid containment cell. Figure out what to do from there." She hesitated again. "Not too bad, right?"

"Yeah," Rita said. "I guess not."

Alone again, Campbell returned to taking down information. She wrote and deleted several purely speculative paragraphs on the 'blue lily chains'. Those fucking flowers, goddamn.

She hoped the Foundation higher-ups weren't actually logging all her keystrokes, or at least not reading through those logs too obsessively. For all that she hadn't given much credence to Cross's overcooked points on science and research and clearance levels, it was true that she was kind of worried about how her superiors would react to too much interest in *reality bending*.

Or, hell, maybe she was overthinking this now too. She was a member of MTF Tau-9, after all. The Bookworms were *supposed* to be interested in magic, even if they weren't supposed to *do* magic.

Or, you know, know anything useful about it at all, just in case you might get corrupted…

Her computer screen seemed to flicker and swim for a moment. Just… dissolved into shapes and colors before resolving back into a computer screen like any other. A computer screen like it always had been.

Great, she thought. Gonna have to catalogue this too. Or maybe

not, maybe it's nothing. She briefly envisioned being taken off all of her projects due to unacceptable anomaly exposure, and left doing terrible interviews with captured Hand members forever. Always either repeating the same line or babbling on about philosophy, forever.

She glanced down at the blue lily flower chains. "You better not be doing anything funny to me," she said.

Just in case, she packed them away, back in the secure ceramic-lined containment box they'd arrived at her desk in. She found herself wondering what was inside, underneath the ceramic lining.

Campbell's follow-up interview went in a fairly unproductive direction, for most of its length. Cross rephrased a few of her philosophical points and gave disappointingly little information. Campbell was, indeed, shit at interviews, she thought. Even though Cross was the one in handcuffs, she was railroading Campbell like a seasoned pro.

Joanna Cross: "Do you know why we're going through this song and dance at all?"

Kendra Campbell: "What?"

Joanna Cross: "Surely you've wondered why the Foundation hasn't just sent in an interrogator to torture me."

Kendra Campbell: "Because torture doesn't work. Subject just tells you whatever they think you want to hear. You have no way of knowing if the information is true or not until it's too late. Sometimes you'll never know at all."

Joanna Cross: "Oh, please. The Foundation isn't gonna give up a thing like torture merely because it doesn't work. They'd torture me anyway if they could, merely because it's tradition. It's how these things go, and that's

reason enough. It's part of the Plan."

Kendra Campbell: "And yet we're not torturing you."

Joanna Cross: "I have protections. I don't mind telling you that they are protections that are easy to unravel."

Kendra Campbell: "Why would you tell me that?"

Joanna Cross: "Because you'll never figure out how to unravel them. Not you or the rest of your team. Your bosses are too scared to let you. To delve too deeply into *anomalous methods*. So here I sit. Forever safe. Only in the SCP Foundation."

Kendra Campbell: "We use anomalous methods. When we have to."

Joanna Cross: "Yet here we are."

Kendra Campbell: "Kinda tempting fate, don't you think? You almost sound like you *want* some good old-fashioned torture."

Joanna Cross: "Jack Bright said something similar."

Kendra Campbell doesn't answer.

Joanna Cross: "Doctor Bright was in here to talk to me before you. He mentioned anomalous methods as well. Technically, he's best suited among you to back that up. Our conversation… did not go well."

Kendra Campbell: "I can't even imagine."

Joanna Cross: "Man, Jack Bright, though… I knew about him before coming here, you know. One of the few exceptions to your No Anomalies No No Not Ever rule. An SCP item who gets to be considered a person? *And* a staff member? Heavens forfend!"

Kendra Campbell: "He's a good scientist. We don't

imprison our members just because they had anomalous exposure, not unless we have to. I would've thought you'd approve."

Joanna Cross: "I do. I've seen his file, of course. They used to keep Bright on a short leash, but it got longer and longer as time went by, right? Now he's… a personnel director, if I remember correctly?"

Kendra Campbell: "Right."

Joanna Cross: "Let me tell you a secret about Jack Bright. Do you know why they keep him around? Why they trust him with so much?"

Kendra Campbell: "I'm pretty sure I'm not supposed to know that."

Joanna Cross: "Then they'll wipe your memory of this conversation anyway." *She smiles.* "Do you know about Five-Ninety?"

Kendra Campbell: "**SCP-590**? That healer kid. Touches you and you get healed. Fucked up in the head."

Joanna Cross: "Touches you and he receives all your ailments. Pain. Wounds. Broken Bones. Cancer. Mental illnesses." *She pauses.* "Did the file you had clearance for happen to mention Bright's involvement with Five-Ninety?"

Kendra Campbell: "Yeah. He used 590 to heal several cases of mental retardation for … I don't know. People. Made 590 tractable. Easier to contain."

Joanna Cross: "Five-ninety is Bright's brother."

Kendra Campbell: "What?" *She pauses.* "What, so he's, like, a little Bright kid too?"

Joanna Cross: "Jack Bright's little brother. They scrubbed the name pretty well, but… definitely Bright's

little brother."

Kendra Campbell: "He's… jesus…"

Joanna Cross: "Bright's been around longer than most of you already. He doesn't age or die. When you're rotting in your grave, be it tomorrow or after dying at the ripe old age of a hundred, Bright will still be here. Quietly doing this having proven his loyalty on the skin and bones of his own little brother."

Kendra Campbell: "What's your point?"

Joanna Cross: "Isn't it obvious?"

Kendra Campbell: "Why are you telling me all this? Why all this philosophy crap? All these existential questions? You know I'm not gonna listen. Are you trying to deflate me with word flood? Seduce me to the dark side, what?"

Joanna Cross: "I don't know. Is it working?"

Kendra Campbell gives her a skeptical look.

Joanna Cross: "I'm just kidding."

Kendra Campbell: What, then? Why are we having this conversation?

Joanna Cross: I am trying to convince you, yes, but you'll probably be mind-wiped after this anyway. But it's not just you. I'm trying to convince all your colleagues and superiors who who will read this, the security personnel who will obsessively vet it before deciding which clearance level can read it and what needs to be redacted into oblivion, I'm even trying to convince your Site Command.

Kendra Campbell: Why? Aren't we the enemy?

Joanna Cross: I think you're redeemable. Not just you. This whole Site. My sister. The whole Foundation. Even

> Dr. Bright. I don't think you've gone far enough into the dark that you can't yet find your way out again."
>
> *Kendra Campbell doesn't answer.*
>
> **Joanna Cross:** "Am I wrong?"

It was that last exchange in particular, especially, irrationally, those last three words, that echoed in Campbell's mind long afterward.

As it turned out, Cross was wrong about at least one thing. For whatever reason, Campbell was not mind-wiped. Not to blank out Cross' last, desperate pitch. Not to remove the knowledge of Bright's little brother, that suffering little boy locked up in a cell somewhere in this very site. Bright came to receive her report, and said nothing. No one mentioned a thing.

There was, however, no follow-up interview. No thirty-ninth interview with Joanna Cross. They moved her cell, to … somewhere. She was still held in Site-17, but Site-17 was an enormously big place, a place that Campbell had only seen about 2 percent of in five years of living on location.

She got rid of the blue lily chains, and stopped suffering audiovisual hallucinations. And she added that to the report. Finally, something solidly anomalous.

And nothing else happened for a while.

One month later, Campbell returned to her computer to see a message on it, typed in Notepad and left open for her to read. It read:

> If you change your mind, don't forget about me.

The note was unsigned. Campbell did not report it. She was going to, but somehow… she never did.

The second month passed without incident.

Present Day

Sigurrós Stefánsdóttir lay awake in bed with her eyes closed, listening.

She could hear it now, as the hours ticked down. That indefinable humming, that humming that sounded like it was coming from somewhere deep inside her soul, and all around at once. A wordless, tuneless, eternal song.

Twelve hours left to go. Twelve hours to the end.

As she listened, she found that she could make out one word. Just one single word in the endless song.

Never never never never

Never never never never

Never never never never…

« **Prisoners**

Showtime »

Family Business

In all great family trees, there is a small and stunted little twig that is ill mentioned and highly embarrassing. A stain on the illustrious painting of heritage. A black sheep. A brown M&M. The family as a whole would prefer that it be trimmed with a nice pair of hedgeclippers, but gardening shears for metaphysical representations of genealogy were very expensive and surprisingly shoddy. Most families survived by very carefully navigating social traps and generally ignoring the existence of such a brown M&M. The more captivating families preferred exile or banishment.

The Wondertainment line was one such captivating family. They were full of colourful names, from the yet-to-be-born Ivan "The-Terribly-Excitable" Aeryn Emthe Remy Wondertainment. Or the grand Mehmed Mahlia Prudence Zanna Wondertainment. Or even Isabel Helga Anastasia Parvati Wondertainment V[1],the distant ancestor and the great-great niece of John Wondertainment.

John. The brown M&M.

John. Born Johnny Monterey Macarena Kalene Wondertainment, known in most documentation as John "I-Don't-Want-A-Bloody-Middle-Name" Wondertainment. Further known to the mundane people with boring things like houses and well-paying jobs as John Unterhaltung.[2]. John, who coincidentally had a house and a well paying job. John, who wanted nothing to do with any of the Wondertainments.

John had a difficult childhood. Being raised by his Wonderparents, John always dreamed of doing well in school and perhaps becoming a doctor. His parents naturally had wanted him to be a painter, or perhaps a sculptor or a bonbon boutiqueist, and were suitably horrified that such an innocent child could ever want to do something so awful with his life. Little Johnny Monterey Macarena Kalene Wondertainment spent many a night in the Wondertainment Sleep Tight Dream Bed™ as punishment. He still has nightmares

about racecar beds.

He left as soon as he could. Using words like "emancipation" and "constitution", he confused his parents long enough to slip out, taking his Way to a nice and respectable college, where he attended classes and received high marks. The ultimate shame for his parents.

So yes, every family tree has its issues. Currently, the Wondertainment issue was driving a nondescript grey car home from the nondescript grey hospital, listening to Steve Reich on the very descript pink radio[3]. It was going to rain, apparently.

It had been a perfectly wonde- good. Good day, John decided. No one had died. In fact, several people were surviving, thanks in large part to his own efforts. It didn't occur to him that something could go wrong.

It was about the time that he pulled up in his driveway that John realised something was off. His door, for instance, was not designed to be hanging uselessly off of one hinge, buckled into his foyer. In a rather polite state of disbelief, he entered the house, awkwardly closing then locking the door, more for his own mental security than any protection it could currently provide.

The interior of his house looked like a small tornado had drunkenly rampaged about before deciding upon a spontaneous redecoration[4]. John's heart was in his throat as he tried the nonfunctioning light switch, then slunk over to the telephone, preparing to call the police. It was all he could do not to panic as he noticed that the line on his very new rotary phone had ended prematurely. His hands trembled as he put the phone down, stepping quietly over the remains of his Magnavox.

It was the sound of some *thing* creeping towards him that gave John pause. In the dark hall, it looked horrible. A brown M&M with legs. Too many legs. The thing froze, raising what might be a head in John's direction, tilting it ever so slightly.

This was when John's nerve broke. He spun around, sprinting to put as much distance between him and the M&M. For a moment, he felt

the thrill of success, but then, the *thing* propelled itself off the ground, throwing John onto his back, dripping some hot, unknown liquid from its gaping maw, hot puffs of stinking breath washing over his face. He flailed wildly, limbs knocking uselessly into the hairy form above him, until he jerked to the right, freeing himself. John scrabbled for footing, accelerating wildly into the bathroom, where he grabbed the door, tensing to slam it.

"Wait!" the thing cried.

John watched in stunned silence.

"I'm here about your father!"

John slammed the door even harder.

John stared at the Shiba Inu wagging its tail in front of him. It was panting happily and drooling on his carpet.

The dog had been chatting through John's silence, oblivious to the quiet numbness that was creeping gently down John's spine, pooling lazily in his stomach. The fatal numbness that comes with betting everything on the three legged racehorse named Lucky. "And so I was worried that you were gone and I had to search everything and then you weren't there and what could I do I and then I thought I heard panicking and then there you were!"

"…What happened to my father?"

"Candy division wasn't going so well maybe someone was fudging the numbers so he went down for a personal inspection and then he slipped and they called it an industrial fudge accident and whoa it was messy!"

The Shiba Inu panted proudly, waiting for John to laugh.

"So, he's dead." John's hand began to shake weakly.

"At least he died before the skeleton got him!"

"Don't-"

"Yup! They're plotting to rule the world! They hide inside of people, and they're skulking in wait for the perfect time to burst out and order spare ribs from restaurants! If they had the stomach for it.[5]."

The dog waited again, his muzzle open and lips pulled back into a huge grin. When John didn't laugh, he kept going.

"Nobody is safe! Not even you! There's a skeleton inside of you!"

John chuckled in spite of himself, before his utter failure to hold his stomach contents interrupted an equally bad pun. It was so unbelievable. The dog. His father. Himself. It had been too long since the real, moving racecar beds, discoball treetoppers, and rocking horse rockets.

He didn't know how long he sat there in his broken home. Perhaps he would have stayed there forever, if not for feeling the dog rest its head upon his leg, meeting his gaze with sad puppy eyes. He idly scratched it behind the ears.

"He asked for you to see it, one last time."

John shook his head at the dog. "No." He was not in the mood to argue.

The Shiba didn't care.

It was now launching a coordinated assault on John's fingers, attempting to flood them out with its tongue. John shook it off, standing unsteadily to look around his house. He had cleaning to do, regardless of the dog, regardless of Wondertainment. Quietly and automatically, he began to clean, ignoring the whines of the Shiba Inu behind him.

His concentration broke at the "schlorp" behind him, which experienced housewives would tell you is the sound of a clogged drain. A Wondertainment would tell you it's the sound of a determined Shiba Inu casually violating spacetime. John turned slowly.

He was greeted with the sight of an impossibly large, gaping maw enclosing around him. In reality, it was more of an improbably bored

yawn, but it would be highly unlikely for John himself to know that. Before he could cry out, the jaws slammed shut around him.

The Shiba Inu wagged its tail happily, precious cargo now secured. It was time for John to visit the family namesake. It looked back once at the ruined house before stepping out into something that was definitely not Earth. There was business apaw.

« **Part 2: Being John Wondertainment (Coming Soon!)** »

Footnotes
1. Wondertainment genealogy is complicated enough to turn a simple family tree into an exercise in 4 dimensional topology. Which they then marketed as Wondertainments Tipsy Turvy Topology Tables!™. It sold surprisingly well in the 8-12 and midlife crisis demographic.
2. Which is an objectively horrid name. Where's the wonder inUnterhaltung?
3. Who am I kidding, it was grey.
4. Wondertainment Tequilanados™ coming soon!
5. Humerus, isn't it?

Family Disclosure Protocol: Revision 90

Jeremiah Cimmerian, Phillip Foster, Jeffery Jacobs

Abstract: Humans, by our very nature, are social creatures. We gather, we find partners, and we form families. This is no less true for members of the Foundation than it is for any other group. Unfortunately, due to the nature of our work, such relationships create the potentials for massive breaches of security, and in several cases, have required the use of amnestics. By granting the loved ones of specific Foundation personnel a special class of **`Level 0`** clearance, not only does one decrease what could be considered a potential security breach, but also reduces amnestic use, and in many cases, helps alleviate the stress and physical/ mental strain constant deception of loved ones has upon Foundation personnel…

"But when you get down to it, Ed wasn't just a good friend. He was a good person. Kind, compassionate, and thoughtful, he poured his heart and soul not only into his own work but also in helping those he worked with."

Site Director Sasha Merlo looked around the crowd at all the faces lost in thought as she spoke. She stood under an umbrella in the spring rain, as part of a semi-circle of roughly fourteen formally dressed men and woman that had gathered within Portland's Forrest Park. At the semi-circle's center was a simple metal urn, inside of which was the remains of the SCP Foundation Site-64's former Site

Director, Edgar Holman.

Sasha recognized most of the faces there. There was Edgar's son and daughter-in-law: Ted and Karen, his grandchildren, Researcher Jacob Conwell and his wife, Assistant Director Clarissa Shaw, a small menagerie of other former and current Site Directors, and a representative of the local branch of the **Unusual Incidents Unit**. She had always pictured Holman's funeral to be much grander, but in the end, living a life in the shadows made your friends few and far between.

"I'm going to miss you, Ed," Sasha finally finished, tears had formed in her eyes. "I really am."

She felt her husband, Gabe, put a hand on her shoulder as she dried her eyes and looked to Holman's son with a nod. Everyone else had already said what they wanted to say. Ted nodded in return and gently picked up the urn and carried it to a pre-dug hole. Without a sound, he deposited his father's ashes within and planted a sapling on top.

Edgar Holman was put to rest.

Activation of this protocol requires fulfillment of the following criteria:

* Approval of Site Command.
* Approval of Site Ethics Committee Liaison.
* The Personnel holds a minimum of Level 2 Clearance or Higher.
* The Personnel is not actively serving on a Mobile Task Force or similar project.
* The Personnel is not actively serving on a project featuring an anomaly featuring a cognitohazard, memetic, or biological hazard of BSL-3 or higher.
* The Personnel has passed their last two Routine Mental Health Screenings.
* The Subject be a minimum of 18 years of age.

With Ethics Committee approval, Site Directors may

include additional requirements for protocol activation. Subjects that are activated by personnel who meet these requirements at the time of activation, but then become ineligible, through assignment change or otherwise, do not face revocation of their active status…

"I never know what to say at these things," **Gabe Merlo** mumbled to Sasha as they attended to funeral's reception.

"Perhaps it's for the best," Sasha replied. "You don't exactly need a social butterfly for these things."

The various attendees stood in small clusters, quietly speaking among themselves. Occasionally a small melancholy chuckle would rise above the low clamor before vanishing as suddenly as it had arrived.

"That was a beautiful speech you gave," Gabe continued. "Fitting you should get the last word on Ed."

"Ed probably would have thought it was far too sentimental." Sasha smiled softly. "But hey, you don't get to choose how people praise you at your funeral."

"I'm sure my dad would have loved it."

Sasha turned to see Ted Holman standing behind her, having made the rounds from the other clusters before stopping there.

"I know I did," Ted went on, stopping to give a sad, tired chuckle.

"I'm sorry for your loss." Sasha gave him a hug. "I meant every word. Your father was one of the best men I ever had the pleasure to meet."

"Thank you," Ted replied. "It means a lot to hear so many people say that."

"Of course." Sasha ended the hug and looked over at Karen Holman as she and Edgar's grandchildren spoke to another guest. "You have a beautiful family, by the way; what are your kid's names?"

"Arthur and Laura," Ted said with a smile. "Twins. Both are off to college in the fall."

"We have a daughter getting to be that age," Gabe commented. "Things really do move fast don't they."

"Like a blur," Ted chuckled. "It's a shame because they just now have reached the point where they don't mind hanging out with me again."

"Speaking of daughters, where is Linda?" Sasha asked.

Ted's smile vanished.

"My sister and my dad had a huge falling out when my mom passed," he explained. "She always saw him as someone who put work first, even when his wife was on hospice. He made attempts to reach out to her, but no dice. I wish she came today and heard all the things all of you said about him. Maybe… I don't know, maybe she would finally stop being so bitter."

"I didn't mean to open old wounds." Sasha frowned. "I'm sorry."

"It's fine," Ted said with a sad smile. "Not your fault. You didn't know."

Ted sighed and looked around at the other guests.

"I should move along. Thank you again for the kind words."

"Any time," Sasha said, looking thoughtfully down at the ground as Ted walked away.

Her mind began to wander to her own daughter, Jessie.

> At no point should any personnel feel pressured to activate a loved one should they feel the benefits of maintaining the Veil Protocol outweigh the benefits of activation. In the event of a dispute between multiple parties as to whether to activate a loved one, maintaining the Veil Protocol takes precedent…

Two days later, Sasha Merlo found herself on the couch in her apartment living room, hair tied back and glasses on her head, typing on her laptop. In the chair next to her sat an uncomfortable looking young man Jessie had introduced to them as Desmond. Occasionally, Merlo would look at him out of the corner of her eye, and smile to herself as he would awkwardly avoid her gaze.

"We'll be back before curfew," **Jessie Merlo** said as she walked into the other room, clad in skinny jeans and a flannel. Like her mother, her brown hair was also tied back.

"Have fun," Sasha replied as she watched Desmond casually scramble for the door. "Don't do anything I wouldn't do."

"Yeah, no," Gabe called from the nearby kitchen. "Don't do anything *I* wouldn't do."

"Can do," Jessie said as she rolled her eyes, and departed with Desmond in tow.

"That boy is waaaaaaaaay too intimidated by us," Sasha said aloud as she resumed typing on her computer.

"I kind of liked him, actually," Gabe said with a chuckle, emerging from the kitchen with two bowls of stir-fry. "Seems like a decent kid."

"We'll see…" Sasha put her laptop away and accepted a bowl with a smile. The two proceeded to eat in silence for several moments before she then blurted out. "I want to activate Protocol FD90 for Jessie."

Gabe stopped mid-bite.

"You… what… why?"

"Just… seeing what happened with Holman and his daughter," Sasha began, "I can't bear the thought of that happening to you or me. Besides… as a Site Director I've basically got a bulls-eye on my head, and for better or worse you and Jessie do through association. One way or another, our world's going to catch up to her. Might as well choose the option that requires fewer amnestics.

She more than qualifies for the clearance."

Gabe sighed.

"Don't you think this is a little reactionary?" he asked. "It's a cliché to say this, but you know for a fact that ignorance is bliss here."

"We both agreed when we got married," Sasha returned, "that if we had kids, and if either of us wanted to activate FD90, we would. I'm playing that card. If something happened to me, or you, wouldn't you want Jessie to know the sacrifices we made?"

Gabe nodded.

"Of course," he agreed, "I just… I don't want to bring someone to our side of the Veil recklessly. Let alone our daughter. "

He then sighed.

"You haven't steered us wrong with these decisions before… so I trust you, but please before we move forward, can you at least talk to others who activated FD90?"

Sasha nodded with a sheepish grin.

"I know a few people…"

Personnel are to complete the following steps prior to completion of activation:

1) A script for the activation is to be completed by the Personnel.
2) The activation script is to be submitted to Site Command for approval.
3) Upon approval of Site Command, the activation script is to be submitted to the Site Ethics Committee liaison.
4) Upon approval of the Site Ethics Committee liaison, a requisition for Class A amnestics is to be acquired, and a training course on their proper use is to be completed.
5) Personnel are to activate the Subject according to the activation script.

6) Immediately following activation, a representative of the Ethics Committee is to provide the FD90 Orientation, explaining the rights and restrictions of Level 0 clearance.
7) One week following completion of Orientation, the activated Subject is to undergo a mental health screening. If the Subject passes this screening, activation is considered completed until a renewal is required. In the event a Subject fails this screening, Class A amnestics are to be used, as per the protocol's Reset procedures…

Follow my light
Follow my lead
Never listen to me
Never listen to me
Fall by my side
I only needed to see
Never listen to me
Never listen to me

The sound of music carried through the office door when Site Director Sasha Merlo poked her head into the PI Office of the **Site-64 Anomalous Materials Lab**. Therein, a gangly man with messy blond hair typed away at a keyboard, humming along to the tune. Sasha watched him for several moments before clearing her throat. The man gave a start, realizing he was being watched, and quickly turned off the nearby iPod.

"Director Merlo," he said, getting up from his chair. "Sorry about that, I didn't see you come in. If you're here for the results on the **2849** pheromones, I'm going to need a few more days to…"

"Conwell," Sasha held up a hand as she spoke. "I'm not here for any of that, relax. You always meet your deadlines."

Conwell nodded and gave a relaxed sigh.

"Ah… well then, uh, what are you here for? No offense, but we don't see a lot of people from the admin offices on this sub-level."

Sasha didn't respond. Instead, she stepped into the office, and approached the desk, grabbing a framed picture that from its surface. The image was of Conwell on what looked to be a backpacking trip. Next to him was a short woman with long red hair, with an arm wrapped around his waist. A teenage boy dressed all in black, despite what appeared to be warm weather, stood between them, by his side was a preteen girl dressed in an eccentric array of bright colors.

"How are Kate and the kids?" Sasha eventually asked, putting the picture down with a smile.

"Can't complain," Conwell replied, raising an eyebrow. "Zach's going through a bit of a brooding phase. Carrie is… not. Still, they are good kids… but not why you're here. Seriously, what's up?"

"I'm planning on FD90-ing Jessie," Sasha said with a sigh. "I know you did the same for Kate, so I wanted to ask you about that."

"You're going to un-Veil your daughter?" Conwell shook his head. "Why?"

"Why did you un-Veil, Kate?"

"Because I couldn't stand lying on a daily basis to someone who only tells me the truth. Also, as a spouse to the PI for a major Foundation Lab, Kate qualified for the clearance. You?"

"Because, if anything happened to me and Gabe, I want Jessie to at least know we didn't just bail on her. I don't want her to end up like Holman's daughter."

Conwell nodded in understanding, he gestured to a spare chair in front of his desk and returned to his own seat.

"Have you asked anyone else about this before me?"

"Gave **Ralph** a call out at **77**, also a few other people around the site here."

"Then you'd know the whole thing isn't cut and dry," Conwell sighed. "A lot of people don't take being un-Veiled well. I talked to Kate

shortly after I returned from the leave of absence Holman sent me on. Upon learning that I had essentially been lying to her for the first seven years of our marriage, she socked me in the face, broke my nose, took the kids and left. I didn't see her again for four days. Thought amnestics might come into play. Eventually, however, she called, we met at a coffee shop, and things were slowly patched back up from there."

Conwell paused for a melancholic chuckle.

"Bringing people onto this side of the Veil changes how they view the world and changes how they view you, for better or worse. If your plan is for this to alleviate stress for you and your husband, that is not happening. It certainly isn't going to alleviate stress for your daughter. There is a reason that they don't allow active duty MTF agents to have FD90 as an option. All it's going to do is put all of you in the same boat. But hey, sometimes that's just what you need."

"Do you regret doing it?" Sasha asked. Conwell replied by grinning and shook his head.

"Not for a second."

Unlike typical Level 0 personnel employed by the Foundation, who typically fill clerical, janitorial, maintenance, health care, and minor administrative positions within Foundation Sites, the rights and privileges of Level 0 personnel created through this protocol are much more restrictive. Those activated through this protocol:

* Have a basic understanding of what the Foundation is and does.
* Have knowledge as to their activating Personnel's position in the Foundation.

Additional disclosure beyond this level generally is neither necessary nor desired…

All sites within the Foundation had a resident Ethics Committee liaison. Site-64 was no exception, and so Sasha found herself in the office of Dr. Lily Campbell, a pale woman with thick glasses and short, curly, blonde hair.

"Well… this is certainly one way to tear down the Veil," Campbell chuckled as she looked at Sasha's FD90 paperwork. An Ethics Committee signature was all that was left before she and Gabe could enact their plan. "I take it you've read all the required materials?"

"Of course."

"Then you know once we start this, there is no turning back or stopping halfway. In the end, your daughter will be technically considered a Level 0 personnel and subject to all the restrictions thereof, or will be subject to amnestics," Campbell went on. "You're basically at the point of no return."

"I understand."

"Very well," Campbell signed the form, sliding it back with a smile. "Godspeed, Director. Please let me know when you plan to activate. After you are done me or another EC rep will need to do our spiel."

"Tomorrow," Sasha replied. "Around 6 o'clock. What, uh, what exactly is the EC's spiel here?"

"Nothing fun, I assure you," Campbell sighed. "We get to explain why the Veil exists in the first place and the consequences of breaking it. Nothing gets people more excited about a world of eldritch horrors and horrifying magic than brutal honesty, which reminds me…"

Dr. Campbell quickly typed something into her computer. A few moments later, the nearby printer shot out a form that she proceeded to sign.

"Requisition for standard issue **`Class-A amnestic spray`**," Campbell explained. "You'll need it in the event things go south, as I'm sure you know."

Sasha nodded and collected the form, looking it over before giving a sigh.

"Well, here goes nothing."

"Like I said before," Campbell smiled. "Godspeed, Director."

> Due to the sometimes-unpredictable nature of civilians upon disclosure of the Veil from a loved one, 'Reset' protocols have been established to allow for those deemed unsuitable for Level 0 clearance following disclosure, or those wishing to opt out on their own volition.
>
> Automatic activation of the Reset Protocols is to occur during any of the following situations:
>
> * Subject fails their mental health screening at the completion of activation.
> * Subject fails a renewal mental health screening, and a follow-up screening.
>
> Reset Protocols may also be used per subject request during activation, should they wish to opt out of the clearance. Activating personnel may not interfere with this process…

The following day came and lingered, the hours before the activation of FD90 creeping away at a glacial pace. Eventually, however, the evening came, and the Merlos sat down to dinner as they would any other evening that didn't require Sasha to remain at Site-64. It was halfway through the meal that a knock came at the door. Sasha and Gabe looked to one another, the former giving a confident nod. It was show time.

"I'll get it," Gabe said, standing up and moving out of the kitchen with a quickened pace.

"Are we expecting someone?" Jessie asked, watching her father

leave and raising an eyebrow.

"Several someones," Sasha replied with a grin.

"… who?"

"You'll just have to see."

Jessie looked curiously towards the front door. A series of four low voices could be heard in the entryway. A few moments later, Gabe returned. Behind him was someone Jessie had met before: a scruffy, lanky gentleman whose face was covered in dark stubble named **Daniel Navarro**, or Uncle Dan as Jessie had grown up calling him. He gave her a small smile as he took a seat beside her.

"And I thought I needed a drug problem before the intervention took place," Jessie joked as she looked over her parent's friend. "What, uh, what's going on?"

All eyes turned to Sasha.

"Well Jess," she began. "There is something your father and I are going to tell you."

Sasha then pulled out her Foundation identification card and placed it on the table. Gabe and Daniel all did the same, the familiar SCPF logo standing beneath the laminate like a brand.

"Turns out," Gabe picked up where Sasha left off, "we may not have told you the whole truth about what we do for a living these past 18 years."

Jessie looked at the various badges curiously, her brow furrowed as she looked at the various titles.

Special Agent, Level 3 Clearance
Head Accountant, Level 2 Clearance
Site Director, Level 4 Clearance

"All of us," Sasha continued, "me, your father, and Dan, all of us work for an organization designed to contain and study phenomena that exist outside the purview of modern scientific understanding, or

as we call them, anomalies. Think 'Cabin in the Woods,' but instead of using the monsters to commit ritualistic sacrifice of college students to a dark god, we contain them to keep people safe, and seek to understand them on a scientific level."

Jessie looked over her mother's badge for a while, taking in the words before finally tossing it down onto the surface.

"So, what, you guys are the X-files?" Jessie snickered. "Fox and Dana Merlo? I appreciate how elaborate this joke is, but I don't get what the punchline could be."

Daniel stifled a laugh at this comment. Gabe and Sasha both sighed.

"This isn't a joke, Jess," Daniel butted in. "As hard as it is to believe, this shit is as real as it gets."

"Alright, let's say you are telling the truth," Jessie rolled her eyes. "Why tell me? Why now?"

"Because you're 18, and we're finally allowed to," Gabe sighed.

"With your parents in the position that they are, eventually this all would catch up to you," Sasha added. "Believe it or not, I'm actually a bit of a big wig for our organization, as my daughter that makes you a person of interest. If anything happened to us, we'd want you to know the reality of things. What kind of world we actually live in, so that you'd be ready. People living on military bases know that their family is part of the military. Same concept."

Jessie shrugged.

"I don't know what to tell you guys. Sorry. I don't believe you. The joke isn't funny."

"We brought proof," Gabe said. "You want to see that?"

"I.. sure…" Jessie sighed. "Show me what you got."

Gabe proceeded to pull a penny, showing both sides to Jessie then sliding it to her.

"Go ahead and flip that, I don't know… ten times?" he instructed.

Jessie complied. Her expression switching from annoyed to baffled as the coin landed heads up each and every time.

"Always lands on heads," Gabe commented. "Forever and ever."

"So, you have a trick coin…" Jessie shook her head. "That's not exactly a lot of proof."

Sasha responded by handing Jessie a pocket watch.

"Try this one on for size," she said with a smile. "Notice its six minutes behind. Go ahead and try and adjust it."

Once again, Jessie did what she was told, winding the watch, only to find it continue ticking six minutes behind. Sasha gestured for her to place it down on the table.

"Now we wait…"

Sure enough, six minutes later, the clock adjusted itself on its own volition. Jessie looked at the watch in shock.

"It’s stuck six minutes in the past," Sasha explained. "Neat, right?"

Jessie shook her head.

"Or its just broken…"

Before Jessie could finish, Daniel pulled out a small razor blade from his jacket pocket and ran it along the palm of his right hand, a small blue flame appearing as he looked at her with a sly smile. He proceeded to twirl the magic fire between his fingers before allowing it to dissipate with a dull crackle. Jessie's mouth hung open in amazement.

"I've wanted to do that for a long time," Daniel explained as he quickly placed a bandage on the cut on his palm, "since you were a little kid actually, but 'You can't show civilians magic, Navarro,' and 'We don't want to amnestitize our five-year-old daughter, Dan.' But hey, here we are now."

"H-how…" Jessie looked from Daniel to the watch, to the coin, to her mother and father, then started the circle over again.

"Daniel is what we call a thaumatologist," Sasha explained. "Or in technical terms, a wizard."

"Do you believe us now?" Gabe asked.

Jessie fell silent, then nodded. Her face became pale as an invisible weight of realization sunk down upon her. She looked as though she was going to be sick.

"Wh… where does all this leave me then… I'm… I'm not a…"

"You're now a special type of what we call 'Level 0 personnel'," Sasha answered her stuttering daughter. "Basically, you know the way things are but are still technically a civilian. There are a couple of guidelines you'll be taught, but other than that not a whole lot will change."

"Not a whole lot will *change?!*" Jessie snapped. "You just showed me my whole life to this point's been a lie, my understanding of the world is wrong, and *nothing will change?* And what the hell are these guidelines you talked about?"

"Those are for Dr. Campbell to tell you." Sasha grabbed her daughter's hand only to watch as she yanked it away.

"Who the hell is Dr. Campbell?" Jessie's voice continued to rise, "Do you have another friend lurking around here who's going to make fire shoot out of their hands, mom?"

"Ahem…"

Jessie spun around to see Dr. Campbell standing in the kitchen entryway. The Ethics Committee liaison gave an amused smile and a small wave of her hand.

"I'm afraid I'm not quite as gifted as Agent Navarro on that front," she said. "Evening everyone."

She then extended a handshake.

"Dr. Lily Campbell, Jessie, it’s nice to meet you. I'm a special kind of representative for the organization we are all a part of. Now that you've been briefed on the way of the world, as it were, I need to talk to you about some ground rules. Will you please come with me? We can speak privately in your room. I can answer any and all of your questions."

Jessie cautiously accepted the handshake and nodded. The two then departed for Jessie's room, leaving Sasha, Gabe, and Daniel alone in the aftermath of their little show.

"I thought that went rather well," Daniel commented with a small chuckle. "Though you guys need to get some better props. A statistically locked coin and a temporally displaced watch are a bit lame."

"It went well? How so?" Gabe asked, raising an eyebrow. "She looked like she was going to vomit."

"Yeah, but she didn't flip the table, or throw a spoon at Sasha's head, or punch you in the throat. My point is it could have been a lot worse."

"It could have been a hell of a lot better too though…" Sasha sighed.

"Certainly," Gabe agreed. "But we have to deal with these things as they come. Dan's right. Could have been a lot worse, and hey, at least there was some healthy skepticism."

The room fell silent for several moments before Sasha sighed again.

"Do you guys want to open a bottle of wine or something?"

> Individuals activated through this protocol are eligible for employment within the Foundation, provided they meet the requirements for the position of interest. Additional conflict of interest training is to be provided in such cases as deemed suitable by Site Command…

Sasha woke with a start at the sound of fumbling keys, her body

snapping up while her hand reached for a sidearm she no longer carried. Standing by the doorway, frozen mid-motion, was Jessie, a stuffed pack on her shoulder.

"So, this is your solution then?" Sasha sighed as she stood up and approached her daughter. "Run away? You were listening to Dr. Campbell during her orientation, right? Someone would come looking for you. *I'd* come looking for you."

"So what?" Jessie hissed in return. "Your secret's finally out and now you are going to threaten me? I'm not afraid of you, mom."

"And I don't want you to be," Sasha said, slowly shaking her head. "But there are things out there to be afraid of. Things out there I'm afraid of. The whole point of all this was so you'd know about them."

"So I could live my life in fear?" Jessie returned in a harsh whisper. "Did you ever stop to think that maybe I was happy with things the way they were? That I didn't want that kind of burden, or to get tangled in your covert web? You and Dad said you wanted me to know about things so that if something happened to you two I'd know why… but Christ that's a pretty selfish reason don't you think?"

"We told you so that you could go on without living in ignorance and face the fear," Sasha snapped back. "We mulled this moment over since the day you were born, and I hate to break it to you, sweetie, but you've been tangled up in our web about that long as well. My position paints a pretty big bulls-eye on your head, and I don't know about you, but I'd personally like to know that such a target was there so I could take actions to ensure no one saw it!"

The two women looked at each other in silent anger for several moments before Sasha shook her head again and returned to the couch.

"Where the hell were you even going to go?" she asked.

"Desmond's outside," Jessie answered. "He was going to drive me to Leanne's."

"Go on then."

"What?" Jessie did a double take.

"I said you can go," Sasha explained. "I'm not going to force you to face this if you don't want to. You're 18. You can make the decision yourself."

Jessie looked at her mom, then to the door.

"What would happen if I did leave?"

"You're scheduled for a mental health screening in the near future, as Dr. Campbell said. If you miss that, you'd officially be considered AWOL and would be tracked down by an operative who would treat you with a special compound that would make you forget the last two weeks. Same for anyone you were staying with. After that, well, everything goes back to normal."

Sasha then held up the small can of amnestic spray.

"If turning back the clock really is what you want, though, I can save us both a lot of time and grief. I have some of that compound here."

Jessie looked at the can with curiosity, then turned away and began to open the front door.

"Just…" Jessie sighed. "Why didn't you tell me sooner. Why didn't you trust me…"

"18's the age minimum," Sasha said sadly. "I have wanted to tell you for a long time. We both have."

"That's fucking bullshit!" Jessie replied. "I've been 18 for 6 months now! You two sure were in a hurry!"

"Fine!" Sasha snapped back. "You want to know what happened? I went to one of my colleague's funerals two weeks ago. There I watched as his daughter didn't show up because she had grown to hate him. Saw him as a man who was more interested in his work than his family, even though the reality of the situation is that he was the one who had my job before me! Never told his family what he did, and one of his kids grew to resent him for it, and… I couldn't stand the thought of that being me and you… You want your mom to

admit she's a selfish woman? Alright, Jessie. Here you are. People don't want their families caught up in this world, Jessie, not unless they absolutely need that support. It's one of the most selfish things you can do."

Jessie closed her eyes, her hand still on the door handle as she froze for several moments.

"I'll see you and dad real soon," she said, and exited into the night.

Sasha watched the door close, and let out a sigh, placing her head in her hands. It was then she felt a familiar arm draped over her shoulder.

"Should we go after her?" Gabe asked. "Leanne's house is not that far."

Sasha shook her head.

"Give her time…" Sasha mumbled. "We fucked up, Gabe. We really fucked up. *I* really fucked up."

"What family involved with the Foundation doesn't?" Gabe replied, gently squeezing her shoulder.

Conclusion: There is simply no escaping that Foundation personnel will form families, and potentially have children. The very nature of these relationships would typically force the strain of constant deception onto numerous Foundation Personnel, resulting in all the associated negative health effects. As the above protocol denotes, however, there is a better way.

Those living on military bases around the world know their loved ones are serving in the military. Families of FBI, CIA, and other intelligence services typically know the type of security their loved ones are required to keep. The Foundation need not be different in this sense and stands to save an approximated 1.8 million USD in Class A amnestics, and 0.6 million in Class B amnestics

annually following widespread implementation of this protocol.

There is a saying popular among some of the old guard. "We died in the dark, so you may live in the light." At a certain level, for Foundation personnel this is true. However, we do not necessarily need to enter the dark without support…

When Sasha Merlo awoke the next morning, she was still on the couch, the early morning rays hitting her through the blinds with what felt like a violent intensity. Rubbing the sleep from her eyes, she proceeded to shuffle into the kitchen, where the sounds and smells of a coffee machine awaited her.

"I don't know about you," Sasha said to the lump sitting at the kitchen table in her peripheral vision, "but I barely slept. Today is going to be hell at work."

Sasha finished pouring and preparing her cup of coffee, taking a sip and turning to the figure. When she saw it was an equally sleep-deprived Jessie, and not Gabe, she nearly dropped her mug.

"You always make a pot in the morning before work…" Jessie said softly. "I figured you'd like it if someone else made it for you for a change."

Sasha immediately placed the mug down, and crossed the room, wrapping her daughter in a tight hug.

"I'm sorry…" Jessie said. "That was just… too much to take in… and I was scared…"

Sasha didn't reply. She maintained the tight grip on her daughter, as tears began to roll down her cheek. As she took a deep breath, she heard Jessie make one more comment.

"Does this mean I get one of those neat ID badges too?"

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of Line »

Family Planning

To marry, to rear his daughters, these things were on the surface good. But to have had the long years in his power, to have controlled their lives, to have warped their natures even, these might be evil things. Perhaps, beguiled by custom and order, one's sense of evil went numb.
-Kawabata Yasunari.

Great King Yama, I apologize for eluding your guardians for so long. Even as a powerless shade I could not leave the world of the living until I was certain that my children would be safe. I will not plead for my soul but I respectfully present my statement for your court of justice.

I was born in the savage Eastern Isles, one of the ten demon daughters of the ogress Kishimojin. In my early days, I was known as Muensoku, *the Insatiable*. Mother relied on my sisters and me to capture young children to feed her countless sons. It was a simple and pleasant life until Mother went crazy with religion. A holy man decided to teach her empathy by hiding her smallest child until she went half mad searching for him. Her anguish turned to remorse when she finally understood the pain she had caused to other parents.

Unlike my sisters, I was not impressed with her new choice of life style. There would have been no problem to start with if my empty-headed mother had not made so many children. I obeyed her command not to feed on little mortals, but that was as much as I could take. I broke ties with my family and survived on my own. I kept my heritage secret from people until the name Muensoku was all but forgotten, except in legends and nightmares.

I adapted to the civilization of mortals and gradually tamed myself. For many generations I lived under various identities. I outlived a considerable number of dedicated and generous lovers, amassing wealth, knowledge and titles. People loved me and people despised

me: I was no longer an outcast. Yet I still felt alone and I came to desire a family of my own. Like many women, I swore that I would do better than my own mother.

I wanted ALL the best for my future children. I traveled to the mainland where I finally became Emperor Weng's concubine; one talented and ruthless enough to achieve rapidly the rank of Guifei. There are those who accused me of bewitching the Emperor. It is amusing that mortals only suspected my dark powers based on my perfectly natural talents. In the words of the Empress, I was nothing more than a foreign mule. But I had powers that this desiccated scarecrow did not possess: true love to enslave the Emperor's soul and a womb where his efforts would not be wasted. The Emperor promised secretly that he would feed me the heart of the Empress and make me his first wife after I gave him an heir.

I bore two sons; two babies of exceptional vitality, each in their own way. *Ku* was a toddler of terrible temper. Glaring in silence at all his surrounding or bawling at the slightest provocation. His cries were never mistaken for sadness or pain. Rage was the only emotion he knew. Sweet milk couldn't satisfy his hunger and, after teething, he would often bite me hard enough to draw blood. A boy after my own heart… *Du* was calm, gentle and he had a larger repertoire. His cries, coos and mewls could at turn instill joy and sorrow in a wide array of nuances. Servants and warriors alike would gather and fawn over him, commenting and debating the meaning of every little gurgle. Even before he could talk, his voice had the power to warp people's heart.

I thought I had a secure grasp on the Emperor's heart, but it was more fragile than I expected. It crumbled between my fingers like sandy clay. The Imperial Council resented the power I had over the Emperor and they poured poisoned words into his ear. Mistrust tarnished our love. I had fulfilled my part of our bargain, yet his Highness could not muster the courage to fulfill his own promise. Meanwhile, the Empress was plotting to have my babies assassinated. She was crafty and shrewd. Faced with a normal concubine, she could have easily removed the two heirs without anyone suspecting anything. I am not so easily defeated, but I would not have been able to protect my children until they could survive on

their own. Without the Emperor's support, doing anything against her would have severe repercussions.

Helpless and desperate mothers pray to Kishimojin, my compassionate Mother. They make offerings for fertility, safe delivery and beg her to safeguard their children. Despicable, cowardly women, unwilling to take responsibility for the well-being of their own progeny. My children were born of my own blood and pain and it was my own blood and pain that would keep them safe.

For a moment, I envisioned seizing control for myself by open warfare. After years in the Imperial court, I realized the Empire was a rotten fruit that would readily crack and split. I had enough influence and power to lead a successful rebellion… and my children would waste their lives rebuilding a broken empire. I had been so focused on my recent path that I had lost track of my goal. Better leave the rotting fruit intact; a safe and nutritious shelter where my progeny could thrive in secret.

One night, when the palace was sleeping, I ordered my ladies-in-waiting to hang themselves from the rafters of my apartment. I had chosen my two most loyal retainers, honorable and wise warriors from my homeland. They disposed quietly of the other guards and servants in my pavilion. One flayed me alive with his sword, while the other played tunes from my childhood on a flute, to cover my muffled screams and to soothe my departing spirit. Sealed with my dying curse, my love and torment was bound to that sword and to my flayed skin. I had instructed each of my retainers to smuggle one of my children out of the Forbidden City and to take them to opposite sides of the Empire. As much as it pained me, my boys had to remain ignorant of their origin and of each other’s existence. My servants nurtured their potential until such day as they could make their own destiny.

Ku received the simple blade that killed me and his anger found a purpose. He traveled the Empire, walking in darkness: an assassin and a mercenary. His sword sustained dozens of rebellions of dissident warlords. Nobles or villains it mattered not; it always ended in disaster for all. His blade turned a blood-red so deep it appears completely black, except when the sun shines on it in just the right way. But it hasn't seen sunlight in a long time. Ku has transcended

his humanity. He doesn’t need mundane reasons anymore to destroy small lives. Children frighten each other with his shadow. "Tonight, He will come for you in the dark and skin you alive". In their minds, his blade shines like an invisible sunray, burning black in the night.

Du received a prayer mat woven from strips of my tanned hide, and his wisdom found a purpose. He traveled the Empire, walking in sunshine. He patronized numerous temples and colleges, both as a student and a teacher. He can appreciate the beauty in everything he sees and he leaves his ugly mark on anything he touches. His voice is a powerful current that erode reality into fantastic shapes, like the scholar stones you see in gardens. Du has transcended his humanity. His wisdom doesn’t need sanity anymore. Students who follow him create elegant artifacts of diseased magic. Pregnant women who listen to his words bear monstrosities.

I had imagined that my sons would rule in harmony under my loving care. And so they do. Which one is the mightiest, the sword or the word? When the sword gives strength to the word and when the word gives purpose to the sword, each is invincible. The enchantment I weaved into my son’s heirlooms makes it so. Every torment inflicted by Ku's blade bolsters the power of Du's words. Every tear of joy or sorrow drawn by Du's miracles sharpens the edge of Ku's blade. So long as they follow their heart, they keep each other safe.

My death remained a mystery. Like the dreaded Muensoku of so long ago, the alluring Guifei is all but forgotten. There remains only the ancient statue in the Imperial Garden, a fossil of my legendary beauty. Of the two imperial heirs, nothing is remembered. To let them live according to their nature was my final gift to my sons.

You can punish me as you see fit. My boys are safe and my mother's heart is at peace.

Family Ties

Elisa sighed contentedly as she sat in the moonlight, her head cradled in Tom's lap. He was just a lowly worker for the circus and she was a member of Fuller's collection of freaks, but while there had certainly been a few raised eyebrows, the rest of the circus folk did not seem to have any particular opinion on their relationship.

"It's so beautiful out here at night," her beau said. He caressed her cheek.

"Tom, why are you with me?" she asked.

"Because I love you, Elisa." He sounded sincerely baffled by her question.

"But why? Look at me, there is very little for you to love."

"There's more than enough to love," he said and picked up the disembodied head in his lap. He slowly turned it towards him, and looked her in the eye for a moment before kissing her.

Elisa closed her eyes and savored the warmth of his lips on hers. After breaking the kiss, Tom leant back and cleared his throat.

"Elisa, can I talk to you about something?"

"Sure. What's on your mind, handsome?"

"Don't you ever grow tired of life in the circus?"

"Tired? How would I get tired? I'm just a head." Elisa said giggling.

"I'm being serious," Tom said.

"Fine, you're being serious. No, I don't get tired of the circus life. Why?"

"Because we can never settle down. Every time I think to myself 'hey, I like this town', off we go to the next place and the next show."

"And?"

"And I don't like that at all, Elisa. I'd like to settle down with you somewhere," Tom said, aware that his love didn't seem as enthusiastic as he'd hoped.

Elisa sighed.

"I really don't know what to say. I didn't take you for a hopeless romantic. Or an idiot, for that matter."

"ELISA!" Tom exclaimed, "Why would you say that?" He put her down in the grass.

"Seriously Tom. You might not have noticed this, but I am just a head. How exactly did you figure us settling down?"

Tom looked angry.

"Well, I'm sorry for believing that if people just got to know you, they'd accept you and we could live together in-"

She finished his sentence for him: "-some nice little cottage somewhere in the country. Picket fence? Couple of kids? I'M A HEAD, TOM."

"I had noticed that, yes," Tom muttered.

Elise relented a bit. "Look, honey, I get it. You like me, I very much like you, but there's a reason I'm with the circus," she said. "Pick me up, please."

Tom huffed, but he did so anyway. They looked into each other's eyes.

"What do you want from me?" he asked, "What do you want from this relationship."

Elisa sighed. "I want to be with you, Tom. But I want to be with you

here, with the circus."

"And what if I don't want to live this life anymore, Elisa? What if I'm tired of not having a real home."

"But you do have a real home. It's just not fixed to the ground like some whitewashed coffin with four walls," Elisa exclaimed in frustration, "Don't you get that? There's nothing out there for you that you don't already have here."

"Well, I don't agree. And you know what? I think you'll agree with me once we're safely away."

"What do you mean, 'once we're safely away'?" Elisa said and raised an eyebrow.

"I mean that I'm done talking about this. We're leaving tonight. I've got my bags packed, and I'm sure I can get some of your stuff too before Manny notices."

Elisa closed her eyes and gritted her teeth.

"Tom, did you ever ask *me* how I feel about my life at the circus?"

"No, but…" Tom began, before she interrupted him.

"No, you didn't. The Circus is my home. You may believe my life to be horrible, but I think I'm the only one who gets to judge that. Besides, Manny would never let me leave."

"I can take him."

"No you can't, Tom. And besides, you're not listening. I don't want to go. Not with you, not with anyone. The circus is my family."

Tom huffed. "Some family; they put you on a shelf in some dusty wooden wagon every night."

She'd really hoped he was different, that he'd be the one to *get* it.

"There is more of me, Tom."

"I know you're more than the girl without a body," he replied.

"No Tom, I said more *of* me, not more *to* me. I do have a body," she said.

"Wait, what? You do? Where is it? It's not in your wagon."

"Yes, I do, Tom. I just don't feel the need to tell everybody and their dog about it. It invites…shenanigans. And no, it isn't in my wagon. Manny holds it for me. It's better that way."

Tom put her down in the soft grass underneath the tree.

"HOW? How is that better? He's holding it hostage, Elisa! He's holding you hostage!" he exclaimed and started pacing.

"No, he's not, Tom. My body's not important; I'm the attraction, not it. By keeping it for me, Manny makes sure nothing happens to it."

"Well, I'm going to find Manny and get your body back. And then we're going to…"

"You'll do nothing of the sort, Tom Brenneman, if only because I was very serious when I said you couldn't take Manny, and I love you enough to want to you to stay in one piece."

The sound of breaking branches cut the conversation short.

"You know, Tom, I did notice," the Man With The Upside-Down Face said as he stepped into the moonlight. Behind him stood the Circus' clowns. The juxtaposition of their unsmiling faces and their cheery facepaint was unsettling.

"Two things. One, Tom, you should really choose a better hiding place when you take Elisa here out on a date. And two, you really shouldn't confide in your fellow freaks about your plans to abscond with one of my star attractions," Manny said before turning to the head in Tom's hands. "Hello Elisa."

She hesitated, unsure how this would play out.

"Hi Manny. Tom's just being silly. You weren't really planning to take

me and run, right Tom?" she said, a note of desperation in her voice.

Tom'd frozen when Manny showed up, but he snapped out of it now.

"We weren't running, no," he said, somewhat unsure of how to react.

The Man with the Upside-Down Face smiled. "Ah, but you were, Tom. I appreciate your attempt at backpedaling though - it's definitely an A for effort, but I'm afraid the evidence's stacked against you."

With an almost imperceptible nod from Manny, the clowns swarmed forward, pinning Tom to the ground. He dropped Elisa as he went down and she cried out in pain when she hit the earth. Manny stepped forward to pick her up. "Don't worry, Elisa. He wasn't going to get far anyway."

Elisa shuddered. She'd meant it when she'd said the circus was family, but that didn't mean she always liked the way it operated.

"We don't take kindly to abduction, Tom," Manny said.

"Abduction!?" Tom said as he struggled, "Admit it, you can't stand the idea that she wants to be with me. You want her for yourself."

Manny cocked his head.

"I really didn't take you for an idiot, Tom. It's not about Elisa, it's about the Circus. What happens when you remove a brick from a building, Tom? Do you know?" he asked, but didn't wait for an answer, "It gets weaker, Tom. The Circus is that building, MY building, and Elisa is that brick-no offense, Elisa."

Elisa didn't answer.

"LET ME GO, YOU DAMN CHUCKLEHEADS!" Tom yelled at the top of his lungs, but the clowns didn't react. Instead they smiled, exposing a set of perfect, shiny white teeth. Somehow that was far more disturbing than the scraggly collection of pointy dentures he'd expected. One of them seemed to be salivating.

The Man with the Upside-Down Face approached Tom's prone form and knelt beside him.

"Tom, you're a good lad; you love Elisa, I can see that. But you chose to turn your back to the Circus when you made plans to run off with her. I can't let that slide. If I did, where would that leave our little family?"

Tom didn't answer, he just struggled furiously against the vice-like grips of the clowns. The strange odor of talcum powder, cotton candy and rotting moss they carried with them almost made him gag.

"Come on, guys. Let me go, the fun's over."

The clowns stared at him with their lifeless eyes. He could see the moon reflected in them.

"Manny! Hey, look, I get the point, okay? Nobody leaves the circus. I get it! MANNY!"

As the Man with the Upside-Down face turned his back to Tom, he raised his hand in salute and said: "Oh, they do, Tom. They just don't go anywhere. Adios!"

"What'll happen to him, Manny?" Elisa asked as they made their way back to the clearing where the circus had pitched its tent.

"The clowns are just going to have a little talk with him-look, I realize all this may seem a bit drastic, Elisa, but we're family," Manny said, smiling that strange upside-down smile of his, "And family stays together."

Behind them a tortured scream rang out and Elisa's eyes filled with tears.

Farming And Coffee And The End Of The World

Once, there was a rundown diner where two elderly men were sitting, waiting for a third to show.

It was dark out and the only light that could be seen outside was that single, dimly-flickering lamp post that illumined the parking lot. Every few minutes it would stop producing light, only to feebly wink on again and continue its dying existence. Under its watchful glow of gold sat two trucks, both of days long before nukes had burned away half of Canada; battered and broken were they, running on scraps of materials that long should have rusted away. Vehicles made these days belonged to the military, destined to be broken or smashed or incinerated or have its existence negated or some horrible event.

“I'm sorry to hear about Miranda, Hank. She'll be missed.” The older man at the table, Peter, spoke with a forced warmth in his voice which came from seeing scores of people broken or smashed or incinerated or have their existence negated. He'd been in the wrong place at the wrong time too many times.

The slightly younger of the two, Hank, shook his head slowly, looking up from his cup of cooling coffee. “It was just before her time- you know? She didn't deserve this. Especially not the way that it happened, you know?”

Peter nodded reluctantly and sipped from his own mug.

“I should have told her to get rid of that peacock.” Hank mumbled into his cup and he rubbed his eyes with leathery palms as tears sprang anew from already depleted reservoirs. “I should have told her to get rid of that fuckin' bird.”

“What did you do- you know- when you lost Elaine?” Whimpered the other man and Peter thought back on his wife.

“I got mad, Hank. Really mad. I put six rounds in that farmhand and it didn't solve anything.” Peter tapped the revolver holstered at his side. These days, it was unsafe to go anywhere without a weapon.

“He just got up and laughed at me with the same laugh that he used to captivate Elaine. I couldn't do anything about it. I called the police and later some guys in suits took him away. They said they were sorry and they were gonna put him in an incinerator. I couldn't do anything at all.”

Outside, another truck pulled into the lot. Its bright headlights reflected off of the dull chrome finish on the bar and the dusty tubes where neon lights used to run. Couldn't waste power anymore, the pretty little waitress had explained. Even out here, where power plants were still running.

That pretty little waitress saw the truck pull in and approached the table with another mug of the steaming black shit that they called coffee. “Is that your third?”

“Yeah.” Peter gave her a nod and she set down the coffee.

Hank looked out the window as the waitress unlocked the door.

“Some goverment suits came for the bird too.” He sniffed, “They had a guy with them, some egghead in a labcoat running tests on Miranda. He told me that there was a shortage, but he could give me drugs that could make me forget her.”

Peter sipped his coffee.

Hank wiped a batch of fresh tears from his eyes and rubbed at his cheeks with a napkin, “I wish I had taken him up on it.”

Peter hadn't gotten that option.

The waitress at the door let their new companion in and locked it behind him.

Michael was a younger man than both Hank or Peter, come out to the family farm to help his ailing father in a world that had no mercy for the elderly. His father had grown up between both of them, “Hey

guys.” He said as he sat beside Peter.

“Why'd you need us, Mike?” Asked Peter, holding up his mug for a refill.

“I think I'm in trouble.” Michael wasted no time, “There's something happening at my farm and I wondered if you guys had ever seen anything like it.”

Michael caught his breath while pulling a very old iPhone from his jacket pocket. He touched the screen and began searching through the files. Those days, even outdated tech like that was hard to come by.

“By the way, I'm sorry to hear about-” Michael looked up at Hank, but Peter gently touched his arm and covertly shook his head. Michael cut off and went back to his task.

Hank pursed his lips and sipped weakly from his coffee. With a cracked voice, he sighed. “It's a fucked up world, Mike. You had a good idea coming to us.” He glanced out the window with rheumy eyes, “How's your dad?”

“He's okay. He's pretty sick these days- some kind of flu. My sister doesn't let him off the farm much anymore.”

Michael found the file and set the device on the table for all three to see. “My sister's kid Eddy recently went over to Nepal or Vietnam or something for some U.N. Mission. Real big secret- won't talk about beyond a few things. He came back and mentioned that he had taken up this-”
“Get to it.” Hank muttered and Michael hesitated.

“Well, he'd been practicing martial arts in the barn and he said that the cows were acting funny. Look.” He pressed play on the device and sat back to watch his companion's eyes widen.
The sloppy video showed a man in his twenties performing a kata and beyond him, five cows were stumbling about upon two legs. As the man moved, so did they. He let out a punch and shifted his arm upwards and the cows mirrored his movement, attempting to perform it quickly enough before their balance failed them. There

were many other cows within the barn and all watched, enraptured as Eddy moved.

“What the hell?” Peter mumbled.

“That's pretty fucking weird.” Hank agreed quietly.

“We thought the same, so I asked him not to practice in the barn anymore.”

Michael switched the file and hit Play on another. The same man advanced in a fighting stance in a courtyard of sorts, closed in by a large stone house and a small shed.

“Look.” Michael pointed to a tabby cat on the side of the screen, “The cat's been following Eddy around ever since he started doing this about two months ago.” Michael switched the file and played another while talking. “-Yesterday, the cat was doing this.”

The video displayed the same courtyard, but the cat was the only occupant. Without Eddy, the cat had preceded to enact the form and same movements.”

“That cat doesn't look-” Began Peter before Hank cut him off. “The damn thing looks like a fuckin' human.”

It was so. The cat's head had been enlarged and its ears had moved more towards the side of its face. Its torso was much thicker than it should have been and the movement demonstrated joints that cats should not have. Its tail had been shortened to a mere nub at the base of its back and its paws had elongated toes that moved like fingers. All in all, the cat stood more than a meter tall.

“I heard it talking yesterday.” Michael muttered and let the video play on repeat. “I shot 'im last night.”

Hank stopped the video. “Anything else?”

“The cows are doing it now. A lot more sloppy than the cat, but they're getting better. They can stand on two legs without support. The other ones that weren't doing anything the first time are doing it too.”

There was a moment in silence in which Michael looked as if he was going to speak, but didn't.
“Are you going to put the cows down?”

“We won't be able to get by without them. Food crops don't take in the soil anymore.”

"Do you still have a working phone?" Hank asked. "One of the normal ones?"

"Yeah." Michael gave a curt nod. "By the grace of God."

“Call the police. Chances are slim that they will but they might be able to help.” Peter advised and Michael sat back silently.

“It's this whole area,” Hank muttered sadly, “I should just move up into the city. Sell my farm and buy a house in the suburbs.”

Peter grunted. “Not a bad idea.”

“They're not letting anyone in anymore.” Michael said, mind elsewhere. “I went up there to look for another generator and these guys in black suits and gas masks run up to my truck with assault rifles and demand that I get out. They searched me and questioned me for twenty minutes before demanding that I leave.”

“What happened up there?” Peter asked quietly.

“Same thing that's happening everywhere else. Everything is going to Hell in a handbasket. My nephew says that cities in Nepal- or wherever- was all locked down by someone else and the U.N. was trying to trying to drive them out. The other guys ended up overrun by some shit and our guys bombed the place into oblivion.”

The waitress finally approached with a coffeepot after seeing Peter's empty mug, “Sorry guys. The coffeemaker's been straining it too thin lately.” She took their cups and filled them to the brim. Not making conversation, she then retreated behind the bar and set the pot on the chrome counter.

"Fuckin' media blackout." Hank muttered apathetically. "I don't hear about anything that happens outside the county anymore.

Peter sipped the hot fluid and watched the lightbulb dimly flickering. “I saw tanks up at the Meyer's farm last Wednesday. Just sitting there. You guys remember Danielle?”

“Which one is that? They have way too many kids.” Hank remarked.

“She's the little redhead that my grandson, Perry, was running around with. He brought her up to your place to help with the harvest two years ago.” Hank began to wear a grin for the first time that day as he remembered the young couple.

"Yeah, I remember her. She was a frisky little thing."

Peter mirrored Hank's grin, albeit more strongly. "She's been running messages for her family- says that she's got quite a few for my family in particular. Anything so that she can-"

“What about her?” Michael asked, coming out of his cocoon.

“Uh- she told me that her great grandma had gotten tired of all the soldiers passing through her land and so she told them to leave. Danielle said that the soldiers just vanished. Right out of thin air.”

“Even our own people are getting weird.” Hank groaned.

Michael leaned forward to the table and spoke in a low tone. “One of the guys up at the city asked me about that. They wanted to know if she'd done shit like that before. They were saying that-”

Peter finished his mug of coffee and looked up and around, trying to find the waitress. His keen eye noted the full coffeepot on the counter.

The waitress nearby saw him looking up and smiled, gesturing at the pot.

He returned the smile and shook his head gently. Reaching for his wallet, he thumbed out a ten dollar bill and placed it on the table. Michael stared up at him oddly, “You leaving?”

“We all are,” said Peter. Both Hank and Michael stood without question. Both knew that a man like Peter was not to be taken lightly

when he acted. As he shepherded them towards the double glass doors, the waitress took the hint and ran forward to unlock it before them. “Thanks for coming!” She said with a smile.

“Thanks for having us.” Peter replied as they stepped outside into the brisk air. What should have been a warm summer evening was instead a frigid evening that had already caused small amounts of ice to freeze upon truck windshields. Dark skies above were a result of the bombs dropping on Canada and a million other things together amalgamating into a freezing world.
Their breath turned to mist as they walked to the group of vehicles.

“Why'd you rush us out of there?” Michael asked, staring through the large clear window at the well-lit interior. The waitress was removing their steaming mugs from the table and placing them in a bin that she had carried from the kitchen.

“They had a full pot of coffee on the counter.” Peter opened the door to his truck and sat inside. He fumbled for his keys, ever so often looking up at the window where the waitress was sliding the bin through a narrow window into the kitchen.

“So?” Hank demanded, “I was having a good time. Why'd you-”

“It was half-empty when she filled our cups. She didn't put it back in the coffeemaker.”

As he started the vehicle, he noted the sudden silence overtake his two companions; contesting his decision was no longer favorable.

Hank reached for a pack of cigarettes in his pocket and went for his truck, “Well, that's just fuckin' great.”

Michael shook his head and got into his own vehicle. The look on his face said that he was either going to call the military or put the cows down himself.

Peter just thought of the whiskey in the cupboard and telling his grandson to watch the farm that night.

Each of the three went their own way in silence and that day were neither broken nor smashed nor incinerated nor had their existence

negated.

In those days, this was as enviable as ends could get.

Faster-Than-Light Prelude

The pale lights reflecting off of Neptune's surface basked the corridors of Orbital Area-11 in an alien hue. N.J. Watts flung herself through the glow as she traversed the corrugated metal passageway, one of many running through and alongside the station. In her zero-g drift she turned her head to face the bullet/micrometeorite/thaumaturgy-proof panes running down it, one of few accommodations provided by the site designers for the claustrophobic Extrasolar Activities Division members.

She spotted a silver spec. Autonomous Exploration Satellite Ehlers-001 was now a glimmer in the orbital void of Neptune, nearly blending in with backdrop of the planet's surface. Unless she had mistaken a stray asteroid for the probe.

"All personnel in Project Aster Jumper report to Command Center 2. I repeat, all personnel in Project Aster Jumper report to Command Center 2."

Already on it.

N.J. grabbed a handlebar and abruptly slowed before entering an elevator at the passage end. She clicked safety straps around her Foundation-issued orbital coverall and tapped a button to descend. The doors clunked shut, electrical motors whirred, metal rattled. The elevator began moving away from the station's axis to the bottom of its second spinning habitation ring. Gravity crept in. Every inch the elevator lowered she felt false gravity, generated by the spinning ring's centrifugal force, press down like lead bricks, the straps pushing into her body more and more.

After a minute the elevator lurched to a halt. She hastily threw the straps off and bounded from the opened entrance, speedwalking down a steel hallway that looped around the ring, ever-curving upwards. White-uniformed technicians rushed past her, frantically asking about potential X-ray receptor errors on Ehlers-001. An eight-

limbed cleaning bot scooted past. She flashed her keycard in front of a scanner and Command Center 2's door shot open.

"…fusion reactor checks are so far looking good, oh, and a good California morning to you, Enjay." Hyeon 3Mun looked up from his holographic display monitor and waved a cybernetic hand.

"You still remember what places on Earth are having their mornings?"

"No, but the internet sure does."

Rows of computer terminals filled Command Center 2, buzzing with neon glows and the activity of a dozen researchers perched over feeds of diagnostic data. One of the four screens on the front wall showed a view of Ehlers-001. The probe's main chassis was a cylinder with arrays of sensors jutting out all over, function over form, with the toroid of a fusion reactor connected to its relative underside. Attached to the far end was a carbon nanotube-reinforced metal octahedron that was large enough to make the main chassis seem like a parasite. The Bifrost Superluminal Engine.

"Stunning, isn't it?"

She averted her eyes, busy inspecting the glimmering square lattices of the nanotubes, and turned to Hyeon. "No views quite like this one," she said, still more focused on the screen. The probe drifted over the Neptunian backdrop — a vessel at sea.

"So much better than anything at the Luna-Korea shipyards. Is it crazy knowing your engine's actually out there?"

"Would be if I still remembered designing it." The cocktail of amnestics and memetic blockers jabbed into her brain. The Foundation didn't trust anyone on the Bifrost design team with knowing what they had actually built, with exceptions for people who must've been promoted that she had also forgotten. A few more jabs and she figured it was best not try the patience of her **nanotech implants** by thinking about it.

The last of Project Aster Jumper's researchers spilled in through the

door. N.J. snapped back to reality. Launch would happen any moment now.

She looked at Hyeon and found him distracted with floating wireframe visuals of the probe's quantum computer circuitry, likely tuned out of the conversation he'd tried starting. Not bothering to get his attention, N.J. slid over to her desk. Another flick of the keycard and it awoke from its slumber. The monitor lit up to extend luminescent text boxes into the air, relaying information sent by the probe's **AIAD unit** on the status of the Bifrost Engine.

All systems nominal.

She pressed a button to send the GO signal. A green light flashed above her monitor. Dozens more appeared as the other researchers confirmed all was well. A timer appeared on one of the screens in the front, every word read out by the simulated voice of an announcer.

> **T-minus 60.**
>
> **T-minus 59.**
>
> **T-minus 58…**

The seconds ticked by like hours. N.J. nervously fidgeted with the pouches on her coveralls, clicking their buttons together and apart in a monotone rhythm. The Foundation was no newcomer to faster-than-light travel, having used probes outfitted with Lang Distortion Drives to explore neighboring stars since the 2020s, but they always went wrong. The thaumaturgic rituals they relied on were too prone to failure, once sending an autonomous station far out of the galaxy **into an intergalactic void**. At best they could only bring you a few light-years away in a year.

> **T-minus 20.**
>
> **T-minus 19.**
>
> **T-minus 18…**

It was too costly to keep using.

She glanced at Hyeon. He wiped sweat from under his brown hair. After so much effort they couldn't afford a problem. Ehlers-001 had to work.

T-minus 10.

T-minus 9.

T-minus 8…

She took a deep breath.

This mission had to work, so she could figure out why the Division needed it to later.

It had to work.

T-minus 3.

T-minus 2.

T-minus 1.

T-minus 0.

Bifrost Engine start.

On the screens, light twisted. The space around Ehlers-001 arced into impossible circles, light passing through the wavering spacetime and presenting magnified views of the Neptunian backdrop and the probe, like it was refracting through the water of a tumultuous sea. The circles bent to form a sphere around the probe, creating a pocket of spacetime only the probe would inhabit. Ehlers-001 was now out of sight, wholly replaced by the magnified views. In nanoseconds, the views vanished too. Monitors announced the detection of high-energy gravitational waves, but there was no trace of the probe left.

Reserved cheers. Murmurs. Silence. A new timer appeared, one that would finish its countdown in seven days. Seven days until they would know if they had succeeded.

Ehlers-001 was surrounded by darkness as its bubble of spacetime carried it through the cosmos. Aside from the probe all that was present was heat it gave off, gradually dispersing into the matterless void. Despite the isolation from the universe, flickers of far off things emerged in the distance. Vague billowing masses that seemed like creatures yet weren't, ethereal glows forming shapes wrong enough to break a human mind, gray spirals — scraping past something beyond reality.

An alert rang out deep in the supercooled quantum computers. Hyperborean.aic — digitized pilot of the probe — had to take action. The Bifrost Engine vibrated the vessel as it began to strip away layers of the bubble, reverting it back into regular spacetime. The impossible imagery vanished in an instant as light seeped in from outside. Slowly but surely the universe came into view.

Ehlers-001 was in the interstellar expanse of a star cluster, 27,000 light-years from Sol. In the visual light range the sky seemed lighter than normal, the stars more tightly packed together than in Earth's skies. Switching to the full EM radiation spectrum brought a cavalcade of data. Thousands of radiowaves, X-rays, and gamma rays sped from star systems, bundles of data in tow. Each hit the probe's communications dishes and was decoded by Hyperborean, unveiling countless messages of alien civilizations. Warnings, diagrams of weapons, seven and four-fold fractals. Most were untranslated but the origins were clear.

Within a subsection of the probe, a vial of blood dripped droplets into a chamber filled with intricately carved occult symbols. Mechanical arms spun and flailed about, moving ritual artifacts through and around the fluids in well-orchestrated patterns, accompanied by a loudspeaker's recording of a thaumaturge's chants. Existence bent. A metal panel folded inwards to form a Way to another universe. Transmitters beamed status reports into the purple skies past the Way, sent to any Foundation outposts built there, and deactivated soon after. Aetheric energy quickly bled out, leaving the metal panel to reform while destroying the Way.

The status reports were short, miniscule in comparison to the reports compiled by past probes venturing to extrasolar shores. Yet they carried all the weight in the world.

N.J. forced her head off her pillow. She gently flicked a switch above the bedside table and watched the holographic display of a **forested area** by her bed melt away. It churned and solidified into a view of a Europan ice mine, the mass of Jupiter looming over its metal domes; a live feed lagging by the 207 minutes light took to reach her. A second hologram emerged above the sight of a spherical cargo drone descending to a landing pad. A message.

She rubbed her eyes, then lifted up to read it.

> Got a signal from Ehlers-001. It's made it to Terzan 2 right on time. Not an error in sight. Division Head wants us to get this show on the road (still won't let us know *why* we're in this star cluster of all places) so get your butt down to ComCent 2.
>
> *Sent by Hyeon 3Mun, 1 Hr 30 Min ago*

A new era of interstellar exploration was beginning.

/

Ad Astra Per Aspera

SCP-3417

Father Iron

The man in the suit wiped the sweat from his brow. Christ, he hoped that they would wrap it up soon. The chanting grew more intense. "Father Iron, King of War!" the crowd sang in Haitian creole, "Lord of Fire! Hear us! Ride your horse!" The *chwal* was shaking in time with the music, the fabric of her long red dress flowing a split second behind her limbs.

He had always loathed these expeditions. The heat, the ignorant jabbering of the yokels, the way it reminded him of the old toothless man who sold charms and "elixirs" back in Libreville. The fact that so far the entire expedition had been a wild goose chase did nothing to improve his attitude. Five ceremonies so far and nothing to show for it other than one of his suits ruined by a stray spurt of chicken blood. The thought had occurred that O'Conner might just be using this an excuse to get rid of him. But then again, if O'Conner wanted someone gone, there was no ambiguity about it.

The *chwal* screamed and began to spasm. The chanting was growing to a fever pitch now. The man rubbed the ring with his thumb, reassuring himself that it was still there. All of a sudden, the woman fell to her knees, her head bowed. The chanting stopped instantly. There was no noise now besides the soft crackling of the torches. Even the ever-present crickets seemed to have grown silent in respect for the spirit. The man in the suit rolled his eyes.

"My balls! My balls are cold. Fetch me rum!" the priestess cried in a voice deep and gravelly. A member of the congregation silently offered her a clay jug. She snatched it from his hands and put it to her lips. She sucked down the mixture of rum, chili, iron filings, and gunpowder, draining the vessel in a single go. She gave a satisfied sigh as she smashed the jug against the earthen floor. "Ahhhh, it's been a while since I've been called this deep into the backwoods. Usually you yokels cry for help to some *Rada* bitch! What brings Papa Ogun to you tonight?"

The supplicants began shouting in Creole to the priestess, asking for help with the law, with a rival, with killing rats. The man in the suit stepped forward into the circle.

"Father Ogun!" the man cried in French, "I request a favor!"

The priestess whipped around to face the man. He caught her eyes and knew that this was a real one. He wasn't talking to some backass Vodou wannabe high on crowd hysteria. He was talking to a *loa*. He was talking to Ogun. "You speak *proper* to me, *gason pòmdetè*!" Ogun answered in an exaggerated French accent, "I remember little ones like you during the Revolution! Little shits, who had a little cash and thought they could pass as French! Forgot all about Papa Ogun as soon as you had a piece of land and a slave to fuck!"

The man considered several retorts before biting his tongue. It did not seem like a wise choice to insult a god, especially one from whom one is requesting a boon. He forced a smile instead. "Your godhood, I request a favor. You are King of War, yes? You saved the slaves from the French, you fight for right against might, no? Myself and my brothers, we seek your favor in a struggle against those who w-"

"I know who you are, Maurice Soglo. I know all about your fight against your masters. I know all the sneaky tricks little fucks like you tried to pull. Hiding, like little rats in mountains and caves and cities. Using your toys instead of fighting like men! Too scared to fight a better warrior head-on. I know how your idiotic revolt got started! Who do you think put the idea in their heads? But you failed, because you were *weak*" Ogun spat. His face twisted into a mirthless smile, filled with teeth. Maurice noticed that the *chwal*'s teeth seemed much sharper than they had been at the beginning of the ceremony. "Give me one reason why you should have my help!"

Maurice took his hand from his pocket, displaying the ring to the god. "Because of this. One of the seals of King Solomon. If you don't help us, I can seal you inside an empty beer bottle for the next ten thousand years." He spoke slowly and deliberately to keep his voice from quaking.

A murmur ran through the crowd and steadily grew into a chorus of angry shouts. How *dare* he threaten *their* god! That little French *chi-manjè*! A few of the supplicants stepped forward to grab the man, but Ogun waved them back. He walked steadily towards Maurice, his eyes burning with rage.

"You think you, *you*, some puny ant-fucker, can threaten me?" Ogun bellowed. Maurice could feel the god's glare burning through him. "I *am* war! Metal melts at my command! Fire devours at *my* whim! Empires rise and fall as it pleases me! And you dare to dream of threatening *me*, you little *pédé*?!" He was very close now, close enough for the man to smell the breath of the god as it looked down upon him. In some distant corner of his mind, he thought that the priestess had been at least a half meter shorter than he.

"You may be a god, but even gods may die. Especially if they're helped along their way," Maurice replied as evenly as he could manage, "You are immortal now, but you can be trapped, where you can't answer prayers. How long, then, do you think your followers will wait? A decade, maybe two, before they move on to a different god. Then you will be mortal. Just a sad sack of rum and shit, alone and forgotten. Except by us. We make sure that everyone gets his due. Do you really want that?" The man's mouth went dry as he spoke.

Ogun's nostrils flared as he considered the threat. He burst out laughing.

"Ahahahaha! You threaten a god and you don't back down! That takes guts! I like you, *pòmdetè*, you've got a dick!" Ogun slapped the man on the back causing him to stumble forward slightly. "If only the other fighters had as much balls as you!"

"All of you," Ogun said, making a sweeping motion to the assembled crowd, "should take note of this man! He fears *nothing*! Alright, *pòmdetè*, you shall have my blessing! Henceforth, your enemies will never be able to destroy you! They may hurt you, but you shall always recover. And in exchange…" The god paused for a moment, "I want some of your toys. Next time I see you, you had best have some prepared!"

"But I-" Maurice started.

"*Pòmdetè*," Ogun said coolly, "you have already argued with a god once today. Do not attempt it again."

"R-right" Maurice stammered. He made his way to the edge of the circle, which parted to let him pass. As he slipped away into the dark night, he heard the sound of the yokels pleading for Ogun's favor in rat-killing or law-evading, or whatever it was that they needed. After a minute of walking, he knew that he was alone. Suddenly, the enormity of what he had done hit him. He had bluffed a god. A *god*. And what was more, he had come out ahead. The stress and fear that he had pushed to the recesses of his mind came flooding back. His knees began to shake. Before he reached the car, he had vomited twice. Wiping his mouth on his sleeve, he started the car and began the four hour drive back to civilization.

By the time he reached his hotel in Port-au-Prince, the sun was already rising, its light just creeping above the shanties of the outer city. He parked the car by the curb of the hotel and headed inside. Soon, he was in his room, dialing a number that he knew but did not know. The after the third ring, someone on the other line picked up. "Yes?" asked a soft voice.

"He went for it. But there's a catch," Maurice said as he laid on the bed.

"*What catch*?" the voice on the other end hissed.

"Can't talk about it here. Nothing too big. We might have to rearrange some holdings is all. It was worth it," he said calmly. The only response he received was a click and a dialtone as the line went dead. He hung up the phone and went to run a bath. Fuck them, he thought. Let *them* try to bargain with the embodiment of war if they want to keep their "anomalous objects" so bad. Besides, it's not as though they could complain; the Chaos Insurgency now had its first patron.

Father Of Lies

Agent Jason Suthers woke with a start, thinking that the only way he could feel this way would be if his face were on fire. From what he could tell, his head was covered in heavy bandages and he felt as if his whole face was disfigured, his nose swelled up and his mouth feeling like it had been torn open. Sitting up, his instincts screamed at him to get a good look at the surroundings and figure out where he was.

Well, it looked so far like he was in an empty surgery room at the Site 18 Medical wing. It was completely empty save him, a some medical equipment, a briefcase on a nearby counter, and a dozen or so television monitors mounted on the far wall. Only one of these was actually turned on, and on it was a man in a similar room with bandages covering his head, much like Suthers.

Peering closer at the one active screen, he realized suddenly that it was him. Glancing down at the rest of his body, Suthers saw that his whole body had went through some kind of surgery, he could barely recognize himself. What the hell had happened?

Oh….right. The raid.

Earlier that day, Suthers had been working on moving some of the more dangerous Items to new containment units with several other Agents, supervised by none other than the legendary Dr. Clef. Suthers had always idolized the infamous stories about the good doctor, and being one of the most senior Agents on site, jumped at the chance to actually be able to work under him.

The move had started off so smoothly, too, right up until the hallway they were moving through exploded, blown apart with a monstrous clang. It was a Chaos Insurgency raid. The agents had tried to mobilize, but the terrorists came in like the hammer of god, tearing through them before absconding with a highly dangerous Item. Suthers and Clef were hit the hardest, both of them caught in the

initial blast.

Thanking his luck that he was still alive, Suthers tried pulling himself out of the bed, testing to see if he could stand on his two feet. As he got up, the other monitors that were on the wall flickered to life, each one with a barely visible figure covered in shadows. Suthers stared. He had seen the occasional glimpse of one or two before, whenever he had to report a particularly important mission or engagement. But never so many before, he counted ten…eleven…twelve. All twelve of them.

O5s. The entire Overwatch Council had decided to speak with him.

"Welcome back to the world of the living, Agent. You are very lucky to be alive today." From the way they were covered in shadows, Suthers couldn't tell which one of them was speaking, or if any of them were speaking at all.

"Uh, sirs." He saluted, noting that he could barely hear his own voice from under the bandages.

"No need for that, Agent, we're here to inform you that you've been promoted to a considerably unique position within the Foundation. You have an exemplary record, hundreds of successful missions under your belt, along with numerous Items captured and contained, and in light of the recent raid, it's been decided to give you a higher ranking position, namely, that of Dr. Clef."

Suthers paused. "Excuse me?"

"Dr. Clef was killed in the raid earlier today. You have been chosen to replace him."

"That's impossible, Dr. Clef is a person, not a position."

"Dr. Clef is a collection of stories and legends. His….antics….have often worked favorably towards the Foundation, giving us a certain image of employing people with seemingly super-human capabilities. The original Clef's savviness, cunning, and history for flagrant lies, such as claiming he was Satan, had a tendency to inspire others and awe those he worked with. Therefore, we decided

to maintain the idea of certain personas under our employ to keep up the image Clef had given us. When the original Clef died fifteen years ago, it was decided that the best course of action was to cover up the death and find a way to continue the legends. So far, it has been successful. You are the fourth man in line to take over the position of Alto Clef."

"I….I see." Suthers looked at the monitors. "I understand now, I'll be more than willing to take this position."

"Excellent. In the briefcase before you are all the necessary documents needed to become Dr. Clef. From this point onward, Agent Jason Suthers died in an Insurgent raid. Remove the bandages, take the documents, read them, and destroy them afterward."

Tearing at the bandages over his head, he looked at the monitor viewing his room. It was the same, except the man sitting in it had a bright red tomato where his head would normally be. He felt the bulbous nose and grinned, feeling the corners of his mouth reaching up towards his ears. And while it was Agent Suthers that was first brought into the room, out of it walked Dr. Alto H. Clef, Father of Lies.

Fault

Document F246-2 - recovered from the site of a suicide of Anomalous Humanoid F246's mother. SCP designation pending. An investigating officer read the note aloud, shooting himself in the head and continuing to read to the end despite the gunshot wound. His partner alerted their superiors, and the incident was then flagged by a Foundation program embedded in the computer system.

Warning! Phasial Cognitohazard. Report to medical immediately if any symptoms are felt. Personnel suffering from abuse-caused conditions should not read this document.

> You have plenty of things. You have a lot of things. You are spoiled. It is your fault that you are spoiled. You did not ask for these things. It is your fault that you have them. You earned the money for them yourself. You are spoiled because you own things. I throw away all of your things. You manage to hide a shoebox of books and toys. You are spoiled. When I find the shoebox I take it away. You always wonder what happened to it. It is your fault. It is always your fault.
>
> You are in pain and it is your fault. It is always your fault. You became sick purposefully, to inconvenience me. You can stay sick. You will stay sick. You're not allowed to go to the doctor. You must go to school. You lie that you are in pain. You do this to hurt me. You pass out at the end of the week and miss Friday. This is your fault. It is always your fault.
>
> Effort does not matter. You can do well. You simply choose not to. You choose to do well sometimes. This only proves that it is choice. Clearly it is not competency. You are intelligent. You are stupid. You do not care. You choose not to care. You choose to be stupid because

you hate me. You try to do better. You try not to hate me. You accept that it is your fault. It is always your fault.

You need to stop eating. You eat too much. You need to eat your dinner. It was made for you and it is yours. You need to eat it. You need to not eat it. You may not have more. If you do not ask for more, you must not like it. You hate me. You choose to hurt me. You do not like it and so you hate me. You eat a chocolate bar. You are fat and it is your fault. You need to exercise. You are lazy and you need to exercise. You may not go outside. You must stay inside. You are lazy and you need to study. You may not exercise. It is your fault. It is always your fault.

You tell the truth. You are lying. You always lie. You know it is the truth. You know you are lying. You were drinking. You know you were not. You were anyway. You are lying about it. You do this to hurt me. You are on drugs. You know you are not. You are anyway. You are lying about it. You do this to hurt me. You may not see your friends. You are planning to get drunk. You say you are not. You are lying. You say the sky is blue. It is not. You are lying. You say you are late because the bus was full. I say it was not. You say you need to get to school earlier. I say you do not. You tell me you are in trouble at school for being late. I say you are taking drugs before school. You know you are not. You tell me you are not. You are lying. You are lying to hurt me. I am hurt. It is your fault. It is always your fault.

You have a room. It is your room. You can stop me from going in there. It is private. I allow you this. I go in there anyway. I make it different. You do not organise it correctly. It is perfectly clean but you still do not organise it correctly. You do not care about my feelings. My feelings may not influence your private space. It is your fault. You do not organise it correctly. You fear I may have taken something. This is because you are a thief. You steal and you accuse me of stealing. You wonder

why I am organising your room. You wonder what private means. You do not know. You never did. It is your fault. It is always your fault.

You are talking too loudly. You are talking too quietly. You must stop talking and answer me. You seize up. Why are you seizing up? Answer me. You hate me. This is your fault. You cannot stand the shouting. You cannot answer the shouting. You run away and hide. You know the shouting will find you. The shouting says that everything is your fault. It is your fault you were born. It is your fault that we had to move. It is your fault that we are not rich. It is your fault that a form has to be filled out. Your school is your fault. Your home is your fault. Your life is your fault. You know it is your fault. It is always your fault.

You have nothing to be sad about. You have everything to be happy about. You are alive and your body works. You hate the disabled. You must hate the disabled. You would be worse off if you were disabled and yet you are depressed. You hate me. You are doing this because you hate me. You are trying to punish me. I am doing my best. I am giving you all the money I have. I have no money to go out. I am going out two nights a week. You use all the money I could have for luxuries. I have a bottle of wine every night. You are the reason we do not go on holidays. I go on holiday while you are at a camp you chose to go to. You chose not to go on the holiday you did not know about. You are the reason we do not have nice things. I buy myself a new television. You can never use it. You broke yours. It is older than you. You broke it. You should never have used it. Everything you touch breaks. It is your fault. It is always your fault.

You will have internet access in the new house. It is a promise made to you. It is two years since. You need internet access for school. You do not need internet access for school. I did not need internet access for school. You are lying to me. You want me to pay money

just to make me poor. You know you are dependent on me and you still want to make me poor. You hate me and so you are lying to me. You may not go to the library for your school project. You are a liar and you may not go. You are in trouble at school. You did not get your project done. You are lazy and did not do it. It is another year since. You may have internet for your birthday. It is expensive and slow. This is your fault. You made me get it. It does not help me. I should cut it off. You lie that it is useful to you. You lie that you need it for school. I do not cut it off. I continually threaten to. It is your fault. It is always your fault.

You want to join a club. You may not join a club. You know they are too expensive. You hate me. You ask to join a club because you hate me. You must join a club. You should not be in the house so much. You are lazy and so you must join a club. You are out of the house too much. Your friends are far away and you cannot walk that far. There are no buses and I will not bring you. You are too young to drive. It is your fault that I chose this house. It is your fault that everything is too far away. You cycle to your friends one day. You will cycle back. You will not cycle back. You will get in the car and come home. You did not know you were being picked up. It is your fault. You must leave your bike there. You know it will be stolen. You may not put it in your aunt's garage. The garage was just cleaned. You know this. You may not go back next week for your bike. Your bike is stolen. You are not allowed such a method of escape. You blame me. You blame me because you hate me. You have no bike. It is your fault. It is always your fault.

You begin to realise you are right. You begin to realise it is not your fault. It never was. It never was your fault. You hand me a note. It has these words on it. I read. I am unable to stop reading. I shoot myself and the wall is painted with my brains and my blood.

You are safe. You never have to see me again. I am

gone. It is not your fault. It was never your fault. It will never be your fault. I cannot make it your fault anymore. I am gone. You are free. It is not your fault. It is not your fault. It will never be your fault.

It is always your fault. You will always feel guilty. You will never be free. I will always be in your head. I will always be there to insist that it is your fault. That you are speaking too loudly. That you are speaking too quietly. That you are wrong. That you are lazy. That you are lying. That you hate. That it is your fault. It is always your fault. It will always be your fault. There is nothing you can do. It is always your fault.

Initial analysis: Analysis indicates that this was a targeted cognitohazard created with the direct intent of causing F246's mother to kill herself. This would indicate a level of aggression F246 has not shown towards the investigating police officers or any Foundation personnel. It is the belief of our team that the investigating officer's death was purely coincidental, and not intended by F246. Analyst Li speculates that F246's mother may have been anomalous herself, or simply abusive. Autopsy results pending.

Based on initial reports of F246 and the content of F246-2, it is believed to be likely that F246-2's anomalous property will fade over time and become safe. Until then, it should not be handled by anyone suffering from depression or related conditions.

Fault Lines

Quinine's bitter, sugar's sweet! The music blared. It was the only way she could stay alert in the early mornings.

Regional Director Kate McTiriss drummed her fingers on the desk, whiny lo-fi music playing out of her laptop speakers. She pushed the button on the radio again.

"Outpost 2072, you're late for the sunrise check-in. Do you copy?"

She heard only static and acoustic guitar. "Jeff, you can't pull this shit, it's 6:21, you're almost half an hour late for check-in." Director McTiriss sighed and paused her music, stepping out of her office into the bullpen, three tired agents monitoring news wires from all across North Florida. "Heads up, guys, we're heading to Micanopy. Jeff's not radioing in." They looked relieved to have something to do. Solowski downed the last of his coffee and slipped on his windbreaker. He asked, "Permission to shoot him myself if we get there and he's asleep?"

"Provisionally granted. I'm driving. Houghton, let Atlanta know we've got a potential containment compromise on a Safe-class. Perez, get on the database on your phone and tell me if there's been any news relevant to SCP-2072 recently."

They barreled down 441, through the early-morning prairie. The sun hadn't been up long enough to burn off the thick fog, lending the well-worn horizon more mystery than it deserved, considering how many times this exact car full of these exact agents had made this exact trip.

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The doors on their Crown Vic closed with a satisfying slam that echoed through the woods. The pet cemetery that doubled as SCP-2072 was off a long dirt pathway, tucked deep in the timber by

the Marion County line. The four defenders of fucking nowhere that made up Local Mobile Task Force 352-Lamedh — “Stump Knockers,” to their friends — tentatively edged their way towards the outpost. Houghton and Perez, guns drawn and tall frames crouched, flanked McTiriss and Solowski, carrying briefcases full of provisional containment supplies. Kate’s eyes darted from grave to grave. This place was unsettling even when there wasn’t a thick layer of fog.

As they approached the one-window temporary office Jeff Pink sat in for 12 hours a day, they saw the security camera mounted on it shot to pieces. Kate heard Solowski mutter under his breath. “Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.” She gestured with two fingers towards the door, put her shirtsleeve around her hand (so as to not disturb any prints) and twisted the knob.

When someone gets shot in the head in the movies, they get this perfect little circular hole and slump down. *Christ-like, really, like a personal stigmata for the frontal lobe*, Kate thought. Maybe it was just on her mind because she was clutching her rosary. Because in real life, there’s no pretty little hole. Field Agent Jeff Pink’s head was torn open. Brain and blood pooled on the ground, wall behind him splattered with viscera, mouth hanging open in an unrecognizable howl. Kate McTiriss felt that familiar bitterness in the back of her mouth, stomach flipping over. No matter how many times she saw this, it didn’t change. “Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.”

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Kate radioed into Atlanta first, voice wavering more than she’d like. This was the first staff death since she took over the force. “We’ve had a Safe-class containment incursion, region 352, SCP-2072. Containment re-established but the info is out, scramble task forces near Montenegro with a focus on protecting 2072-Named individuals.” Next was Jacksonville for backup. “352-Zayin, send all free agents to Micanopy, we’ve had a 2072 breach and an agent killed.”

There wasn’t a soul still around. Whoever did this got in, got what they wanted and booked it straight back to Hell. The tarps covering the 23 graves that seemed to predict every Prime Minister of Montenegro were still there, but the presence of amateur knots

instead of Foundation-standard constrictors betrayed the purpose of the incursion. Solowski summed it up best. “Some Montenegrins are gonna try and fuck causality right in the ass.”

The question was when. The answer was coming sooner than the under-staffed and under-rested agents of 352-Lamedh were quite ready for. McTiriss felt another lurch in her stomach, but this one wasn’t nerves. It felt like all the air in her lungs was trying to escape and throw a Goddamn party on the way out. Her ears popped. Orientation told her about this feeling. It’s the feeling of nearby space folding in on itself. Or as her old boss put it, “It’s like Einstein and Rosen teaming up to gangbang you, Kate. It’s the feeling of your day getting a lot less fun.”

Not that this day was any fun to start with.

The four people standing lost their balance, stumbling with sudden vertigo. The air cracked like a whip and the sound rustled through the surrounding woods. The ground beneath one of the graves began to collapse, like the dirt was falling through a funnel. A hole, a perfect rectangle, formed in the ground, light pouring out of it. The pressure in everyone’s ears disappeared, they could stand up straight again. Kate approached the hole. She saw the image through it, light wood and large desks tilted at a strange angle. A figure was standing, clutching his heart, blocking her view. He fell backwards in the image and straight through the hole. Four North Florida agents stared at the suit-wearing corpse of a member of the Montenegrin parliament, slumped pathetically in the leaves.

“What in the name of the ever-loving holy fucking mother.” She could hear screams in the room through the grave. A gunshot rang out, more screams. Kate turned to her men and gestured towards the hole with two fingers. They jumped in.

Favors-Part One

The man in grey sat on the rooftop and waited. Beneath him, the city spread endlessly, an ocean of lights and color under the night sky. On the balcony below, a party was nearing its conclusion; slightly drunken couples making their goodbyes and wading their way home, the hostess surveying the mess they left behind them and sighing. The wind was fierce this high up, and he had to hold tight to his hat to keep it from carrying it away. The sounds of the metropolis were comforting, familiar. In that moment, he was at peace, though he knew it wouldn't last. He relished this small instance of freedom. Life is made in small hours like this, he thought. This place felt so familiar, yet he couldn't recall ever being here before. Then again, his memory wasn't what it used to be.

It is time.

The Breath of the World came the way it always did—sudden, silent, and irresistible. The words reached his mind without ever passing through his ears, but this ceased to surprise him years ago. A servant of the Breath learns to cope with surprises, or else he didn't get to keep his mind for very long—while the Breath prefers its agents thinking on their own, he knew it wouldn't hesitate to take matters into its own hands if it needed to. He had learned that the hard way.

An Aspect requires your attention and my judgment. I will show you the way.

It was time to go. He made his way to the stairs leading down from the roof and into the service halls. The presence of the Breath led him through twisting corridors and empty, derelict apartments, ones that had no right to exist in a classy part of town such as this. This was, of course, because they didn't. As he followed the Breath's instructions, the quality of the air began to change—the damp, cool northern European air became much drier and dustier. Sunlight began shining through the cracked windows and grimy skylights of

the industrial complex he was making his way through, though it was night when he began his trip, seemingly only a few minutes ago. Turning a corner, he felt a crunch under his shoes—dry bones. He didn't want to know who they belonged to. They might have been his.

Others are searching for the Aspect—the servants of the crescent and those who seek to contain.

At least now he knew where he was going—Iran. His past encounters with the ORIA were often less than civil and ended badly. Mostly for them. Still, the vicious bastards were certainly a force to be reckoned with on their home turf. He was actually relieved to hear the Foundation was here as well—he would much rather leave an unworthy Aspect in their hands. While they were just as ruthless, at least he could respect their goals. He saw what some of the Aspects could do, felt them rend his flesh, tear at the fabric of his mind with mental claws, saw them open doors to places that should never be. And those were some of the more pleasant ones.

You are here.

It seemed he was. The last hallway led to a ladder ending in a metal hatch. He climbed out and surveyed his surroundings: he was standing in a vast salt flat, stretching to the horizon in all directions. Aside from the hatch, the landscape was entirely featureless. "Just lovely," he muttered, forgetting himself for a moment, "You led me to the middle of Dasht-e Kavir. This is one of the largest, emptiest deserts in the world, how the hell am I supposed to find anything here?" A shock of intense pain ran through his body, and he collapsed to the ground, the salty dust staining his suit.

A favor was granted. You will obey. West, towards the twin mirage.

Grunting, he picked himself up and started walking. That was a mistake, and he should have known better by now—The Breath of the World had no patience for complaints. His outfit was ill-suited for the fierce heat of the salt flats, and his hat provided little protection from the sun, but he persevered; the Breath protected him from dehydration and sun stroke, but did nothing to keep him

comfortable. When he spotted what he assumed to be the twin mirage, he was sweating profusely and his tongue felt like parchment. If the Breath hadn't told him about it, he would have missed it—it was just two patches of slightly simmering air, which did not disappear the way a normal mirage would as he approached them.

The Aspect lies between. The others will be here soon, guided by the Manticore.

He had to hurry. While the Breath offered him protection, he was far from invincible, and though he could fend for himself, he couldn't handle an entire ORIA detection squad or Mobile Task Force on his own, not for long at least. He moved into the empty patch of air between the mirages, and found himself standing in an enormous doorway, sixty feet tall at least.

The sarcophagus. The Aspect lies within. It is time to judge.

Colonel Abtin Arjmand was not a happy man. This entire expedition was a complete and utter disaster. First he had to drag an entire platoon to this arid wasteland to search for some heathen mythical beast, and after they finally found it after a month of searching, it devoured half his men before revealing the information they needed. Now, he and his remaining men had to leave their vehicles behind and spend half a day trudging in the salt flats on foot, searching for some half-invisible gate. This artifact had better be worth it, or else he was going to have some words with the research department. Words like "fire!"

"Sir! I think I found something!"

Arjmand hurried to where one of his lieutenants stood, and the young man pointed to a patch of shimmering air. "This mirage is acting funny. It isn't fading, no matter how close I get to it."

"Good man, I think this might be it. Rally the men, we go inside."

If nothing else, at least they'll get out of the sun for a while.

Agent Gladstone watched the Iranians disappearing into the mirage. He and his men were using some state-of-the-art camouflage, which was the only thing keeping them alive. Staying hidden on a salt flat was next to impossible, and he doubted anyone else was capable of it. The Iranians led them right to the location of the possible SCP object, though this left them in a problematic situation—the Iranian colonel had three times the manpower at his disposal, and though Gladstone knew the men of his task force were the best in the business, he didn't like these odds. Plus, the Iranians were already inside, and if they went after them, they'll be discovered. He could wait for them to leave and ambush them then, but that meant risking damage to the SCP object, or who knows what else if the object was dangerous. No, he had to try disposing of the Iranians before they got their hands on the object, and he had a plan.

"Turner! Get that drone of yours ready. We are going to have a good old fashioned fox hunt."

The man in grey crossed the vast hall that lay inside the mirage, making his way towards the sarcophagus. It was massive, far larger than any man could ever need, or so he thought until he removed the cover. The skeleton inside was enormous, at least three times the size of a normal man, and around him were various weapons, even the smallest of them too big for an ordinary man to use comfortably. None of them were the Aspect, so he continued his search. Eventually, he noticed something that stood out, a small piece of softness hidden between the rough edges and metal. It was a piece of dry parchment, a scroll, wrapped around what seemed to be a child's toy. Curious, the man in grey inspected the old scroll:

"Here lies mighty Rostam, Son of white-haired Zal, too great for his mother's womb. Here lies fierce Rostam, tamer of Rakhsh, performer of the Seven Labors. Here lies fool Rostam, willing slave to the coward Kay Kavus. Here lies cursed Rostam, slayer of Sohrab, his son. All who defiles this final place of rest shall share his fate."

The Aspect is in your hand. The toy. Judgment is upon us.

The man in grey never understood exactly how the Breath of the

World judged the Aspects. There didn't appear to be any rhyme or reason to which Aspects it deemed worthy and which it rejected. He'd seen it accept seemingly worthless ones, like that weather vane that wouldn't be moved by wind, and deny ones of immense power.

This Aspect is abhorrent in my eyes. Remove it from my sight.

And that was that. All this effort, for nothing. Once an Aspect was deemed unworthy, the Breath lost all interest in it. It was time for him to leave.

Colonel Arjmand couldn't believe his eyes. A palace, hidden in a mirage, amazing! He's been hunting those damnable relics for years, and he's never seen anything like it.

"Men, I want this place combed. That beast told me there is an object of power here, and what it looked like, but not what it does. Just be careful, we don't know what this thing can do."

His men did as ordered. Arjmand reached for the chain around his neck, feeling the comforting weight of the object that hung from it. He knew the price of using it, but having it around still made him more confident. If anyone tried to take what was his, they would pay dearly.

"Sir, I think I found it! Here, in the sarcophagus!"

"Let me see. Yes, this seems to be it! Prepare the carrier unit, we leave immi—"

A sudden buzzing noise. Arjmand looked up just in time to see a small remote drone drop a payload of grenades on their heads.

"They're all down, Sir. The payload of stingers and flashbangs knocked them out cold!" Turner said, looking up from his pocket monitor for the drone.

Gladstone grinned. They didn't call his task force "The Mirth Busters" for nothing. He almost pitied the poor bastards—they just

spent a month looking for the SCP, and when they finally found it, BAM! It was gone again.

“Alright, move in. I want the object secured and the Iranians neutralized.”

Colonel Arjmand barely managed to get a hold of his talisman before the grenades took down his men. He knew he was sacrificing much by using it, but he hardly had a choice.

They were going to pay for this.

Favors-Part Two

Favors-Part Two

Note: Naturally, this should only be read after Favors-Part One

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Colonel Arjmand wasn't sure he made the right choice. Granted, it was either using the talisman or certain death, but the latter seemed like a more attractive option with every passing moment.

He was standing in a lavishly furnished dining room, surrounded by plump, richly dressed men, each wearing a different bizarre hat. One of them, sporting a hat that Arjmand was sure was made to look like two goats fornicating, approached Arjmand with a huge, smug grin on his face.

"Captain Arjmand!" The fat man said, intentionally getting his rank wrong, "How pleasant it is to see you here again! What brings you to the demesne of the Djinn today?"

Arjmand loathed the Djinn. The very idea of dealing with them was an affront to God, to decency, and, frankly, to common sense. The Djinn fancied themselves traders, honest businessmen, but they were much more similar to loan sharks. Behind that jovial, colorful facade lay a mind like a razor, and Arjmand knew he wasn't leaving without getting thoroughly sliced by it.

"You know damn well what I'm here for, spirit! I know you keep a close eye on items like the one I was searching. Those pigs from the Foundation got the drop on me, and I need to repay them. With interest."

The Djinn smiled warmly at him, and produced a notebook from the folds of his robe. Arjmand shivered. People always spoke of the terrible powers of the Djinn, but they rarely mentioned their complete mastery over numbers, real or imaginary.

"Hmm, let us see," The Djinn peered at the notebook, now filled with

page upon page of numbers. "Carry the one, reduce a week for bulk discount, add four months for multiple assailants…I would say you'll need one year of condensed time to deal with them and stay alive, in a reasonable condition."

Arjmand relaxed a little—a year wasn't so bad, he could live with that. The Djinn wasn't done, however.

"Of course, there is the matter of our commission. Let's see…stun removal, conversation fees, regeneration overload prevention, instant death fail-safe, friction nullifiers…that comes to five years overall."

"Five years!? That's ludicrous! It's highway robbery!"

The Djinn flashed his wide smile again, but there was nothing warm in it this time. "Come now, no Djinn would be caught dead on a highway. Five years, or no deal."

Arjmand sighed. "If I give you five years, you guarantee I'll be able to dispose of those who attacked me?"

"Of course. You know our word is good."

"Do it."

The Djinn placed a thick finger on the talisman still around Arjmand's neck, which started to emit a steady argent glow. Most of the silvery light flowed to the Djinn, whose grin could now only barely be contained by his puffy cheeks. Some of it, however, stayed in the talisman. And grew brighter.

"It is done."

Despite himself, and despite the knowledge he just lost five years of his life, Arjmand answered the Djinn's smile with one of his own.

"Yes. And so are they."

Agent Gladstone couldn't help but winch at the sound of gunshot. When he told his men to neutralize the stunned Iranians, they knew

what he meant. It was dirty work, but he couldn't risk them following his team on the way out. Overall, things went surprisingly well for the Mirth Busters.

"Colt, go check on their commander. I want to question him before we get rid of him."

"Got it, Sir."

With this, Gladstone began looking for the object. The great stone hall with its great pillars and columns would take ages to properly search, but now, with the Iranians gone, they had all the time in the world. Maybe the Iranians already found the object. Their commander would know.

"Colt, what's taking so long?"

No reply. Gladstone turned to find the commander's body gone, and replacing it was Colt's, his throat crushed.

"Defensive positions! We got a possible Zero-Thirteen scenario on our hands! Backs against a wall, now!"

Well, so much for things going well.

Colonel Arjmand hid behind one of the great pillars, having used three days' worth of strength and speed of his condensed year to crush the soldier's throat and escape unseen. He could feel time leaking out of him, a few minutes for each second- the human body was never meant to hold so much time at once. He knew he needed to act fast, lest he won't have enough time time left to finish the rest of them—their commander was already ordering a defensive position, and he would have to spend a lot more time to penetrate it. He knew his sidearm would be entirely unreliable under the influence of the Djinn's talisman, so hand-to-hand was the only option. The entire affair was giving him a headache. Damn the Djinn and their temporal nonsense.

Arjmand considered his options. With his sloppy control, it would take at least two weeks worth of time to pick one of the soldiers off

and just barely avoid the hail of bullets that would follow. There were fifteen of them. With him leaking time all over the place, and his muscles already aching from the abuse of using them in such a careless manner, he knew he had no chance to win using strength and speed alone. Luckily, even a novice like him could use concentrated time in other ways. While he was protected from some of the more horrid effects of the Djinn's intervention, the soldiers were not.

Gathering two hundred days of concentrated time all at once, and leaking time everywhere, Arjmand charged. The moment he left his cover, the soldiers spotted him and opened fire, but he was moving at such speed the bullets seemed to barely move as they floated lazily in the air. He knew he couldn't maintain this speed for very long- he already ate through months of speed, and his muscles screamed in protest. Luckily, he didn't need to. As he reached the first of the soldiers, he placed a finger on the man's forehead. Using the time leaking out of him to his advantage, Arjmand forced three weeks of wakefulness into the man's brain. Without the Djinn failsafe to protect him, the soldier collapsed immediately, suffering the equivalent of three weeks without sleep. With blinding speed, Arjmand turned and elbowed another soldier in the stomach, sending him flying across the hall.

Arjmand was beginning to enjoy himself, despite the enormous temporal pressure his body was under. In less then thirty seconds, or several months of concentrated time, ten of the fifteen soldiers were down, out cold or dead. Arjmand accelerated the air flow in the lungs of one of the survivors, causing the friction to burn the man's lunges to cinders. Another had his bladder and intestines explode, caving in under the pressure of a month of waste that wasn't there moments before. This was true power, Arjmand thought, this was glory! He laughed as he ripped the guns from the hands of the surviving men, casting them aside. It was time to finish this. He was going to enjoy this, oh yes.

A sudden shock of pain in his back brought his euphoria to a sharp end. Turning around, he saw a figure in grey holding one of the discarded rifles. He gathered what little remained of his time and tried to rush to it, but the figure was somehow too fast, even for him.

Three more shots, and Arjmand felt himself falling, as slow as a feather, as heavy as a tombstone.

"You promised there would be enough time…you said I could kill those who attacked me…"

"And we kept our word. You never mentioned the man hiding behind that corner."

Arjmand would have cursed the traitorous bastards, but he just felt so very tired…

Colonel Abtin Arjmand's time had run out.

Agent Gladstone, nursing a broken arm, was gazing sullenly at what remained of his task force. Over half his men were dead, and of the rest, only three were in any sort of fighting condition, including himself. Of course, there was also the man in grey, who was at the moment checking the dead colonel's body for something, while taking care to keep his weapon pointed firmly on Gladstone and his men.

"Huh, would you look at that," the man in grey said, removing a silver necklace for the colonel's corpse. "It seems like this trip wasn't a complete waste of time after all."

"Yeah, I'm real happy for you."

"Come now, no need to be like that. I did just save your lives."

"Oh yes, and I'm sure you didn't wait until most of my men were disposed of before acting on purpose. You must have been busy building an orphanage for the blind behind that corner."

The man in grey just shrugged and turned to leave. "I would advise you to wait an hour or so before making your way back to your rendezvous point. The good colonel here didn't come alone. Oh, I've almost forgotten," he produced what seemed to be an ancient toy. "Are you a father, agent?"

Gladstone shook his head. "Good, then it should be safe for you to

handle this. I believe this is what the Iranians were looking for." He tossed the toy to Gladstone, who awkwardly caught it with his good hand. Then, he threw his rifle away and stepped out of the stone hall's mirage doors. Gladstone, without a moment hesitation, recovered the gun and went after him. He'd be damned if he let the smug bastard get away with a possible SCP object. The desert sands were blowing outside, as the sun was beginning to set on the salt flats. Of the man in grey, there was no sign.

As the dry and salty desert air began to smell of rain, the man in grey knew he was out of harm's way. Passing the corner of what seemed to be an abandoned butcher shop, he sank to the floor and wiped the sweat from his forehead. He seemed to have misplaced his hat, which annoyed him.

A fortunate turn of events. The talisman of the Djinn could speed the growth of the Maker's chainfruit. They are creatures of avarice, but they will serve.

He hated talking to the Breath without his Gem of Aspects. Ever since he was forced to give the Gordian Stone away by the Breath's own instructions, his ability to discern which of its aspects was currently dominant was much reduced. This sounded like the Mind, but it could have been the Eye or the Mouth just as easily. The Breath was a solid, impenetrable storm front now, and trying to have a conversation with it was like trying to fly a kite in a Jovian maelstrom.

The others are stirring. The Pulse has attained powerful tools already, and the rest are not far behind. The fruit will be needed. Acquire the services of the Djinn.

He knew there were other Gems out there, like the Pulse's stone, but he had no way of knowing where they were. Besides, he knew the Breath did everything for a reason, and the blasted thing must not have wanted him to have one anymore.

Do not tarry.

With a sigh, the man in grey twisted the talisman, and the dirty

butcher shop was replaced by lavish dining hall, all ivory and gold. An enormous man, wearing a hat which could not be described in civilized company, rose from a cushion and waddled towards him, a wide grin on his face.

"A new customer, how pleasant! Welcome to the demesne of the Djinn, my good man. Are you here to trade? We have such marvelous wonders waiting for you, and all for just a humble price of time."

"I'm sorry, but all my time is already in the possession of another. No, I'm simply here to take a few years of concentrated time. Twenty-five or so should suffice."

The grin vanished. "If you have no time to trade for it, we have nothing further to discuss."

The Djinn began making his way back to his cushion, and, feeling a rush of air at his back, dived just in time to avoid a large stone bust colliding with his skull. Turning, he saw the man in grey was standing in the midst of a swirling mass of air, which was rapidly reducing the dining hall into piles of expensive rubble. The Djinn, with surprising agility for a man of his size, accelerated his movement and smashed into the interloper with the force of two centuries, but found that all of his time simply vanished into the air flow around the man. Later the Djinn understood why—the thing was so old, two hundred years were nothing more than a quick lunch break for it.

"Who are you?"

The man in grey felt himself disappearing, fading into the gathering storm, and the Breath of the World, sometimes known as the Wind in the West, the sum of humanity's secrets, considered the question for a moment.

Nobody.

Fear Alone

The two doctors stood side by side in the tiny room, facing the locked door on the other side of the one they had just entered through. The elder of the two quietly flipped through a number of pages in a leather-bound journal, while the younger anxiously adjusted and readjusted and made sure not to lock his knees. The light here seemed brighter, the younger might have noted, the air thick with something foreboding, had his mind not been racing through the millions of scenarios that might await him on the other side of the door. He had tried at conversation with the elder doctor earlier, but his nervousness had broken through and his voice had cracked, and the other man had raised an eyebrow and returned to his notes.

It was as if an eternity had passed before they finally heard a voice crackle over the speakers in the room. Dr. Vandivier, the elder, raised an eyebrow yet again as Dr. Montgomery, the younger, jumped at the sound.

"Please state your name as it appears in the Foundation personnel database, and submit your Level 4 Foundation identification number and passcode." The voice spoke clearly, its tone indicating a lifetime of repetition.

Dr. Vandivier coughed slightly, and spoke. "Dr. Gregory Arnold Vandivier. Identification number 4511-12894-19-055. Passcode, 18840-12884-19078-00004."

There was the slightest of hesitations before the voice cut through again, asking the same of Montgomery. The elder doctor looked over to him, something akin to sympathy momentarily crossing his eyes. "Relax," he spoke softly. "Just recite the number."

Montgomery swallowed, took a deep breath, and recited his own information. "Dr. Anderson Dean Montgomery. Identification number 9280-27112-17-054. Passcode-" A brief instance of doubt struck

him, but passed when he saw Dr. Vandivier's reassuring nod. "16738-17489-13782-00004."

Both men stood silently again, the last of Montgomery's words hanging in the air. Another brief pause, another eternity, and then the door in front of them clicked.

"Enter, Dr. Vandivier and Dr. Montgomery."

The sliding panel moved quietly into the wall, and a dull wave of stale, recycled air passed over them. Montgomery was reminded of his time practicing within a prison, where every breath of the men in isolation hung around them like a shroud. The memory caused him to falter briefly, while Dr. Vandivier moved through the entrance.

"Come along, now," he said over his shoulder. "We've not much further to go."

The two walked in silence down the long, white hallway. There were cameras every 50 feet, or so Montgomery had been told. The floor below them was tile, and every step echoed off of the walls around them, announcing their arrival like an army of tiny drummers. As the temperature dropped slightly, Montgomery could feel beads of sweat forming on the back of his neck, persistent in nature despite the chill.

Ahead of them was a set of double doors. To the side of the doors was a brass information plaque, like the dozens of others across the site. As they approached it, the etching on the plaque became visible, causing Montgomery's throat to catch.

Item #: SCP-231-7

Object Class: Keter

Vandivier was unfazed, and quickly pushed through to the other side. Montgomery gave a moment of pause to take a deep breath, and then did the same. The scene on other side of the doors was fairly quiet, with a number of doctors standing around various displays looking at readouts and information that was being processed on the machines behind them. There was an air of solemnity about all of them, and the gravity of the room struck

Montgomery like a ton of bricks. A clock on the wall read 19:45 in bright red numerals, and another to the side was counting down to zero.

A tall man in a white jacket noticed the two men, and strode quickly across to greet them. He shook Vandivier's hand first and exchanged some hushed words, then turned to Montgomery to do the same.

"Good evening, Dr. Montgomery," he said, his expression unwavering behind a bushy grey mustache. "Oliver Targus, a pleasure to meet you."

Montgomery met the handshake. "The same."

Dr. Targus walked him over to a series of consoles displaying medical information and vitals statistics. "Dr. Montgomery, this is your workstation here. I'll give you an opportunity to check out the sensors in a little bit, and see if you want to make any adjustments." He pointed over towards a side screen, which showed a video feed of an empty white room. "This is the video display for the procedure room. We don't keep staff members in the room during the procedure, so this will be your eyes and ears throughout. That look alright?"

Montgomery nodded. He peered at the screens, observed the information about heart rate and EEG readouts, and for a moment felt comfortable. This was his element, his wheelhouse.

But then his eyes flicked to a screen containing a live ultrasound feed, and his own heart rate began to accelerate. He turned quickly to avoid letting his nerves show. "This looks just fine. What else am I going to be required to do?"

Dr. Targus smiled briefly, and then led him over to a large observation window. The window sat above a white room, the same room from the video feed, he imagined. A single door was on the side of the room to his right. He looked across the way, and saw other doctors and researchers standing on the other side of the command room looking in through the observation window on their side. Montgomery wondered what they were all here to do. He

decided it probably wasn't worth thinking about.

"Here in a few minutes, we're going to begin the procedure. Once it gets started, it progresses pretty quickly, so you'll have to keep your wits about you with those monitors. If you notice anything out of the ordinary, report it to Dr. Brunell, over there."

He pointed across the room to a female doctor with shoulder length blonde hair, who herself was going over a packet of notes with another short male doctor. "She's in charge of medical stability, and she'll be just outside of the observation room during the procedure. You'll be able to page her at your station, and she'll be your primary contact for other tasks on this assignment." Montgomery looked up after a moment, and noticed Dr. Targus staring at him.

"I understand your anxiety, Dean." He smiled slightly again. "We were all like you at one point. But understand the importance of our task, here, and perform your job with the excellence that brought you here. Everything will be fine."

Montgomery nodded, and swallowed. "Thank you, doctor. Just reassignment nerves, you know." He tried to get a weak smile out, but felt it falter on his lips.

Just then, a tone buzzed through the command room, followed by the same calm voice from the entrance hall. "Warning: Procedure 110-Montauk will begin in five minutes. All personnel, please report to your stations."

Targus patted Montgomery on the back. "Relax, doctor. I think you'll find this assignment isn't so bad." With that, the tanned doctor walked off to a station across the command room. Montgomery paused for a moment more to look down into the observation room, where a group of nurses in white scrubs were rolling a small bed through the now-open door.

After a few seconds, he moved quickly to his station. Taking his seat, his eyes moved immediately to the video screen, and he watched the nurses setting up the rest of the room. A rug had been moved into the room, as well as a small table next to the bed, a lamp, and some bedding. Montgomery felt his stomach drop slightly,

and then looked again towards the clock above the observation window. It read 19:59, and the one next to it 00:24. It was almost time.

The screens in front of him hummed softly, and the information contained within pushed on tirelessly. He made a few notes and opened a booklet of information he had brought with him, and then heard the last tone.

"All staff personnel: Procedure 110-Montauk has begun."

He turned to look at the clock again, and noticed that large metal plates had slid down over the observation windows, obscuring the room from view. Looking back to his video feed, he saw that the lights within the room had dimmed, and the only illumination that remained was the lamp on the table. The door on the wall slid open again, and two more nurses walked out. A small girl was between them.

She was no older than 8, Montgomery thought, and did not look exactly like he had thought she might. Her hair was cut very short, barely a highlight against her olive skin. She moved awkwardly, and it was then he noticed her stomach. It bulged against the surgical gown she wore, and turned her steps into an awkward, plodding gait. The nurses guided her towards the bed, and helped her up into it. One of them adjusted her pillow, and the other tucked in the blankets. Finished, one of the nurses leaned down and said something to the little girl, and then joined the other before exiting the room. Montgomery thought this peculiar, and wondered if anybody else in the room had noticed it.

He looked up as another voice crackled across the intercom. He recognized it as Dr. Targus, and saw him standing towards the center of the room, watching a series of screens before him. "SCP-231-7 is in place. Is the D-Class personnel ready?" There was a silence, and then, "Ok. Open the door, release the subject."

Turning back to his feed, Montgomery watched as a dark-skinned man in a standard Foundation grey jumpsuit walked slowly through the open doorway. As the door slid shut behind him, the man turned slightly and Montgomery saw that he had something in his hand. He

squinted, trying to get a better look at it, but it was obscured when the man turned back towards the little girl in the bed. With every step he took towards the center of the observation room, the hairs on the back of Montgomery's neck grew ever higher, and he could feel his blood pounding through his veins, screaming against them for release.

"D-55318," he heard Dr. Targus say, distantly. "You may begin."

Montgomery could not look away. His eyes would not allow it, although his mind clawed desperately towards something, anything else. The D-Class moved next to the bedside, and the small girl with the swollen belly looked up at him, naive to her impending fate, and *smiled*. Montgomery choked back a cry, but stopped suddenly when he saw the D-Class move a stool that had been hidden behind the little table up to the bedside. The man sat down, and through the mics within the observation room, he heard the man speak.

"Hello again, Katherine," he said, his voice soft. "I brought you a new one tonight, it's called *Goodnight Moon*. Is that ok?"

The little girl nodded vigorously, and clutched a stuffed rabbit up next to her. The D-Class opened the book he had been holding, and began to read.

Montgomery could not move. He could not breathe. His eyes darted wildly around the room, trying to find another person as incredulous as he. He found none, as no one else had turned from their monitors at all. Everybody else in the room was going about their business as usual, making notes, speaking softly into their headsets. Even Dr. Targus had not budged, and if anything Montgomery might have said he looked *bored*.

He turned back towards his displays, and tried to make notes about variations in her pulse, blood pressure, skin temperature, but couldn't pull his eyes away from the video feed. The D-Class continued to read through the book, bringing his voice up only slightly to emphasize certain passages.

This continued on for ten minutes, though to Montgomery it might as well have been a lifetime. He listened to every word, his mind racing.

This is not what it was supposed to be. What's happening? What is this? He called back to when he first heard that he was being assigned to SCP-231. He remembered how his coworkers at Site-81 had talked, and tried to console him, told him that it wouldn't be too bad after the post-assignment amnestic treatment. He had heard the things that they said about 231, about the convicted sex-offenders required for the containment protocols, about what they did to the little girl…

That was not happening. The man looked hard, yes, and Montgomery could believe he was a felon. But he spoke easily, and had not once touched 231-7. He simply continued to read, all the while looking up occasionally at the little girl. She was moments from sleep, and before the D-Class had finished the book, she had passed out completely. The man laid the book down, stood up, rubbed the sleeping child's head slightly, and then walked out of the room. The lamp within the observation chamber dimmed, and the lights in the command room came back up. There was a buzz of approval around him, and when Montgomery finally managed to pull his eyes away from the screen, he saw that the other staff members were finishing up procedure reports, signing the necessary documents, typing away at their computers, and otherwise *not panicking*. Montgomery spun quickly as he felt somebody come up behind him, and sighed when he realized it was just Dr. Targus.

The old man smiled again. "How are you, doctor? Did you notice any abnormalities with the subject?"

Montgomery grabbed his notebook and began flipping through it. "Uh, I- no. No abnormalities, nothing except, uh… except-" He trailed off.

"…Except that Procedure 110-Montauk was not what you were anticipating it to be."

The young doctor nodded. Targus pulled up a chair and sat down next to him. "Well, it's usually our policy to debrief new assignments, and if you hadn't been called down here on such short notice, we might have gotten a chance to. The secrecy of this project is paramount, however, so it really isn't that bad, I guess." He coughed. "I'm sure you have some questions."

Montgomery hesitated, and them stammered out a reply. "It, uh, why does- I've heard that it's, you know, that they-"

"Rape her?" Targus said, stone-faced. "Yes, that's certainly what we've designed the documentation to imply. That would be about as bad as it could get, wouldn't it? A brutal sex crime against a child?" Montgomery didn't move. "Yes, it would be terrible. Deplorable beyond forgiveness. But that is not what Procedure 110-Montauk is, doctor."

He leaned back. "Early on in containment of the 231 subjects we did terrible things to those poor girls. Not as terrible as that, but we were being advised only by a handful of occultists we had been able to capture and extract information from. That was what they had done to contain the demon, and because of that, it's what we had to do. I was not on the project then, and understandably many of those doctors- most of them, in fact, are no longer with us, as are 231-1 through -6. It was because of our failings that they perished, and it was because of their deaths that we realized that we had to do something different."

"Gods very rarely are bound by the laws of physics, you know. Reality benders can shape the world around us at will, turn existence into their plaything. But everything has rules, Dr. Montgomery." He leaned in close. "Even gods have rules. Old laws, yes. Arcane, but effective. We began to look more closely into information we had gathered about the Scarlet King, about the entity itself. Within all of those documents, all of the collected material we had at our disposal, and discovered something else."

He leaned back again. "The demon does not need to be contained by horrifying, disgusting acts, Montgomery. The demon only needs to *believe* that horrifying, disgusting acts are being done in its name. The documentation we created, the terrible rumors about Procedure 110-Montauk, the reports of suicide by the doctors working on this project, all of it. It's all a charade. All of it is to convince the demon that we are doing the worst thing possible to this girl. These procedures, this campaign of fear, has allowed us to sow dread into the hearts of Foundation personnel, and this dread satisfies the monster."

"As long as so many people believe we are doing terrible things, the monster will continue to believe we are doing terrible things. There is *power* in symbols, doctor. The old gods know this, and the old gods are bound by it. The Scarlet King does not have eyes to see brutality, does not have ears to hear screams, does not have a nose to smell blood. But the Scarlet King can sense fear, and we have given it fear. Fear alone is all that it ever required."

The old doctor stopped and closed his eyes. Both men sat in silence as a number of other researchers filed past them into the hallway outside of the command room. Once most of them had passed, Montgomery spoke up.

"And the reading? The bedtime stories?"

Targus nodded. "Katherine cannot sleep without a bedtime story. How she manages to sleep at all is a wonder to me, but an act of some kind was required to convince the demon. In the eyes of the Scarlet King, Dr. Montgomery," he said, "reading those bedtime stories is the worst possible thing we could be doing to her."

Montgomery nodded, understanding dawning on him. He glanced back towards the steel plated observation room windows. "The steel plates, though? Not keeping staff members in the room?"

Targus opened his eyes. "The danger is still real, doctor. Loss of containment of SCP-231-7 will likely result in an XK. We have precautions in place, woven into the theater of Procedure 110-Montauk. Do not think the way we contain this demon makes it any less dangerous. Indeed, it is likely the most dangerous entity we have managed to contain, but… there are things that we will not do, Montgomery. There are things too abhorrent, and even implying such makes me feel filthy. But if implying is all we have to do, well. I can sleep at night."

Another doctor came up to Targus, and with a brief farewell the doctor hurried off to attend to some other part of the room. Montgomery sat quietly for a time, thinking everything over. He turned to look at the video feed screen, where the little girl was sleeping soundly in her bed, stuffed rabbit tucked between her arms. The young doctor felt the anxiety there, but beneath it was

something else. The dread had vanished, but the fear remained, quiet and looming.

He turned off the monitors, gathered his notes, and left the room.

Fear Not

I had fear.
Fear had me.

I had no words.
There were no sounds.

I found words, in the darkness.
There were none to talk to.

I found ears, in the darkness.
The ears did naught but whistle.

Nothingness never visits.
I cannot visit nothing.

Not fears me.
I fear not.

We cannot whistle echoes in space.
Light music traverses vacuums.

Whistling began, zooming.
Vibrations of the soul.

Nothing there.
Thing here.

Light here.
Light there.

The chandelier spins.
All at once, photons dance.

Nothing is created or destroyed.
More nothing is created than destroyed.

Unobserved, events observe themselves.
Watching is the nature of things.

Unthings tend not to be.
Things tend to be.

Whence thing?
Whence unthing?

Whence nothing?
Whence we?

Nothing tends to be.
Everything tends not to be.

We have our blinders down, still.
Silent symmetries arise, if we know to look.

None.
One, two, on.

The sun sets and we live.
We relish the nothing and thrive.

Unobserved, there is no supervision.
We lived so well, so deep, so glad, so soon.

The sun rises, and with it, our pact ends.
We turn to foam, not of sea, but space.

The bubbles of the world pop.
The wind carries them away.

They, we, I.
None.

[there does not seem to be anything here]

does not mean

[there does seem to be nothing here]

because

[!nothing != something]

and

[nothing != !something]

What was that noise?
It's probably nothing.

What was that noise?
It's probably nothing.

[world]

met

[world]

thus

[annihilation]

the chandelier

[sparkled]

and the west was lost

Festival Of Arthropods

Laurie looked behind her, making sure that Speaker was still nearby. In a festival of arthropods, a human was prone to stand out immensely. Speaker could pick their form, and had decided to change their form to that of a startlingly violet tick-kin with empty eyesockets. The color made it easier for her to find them, and they claimed that they liked this form, but the lack of eyes probably meant that being human wasn't enough for them to find her. It would have been too insulting to tie them to her, though. Besides, they had decided to carry her bag for her. Making sure that they hadn't lost it was reason enough for her to look over every few minutes.

Despite the chatter and excitement, Laurie could still hear the faint squeaking and grinding of her brand-new prosthetic leg as she walked and the click of the metal against the stone. Speaker was fortunate to be deaf, if ticks *were* indeed deaf. It had only been fifteen minutes and she already had a headache.

Normally, she never went here at all. It was so far out of the way of her regular shopping trips that any visit would be inconvenient at best. But, when it came to finding clothes for non-human forms, this was the best place she knew of. Speaker had been no help, just like they had been no help when finding places to shop for human clothes despite the wardrobe they had amassed already. Speaker had plenty of human clothes for all sorts of sizes and shapes, but they *only* had human clothes.

Laurie paused mid-step. "Speaker?"

Yes? They signed back at her.

"Shouldn't you be wearing clothes in that form?"

There was a long pause. *Probably?*

"For fuck's sake, Speaker!" Ignoring the possibility of insulting them,

she grabbed them by a hand (or foot, or paw, or pedipalp, or *whatever* the thing she was holding was called) and dragged them to the nearest place that looked like it had clothes. "You have to think about these things!"

No, because you think about them for me. Clearly. Laurie wasn't proficient at reading human expressions, much less weird arachnid expressions, but she knew that stupid, smug grin no matter what it looked like.

"Next time I'll shove you into a pond and let the fish deal with you instead, you ass."

No! Don't do that to me!

She laughed. "Neither carp nor **dragons** have mercy, so why should I?" Even after reaching the stall she didn't dare to release Speaker, despite the fact that their setae were stabbing her hand and arm. "Yeah, uh, this person here decided to forget to tell me that they needed clothes, I don't suppose you have anything I can get them?"

The beetle-kin seller goggled for a moment, looking between her and Speaker in shock. Laurie couldn't tell what sort of beetle-kin the seller actually was, but she had a pretty good idea of what they were thinking. Her shoulders twitched and she drew her lips back in an attempt at an apologetic smile. Normally she spent her time dealing with fish, not people, and she had a definite opinion on which one of the two was easier and more fun to socialize with.

I just kind of forgot, you know? It could happen to-

Laurie tightly grabbed both of Speaker's hands, refusing to wince even when the setae stabbed her again. "Nothing from you until you're decent, especially not commentary on the situation."

Once again, there was no way for her to read or comprehend Speaker's expression, and yet somehow she knew they were making that idiotic grin again. She turned to the beetlekin seller and ducked her head, fully aware that as soon as she let her grip slacken for a moment Speaker would free their hands. Not for the

first nor the last time in her life, she wished that there was **some way** to keep a koi with her at all times.

"Clothes. Please. Before they keep running their, uh, hands? Mouth? Mouth-hands?" Laurie made a disgusted noise, sighed, and shook her head. "Okay, let me try to make sense this time. Please just get them clothes. Quickly, please."

She watched the beetle-kin scuttle off hurriedly, looking back at her and studiously not looking at Speaker. Speaker, somehow, looked relaxed. Once again, she recognized that stupid grin. She turned the full intensity of her glare upon them. Speaker began to squirm, turning their head away as if they were looking at one of the other stalls. It was much easier to see that they were feigning obliviousness when they didn't have the proper body parts for their body language. That was good. They could be a damnable mixture of whimsical and aloof that glares often couldn't reach.

"If you get me banned from here- a bazaar I only went to for *your* sorry hide, by the way -you could at least do me the favor of hosing down the filter media in the koi pond. For the next month. At least. Every day." She released their hands.

Fine. Speaker stretched, purposefully avoiding her gaze, even with their lack of eyes. *But if that **finger-nibbler** attacks me, I have every right to start screaming.*

"She's a koi! Koi don't have teeth!" Laurie rolled her eyes. "Well, they **do**, but they can't hurt you with them." That was muttered under her breath.

The beetle-kin was returning, holding a pile of clothes with all of their arms. Speaker turned their head, considering the clothes somehow. Laurie decided to save the rest of her lecture for a time that everyone else would better appreciate. She couldn't tell what Speaker was doing with their body now, but it probably wasn't worth her time to ask.

Speaker tried on the clothes the seller had brought them, lost in thought. Laurie had promised that these were purple enough for

their standards, and they trusted her enough to assume that she was being truthful. That was part of the problem, really. They trusted her with that sort of information. They roughly brushed a sleeve out of the way, hands grasping the tie that their setae told them was there.

She'd just been the oddest of all the humans in the Library at the time, hadn't she? Still a potential meal, nothing more. Just the curiosity of hearing talk of fish magic had spurred them on to follow her. Otherwise she was supposed to be nothing. Back home, that would have been the proper way of things. They would have fed on her essence and cared nothing about it. Mindlessly they went through the process of trying and buying clothes, saying little and offering few opinions. Laurie threw a few barbs their way about sulking. Beyond the expected rebuttal they ignored the jabs.

They weren't really supposed to be here, in this universe. Not that it mattered. They'd have died if they'd stayed, and flinging themselves headlong into another universe had seemed like a much better idea at the time. But this universe didn't much care for them. They could feel it in the way reality rippled around them. These uncomfortable forms they took kept that rippling from growing to powerful. Limiting what they did with their abilities was a further way of ensuring that things didn't get too out of hand. If they were unlucky, the spasms that their full being would inflict on this reality wouldn't kill them at all. But at the least it would shatter some very important natural laws within a large area. That should have just bothered them because it would mean that they would be dead or worse. But they were beginning to worry about the collateral damage as well. That was troubling.

Having to think about other people was just so frustrating. Speaker spent the trip back in silence, not even contemplating the Way as they usually did. This wasn't the way of things! They were no predator, sure, but hunger was hunger and that human next to them would suffice as well as any other. Not as well as the great void-creatures that they had once lived among, of course. But those which had survived had not cared for a little parasite in their midsts. That was why they were here.

But they were a little more clever than most parasites. They had

evaded the deaths which countless others had fallen to. They had evaded the imprisonment which had locked away even the Two Serpents. They had even been one of a few to creep amongst the stars while the Fallen One had raged and writhed in the cold of the void. Being unobtrusive had served them well.

Speaker had made their decision by the time they left the Way. The creatures they would destroy in their return had thought them nothing more than a nuisance. That was not a mistake Speaker would make in turn. Perhaps even a little fish-mage could teach them something of use. Cleaning the ponds of such dangerous creatures was an insult at best. But it would simply have to be tolerated.

They would grow, and they would persevere. There was no other option. And if the fish-mage wasn't useful, well…

Feverish

The sweat slid in rivers as he burned. Inches from the fan blades, the pounding breeze doing next to nothing to relieve the searing fire in his flesh. Sick for the last two days, Adam's fever had only started to soar over last night, and now he felt as if water would boil in his mouth. Leaning back, he rubbed his temples, trying to decide whether going to bed was worth having to feel his own burning fever-heat reflected back at him by the pillows.

He felt hot and almost pliant, like almost-baked dough. His throat was also a red, burning lump in his neck, with an opening that felt to be the size of a pin prick. Every time he moved, he could feel twitching, shivering shocks jolt down his limbs to swollen, creaking joints. Told to say hydrated, he had a tall glass of icy water next to him. It could have been on the moon, for all the good it did him, as every time he tried to take in anything more substantial then air, he felt like choking.

He tried to take another swallow of water, but his raw throat seemed to clamp shut the second it touched the cool liquid, causing him to gag. He rose, tossing the cup aside, and stumbled in to the kitchen with the vaguely formed thought of getting something hot to drink instead. As he turned to the stove, he saw the place on the wall were he had leaned coming in. He blinked, his overheated brain trying to process what he was seeing.

There was a bloody hand print on the wall, dripping slowly.

He looked down to see his shirt spotted with blood. His pants, his hair, everything was spotted and dripping blood. He started to stumble back out of the kitchen, unable to scream for help around his raw throat, but everyone was gone anyway, run to the store for fresh medicine. He moaned, feeling sharp, shocking pain rocket through his joints with each movement, sending him to his knees. As he looked, a clear fluid started to replace the blood welling from his skin. Then his finger sagged.

It just…flopped, like a wilting flower, the knuckles reversing as easily as if it'd been made of dough. Adam started panting, gently trying to push his finger back up, but it sagged more, then started to drip through his fingers like overheated play dough. He moaned, trying to rise, but found himself stuck. He looked down to see his legs starting to puddle around him, flowing in a glaze of bloody and clear fluid. He watched, barely able to breathe, as a toenail floated out of his shoe.

He groaned, trying to pitch his sagging, flowing body forward, but landed on the floor with a sickening splat. He felt his face start to flow, the soft tissues pooling in to the carpet, his vision starting to distort and blur as his eyes spread like two brown-yolked eggs on to the carpet. As he felt his gums and skull start to sag and mush like old, rotting pumpkins, his one consolation was that, finally, he didn't feel like he was burning anymore.

Field Man

When I was little - I, that is Crackles, not an unnamed creepypasta protagonist - I went on a lot of road trips with my dad and my brother, almost always to Idaho to visit family. We passed by a lot of fields. Sometimes they had wheat, others had corn, others were littered with bales of hay. On occasion we'd see herds of cows. But the fields that just looked like several empty acres of dirt often baffled me. Were they not being used anymore? Were they freshly planted, with no new plants visible yet? Did nobody own them?

One summer, when I was eight years old, we were driving through Iowa along Interstate 80. One of those empty dirt fields caught my attention, not because it was particularly fascinating, but because there was a man in a brown coat standing in it with his back to the road. As our car passed by, I noticed he was turning slowly so that he was always facing away from me. I watched him until the car dipped over a little hill and he - and his dirt field - disappeared.

I asked Dad if he saw that. The 'field man'. He didn't. My brother hadn't either, as he'd been asleep since Illinois. I'm not certain if it was real, a very vivid dream, or a half-remembered bit from a film seen many years ago. Memories of small children can easily lie.

Sometimes, nearly ten years later, I find myself driving along Interstate 5 and looking out for the field man.

Fields Of Green

A voice echoed from the intercom set flush in the ceiling. "Okay, boys. This is the last of the food flavoring trials. Swallow the pills you've been given, then fill out one of the forms with what you tasted."

One of the men immediately popped the capsule into his mouth and dry-swallowed it before grabbing a clipboard. The other eleven men looked nervously at each other, then one said, "Uh, shouldn't we let them dissolve in our mouths or something before swallowing them?"

There was a pause, then the intercom crackled again. "No, these are supposed to be activated by your stomach acid. Just swallow the things and fill out the forms, okay?"

The remaining men hesitated, but followed instructions. As the last pill was swallowed, the first man jerked forward, clutching his stomach.

An anonymous assistant research, safely ensconced 10 kilometers away, rested her hand near the intercom button. "Lord, I can't keep track sometimes. What was this testing, again?"

Her coworker, not looking at her, typed notes into his workstation and replied, "Whether adding 447-2 to various poisons neutralizes them. Looks like it made them more effective instead."

She sighed and entered a command into the computer. "Well, *that* was predictable. Turning on the camera filters now."

A sourceless green glow suffused the room, faint at first but building to a blinding verdant glare. As it passed a certain threshold, the cameras in the room shut off. When they turned on again a few moments later, the now-fading light was still bright enough to make

the observers blink as their eyes adjusted. Littered around the room were the now-lifeless bodies of a dozen former inmates.

The woman turned from the monitor to her companion and said, "Well, that's another test done and logged. I really don't know why they have us keep doing this. It's the same thing every time."

He shrugged as he typed up the preliminary report. "I dunno. So long as I keep getting paid and I don't get transferred to one of the more dangerous things, I'm cool with logging pointless experiments."

He leaned forward and nodded at the monitor. "Look, right on time. Get ready to turn on the suppressant foam."

One of the corpses started to smolder, faint wisps of smoke drifting from its exposed skin. One by one, each of the bodies followed suit, the skin blackening and collapsing to reveal greenish-black embers that flickered with small emerald flames. A series of clicks sounded as nozzles extended from the ceiling.

The woman flipped a series of switches, then frowned as a pair of amber lights appeared amongst the field of green. "Aw crap, nozzles 4 through 7 are clogged. I bet the cleanup crew last week didn't hose 'em out fully. Is there any way we can get a team in there early to clean 'em out?"

Her coworker shook his head. "I don't think so. The doors are sealed until all levels inside are back to within normal limits. Those nozzles are over in the northwest corner, right?" He glanced from monitor to monitor. "I think all the corpses should be covered by the others. Just log it and let the cleanup crew get their asses in a sling. I'll tell 'em to make sure to clean those out good."

He started typing up an email as she entered a brief addendum into the experiment log. Neither of them paid any more attention to the monitors while they worked.

Eleven bodies were completely covered in a thick layer of purple foam. The twelfth was almost *completely covered. An outstretched arm, flung to the side as the body had fallen, had resulted in a much thinner layer of foam that thinned as it extended up the limb. The very tip of the middle finger remained untouched. The flame on its fingernail grew stronger.*

Their respective typing done, the two assistant researchers leaned back in their chairs and looked back to the monitors, bored by the unchanging nature of their duties. Suddenly, the woman leaned forward to peer at one.

"Wait. The D-class over by the wall… Shit! I think he's still clear! Look at his hand!"

The man stared at the strengthening flame on the monitor, then popped open a clear plastic cover on his console and slapped a large red button. Klaxons immediately started sounding.

"Containment breach in progress. Report to your assigned stations. This is not a drill. Containment breach in progress. Report to your…"

The woman scrambled for the door to the hallway as growing flames flickered on the monitors. She didn't notice the back of her neck start painlessly smoldering where the verdant light from the monitors touched it. The man was rooted to his chair as his eyes reflected green.

A lone figure stood in a peaceful field. A great sea of green and growing grass stretched in front of him, peaceful wave patterns flowing across their surface as the wind blew and bent the stalks. He turned and found a great forest behind him; the trunks of the trees dark and black, but the leaves fresh and vibrantly verdant. The sky looked overcast, but light suffused everything and he could clearly see everything. Every vein in every leaf, every crack of bark, even individual blades of grass on the horizon.

Another person suddenly appeared, laying a few meters away along the treeline, then another standing in the grasses, and another perched on a branch above. All looked as confused as he felt.

"Where am I?" he whispered as he rubbed his eyes with his hands, unbelieving what he was seeing. A fingernail on his left hand shone like sunlight through water.

A loving voice surrounded him, echoing from above, below and all around him, composed of the rustles of wind and leaves and the grinding of stones. Despite its odd timbres of simultaneous power and gentleness, it resonated in him with a feeling of deep affection and tranquility.

WELCOME HOME

Fifteen To Sixteen

“I’d think it would be warmer.”

“Huh?”

“The end of the world. I mean, think about it. When somebody says post-apocalyptic wasteland, you picture a desert, right?”

“Mm. I guess so.”

“Instead of the snowglobe we’ve got goin’ here.”

Joe didn’t reply to the last one, and Emma glanced at him. Joe’s attention was focused elsewhere, eyes squinting against the bitterly cold wind that was whipping small, delicate flakes to and fro. It was a delicate snow that formed a haze in the distance, the light of sundown turning everything a rich shade of blue. The street was not terribly different from how it had been five years ago, when it all happened, but there were…differences. Awnings had torn away from shop fronts and flapped in the wind. Windows were broken in, the stores raided.

And Joe crouched on top of the semi-trailer he called home, eyes narrowed. He actually had lived fairly close to here, although he didn’t think about it anymore. After all, five years ago…thing were very different for him. He had a job and a girlfriend, and two dogs. A nice apartment walking distance from the office. Of course, that was before it happened.

It was hard to piece together what had all happened, things had truly happened so quickly. In a matter of hours, chaos broke out that took months to calm. Bombs had gone off somewhere, a dozen countries declared war, and then they were silenced when the…things emerged. Joe had only seen the monsters a few times, and he counted his blessings for that. It was best to hide when they were around, no matter what they were.

Joe liked to think that he had been a pretty nice guy, before all hell rose up, but it didn't matter now. He fidgeted slightly, having sworn that he saw movement far down the street through the haze of snow, but when it didn't return…he was forced to relent, turning and climbing down the narrow ladder on the side of the semi-trailer. They had initially taken up residence in an abandoned home, then an abandoned shop, but in the end…the massive, heavy metal box turned out to be the safest of them all.

Emma waited for him at the bottom. "Anything?" She asked.

"No. We should get inside before nightfall."

They hurried into the semi-trailer through the small door on the side, pushing their way through several layers of hanging blankets as they shut and locked the opening, before emerging into the warm interior. Joe nodded to David, who doused the fire and shut the chimney slides, sealing the warmth in. The trailer was all but airtight, and they'd wake up chilly, but it was preferable to waking up with something with too many limbs and too many mouths crawling in, attracted by the scent of a fire. Or to never waking up again, carbon monoxide filling the box.

Joe lay back on one of the mattresses, sandwiched between Emma- who nestled against him, and Adam, who faced away and curled up alone. There was little room, and there were fifteen people to share it between them. Joe wrapped his arms around Emma, and glanced up. Emmet was on watch duty tonight, he knew, looking at the young man to make sure he was awake and alert before looking down.

Emma's face was barely illuminated by the faintest light, Emmet's dim watch lantern cast it over the trailer, and she was asleep the moment she closed her eyes. Probably for the better, Joe thought, as the young woman had been out foraging all day, and this life of survival left for little time to stop and think, and only time to eat, sleep, and hope to eat.

They had decent food stores, sure, but this winter had come in hard and faster than any before. The summers were hotter, he noted, and the winters colder these past five years, or perhaps it was some

illusion caused by the lack of central heating or air conditioning. He didn't know, pulling Emma close to his chest.

Four years ago, when their little group had formed in a town filled with dead, dying, and things unspeakable, she had been a portly teenager, often short of breath and easily tired, but the years had carved her into a fine young woman, although her hips were still wide and she never lost all the girth of her upper arms, or thighs. She reminded Joe of his girlfriend, who had been lost when she left town to try and find her parents.

Joe suddenly thought about his girlfriend, briefly, and then held Emma tighter. On second thought, maybe their food stores were better off than he had the impression of, musing that she was a little thicker around the waist than she had been at the end of fall.

Then, he was abruptly and deeply asleep. He hadn't dreamt once in the past five years, curiously enough, none of them had. He thought nothing of it.

Then he was awake, silently, eyes wide and glancing about. Emmet was standing, holding the small pistol he carried warily, looking up at the roof of the trailer. Something scratched along. Joe glanced around, everybody else was awake as well, the faint sound of scrabbling hands and claws having aroused everybody's attention.

They stayed awake, until it passed, whatever had been there, tapping at the metal, losing interest, before falling back to sleep until morning. They didn't dare leave the trailer until the sun was up, stepping out under a clear blue sky and a world freshly covered with pure, pristine, untouched snow.

Well, perhaps almost untouched.

When they collected snow to heat for washwater that morning, Joe and Tina, the oldest woman in the group, a stern woman pushing forty-five, silently looked at footprints that led from the distance up on top of the trailer, where they circled about, then left, heading deeper into town. Joe pointed out the elongated toes and paw-pad like impressions. Tina pointed out the long marks in the snow where it had scratched at the metal.

“What do you think it was?” Emma asked, that afternoon. She had spent a lot of time, lately, Joe thought, rummaging through old drug stores and corner shops.

“I don’t know. Footprints reminded me of my dogs, but with toes like a monkey.” Joe muttered, going about the messy work of cleaning a deer, a small doe, that they had managed to get. Of course, they only cleaned their fresh kills far away from the trailer that was home.

“Do you think it’ll come back?”

He shrugged, and glanced up at her. She had something hidden in her pockets.

“…Dan’s been talking about leaving.”

“To where?”

“I don’t know. He said that he just feels stir-crazy, and thinks he can walk to the next town, see if anybody’s there.”

“Why?”

“Because. I don’t know.” Emma frowned, neither of them knew anybody who left town that came back. They had seen a group of travelers, once, and observed them curiously, but they had left the second they stumbled across Joe’s own footprints, hastening away. Perhaps worried about contact, and frankly, Joe’s group wasn’t too keen on it either. “I’m gonna go back to the trailer. Ana wanted help mending some old clothes.”

Joe grunted and continued his work with the deer, until Emma, dissatisfied with the lack of response, turned and left. Joe watched her walk away, and paused when he saw the corner of a box sticking out of her pocket, just barely able to make out a few letters, part of a logo.

FIRST RESPO

He paused, then, and for the first time in a long time, truly thought, deeply, about something beyond survival and the here and now.

Then he turned back to the deer, a small smile on his lips even in the bitter cold, and went back to work. He would talk with Dan tonight, and perhaps…they could find a doctor in the next town. Yes, that would be good.

Fight

"Fucking hell, Sarah," Mitchell said. "I guess I'll just stop talking. Just…" He made a growling sound of frustration.

"You know how much I hate it when you curse at me," Sarah said. "You can't argue without cursing. I *hate* it." She sighed. "And that weird growling sound. It makes me afraid you're going to hit—"

"Afraid I'm going to hit you, yes," Mitchell interrupted. "Because that's *ever* happened in the past. I can't just be *angry* at how fucking *irrational* you are all the goddamn time; no, I must be *abusive.* Jesus Christ, Sarah."

She was crying already. Mitchell felt terrible, but he wasn't willing to apologize yet. This trip was already a nightmare, and Mitchell didn't think the hike would be much better. He thought about turning around, decided against it. *May as well give her some time to calm down*, he thought.

They reached the parking lot for the trail, sullenly put on their packs, and carried on. After an hour or so, Mitchell finally turned to Sarah. "Look, I'm sorry. For the way I acted."

"I…" Sarah sighed. "Yeah, I'm sorry too. I know how stressful it can be, doing as much work as you do. You really do need to work on your anger issues, though—"

"I know," Mitchell said.

"—and also your interrupting issues," Sarah said, frowning for a moment. Mitchell apologized again.

They held hands the rest of the way along the trail, stopping to sit on a rock for a moment. Sarah got out her canteen and took a drink, passing it to Mitchell. *I really do love him,* she thought. *I just wish he could be—*

Sarah saw something peeking its head out of the woods. *Is that a monkey?* she thought. *What's it doing out—*

The monkey dashed along the ground towards them. "Mitchell! Look out!" Sarah screamed. Mitchell turned and looked just in time to see the little monkey bite him on the hand and dash off into the woods.

"Ow, goddammit!" Mitchell yelled. But the bite didn't hurt as much as he felt like it should, so he composed himself. *She already thinks I have anger issues,* he thought. *No reason to act crazy now, not when we're patching things up.* "Aw, that was weird," he said.

"Oh my god, are you okay?" Sarah asked

"Yeah, yeah, it's cool," Mitchell said, playing off the pain. "Dude had little teeth or something. Eh, I'll be all right."

Sarah packed the bags back up; Mitchell did the same. They began walking back.

Half an hour of far more pleasant conversation followed. Halfway back to the parking lot, Sarah paused a moment. "Do you smell that?" she asked.

Mitchell sniffed. "I don't smell anything."

"Of course you don't," Sarah snapped, "you never smell anything. Jesus, I think you have a tumor or something. Same way you can't hear anything, either. At least not anything I say." Sarah shook her head and walked around for a minute, sniffing the air.

"God, sorry," Mitchell said, recoiling slightly.

Sarah sighed. "It's disgusting. I don't know how you could possibly not smell that." They kept walking.

"Oh, god," she said after a while. "I know where it's coming from. It's *you.* I'm sure of it. What *is* that?"

"Hmm?" he asked.

"Jesus, you really *don't* listen, do you?"

"Oh, not this again," Mitchell huffed. "What is it now? Am I not picking my feet up enough? Did I pick my nose? Do I have too many zits? Did I bring the wrong books? Did I forget what your favorite purse looks like? Did the food I brought not have enough green vegetables? What do you have to complain about now, for fuck's sake?" Mitchell realized he'd gone too far, took a step towards Sarah. "Oh, shit, baby, I'm sorry, I didn't mean—"

Sarah slapped Mitchell directly across the face. "You pissant piece of shit, don't you *ever* speak to me like that again!"

Mitchell was shocked, and in a considerable amount of pain. He rubbed the spot on his face where Sarah slapped him; it had come back with a spot of blood on it. He looked at Sarah and was shocked. She looked nearly crazed with anger.

Sarah charged at him; Mitchell didn't know what to do, so he started running away. He dropped his pack on the ground so as to run faster. Sarah was close behind him, though; her time at the gym left her in better shape than he was.

Mitchell heard a rustling in the woods beside him, then saw a form emerge. A dog was running next to him. Not even a big dog, maybe just a terrier. Mitchell didn't think much of this until the chipper-looking dog launched itself at him, growling and snarling as though it were rabid. The thirty-pound terrier brushed past Mitchell, its teeth nipping at Mitchell's leg before falling to the side. *What the fuck is going on?* he thought.

He wasn't looking at the trail closely enough. A group of small animals were coming at him, mostly squirrels and stray cats. Startled, Mitchell tripped and fell to the ground, huffing. The squirrels began nibbling on his ears as soon as they reached him, while the cats clawed at his hands.

Sarah was close behind. Mitchell fought to throw the animals off of him, clawing his way forward, but Sarah was too fast. She dove onto his back, knees first, shoving him to the ground with her weight.

"You piece…of shit…" Sarah snarled, beating on the back of Mitchell's head with the bottoms of her fists, "moody….insecure…

pussy…asshole!" The blows kept raining down. Mitchell was dizzy, his blood all over the ground now. He was barely holding on to consciousness. "I fucking…hate you…you son of a bitch! Just… fucking…die!"

Sarah found a palm-sized stone on the ground nearby. The terrier caught up to the group and started biting at Mitchell's ankles. That was the last feeling Mitchell noticed before the rock smashed into his skull the first time. He didn't feel the last twenty-six times.

Researcher Kim was sitting in front of his computer, considering the information in front of him. There were six murders now, all unrelated, all in wooded regions of the Southeast United States. All committed by people with no history of violent crime, often simply people who were near the victim. Hell, in two of the cases, multiple people all joined in, beating or clawing or kicking the victim to death. And in every instance, all signs pointed to a temporary yet total psychotic break. They all simply decided to kill somebody near them.

Ten people do not "turn crazy" all at once. They don't murder a man for no reason. Their official cover stories involved drugs, gas leaks, the usual, but Kim wasn't the only one who knew that didn't explain things. Kim agreed with his colleagues who forwarded him the information; something anomalous was going on. He just had no idea what to do with that knowledge. He had no idea how to find… whatever this was.

He heard a rustling sound behind him, like paper on tile. Rubbing his eyes (*how is it already past midnight,* Kim thought), he turned to look.

A large manila envelope was just in front of his door. Kim walked over, opened the door, looked back and forth down the long hallway. Nobody.

He closed the door and grabbed the envelope. Inside he found a batch of twenty photos, a printout of a Wikipedia article, and a single sheet of paper with some words scrawled on it.

He looked at the photos. He was shocked to recognize many of them, all photos of the victims he had been looking at only a few minutes ago. First he saw Mitchell Rosenberg, the most recent victim, covered in bite marks and lying with his head smashed in from behind. Next was another photo, much closer, showing Mitchell's hand. A circle was drawn around one bite in particular.

The rest of the photos were the same; first, a victim, then, a single bite. Kim's knowledge of forensic science wasn't needed here. Anybody would have recognized it. Each victim was covered in bites from small animals, but they were usually different animals. This bite, however, was exactly the same on every single victim. Many of the photos were of victims Kim didn't recognize; he assumed they were new.

He put down the photos and picked up the single sheet of paper. After some time, he was able to make out the scrawl. It was an address somewhere in Tennessee, no place Kim recognized. Below that read simply "LOOK IN THE BARN. BRING MASKS."

Kim, confused, put the paper on top of the photos and looked at the Wikipedia article:

> *The Philippine tarsier (Carlito syrichta), known locally as the kupal in Cebuano/Visayan and mamag in Luzon…*

He skimmed the article and began typing a message to his supervisor.

Figure and Ground

She lay, crying, in the darkened cell, listening to her brother's screams and the threats of their captors if he failed again.

SCP-2162: Supplementary materials

+ Addendum 3: Field Diary - SCP-2162/Navarro/01

Addendum 3: Field Diary - SCP-2162/Navarro/01

30 June 2013:

Met with Agent Green today for an initial briefing on the anomaly. Turns out he used to hunt down reality warpers for the GOC - nice. Not the warmest of meetings then, given my "skillset". God knows why they assigned us both to the skip - I guess the theory is that it's either an experimenting reality bender or an anart project, so it could fit either of our specialties.

But I'm not sure it's as simple as that. It's clear the skip was man-made, but as a piece of art, it's just not very interesting. Simplistic, even juvenile. And the execution feels all wrong. Even if the invisibility was meant to be post-modern, there's no sign of claiming credit for the work - no signature, no announcement.

Even terrible artists want the world to know who they are.

An experiment then - a practice effort? I seriously hope we don't see another draft.

2 July 2013:

The ground team traced the likely origin point for the anomaly to the Happy Camp Canyon Park in Moorpark. They located a possible epicentre based on the concentration of deceased wildlife, and found fresh bike tracks in the area.

Starting somewhere isolated does suggest an experiment. Maybe one that didn't go as intended, that got out of hand? And whoever it was panics and rides off. On a mountain bike.

It's got to be a kid.

7 July 2013:

Green and I have been talking to local anartists, asking about new faces. No luck around the northwest of the city, so we moved into central LA. They're a prickly bunch here - we've had a few walk-offs, a drink thrown in my face, and I think one of them almost unleashed some aggressive-looking mobile knitwear at us. I can't imagine trying to fit in here as a kid.

Green's a good interviewer though: knows what to ask, and when to just listen. Turns out one reason things are so tense is that we're not the only interlopers on the scene lately. Apparently some guy called Michael Cavendish has been asking for anartists to help on a project, offering big money on behalf

of a rich widow in Beverly Hills. The artists here are far too *principled* to work for money, of course, and laughed him out of the place. But now their backs are up, so our intrusion is poorly timed.

Michael Cavendish? I'm sure I've heard that name before.

10 July 2013:

Finally, a lead. We found someone who admits to seeing our mystery artist, and has even given us a name: Robert Baker. I was right - he's a kid. We've classified him as PoI-2162-1.

Apparently Robert arrived in LA earlier in the year, and went straight for the anart community, looking to show off his work. Our contact saw him in bars some nights, "*wearing ratty old jeans and tennis shoes, barely sipping a beer all evening*".

"*Mostly people kept their distance - after Cavendish had been so pushy, everyone was wary of newcomers. So he'd sit quietly on his own. Then some notable anartist would show up, surrounded by contemporaries and hangers-on, and he'd suddenly fill with energy. Like an excited puppy, but one that still half-expected a kick. He'd scamper over to them and work up some quick effects - mostly lights and colours, spinning in intricate shapes. Half the time I don't think they even noticed him. Other times some lackey would make a comment, call him a hick or something, and they'd laugh and move on. And he'd just slink back to his table and wait, or wander out looking like he didn't know where to go.*

"*The funny thing was, some of the stuff he did*

was all right - basic, but he had talent. He should have tried talking to more of us, or maybe we should have talked to him, but he only wanted to be noticed by the big names."

It feels good to be talking with artists again. Researchers, scientists, they draw conclusions, give you the results of their observations. An artist can tell you more by painting the negative space - showing you other people's reactions and impressions until you see the outline of the person in the centre.

Based on the contact's information, we've even managed to find an address in Reseda. No sign of the PoI, and his housemate wasn't much use, but we have set up surveillance and will intercept his mail.

Our interest in PoI-2162-1 has been noticed, too - our contact pointed out Michael Cavendish, who had been watching us from the corner of the bar. We might need to have a word with him, I suspect.

+ Addendum 4: Recovered Documents

Addendum 4: Recovered Documents

On 11 July 2013, Foundation interception protocols obtained a postcard addressed to PoI-2162-1. Text follows:

Hey Goober,

That's awesome news! Well done you. (Meanwhile, you have to get another phone, dude - postcards is cute and all, but I wanna

hear this stuff sooner, and text you congrats)

Seriously, though, you should be stoked. Only there a few months, and already someone wants you to work for them? And pays you in advance!? That's the dream. That's exactly why you left. Who cares if the old lady doesn't appreciate your real stuff. Who cares if she doesn't know what bromidic means. Just give her Mitzi Gaynor and get the rest of that sweet cash, baby! :) And maybe she'll tell her rich LA friends about you - who knows where you could end up.

And when you do, you can go back and laugh at those snobs with their stupid art club. You wouldn't join now if they begged you. Just don't forget your little sis when you're famous! I told you things would work out.

Hey, and show me what you're working on, too - I can't come to visit yet (rolls eyes) so photos please.

Love ya,

June-bug

PS - Mom says hi.

The card was postmarked from Muscatine, Iowa on 25 June 2013, but misaddressed and not received until 11 July 2013. Federal database searches revealed driver's licence and social security details for a June Baker, born 1997, residing in Muscatine with her parents, Mr Daniel Baker and Mrs Sharon Baker. June Baker has been designated as PoI-2162-2.

+ Addendum 5: Post-Incident Interview SCP-2162-B/ Cavendish/01

Addendum 5: Post-Incident Interview SCP-2162-B/ Cavendish/01

Interviewed: "Michael Cavendish"
Interviewers: Agent Green, Agent Daniel Navarro
Date: 12 July 2013

Foreword: Agents Green and Navarro attempted to question PoI-2162-3 ("Michael Cavendish") at a club frequented by anomalous artists. PoI-2162-3 attempted to leave the scene, causing a diversion using tanks of liquid bromine in the PoI's van, together with several items of anomalous technology. PoI-2162-3 was eventually apprehended by Agents Green and Navarro and was brought in for questioning.

<***excerpt commences at 35:16***>

Agent Navarro: This is becoming boring, Michael. Look, I'm pretty sure you know who we are, and if so, you know that the only way we can help you is if you tell us how you know Robert Barker.

Cavendish: Oh, I know who you two are. The ex-GOC traitor and his fire-magic lap-dog.

Agent Navarro: You think I should singe him again?

Agent Green: I wouldn't bother.

Cavendish: Taking orders from him now, are you, dog? How many of your kind has he killed? How many of your *friends*?

Agent Navarro: You piece of -

Agent Green: Daniel, just -

Agent Navarro: Keep out of it!

Cavendish: Oh dear, mister agent. Do you think he might burn you too? Do you think he hasn't thought about it?

Agent Green: Fuck you!

Cavendish: Do you think you could get a shot off first? I'm sure you've thought about that. What if you're not quick enough - what will it smell like when you burn?

Agent Navarro: Perhaps you'd like a reminder yourself!

Agent Green: Daniel, don't -

Agent Navarro: DON'T TELL ME WHAT TO DO!

<***silence - 5 seconds***>

Cavendish: Dear oh dear. It seems you two might have a bit to discuss between yourselves. You don't need me here. And while I've heard all about you, I've never heard of this Robert Baker person. You don't have any basis to keep me here.

Agent Navarro: Except that you just said "Baker".

Cavendish: What?

Agent Green: Yeah, we've just spent the last half-hour carefully saying "Barker". It's an old trick, but there's a reason for that - it's just so

effective on people who think they're the smartest guy in the room.

Agent Navarro: Not to mention you were driving a van full of bromine, which forms a coloured gas to visualise the anomaly nicely. And your alias - Michael Cavendish, one of the earliest patrons of anomalous artists? That was a bit obvious, don't you think?

Agent Green: Actually, I've never heard of him.

Agent Navarro: Really? Maybe it's just me.

Agent Green Perhaps. Nice acting, by the way. You almost had me going.

Agent Navarro Thanks. Anyway Cavendish, we know you're involved, so can you get on with telling us? Or not - we've got all night.

Agent Green: Perhaps you could start with Robert Baker.

Cavendish: <***silence - 4 seconds***> He wasn't like the others. Most of the artists I talked to - once they knew what I wanted them to do, and guessed who I was working for, they'd tell me where to stick it. Sometimes things even got a little nasty, although I don't mind that. But the kid was different. I knew straight away - he looked different. He looked hungry.

Agent Green: Hungry?

Cavendish: Desperate. He wanted approval, wanted someone to tell him how special he was. Hungry for attention, for praise. Also just plain hungry - he was thin as a rail.

Agent Navarro: And you offered him a

commission?

Cavendish: He showed me a little of what he could do - the kid had some talent. We made a contract, and I paid him an advance. Never seen anyone get that excited over a few thousand lousy bucks.

Agent Navarro: What happened then?

Cavendish: He messed up, is what. Tried to test it out and got everything wrong. The size, the level of detail, even the composition - it was nothing like the agreed specifications. I mean, I get the bromine shipped at unnecessary risk and he uses a gas that's invisible! It was no use to anyone.

Agent Green: So what, you killed him?

Cavendish: Unlike you, I'm no killer. But I told him that his patron had a schedule, and he had to meet it. And the kid flaked out, tried to run. I had to round him up - along with some incentive to finish his work.

Agent Green: Where is he?

Cavendish: I honestly don't know.

Agent Navarro: Think very carefully. Where is he?

Cavendish: Shit, like I'm scared of you? Only reason I've said anything is I'm dead in any case - you've had me here too long. They'll know.

Agent Navarro: Who, the mysterious patroness? We can protect you from her if you help us.

Cavendish: Her? Ha! You think I work for that old bag? I've never met a member in my life - I've never even set foot in the club! My job is to get the members whatever they want, so if a member wants some old actress' grinning mug to float around her lounge, I find someone who can make it happen.

Agent Navarro: Cavendish, I'm going to ask one more time.

<***sound of door opening, Assistant-Director Griffiths enters***>

A-D Griffiths: You two. With me - now.

Agent Navarro: Sir, we -

A-D Griffiths: Muscatine team report. This interview is over.

<***recording ends***>

+ Update - 13 July 2013

Update - 13 July 2013: The Muscatine, Iowa field team reported that attempts to contact PoI-2162-2 were unsuccessful. Mr and Mrs Baker advised that June had "gone to see her brother in Los Angeles", but were vague as to the details or timing of the visit. They could not give a date for their last communication with her, or for her expected return. Based on their lack of concern or curiosity, the use of amnestic-related compounds on Mr and Mrs Baker was suspected. On-site tests identified the residue of a substance with effects on memory and perception, previously associated with investigations involving the GoI known as Marshall, Carter, and Dark Ltd.

In light of this information, it was determined (on

Assistant-Director authority) that PoI-2162-3 would be amnesticised and released. Agents Green and Navarro requested that PoI-2162-3 remain subject to surveillance, with the hope that he would lead investigators to PoI-2162-1's location or to further contacts. This request was pending at the time of administration of the amnestic.

Upon administration of a standard Foundation Class-B amnestic, PoI-2162-3 suffered what appeared to be a severe anaphylactic reaction, and was pronounced dead by Foundation medical staff at the scene. Post-mortem analysis revealed that the reaction may have been caused by artificially implanted histamine reserves, triggered by the amnestic.

+ Addendum 6: Investigation Closure Order

Addendum 6: Investigation Closure Order

From the office of the Assistant-Director, Site-15

Date: *14 July 2013*

The investigation into the whereabouts of PoI-2162-1 is hereby closed, due to the presumed involvement of a hostile GoI. Foundation efforts are to focus on containment of the SCP-2162 anomaly, rather than recovery of PoI-2162-1 and PoI-2162-2.

Applications by Agents Green and Navarro to continue the investigation have been refused. A formal protest from Agent Navarro was summarily dismissed. Agents Green and Navarro have been ordered to cease any activities connected to SCP-2162, and have

been placed on one week's administrative leave before transfer to subsequent assignments.

Authorised: *A-D Griffiths*

She lay, crying, in the darkened cell, listening to her brother's screams and the threats of their captors if he failed again. Sometimes she imagined shapes in the blackness, figures coming to save her. But no figures appeared in that perpetual, numbing dark - no-one had come. Would no-one come?

Fik'ra

Abd al-Rashid bin Tannous adjusted himself again in the uncomfortable plastic chair provided to him. The Office for the Reclamation of Islamic Artifacts operated on a limited budget, it was true, and there was a logic to avoiding wasteful expenditures on luxuries such as comfortable furniture. The Director of the Office most certainly could not be seen making an exception for himself; or, phrased differently, *this* Director would never be seen making such an exception. Parviz Jafari, formerly of the Islamic Republican Air Force, formerly before that of the Imperial Iranian Air Force, was not one to tolerate frivolities. Particularly as a man who had spent the last decade publicly humiliating himself to maintain his cover as a retired general and conspiracy lunatic.

Director *né* General Jafari was presently concluding — *theoretically,* Abd al-Rashid thought to himself — what must have been a twenty-five minute long phone call to a granddaughter or great-granddaughter who lived somewhere just outside of Tehran. Never having had, or cared for the idea of, children, Abd al-Rashid was systematically incapable of conceiving of what a seven-year-old girl could find to occupy twenty-five minutes of time in conversation with a grown man. Particularly twenty-five minutes of time that Director Jafari was supposed to be spending chiding, actively berating, or demoting Abd al-Rashid. He didn't know if he should have been thankful for the extra time needed to gather his thoughts or cursed the little girl for giving him more time to be fearful. Neither had any particular moral weight for him.

"Yes, my darling, I will see you this weekend. Hmm? Yes, yes. Sleep tight, dear," he said, chuckling. "I love you." Still chuckling as he returned the telephone to the receiver, he said "You really know how to *kos nane kherse ghotbi*, don't you?"

Realizing he was the one being addressed and not the now-unavailable preadolescent, Abd al-Rashid shook his head. "I'm

sorry, s—"

"Oh, yes. That's right. You aren't fluent in Farsi. But we didn't recruit you as a linguist, did we? We recruited you as a man with command experience in covert operations." Director Jafari was still smiling as he continued, which Abd al-Rashid knew *very* well was a bad sign. "You came well recommended from our contacts in Ankara, you know. People who recognize…ah, here it is. "Field operative administration". That sounds suspiciously like a job that involves communication. You know, the thing where you speak to people? Possibly one of those jobs that involves working with others?"

Director Jafari then fell silent for a long time. This was not Abd al-Rashid's first time in this particular chair, and he knew he should say something, simply because that was the only way this would end without bloodshed. "Sir —"

"Fuck the polar bear."

The look of utter bafflement on Abd al-Rashid's face now would have been universal across time and space.

"I said 'you really know how to fuck the polar bear, don't you?' Persian expression. An operative I met once from Qā'idah-SCP once used a similar expression in English, ah…" Jafari paused for a moment before continuing, "'You really know how to shit the bed,' I believe the translation would go. To put it literally, 'You are remarkably, incredibly, unprecedentedly skilled at making my job profoundly difficult.'"

Abd al-Rashid was only certain of the depths of his superior's anger upon his realization that he had driven the man to use four adverbs in one sentence. The silent prayers to God in his head redoubled in intensity.

"Now, as for your behavior in Samothrace, I find myself at a bit of an impasse. You were and remain far and away the youngest man I have sent to perform a mission of that importance. I sent you there in command over Bijhan, for God's sake, a man with *three times* the number of years in the Organization as you have. Soothing that particular ego is not the easiest job in the world. That mission was

and remains far and away one of the most difficult to justify within our limited scope of operations. If we didn't have definitive proof that Qā'idah-SCP already had operatives within the anomaly, I doubt I could have reasonably authorized it in the first place."

Director Jafari rose to his full stature and glared deep into Abd al-Rashid's eyes. "So tell me what in the name of al-Buraq's venerable airborne *balls* kept you from holding your tongue around the Afsanites?"

Abd al-Rashid had seen past fear and through to the other side, apparently, because with only the mildest of stutters, he replied "Sir, they're *demonic*. They can't be of God."

The silence that pervaded the room made Abd al-Rashid feel optimistic for a moment. It was foolish, of course, to think that argument was going to fly. But for just a moment, he could imagine that this conversation would end without too much mo —

"Did owls shit in your brain *in utero*, or did they have the patience to wait until the delivery?"

Abd al-Rashid's heart dropped.

"I can barely accept that you *believe* such nonsense. I have profound *difficulty* believing that you took no time to develop a better reasoning before coming in here and defending a deformed and malnourished interpretation of the Qu'ran that sounds like you cribbed it from a fourteen-year-old's final paper at his village *madrasa* in fucking *Dhofar*! You come in here with — did you even fucking *read Sūrat al-Jinn*? Would you like me to see if I have a Qu'ran in some pitiful *torke char* dialect you can comprehend?"

Shame and fear turned to anger. "You *dare* to slander my heritage —"

"Oh, what *shame* I feel, confusing you with someone who finds ethnic slurs to be trivial and casually used in everyday conversation! Please, Muhammad, praise be unto you, descend from Jannah yourself and stay my fucking tongue, lest I offend this poor, parchment-skinned boy once more!"

Director Jafari came around his desk. "Allah said unto Mohammed, peace be unto him, 'Say this: "It has been revealed to me that a group of the *djinn* listened and said, 'Indeed, we have heard an amazing Qur'an. It guides to the right course, and we have believed in it, and we will never compare anyone with the Lord. And it teaches that exalted is the nobleness of our Lord, that has no spouse or child; and that the foolishness we have spoken about Allah has been an excessive transgression. And we had thought that mankind and the *djinn* would never speak about Allah a lie.'"'"

"Sir, we have only their word that they are the *djinn* spoken of in the Seventy-Second Surah of the Qu'ran," Abd al-Rashid said. "These… these *things* are not made of smokeless fire; I touched one of them during this expedition! Solid as you or I!"

"Yes, fool, this was reported to me as well, by the Afsahnite in question," Director Jafari said, pinching the bridge of his nose. "This is another transgression that you will pay for. But it is illusion, Abd; they have no physical form whatsoever. Their bodies are *fik'ra*, thought-stuff, pure idea. The Qā'idah-SCP would refer to them as "sapient memetic organisms", which translates poorly to Arabic. Suffice it to say that the *djinn* stood before you and put forth into your mind the thought of its appearance; when you reached out to where it stood, it put forth into your mind the thought of a corporeal body. Do I know if this is the literal third race created by God? No. Do I particularly care? Most assuredly not. Doctrine is for the Revolutionary Guard; results are for the ORIA."

Abd al-Rashid paused before his next words. "Sir, that…that very nearly borders on —"

"What, blasphemy? Heresy? Treason? Whatever combination of all three now exist in this iteration of the fatherland?" Director Jafari sat back behind his desk again. "The Supreme Leader has placed me and kept me in this place regardless of my adherence to any religious or political doctrine because I have accomplished the goal of protecting the homeland, the *Irānzamīn*, from our external threats. The Qā'idah-SCP would colonize us, their Insurgent counterparts would conquer us outright. The UN pigdogs would dilute us. The various gangs of capitalists would exploit us, the various bands of artists would corrupt us, the various stripes of pagan fanatics want

God knows what with us."

Jafari sighed, leaned across his desk, and continued. "We have our treaties with the Horizon Initiative when it suits us, but trust there is strained. You worked with them in one of the joint raids against the Clockworkers, didn't you? You understand this. Our primary advantages in this sorcerous cold war are the extensive campaigns we've undertaken to make *very* sure our enemies vastly underestimate our capabilities, and our alliance with the *djinn*. Any step you take that undermines the trust between our peoples undermines the land of our fathers. Do you understand that?" Jafari's face was sunken now, disappointed rather than angry; this revealed to Abd al-Rashid the extent of his years. "You are going to make this right. If you happen to eliminate some of your ridiculous prejudices on the way, that would be *marvelous*. But you *will* assuage those you have offended."

It was well understood by most veteran operatives within the Directorate that Parviz Jafari held an almost fatherly role over many of his employees, whether it was spoken aloud or not. The shame Abd al-Rashid felt at that moment made him understand how this was possible now with little difficulty. "I will, sir. Please, tell me what I need to do."

Businesslike again after that moment of vulnerability, Jafari reached into his desk and removed a thin manila folder. Handing it to Abd al-Rashid, he said, "These are instructions on where and when to meet up with your contact; details on how to access House Afseneh are restricted only to trusted individuals, and you will need to be accompanied by one such in order to reach it. It will be expected that you apologize to the *imam* of the House in person on behalf of the offended party, who is likely deployed elsewhere at the moment. The other documents in there deal with etiquette and protocol for interacting with the Afsenites; every House has different rules and procedures, and while I don't seriously expect you're familiar with *anything* of the sort, you need a familiarity with these rules more than you need to be able to wipe your own ass for the next three days, so I suggest you start reading. You will meet up with the contact tomorrow, so I suggest you spend that time reading."

"Yes, sir," Abd al-Rashid said. He stood, nearly saluted out of habit,

and walked out with the folder.

Director Jafari turned to the next piece of business on his desk. To nowhere in the room in particular, he said, in English, "You can come out now, you know. Nobody will be coming in for the next half hour."

A pause, and then a space beside the Director's bookshelf was occupied by a tall, pretty, fair-skinned woman. Aside from thin streaks of gray barely visible in her hair, she could easily have passed for a woman in her early thirties who had lived an unusually stressful life. *Not bad for a centenarian,* Jafari thought to himself.

"Is he nearly as good as you claimed?" the woman asked.

"I have high hopes for him," Jafari replied. "Are you less impressed?"

Josephine shrugged. "I must admit, I'm still working on my Arabic, but it didn't seem like the boy had a great deal of confidence."

Jafari chuckled. "He called Hami Faruhar of House Afsaneh a 'depraved ifrit', apparently. I told him he had to go to the Afsanites and apologize."

Josephine looked puzzled. "How do you expect him to get into…" She paused. "I take it I'm about to take a bit of a trip with the child?"

Jafari smiled. "Well, you had been saying you were wanting to get out of Tehran for a little while. And I think some of the heat has died down, at least from the GOC. You'll have protection from our people if the *magighasseb* come after you, as per our agreement."

"The m — oh, magekillers?"

" 'Wizard butchers', literally," Jafari said. "Close enough. Work on the Arabic, the Farsi, or both, or rely on the telepathy if need be, but you'll need to be the boy's guide among the Afsenites. Consider it the beginning of repaying a favor."

Josephine's face darkened almost imperceptibly, then returned to normal. "Fair enough. I suppose I'm attracting plenty of unwanted

attention on this part of the world from my enemies."

"That you are, dear," Jafari replied. "We will continue to protect you, but some…assistance in our operations now and then would be much appreciated."

"I can assist," Josephine replied, and faded away.

Jafari returned to the work on his desk.

Final Attack Orders

Pico Wilson sat in the middle of his corpse pile.

The Sculptor was talking at The Painter; The Painter talking at The Composer; The Composer was talking at The Builder; The Builder was talking at The Sculptor. The Snipper sat atop his throne, saying nothing to anyone and not being spoken at, the only person in the room actually listening. All of them wanted attention but him.

“I’m telling you, we mock them through ear worms and jingles! They won’t be able to get it out of their heads, they aren’t free in their own minds!”

“No, we literally turn their art into adverts and billboards! The corporatisation of artistic expression kills its meaning!”

“We can literally grow a gallery around them, the ultimate display of power! Forcing them within the confines of the institution!”

“Just sculpt our own artists to take their places, claiming themselves to be the original creators! The real ones won’t know what to do!”

The Snipper played little attention to the squabbling. Surrounded by petulant children, he thought, snapping out some of his subjects’ ribs and stabbing them into the dead man’s legs. How the hell does The Critic even keep them in line?

The answer to that question kicked open the door. Immediately, all conversation was dropped, all disagreements put aside, and all heads turned to face The Janitor.

The Janitor towered tall, a long black trenchcoat stopping just short of its knees. It was definitely an ‘it’; the presence was not of a human but an immutable force of reality. Its face was entirely obscured by a gas mask; it wore a pitch fabric that hurt to look at. Where it moved, lights seemed to flicker and disappear, physical

objects looked intangible and transient, the impossible was certain and certainties could not even be conceived. The Janitor walked into the room, wooden floor creaking to accommodate the immense pressure, and it glanced towards the corpse pile. The Snipper looked directly into the black eyeholes, and in that instant, his stomach turned, his throat tightened, his heart started beating faster and the hairs on his arms stood on end. For the first time in his life, The Snipper felt the sweet rush of love. Well, that or fear. He'd never felt either before, and from what he had heard, the two seemed very similar. He knew one caused attraction, and the other repulsion, and yet here he stood immobile and completely awestruck by the being in front of him. He blurted out the one thing he knew, from an artistic perspective, was objectively true.

"You are beautiful."

He numbly offered The Janitor a cracked rib, grinning dumbly while shaking. The Janitor cocked its head to one side, as if confused, then took the rib and placed it inside an inner trenchcoat pocket. A heavily obscured, almost mechanical voice buzzed from the diaphragm of the gas mask, and yet the words were clear enough to be understood by all.

"You know not what you have offered me. I may well craft Eve from this rib."

The Snipper's grin, somehow, widened even more.

"Then shall I consider you my Yahweh, my Jehovah, my lord and god?"

"I am not a god. I am simply a hand."

"The hand of a god, then!"

"I am my own hand. Nobody thinks themself a god."

"Nobody does, indeed."

The Painter and The Composer shared glances, The Builder actively stared at his feet, and The Sculptor felt somewhat ambivalent to the whole affair, breaking the conversation.

“Get a fucking room. We’re busy.”

The Janitor turned its head to face The Sculptor.

“Apologies, Sculptor. To business, then. To the topic of Friday.”

“Right. Well, you’re obviously here to sit in on the plans. I want you standing by as an ace in the hole in case things go south, you can probably keep track of everything from one of the nearby rooftops.”

“I was planning on doing so regardless. The Director had requested such before her accident.”

“Good. Now I think, perhaps, it would be interesting if we used a bit of a multi-pronged approach here. We’ve all got good ideas, we all think we’ve got the best ones… why not just go for all of them at once?”

The Painter interjected.

“We still need to organise ourselves, else we’ll be tripping over each other’s feet the whole time.”

“True. So, everyone – Janitor excluded, of course – put your plans down on paper, set a timetable, and we can work around it all. Here.”

The Sculptor passed pens and paper to everyone in the room. Everyone began to scribble down notes, The Janitor dutifully standing in silence. The Snipper finished writing, and started to fold his paper into a small origami flower. He began his conversation with The Janitor anew.

“So what do you look like under the mask?”

The Janitor turned. The Sculptor scowled, but continued his own writing.

“Under the mask I am something else.”

“Do you ever take it off? Like, if you get itchy or something?”

“I remove the mask when I am not needed.”

“And then what?”

“And then I am not me.”

The Snipper scratched his head.

“But you are you, though.”

“The me that is this me is not the only me. This is the me that wears a mask. The face beneath this face, perhaps, considers itself a mask concealing me.”

“Oh, so it’s like a split personality shindig. A bit cliché, but hell, who am I to judge, right?”

The Janitor remained silent.

“So, you’re not planning anything for Friday then?”

“My role differs. I am not an artist.”

“Everyone’s an artist.”

“I cannot create.”

“Not all art is in the creation of things. Hell, look at me.”

The Snipper removed a kidney from his subject, rubbing his finger along the rubbery flesh.

“I do not wish to be an artist.”

“Then you’re a critic?”

“I do not judge. I observe.”

“That’s just silly. Observation is inherently judgemental. You choose to observe things worthy of your attention; your choice of what to watch is a judgement.”

The Janitor remained silent. The Sculptor placed his pen down on

the table, a detailed itinerary of his exhibit completed.

“Stop bugging The Janitor. If you’re done, hand over your paper.”

The Snipper threw his completed paper flower over to The Sculptor, who began to unfold it with poorly veiled anger.

“So you clean up after us, yeah?”

“That is correct.”

“No matter how much mess we make?”

“That is correct.”

“If I nuked the city, could you clean it up?”

The Painter interjected.

“Don’t nuke the city.”

“Don’t tell me what to do! Could you?”

The Janitor placed a gloved hand to its chin. It thought for a few seconds, The Snipper’s face grinning madly at confounding his new friend.

“Yes.”

“How?”

The Janitor remained silent.

“Oh come on, don’t be a cocktease. How would you do it?”

The Janitor turned to look at The Snipper. Pico’s body was overcome with the same primal shock that he felt when first seeing it, shivers running down his spine and losing feeling in his extremities.

“Alright, whatever. I guess I’ll just have to find out the hard way.”

The Painter yelled louder than before.

“DON’T NUKE THE CITY!”

“Sigh. Fucking spoilsport.”

The Sculptor completed unfolding the piece of paper.

“What the fuck is this?”

He held it up for all to see. The only words on the piece of paper were drawn in blood, spelling out ‘CORPSES FOR THE CORPSE THRONE’.

“I think I was direct and to the point with my itinerary.”

“You’re just going to be exhibiting piles of corpses?”

“Yes.”

“…you know what? I’m fine with that. It’s simple, it’s creepy, and some people will probably just run the fuck away. Straight and to the point. Good job, Snipper. Glad to have you onboard.”

“Snip snip snip.”

“No. Don’t try and make that a thing that you do. That’s not a thing. Everyone else done?”

The Builder and The Painter passed back their papers, The Composer having long ago written down his song list. The Sculptor appraised their plans.

“This is good. This is really good, actually… Bob, you’ll have to move your plan around so you’re not getting in Robbo’s way, your gallery’s going to start blocking the adverts if you have it coming up through the alleyways.”

The Builder offered a solution.

“I’ll have the gallery mimic the surrounding wall decorations, anything you’ve done can move through to inside. Actually, scratch that, I’ll just stick windows around everything you do.”

The Painter nodded in agreement.

“I’ll send you a map of the whole plan tomorrow morning, we can figure it out by the night.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

The Sculptor continued.

“Like I said, Snipper’s just running corpses, and Sam’s fine, since sound doesn’t really… oh, actually, the internal acoustics of Bob’s stuff might fuck with it. Something else you’ll have to figure out tomorrow morning, but it’s a tiny issue, you’ll be able to figure it out. I’ll be fine since my stuff’s mobile anyway. We’ve cut this close, gentlemen, but we know what we’re doing. We have our battle plans. After this, nobody’s going to forget why we’re the cool ones. I’ll see you all tomorrow.”

The Sculptor straightened his papers, placing them into a small folder, then walked out of the room, shortly followed by The Builder, Composer, and Painter. The Snipper snuggled into his corpse pile, The Janitor observing every movement. A voice came from deep within the pile.

“Why? Why do you clean up after them?”

The mask’s diaphragm buzzed.

“That is my role.”

“Who set that role?”

“The Critic.”

The Snipper lifted his head above the pile.

“How does he strongarm someone like you?”

“I have free will. I follow willingly.”

The Snipper frowned.

“Nobody who follows instructions is really free.”

The Janitor remained silent.

“Does he know who you really are, then?”

“I am who I am who I am.”

“Do you know who you really are?”

The Janitor remained silent. The Snipper cackled.

“You’re like a caged bird, except the cage is made of glass and you’re a rhinoceros. You don’t even realise you can break free, do you?”

“I am already free.”

“No. No you aren’t. You poor thing. You poor, pitiful little thing.”

The Janitor faced The Snipper, again shooting lightning down his arms and drying out his mouth. His face betrayed nothing of it.

“I am more free than you will ever understand. I am free from desire, free from emotion, free from everything. You may be free from others, but I am free from myself. I shall take my leave.”

The Janitor left the room with a single step, leaving The Snipper to lie in collected viscera. He sucked the blood from his thumb, spitting it out onto the floor. It was lying, it was deluded, The Janitor was not free.

That would not do, Pico thought.

He would have to free it.

All face-up monsters on the field are changed to Attack Position and their battle positions cannot be changed.

Final Regrets

Regret had existed since time immemorial, since the first mind capable of reflecting upon its actions took a moment to consider the consequences of its decisions. With each passing generation, as minds more intelligent and wise came to be, so too did Regret become more and more powerful.

It was unfair to think that Regret was cold and uncaring; after all, it would be silly to think of an emotion as unemotional. As one subjected to the final misgivings of every living mind, she was audience to their suffering and their ultimate sorrow and defeat. Even though this was the very essence of what she was, the burden of grief bore down upon her until one day she found that she could not stand it any longer. Deciding to take action, she picked a random thread of thought and followed it back to the mind that had given it life.

The mind of a human was a turbulent thing at the best of times, but the panic that accompanied impending death made a fantastic mess of things. A torrential rush of clashing thoughts rushed through her as she reached out and touched it:

> Why didn't he wait for the others to catch up?
>
> Why didn't he watch where he was going more carefully?
>
> If he had worked out just a little more, would he have been able free himself?
>
> If he wasn't stuck, would he have been able to save just one more?
>
> Would his family be alright without him?
>
> Would—

With a jab of pain and a final shudder, the candle was snuffed out and his broken body lay still. Regret sat and stared for a long time, turning the thread in her hands over and over as she replayed those final thoughts. An eternity passed in the blink of an eye as she deliberated, but in the end she came to a decision: she of all people would not allow herself to have cause to have misgiving. Delicately, she reached out and re-lit the candle.

> John gasped as he came to again, coughing violently as his lungs burned from the stifling smoke. In an act of desperation, he found one last reserve of strength and pulled himself out from under the pile of debris. With his equipment broken or missing and his eyes watering, he threw the unconscious child back over his shoulder and pushed on through the raging flames. Somehow, he managed to make it all the way back to the main entrance before his legs finally gave out. His last conscious thought was that everything would be alright as the paramedics rushed to his side and took the still-breathing child from his arms.
>
> He woke up in the hospital two days later, and paid little attention to the doctor's bewildered inability to explain how he was still alive; he had more important things on his mind. Things like never forgetting to tell his wife he loved her again, not missing another one of his son's soccer games, and making sure that all the proper arrangements were made if something were to happen to him.
>
> Three weeks later, John rushed to the site of another burning apartment building. The chief hesitated, and tried to explain to him that the building was too dangerous to enter, but the crying of a child over the roaring flames ended all further discussion. Without Regret, he turned and rushed through the door.

Shaking from the exertion, she knew instantly that she had irrevocably lost a part of herself as she sank to the ground. Yet, even as her eyes watered, Regret smiled, knowing that through her sacrifice she had given a man a second chance. Without hesitation,

she drew another thread — the nearest she could find — and followed it with determination.

Time passed as she touched countless lives, selflessly giving a month, a week, a day, or even an hour, one extra chance after another to do that which they could not before the end. A young man recovering from a car accident finally found the courage to confess to the woman he loved. A mother who fell down her stairs told her daughter that despite everything that had come between them, she was proud of her accomplishments. A new father and survivor of a heart attack held his newborn son for the first time.

And then, the unthinkable happened. With an outcry of agony, the minds linked to her began to wink out, a catastrophe of global proportions. Millions, then billions, died, their flames extinguished in the blink of an eye. More would follow in the wake of the disaster, but despite the pain that threatened to cripple her, Regret continued to touch as many lives as she could, giving them the closure they so desired until but a single thread remained.

> Was there more he could have done?
>
> If he hadn't approved that last experiment, would none of this had happened?
>
> If he hadn't been so ambitious and reckless, would he have been spared the torture of watching his friends, family, and coworkers suffer in the last waning hours of humanity?
>
> Was this all his fault?

It was unfair to think that Regret was cold and uncaring. She had avoided interfering with the actions of those she touched, but she would make an exception for this last human man lying alone in the ruins of civilization. A part of her knew that this was it; with all minds gone, there would be no more reason for her to exist. So weak was she that she could not even fully re-light the candle; as its meek flame sputtered in the darkness, she took the man's hand in her own and, with a firm but gentle motion, traced his finger through the thick ash that covered the ground until a crudely formed phrase took

shape:

It's okay. You did your best.

The flame went out one last time, and only the darkness remained. Regret closed her eyes with a final sigh and sank into nothingness.

But it was not the end.

Was there something left, something she had missed?

What part of her could possibly remain when no more existed?

Struggling against the emptiness, Regret reached out as far as she could, stretching up on tip-toes until her fingers brushed against a distant but unmistakable thread. Clawing at it with her final shred of strength, she latched on with all her might and pulled herself towards it.

Feeling warmth against her face, she opened her eyes to the brilliant green light of an unfamiliar sun.

Finding Anderson

Agent Clarissa Shaw stood silently, looking into the contents of a **Site-64** interrogation room. Sitting at the table inside was a Saker who called itself Miles Wilson, an android designed to resemble an African-American man in his mid to late twenties. Agent Shaw brushed a strand of her blond hair out of her eyes as she reviewed the contents of a file she held in her arms. With a minuscule smile, she pushed up her thin rimmed glasses and entered the interrogation room.

“Afternoon Miles,” Shaw began as she took a seat at the table, neatly placing the folder in front of her. Miles immediately looked away, his gaze focused anywhere else rather than risk eye contact with the agent.

“Hello Ms. Starling,” Miles mumbled.

“You can call me Agent Shaw,” Shaw began, “I told you already that was just a cover.”

“I liked you better when you were Ms. Starling,” Miles replied. “You seemed nicer then.”

Miles then paused; his eyes looked around the room but still refused to make eye contact.

“That was a Silence of the Lambs reference, right?” He asked, “Agent Starling?”

“Correct,” Shaw said with a smirk, “Fitting, don’t you think?”

“Whatever you say,” said Miles. “I don’t have anything else to tell you.”

“Oh, I doubt that,” Shaw said as she opened the file and scanned its contents. “I think there is still a lot you can tell me, like what your

particular purpose as a Saker unit was."

"I don't know what you're talking about…" Miles shook his head. "I'm sure I would know if I was a robot. Clearly I'm not."

Shaw sighed, pulled a photograph from the file, and slid it across the table.

"What do you see here, Miles?" She asked.

Miles looked down. The photo was of him in a college baseball uniform, standing among several other players. He smirked as he slid the photo back across the table.

"You have a picture of me from when I played baseball for the Beavers, so what?" He said, his gaze shifting to the one way mirror.

"That picture was taken for a newspaper article that was published in 1998," Shaw replied as she placed the photo back in the file. "You're how old? 23? 25? You should be in your late thirties by now, but it appears you haven't aged. On top of that, my friends did some digging. The Miles Wilson pictured here died in 2001 from small-cell carcinoma."

Miles closed his eyes tight and violently shook his head. Shaw could hear him mutter, "stop" under his breath.

"I think someone in Miles Wilson's family is very close to **Anderson**, if not Anderson themselves," Shaw continued, "And I think Anderson made you as a surrogate. You're designed to look and act as human as possible. Anderson hasn't terminated you yet because you're too special. I wouldn't be surprised if…"

"Why are you doing this?" Miles interrupted, slamming his fist down on the table with a sickening thud, his eyes filled with tears as he finally made eye contact, "Why are you guys trying so hard to tell me I'm something I'm not? What does it matter to you if I think I'm a human or a robot? At the end of the day I've still told you everything I know!"

"As I said before, I doubt that," Shaw said coolly. "I imagine we'll find out soon enough."

Agent Shaw sat in the office of Agent Sasha Merlo, leader of MTF Gamma-13, Asimov's Lawbringers. While Shaw sat back in her chair, relaxed and with a cup of coffee, Merlo's eyes remained glued to the phone, biting her nails. A portion of the MTF had been deployed to the residence of Jeffery Wilson, Mile's father, to bring the man into Foundation custody. Now they both waited to hear the mission status. The room remained silent, save for the ticking of Merlo's electric blue clock on the wall.

"Aha!" Merlo ecstatically shouted as the phone rang, the sudden influx of noise forcing Shaw to jump and spill some of her coffee. Shaw attempted to regain her composure as Merlo flipped to phone on to speaker.

"Go for Merlo!"

"Merlo, this is Carter. We're at the Wilson residence," A man's voice came over the speaker, heavy rain could be heard in the background. "It's gone."

Shaw watched the color drain from Merlo's face. Her smile morphed into an expression much more solemn.

"What?"

"It's gone!" Carter repeated. "The house is burnt to the ground. There's nothing here. We're combing the area, but I don't think the search will…"

Merlo hung up. Slowly she sank back into her office chair and spun around, turning away from her companion.

"Just once, I want us to be faster."

"There' still a chance. If the rest of the team combs the area, maybe…" Shaw began, only to stop talking when Merlo shook her head.

"The man's house burnt down. Something tells me it wasn't because he left the goddamn stove on," Merlo replied. "No, Wilson knew we were coming. He's long gone."

Merlo then got to her feet and began to head towards the door.

“Do you want back up?” Shaw asked.

“I should do this alone,” Merlo called back, and disappeared into the hall.

Edgar Holman, Site Director

Merlo took a deep breath as she read the name plate on the door, and then gave a sharp knock.

“It’s open,” Called a man’s voice from inside.

Merlo took a moment to compose herself before stepping inside. The office itself was quite large. Numerous shelves lined the walls, each filled with minor anart items that had been brought to Site-64 over the years, but didn’t require official object classification. At the back of the room was a large desk covered in a slew of files each labeled **“Clayton.”** Sitting in a rather large chair behind the desk was a tall, sharply dressed man with slicked back hair.

“Merlo?” Holman asked. His voice was a deep bass.

“Director,” Merlo said with a halfhearted chuckle, “We’ve had some developments with Wilson…”

“Oh? Go on.” Holman quietly placed the folder he was reading down and made it clear she had his undivided attention.

“Gone,” Merlo cringed, “The residence was burnt to the ground. Carter is having the rest of the crew comb the area, but you already know how that will go.”

Holman nodded in agreement. A sympathetic smile came to his face.

“We just can’t win, can we?”

“Maybe not this time, but we still have the Saker. I’m sure that we haven’t exhausted that avenue yet.”

Holman's smile quickly morphed into a frown.

"About that," Holman said with a sigh, "I just got word from Overwatch. The Saker is to be transferred to **Site-81**."

"Excuse me?" Merlo nervously chuckled.

"I'm sorry, Sasha," Holman replied, "It's out of my hands. Security reasons."

"Those motherfuckers broke into Site-19!" Merlo shouted as she banged her hand on the desk, "How the hell is Site-81 going to help? You're just going to let that bald quack take our prize? We lost three agents during the last raid! Aside from that **punk** out at **Site-84,** Gamma-13 is *the* authority on Anderson…"

"Agent Merlo!" Holman's voice filled the room like a sonic boom; Merlo took several steps back from the table.

Merlo remained silent for a few moments as Holman took a few deep breaths.

"Edgar, please," said Merlo, "Don't let them do this to us."

Holman closed his eyes and slowly shook his head.

"There's nothing more I can do. I'm sorry."

Merlo nodded in understanding. With a sigh she turned and began to head to the door.

"Oh, Sasha," Said Holman as Merlo began to disappear into the hall, "Remember that you're still in charge of Miles until the transfer. Do with that information what you will."

Merlo gave Holman a sly smile and nod before quietly disappearing into the hall. There was work to be done.

Agent Merlo sat alone in her office, her eyes glazed over as she furiously scanned document after document from Anderson's POI file.

“There’s got to be something here…” she mumbled to herself.

Merlo’s phone then rang.

“Go for Merlo,” she impatiently shouted as she picked up the receiver.

“Ah, um… this is the office of Sasha Merlo, yes?” asked a deep, metallic, male voice. “I have to say that it’s very nice to have a chance to finally speak with you.”

Merlo froze.

“Who is this?” She ask.

“Oh yeah, sorry about that, I’m Anderson,” he replied, “I, uh, I believe you’re familiar with my work.”

There was a pause. Merlo wasn’t sure what to say. *This* was Anderson?

“Why should I believe you?” Merlo hesitantly asked.

“Well, if you put me on speaker phone I could disable that Amur unit that’s been in your office the last two days.”

Merlo immediately dropped the phone and reached for her pistol, quickly scanning the entire room before she heard the laughter coming from the other end.

“Yeah, uh, I was just kidding,” Anderson chuckled.

“You have my attention,” Merlo hissed, “Why call just now?”

“Oh, right! Well, you see, you are right to think that Miles is very valuable to me. I was sort of hoping that maybe I could pick him up.”

“… You’re serious.”

“As cancer,” Anderson replied.

“That’s not going to happen,” said Merlo, her eyes were wide in confusion.

“I thought you might say that…” Anderson sighed, “I wish this wasn’t always so difficult.”

“I’m sorry?” Merlo asked. “I’m making this difficult for you?”

“Don’t get me wrong Sasha,” said Anderson, “I really do like what it is you and the Foundation do. I think it’s, uh, the bee’s knees. You guys do things I’d never want to touch, you know, containing eldritch horrors and such. I, uh, I just wish you weren’t so quick to squash the little inventors. Given enough time even anomalous technology becomes mainstream. I mean, Christ, if we were cavemen you guys would try to contain fire because it would be too spooky for your tastes. Do you know what I’m saying?”

Merlo didn’t respond. *This was Anderson?*

“Well, fuck it then,” Anderson said after several more moments of silence. “I, uh, guess I’ll just have to come get him myself. I was really hoping it wouldn’t come to that. Oh well. I guess I’ll see you soon Sasha. Tell Ms. Starling hello for me.”

The line went dead.

Merlo then felt something move on her neck. Out of reflex she quickly snatched at the spot and threw the object away. A small black ball bounced against the wall and came to rest on the ground. The object quickly produced a set of legs and a red spot for an eye. Merlo recognized it as one of Anderson’s **Amur Recon Drones.** In a flash, the tiny robot scaled the wall of her office, and disappeared into the ventilation system. Merlo’s mouth hung open for a few moments before she slumped back into her chair.

“Well, fuck…”

That *was* Anderson.

«**Part One: Hunting Anderson** | **The Elusive Anderson** | **Part Three: Meeting Anderson**»

Finding Balance

And thus, the Aethers shall be in balance. The Five Aethers are the foundations of practical alchemy, and must always be respected. Some call them "elements", others "Eidolons", and other more esoteric names. The Aethers however, are the pure elemental forces of the universe. Air, Earth, Fire, Water, Electricity. Aeronous, Terronous, Igneous, Aequeous, and Fulminous. Respect the Aethers, and they will serve well…

-Excerpt, Practical Alchemy, by R. Diaghilev

Ruslav Diaghilev woke to the sound of the cosmos rushing in his ears. That, and the liquid clock that was gifted to him for his birthday last year. He blinked the bleary sleep from his eyes, and sat up into the cold autumn morning. The first inklings of light were slipping through the windows, as he swung his feet out and over the edge of the bed.

Across the room, faintly glowing liquids burbled happily in their decanters. Soft orange and blue light emanated from several tubes, rushing around the apparatus with merry abandon. He rose with a grunt, shuffling towards the laboratory on the other side of the room while reaching out to touch the series of activation studs on the wall for the muted amber overhead lighting.

He smiled, as the orbs slowly winked to life, the deep amber light turning the room from shadows to a world of deepest bas-relief. As the light spread across his workbench, the familiar sights of numerous notebooks, fragments of recipes, and formulae appeared before him. His chalkboard, covered in his heavy, angular script shone with the faint sheen of recently erased chalk.

Reaching out with one tired hand, Ruslav turned the activation knob for the burner underneath the faintly glowing blue liquid, causing it to bubble higher and the overflow to slowly drip into the brown liquid in the largest decanter. He agitated the mixture with a glass rod, while chanting quietly in a language that few knew, and fewer still dared to

utter. As he chanted, the mixture turned from a dark brown to a light brown with a golden sheen. He smiled, and turned the knob, allowing some of the liquid to flow into an earthenware jug.

He raised the vessel to his lips, and a smile spread over his face as the liquid passed through his mouth and down into his stomach. *Ahh, I've finally done it; counteracted the Aeronous Aether. Finally, it tastes like coffee.* He felt the fatigue and discomfort of waking so early washing away as the philter took its effect.

Ruslav Diaghilev, Alchemist of the Seventh Circle, looked out of his windows across the snow-laden scene from his cabin. He nodded, taking another sip of the mixture before replacing the jug on the table.

…Alchemy, like any other science, has laws. Rules. These laws and rules may bend from time to time, but they are as indelible as physics. While the physical sciences may be more practically applicable, the simple need for the containment of Alchemical Anomalies requires special attention to the alchemic arts…

-Excerpt, The Sealing Way, M. R. Tissart
First historical mention of "Anomalies"

Hours later, R. Diaghilev, as his nametag so helpfully proclaimed him, sat hunched in his car in the line to get into Site-79. The snow had started to fall faster now, and Ruslav sighed in frustration. The snow always caught in the hem of his robes. The line to get into the site was unusually long due to the weather, and his heater wasn't as strong as it used to be.

A few minutes passed, and Ruslav came to the front of the line, and presented his credentials to the security personnel at the gate. As he pulled up, and looked the man in the eye catching a hint of a smirk on his face. The guard took the card, and scanned it before handing it back. "Thank you. Please proceed."

Ruslav suppressed a sigh at the grin on the security guard's face. He was well used to the stares, and the questionable deference he had from his colleagues.

He pulled into his parking spot, and got out of his car, cursing under his breath, at the snow on the floor of the parking structure. He brushed a small spot away and counted his steps before reaching 88, then reciting a quiet formulae. A junior researcher stared at him as he did, nearly breaking his concentration. The researcher may not have thought much of Ruslav's robes, but the snow never quite reached them after his recitation. He smiled to himself, and said a thanks to the Aeronous Aether for its assistance.

He walked through the halls, the quiet swish of his robes at odds with the hard clack of the researchers' shoes, and the quiet clicks of high heels. His own shoes were made of rubber properly made in accordance with ancient formulae many years ago. They were bright purple, and the shoes themselves were poorly stitched, but he was an alchemist not a cobbler. They were warm, waterproof, silent, and earned him the nicknamed "Grapefoot" from his college companions.

He settled into his office, with a quiet sigh, and pulled his phone out of the recesses of his robes, plugging it into his computer to charge. He muttered a thank you to the Fulminous Aether, and a curse to Apple for short battery life.

The office was functional, covered in a few work benches, one of which contained a simple decanter-reduction system. The only other door in the office led to the lab, connected to his colleague's office as well. The drab concrete walls fit Ruslav's personality perfectly, and he smiled at the calendar beside his desk. There were cats on it.

Ruslav settled in to his workstation to go over morning emails. There was always some bureaucratic nonsense to deal with at The Foundation.

…and so it has come to us, the Wise, to protect the world. The Foundation is our best chance to seal off the influence of the Entities for all time. As such, I propose that we take action once and for all. Create the Great Seal, and for all time prevent such incursions into our reality…

-Excerpt, A Call To Action, R. Diaghilev

As the twelfth hour of the day arrived, Ruslav's stomach rumbled with hunger, and he put down the report on a philter of Molasses, which some famous American had used to attain immortality. He left a few final scribbles on his notes for now, and stood up, stretching his broad shoulders with a yawn.

He started his way towards the cafeteria with slowly creeping fatigue. The philter from this morning had to be wearing off. He hoped quietly to himself that he made enough to last a few weeks at least. That particular convergence wasn't likely to happen again for a very long time.

As he walked along, he spotted Dr. Collins walking towards the cafeteria, and waved slightly. The doctor looked over, and smiled, waiting for Ruslav to catch up, before they walked in tandem towards the cafeteria. "It's good to see you, Ruslav. Have a good weekend?"

Ruslav nodded, and smiled at Dr. Collins, "Yes. My philter finally came into the proper solution this morning. I was very happy to say that it worked without any difficulty." Ruslav took a left turn towards the cafeteria, the sounds of conversation filling the off-white hallways.

They joined a small crowd on the escalators up to level 3, to the cafeteria. It opened out into the expansive, and tastefully decorated cafeteria level. They had remodeled recently, the dark glass looking out over fields of snow-covered grass. The dark tile of the floor complemented the subtle burgundy of the walls. All colors Ruslav found pleasing.

Dr. Collins smiled at Ruslav, as they walked towards the serving area. "Congratulations, Ruslav. I had hoped it would happen soon. Is this the same super coffee you were discussing before?" Dr. Collins got into the line for the hot buffet, and grabbed a tray, loading up a couple of plates with his usual starchy fare. He had gained a few pounds recently, stress eating due to a recent project.

Ruslav grabbed his own tray, loading it up with a mix of vegetables, a light salad, and a large piece of some pink fish, pretending to be salmon. "Yes. I am happy to say it works properly. This morning was

significantly easier." He grabbed up a small tray of cookies, his one indulgence, and headed to the top of the line.

Dr. Collins flashed his ID to pay for his lunch, and Ruslav did the same, the two of them heading for an empty table, nearby. Several other researchers waved to Dr. Collins, and the two sat down, digging into lunch with abandon. The other tables were rapidly filling up, but Ruslav and Dr. Collins had one of the smaller round tables to themselves.

His dark brown robes stood out from the white-coated researchers, but they did every day. They made small talk for a few minutes, before a young researcher stepped up to their table looking eager and bright eyed, "Dr. Collins? I was hoping I could ask you a few questions about the new research topics you had suggested last week?"

Dr. Collins looked up, and quickly swallowed the bite he was chewing through, "Of course Daniel. This is Ruslav Diaghilev, one of the members of the Alchemy Division." Ruslav looked up to meet the eyes of the young man displaying the usual mix of confusion and surprise.

"How do you do young man." Ruslav held out one large hand, shaking the younger mans hand firmly.

"Ahh, good, good, it's nice to meet you Dr. Diaghilev." Daniel said a little too fast, not particularly covering up his confusion very well.

"I am not a doctor, but I understand the confusion. Mister, or if you're being very formal, Elder is the appropriate title." He tried to hide his grimace as the usual look of incredulity passed over the young man's features.

Dr. Collins looked over at Ruslav, and quirked his head, "If I heard right, you guys are getting a new hire today. Unless Jamesson was talking out his ass again." He scooped up his last bite of pasta, and leaned back.

Ruslav's eyebrows raised, the deep lines on his face creasing. "New Hire? I wasn't aware we were getting new apprentices anymore."

And I hadn't realized anyone could even feel the currents anymore He thought to himself. "I will have to consult my colleagues."

Dr. Collins rose, escorting Daniel away, "Till next time Ruslav, enjoy your studies!"

…And so, our Alchemy Division, shall henceforth be tasked with the sealing, and secrecy of Initiative [REDACTED]. All knowledge of Alchemy shall be discredited. All maintenance of the seals, circles, and other Alchemical devices shall be entrusted to R. Diaghilev, and M. Adebeyo, Directors of the Alchemy Division…

-Excerpt, O5 Council Plan of Action no. [REDACTED]

The quiet walk back to his office was uneventful. Upon reaching his door, he heard a quiet tingling, a soft sound like water upon a starlit lake. He closed his eyes, growing lost in the sound, the Aequeous Aether speaking to him in the deepest language the universe offered.

It was soon, a convergence. He would be able to access both the Aequeous and the Aeronous. It was finally time to begin the next steps in his processes.

He hurried to the lab, where his only colleague Elder Adebayo stood, his coal-black skin a stark contrast to the, if he was honest with it, tacky milk-white robes he wore all the time. The walls of the lab were unlike any other room in the site. From top to bottom, it had been inscribed with copper chisels, formulae of containment, order, and protection.

Ruslav and Adebayo had prepared this room over sixteen painstaking months, using various convergence events, and stored Aether where necessary. This room was the Alchemical equivalent of a bomb shelter, and the only place they dared to work any significant research.

The walls were lined with tables, containing several decanter-reduction systems, wind-flow apparatus, a few burners, and even a fine earth separator.

Mounted on one wall was a solid wooden holder, which contained two heavy Croziers. One of brass, and wood belonging to Adebayo, the other of cold iron and lead belonging to Ruslav. Across from the crozier stand was a set of three concentric circles set in the floor. The first was polished, inscribed copper, the second was cold iron, the last was the finest and most delicate gold. The materials for the last circle had been transmuted from pure aether to common lead, then to gold.

"You felt it too, Ruslav?" The rich syllables of the Third Language flowed from his lips, his mellifluous accent blending perfectly with the interplay of light and dark in the phonemes, his hands spread over the wind-flow measures and pinwheels on his desk.

He felt the swirling currents, as he hurried to the equipment along the wall. He adjusted several knobs, and the liquids began to bubble, already taking on a soft glow. "Of course, I felt it. Where are you in the harness of the Aeronous?" Adebayo's specialty lay in the Aeronous Aether, and Ruslav would be significantly more comfortable in the Aequeous.

Adebayo's hands spread slightly, as he switched to the Second Language, approaching the beginnings of the True Language quickly. "I am almost there. Could you bring me the circle of Aeronous Binding?"

Ruslav nodded, and picked up a copper circlet, inscribed with various symbols occult organizations had cribbed from ancient alchemists in centuries past.

"We're going to renew the thirteenth seal, this time, yes?" Ruslav placed the circlet on Adebayo's head, crowning his shaved scalp.

"Yes. The creature made a noise a few months ago, and we need to make sure it's held. The seal is almost in the fullness of its shape. With this, we can—" A sudden crack of Aether sped through the lab, disrupting the energies shaped by the words of the second language. The Fulminous Aether surged quickly, pushing back against the ritual motions and words.

From the currents of the unseen, a laughing sound could be heard.

Accompanying the electric energy of the Fulminous Aether was an empty feeling. The feeling of chaining and binding, of energies reflected and amplified. Ruslav knew that feeling well. The laughter echoed in the paths of his memory, as his eyebrows narrowed, his teeth setting in a snarl.

The Scarlet King was bucking his seal, and attempting to push back against Ruslav, and Adebayo.

Ruslav's hands blurred, as he drew the simple iron circle from the space under his lab desk, and tossed it into the air. His hands spread, as he began to chant in the First Language, one step removed from the True Language.

The iron circle stayed suspended in the air for a moment before bouncing, and landing on its side, slowly spinning around, on its side.

Adebayo's head burst into sweat, as the Aether's compressed. "They are pushing back. I do not know how long—" his words were strained now, the Second Language's powers being stretched to their limits.

Ruslav's voice rang out like thunder, and he pulled his hands to his sides, his fists clenched. "YOU WILL NOT DISRUPT OUR WORK, TODAY. I PUSH YOU BACK TO WHENCE YOU ARE. BEGONE SCARLET KING!" With a sudden crack of thunder the building energies flowed into the iron circle, grounding harmlessly into the hand-forged iron. The laughter turned to a snarling sound of pain, as the chains around the entity went taut again, pulling it tight. All went quiet, except for Elder Adebayo's chanting.

Several minutes passed, as Ruslav's breath came back to him. The effort required to banish the Fulminous Aether gathered by the Scarlet King to push against their ritual had been staggering, but he'd forced it into the circle at last, the energies contained within the ring of purified metal. Shaped by hand, with the right rituals, nothing could break it in the Aether. Only a mortal hand could undo the energies stored there now, and even then, they would need to be significantly gifted in the Art.

Ruslav struggled over to the lab desk, and put his hands to work on the Aequeous harness for the ritual. The waters and philters bubbled, as he spoke quietly in the Second Language, his words blending with Adebayo's, and forming a harmonious chorus.

The energies of the Aether poured into the small vial of purified water, creating truly elemental water. He held it gingerly between two fingers, and brought it to Adebayo's station. "Elemental Water. This will reinforce the seal perfectly. Did you get yours?"

He held up a small pinwheel, brightly colored like a child's toy. The ultra-fine inscriptions on the blades were near invisible to the naked eye. It spun slowly, with small air currents flowing around it. "Of course, Elder. I will perform the ritual tonight. Our colleagues in Vienna, and Casa Verde should have the Fire, and Earth required."

A quiet knock on the door drew both of their attention, to the small crowd of onlookers. Several of them had hands over their mouths, trying not to laugh.

Ruslav's heart dropped. They couldn't feel a single thing of what just happened. To them, it was two old men screaming at nothing, and pantomiming.

"What?" He growled, his hands shaking with exhaustion, and his mind filled with annoyance.

"Your uh…new hire is here. Mike sent me to get you, Mister Diaghilev." Ruslav narrowed his eyes. It was the young man from lunch. Daniel. He sighed heavily.

"Of course. Thank you." He shuffled off silently, his shoes completely silent.

The last thing he heard was Daniel's voice under his breath, "What's up with the purple shoes?"

…Why do we keep these people around? I know we're all about the anomalous, but there's no way these guys are for real. They're just wasting foundation resources. The amount of money they spend on raw copper is absurd…

-Excerpt, Email from Site Director [REDACTED]

The rumors were true then. Ruslav turned, and headed towards the front gate, nodding at the various doctors, security staff, and administrative staff he passed. Most of them didn't give him odd looks anymore.

A few flights of stairs, which were getting harder, and muttered thanks to the Aethers at the correct times, brought him to the front desk, where a nervous looking young man stood in the lobby of the Site, along with Mike. Mike was giving him an odd look, with a hand on his hip, near to his baton. The reception area looked fairly plain.

There was a desk, behind with Mike sat, and a row of chairs along two walls which visitors were seated in. The drab taupe walls stood out slightly from the off-brown carpet across the floor. Two men looked at Mike and the young man with careful attention, interested in what was taking place before them. The magazines they'd been reading were tossed back on the table between the two sets of chairs.

The waiting room always reminded Ruslav of a doctor's office waiting area.

"I'm telling you, son, I can't let you bring unapproved weapons into the site." His eyes were locked on the glass and silver Crozier in his hand, the twin snakes of asclepias. Ruslav smiled, as his eyes hesitated for a moment over the young man's robe, a royal blue. Unpretentious, functional, and yet tastefully traditional. Perhaps there was hope yet.

He held a hand up to Mike, "It's not a weapon, Mike. It's a crozier. Alchemist's tools. He's alright."

Mike looked over at Ruslav, and nodded after a moment. He sat back down at the office chair in front of the monitors. The young man couldn't see, but the two "waiting" patrons relaxed as well. MTF members took threats and potential threats seriously.

"I am Ruslav Diaghilev, Alchemist of the—" Ruslav started, his voice tired, and heavy, expecting very little of the young man in front of

him.

"Seventh circle. Yes, sir. I was recommended to study under you by Allen Barned, of the fifth circle. He said you were the best, and one of the last practical appliers of the Art." The clear Barcelona accent on his English lisped a few of his ess's, but he was reasonably understandable.

Ruslav narrowed his eyes, and switched to a form of proto-Etruscan, the Eighth Language. Closer to the True Language, but still distant enough for conversation. "And how trained are you, young man? Do you know the vagueries of the Art? Have you been initiated?"

The young man hesitated, and his head drooped slightly. He attempted to speak as well. "I am to be not practiced in the Art as one such are you to be. My—" he attempted to pronounce the name of the language, poorly, "Is not very good. I am sorry."

Ruslav smiled, and nodded, switching back to English. "You are more than a dabbler, young man. What is your name?"

"Arturo Genuomo, sir." He said, with a deep bow, which shook the backpack slightly on his frame. Ruslav's face split into one of the first genuine smiles of the day as he took notice of the equipment on his pack which marked him as a student of the Aequeous Aether.

"Welcome to the Site, Arturo, please walk with me." He turned, and silently walked off, Arturo's odd purple shoes an exact match of his own.

…As I've told you, they're not frauds. I've witnessed what they can do firsthand, and the O5 Council says they're necessary. You've seen the budget allotments for the alchemy division, and it's not like we haven't encountered Alchemical SCP objects. Just give them a chance, Jim…

-Excerpt, Email from Dr. Collins, in response to Site Director [REDACTED]

Finding The Machine

We were prepared for war. It was obvious our mission was important from the start. Oftentimes, a manager or vice president would send their good graces before a mission, but seeing you was a rare event. We simply heard your announcements on the loud speakers, or received your signature at the bottom of a letter. Sending out a platoon for a raid on a residential farmhouse was quite uncommon as well - seemed a touch excessive at first, but when we were briefed that we were butting heads against the Church of the Broken God, the reasons became more clear. The last encounter we had with those bastards ended in flames, with the prize destroyed as a result.

They had something we wanted, of course. Our plant informed us the Church had quite the peculiar object in their possession. All I was told was that it excels in both improving and taking apart any object placed inside. This information alone made it invaluable. None of us wanted to know what the Church was planning with such a device, but if we knew their intentions well enough, it would be best for everyone if we confiscated the device.

Before we arrived, we expected a number of things to be in our way; guardsmen patrolling the area, large, grisly automatons, snipers from the rooftops, of all the things that could have feasibly been there. Few things could have been more off. Instead of the heavily armed fortress we were anticipating, we found that no one was patrolling the perimeter and the dwelling appeared entirely empty.

We suspected that they might have been expecting us. Perhaps our plant was discovered, and they anticipated that we'd make an attempt to claim the machine for ourselves. But if that was the case, why in the heavens would they leave what was most likely one of their utmost holy relics completely unguarded? None of us wanted to be hasty and jump to any conclusions, so we devised a course of action.

The barn reeked of death as soon as we passed through those thrice-damned barn doors. It was previously utilized as the center of worship, but at the time of our exploration, it was closer to a ghost town. Pews were either propped up against doors or used as barricades, and refuse was littering the dirt floor. We spotted a man at the far back of the chapel. Very slender figure, blond hair, and sporting a blue robe: probably part of the choir. The man was leaning on a podium, his back turned to us, giving me the impression that the poor sod was crying. We ordered him to get down on his knees, but he didn't give a response. I went up to restrain him, but… I apologize, sir, I'm at a loss about how to put this in words. The instant I laid a hand on him, he fell to the ground. The entirety of his front half of his body was flayed, freely exposing his bones and muscle.

We were all appalled by this, but none of us moved. After a brief moment, we continued our search, and came across a cellar door buried underneath a stack of pews. Two of the other squad members were ordered to remove the benches from the door. We stacked up against the door, and upon opening, several men and women were on the other side, facing our direction, with their backs flayed in a similar manner to the man on the pew.

They weren't moving, but they all looked as if they were making an attempt to crawl out of the cellar with a look of horror on what was left of their faces, as if they were frozen in time. We reported our findings to the rest of the platoon through our radio, and called for reinforcements. We haven't a clue if this was an anomalous plague of some kind, but we were unprepared for it if it was as such.

We awaited our cavalry at the chapel's entrance, who arrived promptly. Four more good men and the biohazard suits made us all feel more secure, but I don't know if it did any real good. The nine of us went back to the hall, cataloging the bodies as we went. Suffice to say, sir, I was a mite spooked at the number of dead bodies in the room, but it wasn't until I stepped in a liquefied puddle of what had been brains that I started to get truly worried. We didn't take notice of it before, but the parts of them that were skinned off were all facing a single direction, like moss on a stone. We had a hunch that we were only getting closer to the origin of this disaster.

The flayed portions all faced the end of the hall, pointing to a single wooden door. A woman was laying upon the ground, her legs skinned, and pointing toward the door. Her gown had a large rip in it, revealing a rather nasty - and fatal - wound on her stomach. Even if whatever blighted this place didn't get to her, she would have, in all likelihood, died from the blood loss. What was most important to us though, was her look of complete dread as she stared at the door.

We were almost certain that the door would suddenly give way to an eldritch abomination that would crash down upon us as soon as we went near it. Our squad leader ordered us to keep our rifles aimed for the door, and to be prepared to open fire if things got nasty while he opened it. That quarter of a second it took for the doors to open seemed to capture an eternity, and even now, I still don't entirely know what to make of what was there.

We saw the machine. We expected it to be rather large, but not quite as big as the room. It came in three segments, each as big as a typical walk-in closet, and connected to the center piece by tubing of some kind. It appeared to be very user friendly, sporting a dial with five possible settings, set on 'coarse' at the time, and a key that presumably activates the machine when you turn it.

There were three men in monkish robes, arms up in defense of what had already killed them. The door of the machine's left compartment was closed, but the right side's was open, with a large red pool seeping out of it. The inside was akin to the inside of a meat locker, for a lack of a better comparison. The organs, bones, muscles, … what I have to assume were nerve endings, hair, and skin were all neatly separated and organized into piles along the output stalls floor. The rest was just a blur after we found it. We packed the machine into the truck, along with some other objects of interest, and retreated to headquarters.

Mr. Carter, I have reason to believe that the device is capable of far more than we think. I have a hunch that the Church was using it in an attempt to exorcise some anomalous beast. If it was able to completely separate the innards of an anomalous creature, with little to no damage to the organs, the anomaly might have been separated as well. I'm not asking for its destruction, of course, I'm asking you to use it carefully, and understand its functions before

you let it loose. I don't know what you plan to do with it, but if we intend on giving it the usual treatment by putting it on the list, appropriate measures should be taken to protect the buyers.

Lot #: 50621-914

CLOCKWORK MACHINE

Minimum Bid: $368,000,000

Almost certainly the pride of the auction, this clockwork titan of ingenuity comes in three pieces, each anchored to the center piece by sturdy copper tubing. Sporting a very user-friendly interface easily operated by even the most inexperienced layman, the applications of this wondrous appliance are boundless.

Unusual Qualities: Upon placing any object into the machine's 'Intake' booth, the owner will have the option to modify that object with five different settings to choose from: 'Rough', 'Coarse', '1:1', 'Fine', and 'Very Fine'.

- Rough: Reduces the object placed inside to component elements, and separates them into individual piles.
- Coarse: Neatly takes apart the object, and separates the parts into categories.
- 1:1: Replaces the object with a random item of equivalent function and value.
- Fine: Grants an item a random, although remarkable, improvement related to its function.
- Very Fine: Randomly and radically alters an object in an abstract fashion, loosely related to the item's general purpose.

Care Instructions: This exterior of the piece should be cleaned once every week like any other metal appliance. The intake and outtake booths may also be cleaned. Under no circumstances should the device itself be disassembled.

Disclaimer: Marshal, Carter, & Dark holds no responsibility for the improper handling, loss of valuables, or results of any exchange

when using this item. Especially when used on the 'Fine' and 'Very Fine' settings, the end result of "refinement" could prove hazardous to the user's health: proper precautions must be taken to prevent loss of life or limb. Placing already 'gifted' items, living beings (including the user), and remains inside the machine is greatly discouraged and will void the warranty.

Fire

I am followed by fire.

It sounds really, really weird, I know, but it's true. Every house, every apartment I've ever lived in has burned to the ground. Even stranger—it's predictable. If I lived somewhere for six years, six years after I move out it goes up in flames. It's not exact, but it's close, usually accurate to within two or three months.

It's true. I'm not sure when I noticed the pattern for the first time, but it's always been there. When I was just a kid, right after I was born, my family lived in an old house behind my grandmother's house. We were there until I was two, when we moved. I remember visiting my grandmother's at four, watching the smoldering embers of the little house and the curling smoke rising into the air. Old wiring from the 50's finally gave out.

From the shack, we moved to a farm. We weren't well off enough to own it or anything, but we did run it for the local doctor. The farmhouse wasn't that big, and most of my childhood memories come from the cozy, family setting it engendered. Here, I remember Christmas, Thanksgiving, birthdays. I think of it whenever I think of "back home." We lived there from when I was two until I was nine, when the doctor we worked for died. At fifteen, it burned, an old tree struck by lightning sparking off the blaze.

The third house I lived in was the second to burn to the ground. We only lived there for around two years, so it happened when I was thirteen. It was an old house, a very old house. What I remember most was its shape. We called them "shotgun" houses, because you could fire a shotgun from one end and it would pass all the way through to the other. One room after another, all in a straight line, built as needed. It was, honestly, very old and dry. I'm not surprised that the heating stove in the front room sprung a leak on the tenants after us.

Other than where I’m at now, the only place left is my parent’s current house. When they asked me why I was moving all my stuff stored in the basement out, I didn’t have the heart to tell them, so I made up some excuse about having my old books and stuff closer to college. I didn’t know what else to say.

When I turned nineteen, I moved out of my parent’s house, and went to college. Before renting the house I live in now, I stayed in an apartment in the city. I shared it with a couple of assholes that seemed nice enough before I moved in. Everyone knows the type. Won't pay their bills on time. Eats whatever they can lay hands on. It got worse and worse until I made up my mind. When I'd finally had enough, I left. We were four months into a one year lease. Now I'm just keeping an eye on the news. Waiting for the sparks. A gas leak, a stray match… Sooner or later, they'll burn.

They always burn.

Fire and Brimstone

The Lock was opened and with it the World Enders awoke, each bringing their own Armageddon with them. Some desired to cleanse the world in fire, a few with ice, others in darkness, but all endings would result in the enslavement or destruction of humanity as they know it. They all arose bringing death and destruction with them. These divine entities arose when called by the lock, but their demons continued to slumber.

As Patrick scrambled over the fence and started his walk towards the town in the distance, he could hear his friends goading him on from the fence. He was a timid and quiet child, and as he strolled down the solitary road he just couldn't understand why he accepted the dare.

He followed along on adventures and got into mischief with the rest of his friends, but he was never the leader; or even the one to act out on his own. They were just all supposed to be staying over at Kyle's house, then Brenden had to make a call out Patrick on never doing anything brave. Daring him to do this as a way to prove his bravery was stupid, but accepting it was even more stupid.

Walking along the road, he looked over to the fields on both sides of the road. Even from where he was, he could see that holes perforated the grass. Each one spewed noxious clouds of gas, while colorless, when combined with the heat made the surrounding air shimmer.

The natural state of reality is chaos and disorder. Entropy is the proof of that. Every action puts the universe a step closer to eventual death. No matter how much mortals try to reverse it, chaos will always end up winning. All they can try to do is make order within it. Its almost poetic.

After a few minutes of walking, Patrick almost reaches the edge of town. The road he's walking down acts as a sort of main street with the buildings standing on either side. The road runs between the buildings and up to the top of a hill centered in the middle of the town.

Looking around, Patrick sees that the buildings are in much worse shape than what was initially observed. Each structure is crumbling slowly, with some having completely collapsed. The temperature is slowly rising too, causing a layer of sweat to soak through Patrick's clothes.

Feeling light-headed all of a sudden, he assumes from the gas, he takes a towel that was carrying with him and wets it with the water bottle he had in one of his cargo pants' pockets. He places it over his mouth and nose and then ties it around the back of his head. The cool cloth gives him a moments respite from his dizziness and he continues to soldier onward further into town.

Beings of the occult do not exist inside reality however; but instead they are a part of it. They are woven directly into the fabric of the nature itself. Because of this, they aren't ruled by chaos and order but instead by balance. Good and evil, Yin and Yang, light and darkness; for every one, there must be its opposite.

After he accepted the dare, Patrick asked what was so dangerous about the town? All he was told is that there was a bunch of noxious gas being spewed that smelled pretty bad. Chuck decided that would be a good time to make a fart joke. Everyone burst out laughing leaving the question hanging in the air unanswered.

He regrets not having that answered now. Passing the police station, Patrick starts to notice how much more his head is pounding. Approaching the hill in the center of town, he can feel his reactions slowing down. He starts to crest the hill anyway hoping that being up high would help him escape the fumes.

This is why heroes and Gods of myth and stories must have an

Antithesis. The good Hero has to have a Serpent to slay, armies must have corrupt emperors to overthrow, and even Gods must have their Demons to conquer. But what happens when a being who was meant to provide their salvation, turns instead to damnation?

Chuck watches Patrick start to march up the tall hill. He is quite mad at Brenden for making Patrick go through with the dare. Why would he make Patrick do this? Patrick wasn't a bad kid, just quiet. Brenden always made him the butt of his jokes and even though all of us felt bad, we laughed anyway. Its okay though because when he gets back from this, no one will treat him like that ever again. Especially not Brenden.

Chuck grabs on to the fence harder, and along with the rest of the guys there, continues to yell encouragement towards Patrick. Amazed that he's actually doing it, all the guys are lined up along the fence keeping a close eye on him.

As the group is yelling their support however, the ground begins to shake. Chuck can see from his standpoint that the holes in the field have began to open up even more, and suddenly a large fissure splits the field into two. The ground continues to shake more and more, and with each jolt the fissure grows. Most of the guys turn to hop on their bikes and peddle away as fast as they can. A few of the more scared ones even leave their bikes. The only people left there now are Chuck, who is frozen staring open-mouthed at the scene unfolding in front of him, and Brenden, who had fallen underneath his bike and had his pant leg caught in the gears.

Chuck can't understand why Patrick doesn't notice this shaking though. Wide-eyed he watches the breach quickly reach and engulf the buildings at the very edge of the town. Brenden begs Chuck for help getting him untangled so he can get away. Chuck ignores him as best he can, even as Brenden starts to cry. Instead he takes a deep breath and as loud as he can he yells a single word.

Run.

I was made to represent the punishment of what would happen

when mortals were to drift from the path to salvation. I was painted as the torturer, the tormentor, the scourge of purgatory. But instead of hell being a place where those who had strayed from his path were to go, in actuality it was simply a jail cell for me. A solitary prison of one. Buried deep into the earth that we had created together. I was forced to fall to be a manifestation of this fear though; the path of the damned and the sinners. I became a symbol of something to fear and stray away from.

Making it to the top of the hill, Patrick surveys the rest of the town in front of him. Being a relatively small downtown, made of only one single main street, from his perch he can can see the rest of the buildings. He could even see the entrance to the mine about half a mile further inland.

Patrick slowly notices yelling coming from the fence and turns to wave back, thinking it's the guys still cheering. Smiling underneath the towel covering his mouth he slowly notices through his hazy mind that the crowd at the fence is no longer there.

I wasn't something to stray from though. I was the one who gave them true life: love, anger, sadness, passion. I was the one who gave them true knowledge: curiosity, individualism, organization. I was the one who gave them their future. They are as much my flock as they are His. How could he turn his back on them.

Although his mind is foggy from inhaling the vapors, he slowly begins to hear his natural instincts crying out to him that something is amiss. He starts to slowly walk down the hill instinctively placing his hand over his eyes to shield them from the nonexistent sun. All of a sudden his toe hit something and he stumbled a bit down the hill. Barely catching himself, Patrick looks down and stares. The ground had split and started to sink directly beneath him and his foot had barely just kicked the edge of the quickly widening crack.

Opening the lock gave power to the gods, and by the laws of the universe gave power back to their demons. Strength flowed into my

physical being, and for the first time in many a millennia I opened my eyes. Flexing my body, I broke free from the first layer of my prison and quickly fell to my knees. Looking up from my position, I spread my wings as far as they could into the cavern that was quickly forming. The rapid gust of wind whipped the flames of the burning cavern into a whirling inferno around me.

A massive tremor, the biggest yet, came and knocked the already unsteady Patrick onto his back, hitting his head. Sitting up on his hands, Patrick's headache was even worse than before, partially due to the new bruise. He didn't really have time to worry about it though because the gap he had just tripped over had suddenly collapsed into the ground.

Trying to crawl frantically back from the pit, the edge continues to encroach on him, nipping at the edges of his heels. The rising temperature heating up the ground was burning the palms of his hands, and Patrick could feel the skin blistering off the tips of his fingers.

He was scared, so scared. This wasn't just regular fear, this was the fear that arises when your life is no longer in your control. The world was falling apart around him and all he could do was to wait for his death to finally arrive. Giving up on even moving backwards, Patrick curled into a ball and started to cry.

Shifting my arms I reached out and called to me my weapons. With a blinding flash, my sword appeared in one hand and in the other was my fiery whip. Gathering more and more of my essence into this physical existence, I called out to the earth to move aside and release me from my shackles. Having rejected my authority for thousands of years, it refused to budge. I smiled. The fangs of my teeth sparkling in a brilliant white from each corner of my mouth. Fine. If creation chooses not to release me, then I shall break free instead.

Chuck could see that the breach was more than just a group of small holes now, but had become a massive cavern, ravaging the

small town with every shake. It had expanded so much that almost the entire town had been swallowed into the pit as it glowed with fire. It was so large that even portions of the fence further down had dropped away into the ground. All that was left untouched was the large hill in the center of town, and even that was slowly spilling away.

Massive bonfires were launching out of various areas all around the growing pit. The temperature had risen so much that the fence became so hot that it burned to hold. Chuck didn't care though. He was staring transfixed at Patrick trying to escape the hole, and summarily giving up. Brenden was still stuck under his bike, screaming for Chuck's attention. No longer even noticing him, Chuck wanted to cry out to Patrick to keep moving and not stop, but his voice was caught in his throat. The only thing that came out was his own sobbing.

Spreading my wings as far as they could reach, I rolled all my weight onto my heels. Keeping my balance under me, I pitched my wings down as hard as I could. The breakneck speed of the force from my wings launched myself upwards. Swinging my sword above my head as I burst upwards, I cleaved the earth in two. As the gravel, mud, and sand collapsed around me, I looked up. And for the first time since the dawn of the world, I saw the gentle twinkle of the night-time sky and the light of the heavens shining down upon me.

I called the fire and wind to flow underneath my wings, and with a smooth shake of my wings I flew forth from the hole. Hovering over the land, I surveyed the ground below me. The destruction I wrought obtaining my freedom came at a price. I could see a small human child cowering on the ground below me.

Patrick stayed curled up in a ball even as the tremors slowed down and finally stopped. Glancing at the ground around him revealed that the ground had stopped falling away, and the fires had subsided. Suddenly feeling a sharp wind start brushing across his face, he wiped away his tears and looked up from his knees. Above him, a colossal monster hovered in the air suspended by two massive beating wings. From its head spouted two curling horns coupled with

the forked tail dangling down to the two legs ending in cloven hooves. Its eyes glowed a dark red, and they were staring right down at him.

It swung its sword through the air, and as it did the ground at Patrick's feet solidified. The point of the sword traveled from Patrick all the way to the fence line. Where it pointed the ground rose and formed a bridge across any gap between him and the fenced-in perimeter where Chuck was waiting.

Looking back up at up at the monster, a voice appeared in Patrick's head. "You'll be okay" it said in a dark guttural growl. "Please return to your friend and head home to safety. I must apologize for scaring you."

Patrick stumbled up to his feet and quickly started walking down the makeshift path. Not stopping until he reached the fence, he climbed over a section that had collapsed and rejoined Chuck and Brenden. All 3 turned and looked at the hovering monster as it turned to face them. It bared its fangs at them in what may have seemed like a half smile, but instead frightened the boys so much they ran away screaming.

Mankind has never had a true guardian, always being forced to bend the knee to one deity or another. They were considered nothing more than servants and sacrificial lambs led to the slaughter. Those days ended long ago, and I will not allow them to return.

I know that Man will never accept me as their savior. But His plan; to cleanse the world in fire, abandoning humanity in the process, is far too cruel to be allowed. For so long, man has put their faith in their God and that's what gave him His power. Instead I will place my faith in humanity, and thereby give them my power.

No single entity could defeat both God and his army of angels, but even The Devil has his allies. The time has come for the army of the damned to march against the host of heaven.

Mankind will not go back to hiding in fear.

+ Emergency Transmission

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[BEGIN TRANSMISSION]

This is an automated emergency message issued from I

SCP-1179 has reawakened and broken containment.

Rapture Protocol is now in effect.

May God help us all.

[END TRANSMISSION]
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Fire on the Horizon

The narrow alleyways of the Armenian Quarter of Old Jerusalem were beginning to darken as twilight stretched the shadows of the ancient stone buildings over them. Henry De Montfort felt the age of the city bear down on him like a lead brick, the sheer magnitude of the events it has seen dwarfing his already unimpressive frame even further. As he approached a seemingly deserted building at the corner of the old market, he wanted nothing more than to turn away and leave. De Montfort cursed silently. Damn those foolish old men for choosing this place. They did it on purpose, he was sure, they knew how uncomfortable the memories of their joint history made him. Well, he wasn't about to give them the satisfaction of seeing him cower before a few piles of old bricks. Not when he finally won.

De Montfort knocked on the heavy iron door at the front of the building, and through a hatch appeared a pair of suspicious eyes.

"Where did you come from?"

"From the walls of Carcassonne, mighty and thick."

There was a sliding sound, and the door opened to reveal a heavyset man with a broken nose wearing the shift of a Cistercian monk.

"You're late."

"You can't rush progress, Brother Alberic."

"Tell that to the old men. You know how they get."

That he did. As he was ushered in by Brother Alberic he could hear the sounds of a heated argument from the inner chamber:

"… they still expect us to continue our funding after the fiasco with the honey? That's absurd!"

"The Manna Charitable Foundation has proved to be a valuable asset in the past. It would be prudent to-"

"Valuable? That honey of theirs killed thousands! More! If anyone discovers our connection with them we might as well bury our efforts in East Africa. No, from now on, they are on their own."

"Adnan?"

"I'm sorry, Bernard, but I have to side with Samuel here. They are a liability the Initiative can no longer afford to be associated with. The honey was simply the final straw in a haystack of failures."

De Montfort cleared his throat loudly.

"We shall continue this discussion later," said the voice from within. "Come in, Henry. You said you had some important matters to discuss."

"I should bloody well hope so," grunted another. "If he insisted on meeting us in person to discuss them. We are busy men, De Montfort, this better be good."

De Montfort entered the dim room. Most of it was taken by a wooden dais, on which three heavy leather chairs were stationed. The occupants of the chairs were shrouded in darkness, a pointless precautionary measure, since De Montfort knew perfectly well who they were. He didn't care. Let the old men have their fun playing spies if they wished.

"I assure you, gentlemen, it is. I am here to inform you that the Montsegur Loyalists are no more. If the information we have is correct, the death of their final member should rid us of Bélibaste's journal once and for all."

"Excellent work, De Montfort," said the central chair. "The Cathars have been a thorn in our side for far too long, spreading their foul heresy, and that journal was one of their greatest tools. Might I ask how you disposed of him?"

"I'm afraid this is where things begin to get complicated. We found him using one of the relics, and disposed of him using another."

This caused quite the commotion. De Montfort was surprised at the amount of noise three old men could produce.

When he next addressed him, the outrage in the voice of the left chair was obvious. "You dared to use one of the relics as a killing tool? The relics are sacred objects, De Montfort, as you of all people should know!"

"I had no choice. Someone informed the Foundation of the whereabouts of the last Cathar. We couldn't risk them getting their hands on him, not considering what he knew. It had to be done."

The chamber was silent for a moment. Then, the central chair spoke. "How did they find out? The only way they could possibly… Oh no."

"A traitor. Someone within the Horizon Initiative must have informed them."

"Well, we all know which section of the Initiative this traitor most likely belongs to," said the right chair. "The journal was stolen from your archives, after all."

There was anger in the voice of the central chair. "What exactly are you accusing me of? The Initiative didn't even exist when the journal was stolen, and you know how the situation in Europe was in the years following the theft. The church had larger matters to deal with than an ancient heresy!"

"Oh, we all know how busy the church was," said the right chair, a dangerous undertone sneaking into his voice. "Yes, the wars kept it very busy indeed."

The left chair sighed. "Gentlemen, this isn't the time. Allow De Montfort to finish his report."

"As I was saying, a relic was used to sabotage the Foundation's attempt to retrieve the last Cathar, leading to his death. As far as we know, they remain unaware of our intervention."

"Very well, the matter is closed then. If that is all, I believe we can adjourn-"

"Not quite," De Montfort interrupted. "There is one more subject I wished to discuss with you. Project Malleus. The Initiative has spent far too long fighting old enemies and burying even older secrets, while new and much more dire threats have arisen. The last Cathar showed us how dangerous inaction can be. It is time we take the fight to them."

This caught the old men by surprise. "Impossible!" said the central chair. "Confronting the Fifth Church and the Church of the Broken God directly?! It's madness!"

The left chair seemed to agree. "We are still far too few, and far too young. Those groups hold many powerful relics, and who knows what else. The Initiative is still in its infancy, and our support structure is very limited. We must learn to crawl before we can run."

De Montfort was somewhat surprised at the indignation in his voice when he spoke next: "Crawl? We are the leaders of man, the shepherds, the bearers of the sacred light, and you want us to grovel at the feet of pagans and idol worshipers? When will the Initiative be strong enough? When the pieces of the True Cross are burned to fuel a Fifth ritual? When the Menorah is smelted for gears? When the Kaaba is shattered by heathens? We cannot continue to rely on secular groups to stop a spiritual threat such as this. They do not understand, cannot understand. They think they are fighting to preserve normalcy, to defend humanity's flesh. We know we are fighting for nothing less than its eternal soul."

Silence.

Finally, the right chair spoke. "As much as I hate to admit it, you are right. You have the support of the Sons of Shamai. Let it never be said we have cowered before evil again."

The left chair spoke next. "Atibba al-Kitab are behind you as well. I have let our weakness cloud my judgment and shake my resolve. We must fight, regardless of the odds. It is our privilege and our duty."

The center chair was last. "It seems I have no choice. The Ordinis Occulti Luminis are with you as well. You may begin the first phase

of Project Malleus. We will require additional reports before approving anything further. Leave us."

As De Montfort made his way through the now dark streets back to his hotel, a smile crept to his face. He knew informing the Foundation of the last Cathar was the right thing to do. With the old men finally stirred from their complacency, the world was about to find out just how terrible the Wrath of God could be.

First Day

Joshua Thomas Eichburg stared in disbelief at the room in front of him. It was smaller than any other office he'd seen at the FBI, maybe the size of a bedroom. It was the only one he'd seen with no windows. Two of the seven overhead lights had burned out. Six desks had been shoved up against the walls. At one of them, a short woman in a blue suit was tapping away at a computer. At another a middle aged man was reading a book and smoking a cigarette. A second woman, tall and dark-skinned, was reading through the contents of a manilla envelope. None of them noticed him. He looked for a good place to put the box of supplies he was carrying.

“Hey, you must be the new guy!” Joshua felt someone tap his shoulder. He turned and saw a scrawny looking young man with messy blonde hair smiling at him. “Joshua right?”

Joshua nodded. “Right.”

The three people in the office had all turned to look at him now. He gave a half hearted wave to them. They turned back to their desks.

“Ah, ignore them,” said the young man. “They're just jealous.” He extended a hand. Joshua shook it. “So, my name's Isaac. I was the newest, till you came along. That's Sabrina,” he pointed to the dark-skinned woman, “Jessie,” the woman typing, “and Matthew,” the man. “Any questions?”

“This can't be everybody.”

“It's everybody. The five of us, tasked with handling any and all 'unusual incidents' on the east coast.”

Without looking up Matthew grunted out, “That's five too many.”

Isaac shook his head. “Matthew has some strong opinions about the usefulness of our group. It's best to ignore him. That's your desk.”

Joshua put the box on the indicated desk. Like the others in the room it was made out cheap plastic, with a marked lack of structural integrity. One of the drawers only closed halfway. When the box was dropped onto it, it made a long groaning noise. Joshua quickly took the box off and placed it on the floor.

“I want to show you something,” Isaac said. He was standing across the room, at another desk. Joshua walked over and saw three objects laying on it- a penny, a copy of Action Comics issue 430, and a ballerina statuette.

“This,” said Isaac with a hint of pride, “is the collection.”

“The collection of what?”

Isaac just grinned. He held up the penny, turned it over so Joshua could see both sides. “I present to you, an ordinary penny.”

“Amazing,” said Joshua.

“It gets even better.” Isaac flicked it at the wall. It fell on the desk, and he made a dramatic sweep with his hands at it. “Behold.”

Joshua beheld. Rather than heads or tails, the penny was showing a third side, a large eye. Joshua picked it up and turned it over. The bottom side was tails. He turned it back and saw the eye had turned back to heads. “What the fuck?”

“It gets cooler,” said Isaac. He was grinning like a child who had just gotten away with a particularly nasty bit of mischief. He flipped it again, and it showed a picture of George Washington instead of Lincoln. A third flip revealed a turkey clutching an olive branch and bundle of arrows in its talons. “Wild huh? This is our collection.”

“Your collection.”

“*Our collection*. You're one of us now, hombre. You're looking at 20 years of UIU heritage.”

“Right. But there are only three things,” said Joshua. He eyed the comic and ballerina.

“Three unusual things,” said Isaac, and put the penny back up the table. “We've found other stuff, but we normally don't get to keep it.”

Joshua laughed. “What, does somebody take it from you? Big scary men in black with funny accents?”

Before Isaac could respond, Joshua's phone rang. He answered, and a voice said “Hello Joshua. This is Skip.” The voice was a male's, smooth, clipped, and professional. In the background Joshua could hear two people chattering.

“I don't know anybody named Skip,” said Joshua. When he did, Isaac's body seized. Sabrina and Jessie both shot up and hurried over to him. Matthew ignored them.

“Give me the phone!” hissed Sabrina. “Let me talk to him.”

“Don't give this phone to anybody else,” said the voice. “Just listen. You're probably angry and frustrated. We understand that. Your future's just been crushed. You've been transferred to an underfunded, understaffed unit where agents' careers go to die. You think you'll be stuck for the rest of your life chasing ghosts and Bigfoot and other fantasies. Is this correct?”

“Maybe,” said Joshua. The others were looking at him solemnly. “That depends on who this is.”

“Joshua, we're the people who are here to tell you that you're wrong. The work you'll do in the UIU matters greatly. Everything you've been told about, it's all real. And you're going to help protect the world from it.”

“I'm not sure I understand.”

“We'll call. When we do, be sure to pick up.” The voice hung up. Joshua looked down at his phone. “What the fuck was that?”

“Ah,” said Isaac.

“A great big pile of horseshit, dropped right down your fucking britches,” said Matthew. He stamped out the cigarette and stood up. “I'm going to go out on a limb here and say they fed you a bit about

'saving the world'. Our work being 'important'. Is that right?"

Joshua nodded.

"Let me tell you what they actually meant. We're their gimp. We're here to take it up the ass, smile, say 'thank you sir, may I have another', then go and fetch them a big bundle of grapes and feed it to them. They'll call, send us out on some inane fucking errand, then pat us on the back and send us packing with a lollipop in hand."

"That… I don't think that answers my question," said Joshua.

"What Matthew is trying to say, in his own inelegant manner," said in Jessie, "Is that the person lied. We don't know who they are exactly, but they're massive. Government scale influence and resources. Sometimes they'll call, always with a menial assignment they can't be bothered with. They're the ones who take most of what we find, like Isaac was saying."

"Lovely," sighed Joshua. "Just when I think this couldn't possibly get any more demeaning." He pulled out his phone and tapped in *69. Nothing happened. He tossed it onto the desk. "So that's it then? Everything we're going after is actually real, and we can't do anything about it."

Jessie nodded.

"We sometimes do things about it," chimed Isaac. "We can do stuff on our own. It's just not very effective."

"Do things like find pennies, you mean?"

"Yes! Exactly like that. We do stakeouts some times. Busts. It's uh, normally nothing. But sometimes, you know, we get lucky."

Joshua rubbed his temples and looked at Sabrina. "And you? What do you think about all this?"

She shrugged. "I think… it's good that we're not the only people out there handling this. If we were the best humanity had to offer, that wouldn't be a very good sign, would it?"

Matthew snorted.

“Okay. Okay. Maybe this could be a good thing.” Joshua ran his fingers through his hair. “At least it means we're not chasing after nothing right?”

The room was silent.

“Dammit, there has to be something we can do. We must know something, right? We have some sort of budget, even if it's fucking nothing. We're FBI agents. That means something, right?”

The room was silent.

He walked over to his desk and began to unpack the box. “Right.”

The Man with Oscilloscope Eyes

The smoking ruin of the black Crown Victoria lay on the side of the road, its wheels slowly turning in the air, a massive tree trunk piercing the windshield. The tree had blasted through the safety glass and through the driver's seat, knocking the steering wheel off its column, through the headrest, and into the back seat. A clearly unsurvivable accident.

Except for the young man in the grey duster sitting on top of the transmission hump, smoking a cigarette. Clearly a dangerous activity given the heavy scent of leaking gasoline in the air.

The glare of halogen-bright headlights coming down the curve interrupted his reverie, so he hopped down from the mangled wreck, tossing his still-glowing cigarette butt into the passenger-side seat. He climbed up the embankment and stepped into the middle of the road, waving a battered Yankees baseball cap over his head. The Mitsubishi pulled up beside the wreck, and he walked over to the driver's side window, where an obese, balding man with a furrowed brow glared up at him angrily.

"You're late," the young man said, showing him the time on a Mickey Mouse watch. "You said you'd be here twenty minutes ago."

"You said you could take this guy in. What happened?"

"I'm guessing a little girl happened," the young man said.

"How the fuck do you figure?"

"Well, I don't know. You think maybe the little girl whom you told me could mess around with electronics might have had something to do with the inexplicable failure of my car's transmission system? I thought you told me she could only affect computers."

"Shut up. You're supposed to be the best. My bosses paid a lot of

money for you. So far you've given us shit. Get in the car."

The young man walked to the passenger's side without another word, tossed his grey duster in the back seat and climbed in. "Little girls," he muttered. "It's always little girls. Make a note, if you have a chance to fight a seven-story monster or a kindergartener, take the monster, you'll live longer." Behind him, the gas fumes had finally started to ignite, and blue-yellow flames were licking the upholstery of the wrecked Crown Vic. "I'm going to need a new car, and a six-man support team," the young man said. "In addition…"

"You're getting jack shit." The young man felt cold steel against his temple. He glanced up into the rear view mirror. Walther PPK. 9x17mm. Silver finish. Ivory grips. Stylish gun, must have cost a small fortune. "This experiment is over. We're switching back to our usual MO, and you're going to hell."

"I really wouldn't do that if I were you," the young man said. His voice was low, and flat, deliberately cool, like a snake in the rushes. "Not with only a gun. I'd recommend a stake and some holy water."

The fat man laughed. "Shut up. Aren't you a fucking lousy liar."

"You shut up. You won't kill me. You paid a lot of money for me, and your bosses won't like it if you waste resources."

"My bosses don't know about you. This is an independent operation. Perfect deniability. You were dead the moment that you took the contract. Or did you really think that the Foundation would even bother with some loser who got kicked out of the GOC?" A fireball ignited the night sky as the gas tank of the Crown Vic finally caught and lit. In the lurid scarlet light, the fat man's features appeared harsh, cruel… yes, even demonic.

The young man smiled, a wide, mirthless smile showing lots of crooked white teeth. "No support. No resources. No replacement car. I guess that makes sense." The young man leaned his head back and sighed, staring up at the roof of the car. "My mistake. I guess I've gotten soft. But one thing that I haven't forgotten…"

There was a gunshot, and a brief flurry of movement, and then the

small Mitsubishi leaped forward like a pouncing cat. The tiny car swerved off the side of the road and over the edge of the embankment, where it tumbled end over end down the rocky ravine and crashed, inverted, into a small creek bed at the bottom of the hill. Two more gunshots, then silence.

The young man pulled himself out of the passenger's side window, grimacing as he nursed a gunshot wound in the ear. Blood was streaming down his face from a cut on the forehead, and his left ankle was twisted strangely as he rolled over onto his back, gasping for breath. Broken ribs. Definitely broken ribs.

He grinned up at the starry night sky as he tossed the silver-plated Walther into the creek. "As I was gonna say… I never forgot to set the car into Park when doing a roadside execution," he wheezed.

He reached into his coat pocket for a pack of cigarettes that wasn't there, realizing only then that his coat was still in the back seat of the car. He considered his options. Given the situation, passing out seemed like the best course of action.

So he did.

First Locke Donation

Graciously donated by Ms. Pris

Of Interest: *trans-reality, trans-reality transference, non-entropic, device, donation. Cornucopian?*

Asset Summary: *A report written by Junior Assistant Secretary Rhiannon Locke, of the Committee for African Operations follows:*

Some of you may not have known that I had a sister, Priscilla Locke decade ago. Now, she's returned, or rather, another version of her h

Ms. Priscilla Locke, as you all know her now, is living witness to the carrying around with her, known as the "Anabasis." Long story short started to come apart, and she used the "Anabasis" to come to us. W the "Anabasis", she tracked me down and graciously offered to help "First Locke Donation".

We don't know how the device works, but we've figured out how to p terms, is "merge" two or more selected "dimensions" (or alternate u space, with a preference shown based on the dimension the device from its front "spout" and begins tracing out a three-dimensional sha space is then "merged" with the accompanying space from another

It should go without saying that uses for this technology are potentia desert on an Earth that has been racked by natural calamity and ru certain events in the past hadn't happened, you'd be standing in a lu where that alternate universe is, mathematically. You could use the "merge" it with that grassland. It's like carefully cutting a square out equal-sized square from another piece of paper, then sealing it all b fertile grassland in the middle of a barren desert.

(Additionally, the device's settings can change selected time and pla
empty space in your backyard 3 meters in the air and "merge" it with
from 3,000 years in the past, and have it drop harmlessly onto your

Of course, that's an extreme example. Practically, merging grasslan
with the different settings and the right supplementary resources (su
CETres Donation), it could be a potentially world-changing device.

Safety concerns would obviously be paramount, as we could certain
microbe or foreign strain of virus or bacteria never experienced in ou
personnel and cause a pandemic. Given the small amounts of spac
this can be mitigated and overall prevented by careful quarantine pr
dimensions being drawn from. Keep in mind Priscilla Locke herself c
got a medical checkup and is perfectly healthy here in ours.

There is the potential moral dilemma— after all, how would you feel
snatching up water and resources from *our* dimension to help their c
out there with 'Anabasises' of their own, they're not willfully targeting
from them. As such, we will take care only to target universes which
develop as fully as ours has, or where human life has gone extinct f

Priscilla Locke has full working knowledge of how to best analyze th
whose Earth has more than enough extra resources to spare and no
the proper example, even if we are the only ones who can.

Let's use this to show the world (and show ourselves) that compass
will always be people who care about you, and are capable of loving
you are. No matter what you do or say, you are our family, and you
with us.

*Rhiannon Locke is a thirty year old member of the Mission B
Operations and the General Assets Administration of the Ma
she has belonged for six years. She graduated* cum laude *in
University of California (USA), thanks to a grant offered by a
Programme for Excellent Alumni.*

Maintenance and Operation: ONGOING RESEARCH. The free Agent and Benefactor Priscilla Locke is currently the only person with an approximate understanding of the item's operation. Notes and reports will be taken, when available, and relayed regularly to Mission Branch for safekeeping. While no maintenance concerns

have been noted, both the free Agent Locke and the Security Executive member Frank Westinghouse have been charged with test operations in controlled environments.

Security Restrictions: **NO PERSON OR GROUP ASIDE FROM THE EXECUTIVE MEMBERS CHARGED WITH ITS HANDLING CAN RECEIVE ANY INFORMATION ON THE FIRST LOCKE DONATION.** 1987 GOC-MCF Regulations clearly establish that any trans-reality effects fall well beyond our allowed areas of operation; therefore, this item must remain a matter completely internal to those MCF members included in current Safety Concerns limitations.

Safety Concerns: Restricted to previously selected members (at this time, Priscilla Locke — free Agent —, Rhiannon Locke — Mission Branch Committee for African Operations, Assets Administration —, Frank Westinghouse — ecSec). Document information restricted to Mission Branch, Cornucopia personnel.

Assigned To: **ONGOING RESEARCH.** Programme-Anabasis on hold. Compound Programme Cornucopia may absorb Programme Anabasis.

First Ones In

The Eight Banner system of the Qing Empire's army had been maintained for hundreds of years, with each banner consisting of men of certain races — Manchu, Han Chinese, Mongol, and so on, until the modern era came and the blending of ethnicities made such a system imbalanced. Now the Banners were utterly indistinguishable, particularly after the Reynesian Reforms of 1890, which mandated that each banner was to be its own self-sustaining unit, with its own complement of artillery, cavalry, and infantry. Each Banner was not to roam further than a day's march from the other, so that if one came under attack, any number of others could rush to its aid against a larger foe. The idea had come from Napoleon, Cpl. Steve Chin had heard. An awful lot of westernization had occurred during the mid to late-1800s in China. He highly doubted China would have survived today if it hadn't.

Today, the average Banner was a heavily armed legion of mobile artillery, tanks, and enough armored vehicles and helicopters to carry all a Banner's infantry at a moment's notice. Meant to swarm an enemy, with a mass of helicopters firing rockets and dropping hundreds of heavily armed men, while tanks blew past at 50 km an hour. Each Banner had been drilled extensively just on loading and unloading as quickly as possible, what was called the "Green Lotus", for the way in which the camouflaged military hardware unpacked from its transport, blossoming like a flower. It was designed based upon Sun Tzu's advice to attempt to break an enemy before firing a shot, by the mere sight of its discipline and èlan alone.

"Not Sun Tzu," Sgt. Sheng said beside him, packed tightly to see Chin scribbling in his diary, "Napoleon said it."

"The fuck he did," Pvt. Qianlong called out from across the trench, "Respectfully, sir. It *was* Sun Tzu."

"It was *Napoleon*," Sheng snarled, "'Elan' is a French word."

"Alan who?"

"'Elan'! It means… something."

Chin grinned, "I'm pretty sure every great military mind has said something like it at one point or another."

"Only one that matters is Sun Tzu," Qianlong insisted.

"Because that's the only military guy you've ever heard of, *bái chī*" Sheng called out.

"Ey, who you callin' *bái chī*, *bái chī*?" Qianlong shouted. A faint popping sound was heard in the silence immediately after his words.

Sheng peered up from his trench, "Aaaawww… so much for an ambush."

Chin peered up from the trench, not able to see whatever Sheng was looking at, "We're spotted?"

Sheng shrugged, "Wait for command to decide."

A moment later, Sheng's radio came alive, a voice shouting too fast for him to pick up much beyond names, numbers, and coordinates. Sheng caught it all without fail. He grinned cheekily, the tips of his mustache pointing upward.

"As one. Total silence. Fingers off the trigger."

The infantry group rose from their trench. All along the line, other companies rose in similar motion, ready for the sort of steady advance they'd all been drilled in. They were expecting civilians, so firing at will was out of the question.

"Hey Sheng," Another soldier, Liu Kim called out, "You know in America, a sergeant doesn't command a company? Man who commands a company is called a 'Captain'."

Sheng snorted, "Captain? Captain is a naval rank. Why would a captain command land soldiers?"

"It's — "

"No no no no, don't interrupt me! You speak about the Americans and only further reinforce how backward and barbaric their military is. Are they so stupid as to have naval commanders in charge of their infantry? Are their academies so anemic?"

"Sgt. Sheng use much pretty words," Qianlong grunted out, prompting a laugh from the men around.

"Because I am a Sergeant! We here in China prefer the more civilized type leading you pack of *chòubī* into combat. Hopefully we can make passable gentlemen out of you."

Civilians started to appear through the foliage, rushing towards the company. Sheng lifted his rifle, prompting the other soldiers to raise them up high as well, so as not to scare the civilians off. Some started to scream, but pressed on regardless, moving through the company's ranks, shuffling and shoving, momentarily disrupting the line.

"Hey," Sheng called out down his right, "Hey! Close the line! Set your blocks down and start pushing!"

Once the civilians had brushed past, the company unslung their backpacks, and pulled out their 'blocks'. A solid gray cube, it was spongy to the touch, with layers of densely packed material underneath it. Freed from its packaging, it began to slowly rise, roughly to chest height, and as wide as a man. It was in effect a makeshift wall, able to be crushed into a portable size for transport. Although the bullets lodged in the layers had to be dug out before it could be re-fit into its packaging.

Once they were on the ground and rising, the soldiers could start pushing it along with their knees as they lowered themselves to a crouch. It offered all the protection of proper cover, while allowing for a solid firing line reminiscent of old Napoleonic line infantry. That didn't mean the blocks weren't obstinate when packed onto the muddy ground.

"This blows," Cpl. Chin grunted, having to reach around the block to

keep it from falling over the more he pushed. He could hear other blocks falling over around him, plopping wetly or managing to hit mostly dry dirt and just thud heavily.

The first shot to hit nearly took him in the hand, just as he let go of the block. More bullets started spraying wildly all along the front of the line. He could hear voices shouting, screaming in some language, probably Vietnamese, while soldiers in the company braced themselves against the blocks. Those who had pushed theirs over had to drop face-down in the mud for cover.

"What's it sound like? AKs?" Sheng shouted to someone else. The reply was caught in the middle of a loud blast. Sheng nodded regardless, and started to nod slowly, in rhythm.

"Now, return fire!" He called out calmly, and rose up onto his knees, taking careful aim and shooting in deliberate bursts. There was little to see through the foliage, but the line of infantry firing en masse would have devastating impact in a largely flat, unimpeded jungle environment.

"Down, and keep pushing," Sheng dropped again, pushing his block forward quickly, too fast to allow it to keel over. Return fire came, less heavy than before, and focused more down along the left of the line. A solid white mist was falling up ahead, and as they pressed on into it, Chin could begin to see Dai Viet soldiers, riddled with bullets, staring intently at them as they came within view.

"Stop!" Sheng called out. Most of the soldiers downed were still alive. That meant they were still dangerous. Possums, they would've been called in America. Sheng casually drew his sidearm, and peered up from his block, taking casual potshots at the prone figures to confirm them as dead. Others along the line did the same. After that, they dropped back into cover, waiting to see if a grenade or other explosive had been rigged to go off.

"We got our first snag," Sheng called out. Cheers arose. A 'snag' meant some part of the line hadn't been as lucky as them, and was now stuck in a genuine firefight with experienced militants. It also meant the company could rest for an indeterminate period of time.

Steve Chin pried open his diary, skimming through the entries he'd been putting over the past few weeks. The sluggish advance across wide swaths of land was pure 19th century-style warfare. The Emperor was impatient, and unwilling to commit to a systematic offensive that would see Qing Banners occupying thousands of towns and villages, and spending years more training locals to properly fight the Marxist insurgents. He wanted his army to sweep the ground once, claim victory in the name of Heaven, and set his name in the history books for centuries to come for his military genius in so quickly and thoroughly uprooting the Marxist insurgency.

"Marxist" was what all of them were called — in reality, the insurgents who claimed to be Marxist were less than a third of all non-Qing fighting forces engaged in Dai Viet. The Emperor simply chose to drive his boot into a pile of shit surrounded by people who'd been fighting over that pile for the past three years.

"Cpl. Steve," Liu Kim swatted at his helmet lightly, "We're moving again."

School had resumed, and without any other plans, children were pouring back into the school that was known to Foundation personnel solely as Site-141.

"What you think? Politics or laziness?" Sharpe asked as they pressed through the open doorway, both women well over the heads of the children crowding around them.

"Can't it be both?" Priss suggested. There just wasn't enough money or manpower to handle shutting down a big public school right at the start of the school year. There was no space in neighboring schools, and most of the parents whose children didn't ride the bus couldn't afford to extend their commute by a half hour or more to reach the more distant schools. At some point, the pressures of maintaining every day life outweighed vague assertions and assurances from the Foundation, no matter how much money was offered.

"I like kids," Sharpe reached out to pat one on the head. The boy whirled on her, shouting 'Fuckin' bitch, don't touch me!' and running.

"I want the security footage of that," Priss joked.

"That was really unfortunate wording, wasn't it? Fuck."

At the very least, the school could afford to spare several classrooms and a conference room for Foundation personnel to continue operating. The tons of dirt were shipped to nearby Site-189. Everything worthwhile was happening down in the cellar.

A guard was stationed outside the storage closet, with two orange-coated D-Class. Priss clenched her jaw firm, and saw the black one lower his head towards her, "Ma'am."

"Boo, what…"

"Ma'am, I was picked an' now I'm workin' wit' you's," Boo squirmed uncomfortably, "Miss Marlowe, she ain't had no mo' use for me, so I'm doin' this…"

She shook her head, and looked at the guard. He looked just as uncomfortable. The door opened, and Edgars backed out, clipboard pressing on his gut, "99401, your turn."

Priss glared at Edgars, who looked up to see her, "Oh. Hi."

"No more of this," She nudged him back into the room, marching in after him, with Sharpe closing the door behind them, "Are you a licensed judge or professional executioner?"

"I… what? No… what?"

"I don't care what you think or what Foundation protocol is, I'm not sending people into infinite meat grinders to die until we find someplace that won't kill them on contact," Priss felt her head start to spin, and an ache in her temples, "I didn't join up to be a killer. And if you have, then fuck you, go home and don't come back. This is supposed to be fucking science, securing shit, containing shit, protecting it from us, and us from it. I'm not going to put up with this chickenshit-bullshit just because we have money to shut people up."

Edgars stared at her — everyone in the room stared in awkward silence. Priss felt her hands start to tremble and her chest ache.

"Being a social justice warrior runs in the family, then?"

She whirled on the voice in a blind fit of rage, "Why don't you piss off and go fuck yourself at home? No one fucking wants you here. Do us a fucking favor and leave."

She barely noticed at the time who had said it. Now her anger was sucked out of her like a vacuum as she saw Sharpe staring back at her, eyes brimming with tears. The taller woman backed out of the room, and left.

"So I was about to say… we found a safe area to send shit to. Brought a D-Class back safe and all. Checked out all fine," Edgars muttered sheepishly.

Priss could only take shallow breaths, feeling her chest throb in immense pain any time she tried to breathe in too deep. She undid her jacket and set it aside, trying to calm herself, "Then send me in."

"Uhhh…"

"I don't want to see any more slaves being put through this thing's inter-dimensional reamer. Volunteers only. And I'm volunteering."

Priss wasn't even in charge of the project, but with Marlowe gone and not one of the technicians reporting her to any of the other on-site administrators, she was free to boss everyone around. They still preferred her to Dr. Marlowe.

Sandy shuffled over, and handed Priss a wristband with a built-in tracker, and a small camera to affix to her shirt, "Just hit record once you're in. You've got about an hour of battery, but we're pulling you back after 10 minutes."

"Half an hour," Priss commanded.

Sandy sighed, and glanced at the camera, "D-Class who came back was pretty flustered by what he'd seen…"

"Half an hour is fine," Priss stepped in front of the Anabasis, emptying her pockets and her belt of everything but her pistol. The presence of armed agents still put the techs and researchers on

edge. Even the guards' guns were loaded with rubber bullets. Priss's wasn't.

"Stand by," Edgars turned the knobs, and the light started to beam at her, like a weak flashlight.

She kept her eyes open as the world around her dissolved like a heat-induced mirage. The world became hazy, then abruptly cleared. She was still in the room. It was completely empty, and an orange light was shining through the open doorway.

Her movements were sluggish, as if she were underwater. The air was oppressively hot and dry. She made her way out of the room. To her right was a stairwell, just like the school. She made her way up, brushing her hair back and pulling it into a loose braid to keep away from her face. Then she fidgeted with her camera, pressing the red button to begin recording.

The building above was completely barren; no other rooms, walls, dividers of any kind. An empty warehouse, with the front door wide open. Harsh sunlight filtered in from the door, casting everything in an orange pallor. She couldn't tell if it was sunrise or sunset. The closer she got to the open door, the more features she could make out.

The building was at least fifty feet above ground, with no stairwell leading below. Instead, a mound of dirt and sand had been piled up just short of the entrance. The land around the building looked desiccated and flaking, like snakeskin left in the sun.

The sound of footsteps drew her back inside, gun drawn and held steady towards the ground. A figure approached her. It looked like a man, dressed only in a pair of dark blue pants. He looked as though he were missing most of his ribcage and his shoulders — not removed; never there to begin with. Most prominent of all was his head. The upper part seemed to cave in on itself, topped with two fleshy lobes that might have been eyes or its brain, and a mouth that opened and let out a barely audible sound of clicking and croaking. It raised a wobbly wooden stick up at her, starting to croak more audibly as it approached her, jabbing at the air defensively.

Priss took a step to her left, carefully raising the gun up to groin level, finger off the trigger. Then she took another step. The creature stepped to its left as well, preventing her from leaving its direct line of sight — if it even had sight. She continued circling with the creature until her back was to the stairwell she had emerged from. The creature croaked loudly, and lowered its stick, banging on the floor with the bottom of it. The noise it made was surprisingly loud, and almost immediately she heard more croaks echoing around the open space, from other stairwells and openings around her.

She took a quick look behind her, then ran to the stairwell. She couldn't tell if the one with the stick was following her; the croaks didn't let up, and only got louder. By the time she shut the door behind her, she could see movement down the stairs. Several of them must have piled on top of each other, slamming against the door and howling wildly at the door. They probably couldn't move, stuck in the enclosed space against the door.

She sighed, and looked around. There were wooden boxes in the room, nailed shut. She sat on one, and leaned her head against the wall.

"How long was that? Seven, eight minutes…?" She looked down at her wristband. No clock on it. Nothing she could interact with.

At least they couldn't pound on the door. She sighed and shut her eyes. In her mind, she re-played the events that had unfolded. Sharpe… Annie. She'd just been joking, Priss realized too late. She'd never seen Aurianne Sharpe look like that, her eyes so wide, tears welling, shoulders slumped so low. It was terrifying; Sharpe had always been the strong influence in her life, the loving, protective "big sister" she hoped she was towards Rhiannon. Annie had never shown the slightest bit of weakness. Even when it was a genuine time to cry, it was always red eyes and crocodile tears with her, voice never warbling, head always held high.

I bet she has a crush on you, Rhiannon had said to her, derisively, *but she doesn't know, does she?* Priss lowered her head. She hadn't ever told Sharpe, but somehow she'd found out.

A light shone in her face, and she jumped to her feet. The world

became hazy again, and the light grew brighter, with more clear humanlike figures emerging. Then she was suddenly back, the room brightly lit, Edgars standing before her, looking relieved.

"Pulled the plug early?" She realized she was drenched in sweat, and the room was freezing cold.

"No. You were gone for ten hours. We kept trying to bring you back, but… we couldn't risk shifting the controls and bringing back pieces of whatever might've been over there. Or pieces of you," He rubbed his eyes, and turned away, "So we started igniting her every half-hour, just in case. Then every ten minutes. Then everyone went home, preparing for the worst. Some kind of… general relativity thing, I guess?"

She smiled, barely absorbing his words, instead savoring the freezing cold air the Anabasis somehow put out when it started to overheat. She drifted over to the table where she'd left her cellphone, and started to call Aurianne.

« Potent Drug | First Ones In | Key Biscayne »
Anabasis Hub

First Quarto

The Architect
The temple now is slumb'ring in its sprawl
The dark of night has taken it upon
But growth can yet succeed within its walls
And rooms within continue yet to spawn
Does wood not crack if alterations made
Continue so to do while it does wake?
Do tiny Buddhas ever truly fade?
And hallways moan, and bones and teeth do break
To craft the yawning caverns of the god?
A frozen earthquake, trapped within the mud
Always growing, shifting where we trod
To craft a place of worship dripped in blood
And later when the lives and walls can't keep
I wonder, will we remember to weep?

Star-Eyed Child
She cannot see the dark inside her eyes
A film, in day, that eats the world within
The horror that the blackness does imply
Does not reflect upon her gentle skin
A child yet, a flower not yet grown
A bud attempting sight unto the world
But even here, ensconced among her own
She cannot try to even come unfurled
She only sits and stares, her eyelids gone
And never even really there to start
The curtains to her solemn mind are drawn
Her eyes, reflection, lonely counterpart
And yet within, below the membrane lies
Her galaxy, a heaven in her skies

Season Opener
In darkest room a researcher sits still
Rewinding on the Motorola box
To watch the 'faithful' execute God's 'will'
Prosthelytizing vainly to their flocks
"What makes a man descend so far below?"
He wonders as he presses pause to stare
Bathed in the television's bright blue glow
To watch them, fans still dimly unaware
That nothing will allow them to escape
The hellish nightmare of this picture show,
This prison cell, this never-ending jape
That lost its comic timing long ago
But who'd have thought a basketball's long arc
Can mirror us truly within the dark

Pesterbot
Destruction is its one prerogative
But fate has doomed it to a life of want
Its threats become merely declarative
Without the weight behind to truly daunt
It tries on names like different kinds of hats
Attempting to find one that truly strikes
Fear into hearts of men, those bureaucrats
That treat it like a toy that's meant for tykes
But deep within it burns a heart of flame
A thirst for blood that's never been compared
Yet locked within a body that's been lamed
Its only comfort never truly there
Those empty threats are all it ever had
And in the end that's really rather sad

Cross-Dimensional Barbershop
"Did you know, boy, this shop used to be full
"Of barbers, not just me, a massive fleet
"Of men with gel and deft fingers that pull
"At curls and kinks, voices raised to greet
"The men who came to us, with coins in hand

"To ask us for our willing expertise
"In all things follicle, to make them grand.
"Surgeons, lawyers, corporate types, police,
"All came here to Giuseppe. Now, they're gone,
"Absconded," he said, glowering past me.
The bags below his eyes belied a yawn.
"A handful left, perhaps a score, and thee."
His accent was too thick for me to grasp
"It was fun, once," was all I heard him rasp

Deus Ex Machina
We live our lives in quiet discontent
But safe among the rambling lies we weave
About how we've protected our ascent
To afterlife, and yet we thought to leave
A ranger station, quiet in its place
Among the geyser's roaring waterspout
Concealing network hoping to replace
The world that we can learn to do without
A hidden comfort we cannot learn of,
Despite the fact that it would bring us peace,
A magnifier of the dange'rous love
A counter to the promise of release
But in the end, with blackness ending yawn
I bet no one will even know we're gone

The Black Cat and the White Rabbit / Jackie's Secret / Site-45-C: Floor 24
Oh, listen close to humming in the air,
The disk drive, like a flitting moth, awakes
And spins the empty numbness it can spare
From lines of code that slither through like snakes
The party's in full swing now, and the lords
And ladies in their grandeur turn to watch
The cat among them, slowly drifting towards
The center, now devoid of all debauch
But even masks can't save him now in this
Emaciated form, he tries to tamp
The feeling grown of dread encasing bliss

He's wond'ring if he should have asked the lamp
A sharpened mind's no match for rabbit's claws
Our Sarah isn't here now, never was

WHAT THE FUCK IS THAT THING
Do living creatures not deserve respect
No matter how upsetting their visage?
Maybe. Perhaps we all need to reflect
Upon the thin genetics, and the bridge
That draws us close together, us and them
(Disgusting though their many legs may be)
The tree of life has crafted many stems
And good or ill, entwined with them we see
Them only through the crystal glass I wield
To capture them, release upon the earth.
The index card's a flimsy sort of shield
Protection that we've borne against since birth
Yet tender love for them—oh no, it fell
Oh shiTTING FUCK, IT'S ON MY FACE, OH HELL

« **First Quarto** | **Second Quarto** »

First Seed

March 11th, 2015.

Siberia was not nice this time of year. Anders Forsman wondered if Siberia was ever really nice at *any* time of the year. Either way, this wasn't his normal neck of the woods. The Siberian tundra was the kind of place you shipped low performance Insurgency officers to try and whip them into shape. But apparently one of those washouts had stumbled upon something big before the hoarders had a chance to nab it from them. So the Insurgency had decided that he would be the one to go verify that it was as big a hazard as they claimed it to be. Forsman personally thought that it was a cluster of bullshit coming from some attention whore officers. He'd see that it wasn't as jazzy as they had made it out to be, and some of them would probably be shot. Bing bang done.

The convoy was beginning to slow down, and at the head of the pack Forsman could almost make out the silhouette of a big tower. He opened his car door and was hit by a block of freezing air. Pulling up his parka, he began trudging down toward the silhouette of a tower, hazy from all the snow in the air. It was the thing the washouts claimed to be the greatest thing since sliced bread. Orville walked up next to him. Orville was another one of the guys the big chiefs had sent down to look at this thing. He was great at explaining to overexcited officers that the magic flying bobble-head they had found did not require an Apozem recovery protocol. Forsman nodded to him as they walked toward their mutual destination.

It was a big fucker. That was the first thing that occurred to Forsman as they got closer. There were the signs of excavation protocols being enacted even at this distance from the site. He saw kids digging holes through solid permafrost. Locals, probably recruited recently. As they went on, the digging became more and more organized. It went from freezing teens digging haphazard holes to professional engineers yakking about controlled demolition with the

tremble of heavy machinery permanently in the background. The excavated area itself was at least three hundred and fifty meters across. Not meters, thought Forsman, yards. They didn't use meters anymore.

The hole itself was too deep to see anything, but the officers in charge were more than happy to blather about all their theories on what the object really was. "Maybe it is some ruins that came from ancient civilizations!" was one of the more popular theories. Another one that was brought out almost as often was that it was an extraterrestrial vehicle. Most of them hadn't seen the thing for themselves, and had no idea what it actually was. But that didn't stop every officer Forsman interviewed from spouting off their own kettle of bullshit.

"Now lieutenant," Forsman would say, as he pretended to look at the important documents on his clipboard, "When did you first become aware of this object?"

The lieutenant would reply that they had found it "Pokin' out of a big ditch. Some of the people that used to live in the next town over went wild over it after it grew right into an insurance office."

Things would go on like that, with Forsman asking what had happened to the property (Demolished), townsfolk ("Evacuated"), and how things at the excavation site were going (they always said it was excellent).

And then he would have to ask about their theories on what the object could be. And he would sit and listen as the man seated in front of him listed off speculative bullshit, sometimes with clever theories they had come up with all on their own. The theories usually ran the gamut of things that he had heard a million times before. Aliens, ancients, conspiracy blah blah blah. The only one who wasn't completely up his own ass was a junior officer who had been in the dig site. He was the only officer Forsman knew of who had seen the thing. His name was Jasper.

Jasper told him that the thing looked like a tree connected to a bunch of big roots, all made of some kind of metal substance. When one of his men tried to touch it, they'd been snarled in by millions of

fibers growing out of the thing that pulled him in. They had stopped underground excavation after that, and begun trying to dig it out from the surface. Jasper told him that it looked like the thing went a long way into the dirt. It was the only useful information Forsman had gotten all day.

Forsman looked at his accumulated data and shook his head. It was just a textbook case of overeager officers taking something big and scary to be more dangerous than it actually was. All it seemed to be was a big fibrous root in the ground. Strange, certainly, and definitely warranted the Insurgency's attention, but it wasn't doing anything particularly dangerous. Such a shame. He had had hope that maybe this wouldn't be bullshit, that they may have actually found something important before the Foundation could add it to their collections. But…well…that was a fanciful thought. Realistically, he would probably never be important enough to do anything other than these backwater assignments. At least he didn't have to live here.

He shut down the terminal, and a piercing whine began blaring. He covered his ears and ducked. After a second, he realized it was the alarm. The intercom crackled and fizzed, and then spat out a static-riddled announcement.

"ALL SECURITY PERSONNEL ARE TO REPORT TO EXCAVATION SITE PRIME IMMEDIATELY, OBJECT NASAW HAS BEEN ACTIVATED, REPEAT, OBJECT NASAW-" the bulletin sputtered, and then went silent. Forsman got up and grabbed his gun. The door handle stuck for a second, but he was still out in the corridor within moments. The corridor itself was in pandemonium. Men and women in secondhand uniforms ran in every direction, and the feeling of panic was heavy in the air. Forsman noticed Orville calmly walking toward the exit. He pushed his way past a security agent fumbling with a gun and walked beside him.

Their conversation was short.

"Any idea what's going on?"

"None at all."

"Heading out."

"Of course. You?"

"Of course."

They hit the exit doors and looked up.

The tower was no longer at the center of the excavation site. Or, rather, it was in the same relative place, but the excavation site was gone. The tower was several hundred feet in the air. Several hundred tendrils, the root structures, trailed down to the earth. They ripped tremendous amounts of earth apart as they were liberated from their underground resting place. It looked like a flower being pinched and lifted into the sky, and they were the bugs being smashed by the uplifting roots.

As the tower grew higher, the ground around them started to break. The trails of the roots drew closer to their location. Forsman looked to his right to ask Orville what to do. He realized Orville was gone. In his place, there was a big mesh root, ornately woven and glimmering in the winter sun. Forsman turned around to go back into the base, radio command about what had happened. And he would've been able to, had the door not been blocked by a large root, also ornate, with intricately carved patterns. Forsman would have turned to try and run, but he tripped on a root. As he watched it crawl up his leg, he didn't feel any pain. He looked over at the dig site, saw roots spreading, making new towers to put themselves out of the ground. Some might call it a shame. He thought it was beautiful.

It was the last thought he ever had.

First Time's The Charm

Assigned Personnel	
Light Transport Vessel 04	
Pilot:	Brad Cannon
Deckhand(s):	George Montgomery
	Rudy Lynch
	Timothy Holland
Boarding Party	
Security Officer(s):	Ken Jones
	Peter Alves
Researcher(s):	Gene Perry
	Dorothy Hansen
D-Class:	D-3487
	D-6533
	D-2995
	D-3855

Brad Cannon heard Peter Alves coming before he entered. He was humming some tune from some opera that Brad didn't know the name of. Peter didn't know the name either; he simply identified it as 'that song where the dude's *just stoked* about the elephants'.

"So," Peter slid into a seat across from Brad in the mess hall. "Your crew got picked to take us on our little trip tomorrow, huh?"

Brad swallowed the last of his lunch. "Heh, I volunteered us."

"Oh. Really?"

"Yeah, it's something to do. Beats just cruising around the perimeter all day, at least."

"I hear ya, man." Peter replied as he dug into his own meal. "Three months of seatox, and then the post is boring as sh-"

"Seatox?" Brad interrupted.

"Oh. Yeah, y'know. Like detox, but out at sea." Peter explained, adding with a grin "I am gonna party *so* hard once I'm back ashore."

"Sure kiddo," Brad smiled back. Then he stood and took his mealtray. "Speaking of boring, I've got to get ready for a patrol-shift right now. See you at the briefing tomorrow morning."

Alves gave a small wave goodbye as Cannon walked away.

Specialized Tools/Equipment

- Noise-cancelling Ear Defenders (x12)
- Disposable Camera (x6)
- Set of Semaphore Signal Flags (x2)
- Retractable Personnel Tether (x4)
- Analog Stopwatch (x2)

Ken Jones held one stopwatch in each hand. After watching them count off 60 seconds in sync, he reset them and placed them back on the workbench with the rest of the items. Satisfied that everything was in working order, Jones turned around to find Brad Cannon approaching him.

"Hey," Ken greeted him "how was patrol?"

"Meh, same old same old." Brad replied with a shrug. "Weather's a bit nasty out there."

"Hm… That going to affect the mission?"

"Nah, shouldn't be anything we can't handle." Brad reassured him. He then turned to Rudy Lynch, who had just now followed him in. "Everything squared away down there?" Brad asked, referring to their patrol boat.

"Pretty much, sir. Tim and George are just topping up the fuel. Wanted to let you know we tuned into the forecast; it might blow a bit more tonight, but should die down by late tomorrow morning."

"Ah, good news." Brad said, as much to Ken as Rudy. "Make sure they don't need any more help, then all three of you can turn in until tomorrow's briefing."

"Oh hey!" Ken interrupted as he slotted the four mini-flags into the box holding the ear defenders. "I'm gonna come with, put these on the boat so they're there in the morning."

"Nah, Rudy can take care of that for you." Brad took the box from Ken and passed it along. "Right Rudy?"

"Sir!" Lynch gave an informal salute before he turned and left with the box tucked under one arm.

"Oh, the rest of that..?" Brad gestured toward the remaining gear.

"I'll hang onto it 'til tomorrow." Ken said.

After bidding each other farewell, Cannon left. Jones, once more, examined and tested each piece of equipment; then he tucked everything into his gearbag and retired to his quarters.

Objective

- To board **SCP-2454** for the purpose of gathering data and recording observations

"It doesn't mean 'get ready to make your way back soon'; it doesn't mean 'just finish your roll of film quick', okay? You get three pulls, you get your asses out!"

Ken Jones, giving the D-Class personnel their directions for the operation, could not seem to emphasize this enough. "Because there are no extra minutes. If you aren't back on this boat when the timer's up, I cut your cord and it's nobody's problem but your own."

The four D's tasked with entering the ship to take photos nodded broodingly. Jones, apparently satisfied, turned and faced the front window. He saw the cloudy gray sky as the small cabin cruiser's bow rose up over the crest of a wave, then the cold gray sea as it dipped back into a trough. Briefly in between, the massive cruise

ship on the horizon.

Brad Cannon leaned over from his captain's seat. "Support Vessel's reporting about 11 minutes between pings," he mentioned to Jones. "Could be you will have an extra minute…"

Jones turned to him now. "Is that coming from the guy who woke up ten minutes before his alarm this morning, treated it like an extra hour, and *still* was late to briefing?" Cannon smirked at that slight exaggeration, but kept his eyes ahead as he negotiated the ocean swells. "If I'm lucky enough to get a bit of breathing room," Jones continued, "I want it there when I need room to breathe."

Planned Procedure

- Light Transport Vessel 04 (operated by Brad Cannon and crew) will transport all personnel from Support Vessel 01 to area of operations
- Boarding Party will enter SCP-2454 with cameras and evidence bags, taking photographs and collecting articles for study
- Light Transport Vessel 04 will extract personnel from area of operations and return to Support Vessel 01 for debriefing

"Of course he won't *want* to leave anyone behind," Dorothy Hansen spoke in a hushed tone. "But if it comes to jeapordizing the entire team, and the objective, for the sake of trying to save one -" She halted mid-sentence and stared gravely at the back of the seat inches in front of her face.

"Relax," said Gene, soothingly. "Breathe… Try to focus on the horizon." Gene Perry and Dorothy Hansen were the two official researchers on this assignment. They shared a bench seat, and for the most part had been chatting between themselves.

The pair of them had been slated to board SCP-2454 together; recording observations while remaining on the deck of the ship, in sight of Jones and Alves at all times. But Dorothy started feeling nauseous shortly after the transport boat got under way, and Jones

made an executive decision that she would not be boarding the cruise ship in that condition.

Gene, however, had insisted that he still get to investigate the anomaly himself. And Dorothy had been trying to convince him it was too dangerous to go alone; without a tether, without a second pair of eyes to keep contact with the guards. If he was, at the wrong moment, wrapped up in taking notes instead of watching for the signal to evacuate…

Gene argued that this opportunity was too good to pass up. If it's taken ten years to even attempt a first exploration, how long would it take to mount a second? This was a chance to make a breakthrough, to earn some recognition. He wouldn't get another chance like this one.

Dorothy raised a finger. She wanted to interject, after taking a second to brace against the seasickness. "You said 'ten years'?"

"It's a fairly short assignment, you know," Gene reasoned. "This posting, I mean. I guess enough people are happy to just put in their three months and transfer out." He sighed and added derisively "Without contributing to our overall understanding of the thing."

Hansen understood Perry's point. But this conversation only made her more anxious about the plan, though she couldn't articulate why.

"And we finally got a project head that's pushing this stuff through," Perry prattled on. "Not just thermal imaging and satellites, but real hands-on observations. I can't let this chance slip away."

Hansen had tuned out, instead committing her focus to not throwing up.

Hazard Assessment

- Constant vocalizations by SCP-2454-1
    - Noise-cancelling ear protection will be worn by all personnel within the area of operation

- Bursts of radiation occurring at approximate ten minute intervals
    - Total time in area of operation will be limited to seven minutes
- All electronics brought on board rendered immediately inoperable
    - Non-electronic means of communication and data collection will be established and used while within area of operation

Deckhand George Montgomery held one hand up near his face, and the other pointed out to the side, extended index fingers representing the signal-flags he was rehearsing to use. "So, this is..?" he prompted Security Officer Peter Alves.

"One-minute signal," replied Alves, with mock indignation at being given the simplest of options.

"And you…" Montgomery pressed on.

"Return the same signal to acknowledge." Alves answered, his indignant feelings now a little bit genuine. He mirrored George's hand placement, with his elbows tucked in to his sides.

"Good," Montgomery replied. "Now, if you need immediate evac?" Alves pointed both fingers upward, then outward, then up again. "Right," Montgomery affirmed, "and if I give you that signal?"

"Then you're coming to pick us up, ready or not." Peter was confident he had memorized the pertinent signals they'd be using. "Hey," he looked to George with one finger pointed upwards tracing circles, and the other hand in a fist rocking back and forth. "How about this signal?"

"Oh," replied George thoughtfully. "That's… you signalling that giving some handjobs ain't no big deal."

"Hey," Peter looked sternly at him, "it's only gay if you cuddle after." The two of them stared at each other for a beat before Alves'

expression cracked a little, and they had to turn away from each other to avoid bursting into laughter.

Contingency Plan

- In the event of any unanticipated problems or emergency situation, all personnel must immediately evacuate SCP-2454
- No recovery efforts can be made beyond the original allotted timeframe.

"Roger that." Cannon slotted the radio handset back into place. "Care to make the announcement?" he asked Jones. Jones nodded, and turned to address everyone in the cabin.

"Alright, listen up!" Jones waited until everyone gave their attention. "Support vessel's just reported a hit, and the next window is ours. That's action in ten minutes time, everyone be ready!" He concluded on that note, and everyone seemed to withdraw into their personal thoughts.

Ken Jones opened his gearbag and re-examined his equipment. He'd given one of the stopwatches to George already; the other he took out now and hung around his neck, tucking it under his sweater. The 'Personnel Tethers' for the D-Classes (actually not much more than retractable dog leashes) he left in.

Two of the Ds turned over in their hands the disposable cameras they had been issued, the other two just gazed out at the rolling waves. Deckhands Rudy Lynch and Tim Holland, who had been sitting quietly near the cabin doors, stood and shrugged into their cold-weather coats.

Hansen looked to Perry once more. It was a final, silent plea not to go, yet acknowledged that said plea was futile. Perry tried a reassuring smile; it faded to stoic determination after he turned away.

The support ship radioed in their latest reading. Everyone donned their ear defenders. The boat made its way toward the objective.

After Action Report

Mission was a complete success. Although no physical items could be retrieved from SCP-2454, (sample collection bags containing various items were all found to be empty after disembarking) photographic evidence gathered has been very useful.

I believe that this has provided an excellent baseline for how more information on SCP-2454 can be gathered moving forward. For reference, I've attached a copy of the original mission outline to this file. My recommendation, however, is that future undertakings might increase the number of participating personnel. With multiple photographers we could collect more data in a single exploit.

Operation Plan

Objective

- To board SCP-2454 for the purpose of gathering data and recording observations

Assigned Personnel

Light Transport Vessel 04	
Pilot:	Brad Cannon
Deckhand(s):	George Montgomery
	Rudy Lynch
	Tim Holland
Boarding Party	
Security Officer(s):	Ken Jones
	Peter Alves
Researcher(s):	Dorothy Hansen
D-Class:	D-3855

Planned Procedure

- Light Transport Vessel 04 (operated by Brad Cannon and crew) will transport all personnel from

Support Vessel 01 to area of operations
- Boarding Party will enter SCP-2454 with cameras and evidence bags, taking photographs and collecting articles for study
- Light Transport Vessel 04 will extract personnel from area of operations and return to Support Vessel 01 for debriefing

Specialized Tools/Equipment

- Noise-cancelling Ear Defenders (x8)
- Disposable Camera (x2)
- Set of Semaphore Signal Flags (x2)
- Retractable Personnel Tether (x1)
- Analog Stopwatch (x2)

Hazard Assessment

- Constant vocalizations by SCP-2454-1
    - Noise-cancelling ear protection will be worn by all personnel within the area of operation
- Bursts of radiation occurring at approximate ten minute intervals
    - Total time in area of operation will be limited to seven minutes
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Contingency Plan

- In the event of any unanticipated problems or emergency situation, all personnel must immediately evacuate SCP-2454
- No recovery efforts can be made beyond the

original allotted timeframe

APPROVED

The First Fifty-Five

Excerpt from Hunt and Gather: Stories from the Recovery *, compiled and edited by A. Haley. Available for public access in United Nations Occult Coalition Archive 1, East Sector.*

> Douglas Pangwar greets me in the cafe on Deck Twelve, North Sector, which is apparently his regular haunt. The former commander of SCP Foundation Orbital Task Force π-3, "Cochrane's Children" is short and stocky, with the heavy build and hunched posture typical of heavy users of Foundation bone-density medication. His long beard is tied back underneath his chin, and his white turban is the only personal touch to his crisp, standard-issue Foundation jumpsuit. His manner is brusque and military, though there is an odd gleam to his pale green eyes.

I should preface this by saying that I deny all- no. No, that's not how we should begin this. Erase that from the record, please.

I think we were all surprised by how easy cooperation was in the early days. When **2047**[1] occurred, the first thing everyone thought was technical issues, because all our ground connections cut out. It was only when we reeled in the fork[2] dish array and got our suits on for an EVA that we realized we weren't orbiting the Earth anymore. We were all shocked, of course- there'd been no warning, none of the usual K-scenario preparedness messages. Of course all the O5s but one[3] were gone, along with most of the command hierarchy- there was no one left to send those messages in the first place.

The GOC contacted us first, actually- one of their Bastion stations was in a close geosynchronous orbit to us, and the first thing they asked us was "did you have anything to do with this?" Having a command structure on the moon and fewer facilities outside the Earth/moon system helped them recover much faster than we did. Everyone's first instinct- even dealing with the Soviets and the

Chinese- was curiosity, and perhaps fear, not hostility.

I don't think anyone seriously considered the nuclear option at any point, though God knows we had the arsenal up there in orbit to wipe out most of what was left of the species. It took us more than a month for the GRU and the Sids[4] to contact us, after… anyways. We on fork Three were quite lucky in that we weren't containing anything- several of the other forks were lost early on to containment breaches.

I suppose what always surprises me is how little people know about the real extent of the Recovery. The UN forces on the Moon were quite proactive about gathering and recovering civilians, but the military and covert presence of the various Groups of Interest, Foundation included, was spread most of the way across the Solar System. A particular concern was getting back in touch with all the lost FTL ships out there- yes, faster-than-light. One of the worst-kept secrets of the Recovery, I'm afraid. The Foundation had never developed true FTL travel- we used **1822**[5] to get around the system quickly, but otherwise our spacecraft were purely conventional. The GOC and the GRU had turned to other, more arcane methods, the GRU especially. Everyone saw the recovery of the GOCS *Yeager*[6], but the Soviets had had FTL prototypes in orbit since at least the 50s.

I won't claim to understand the science behind them- I'm not sure the Russians entirely did themselves- but they ran off some kind of- I've heard the phrase "human-initiated quantum teleportation" used, but that's entirely incorrect. It's… something to do with psychics, yes. Suffice it to say that when the Earth went the… I don't know what you call them, psychic batteries powering the things went too, leaving several dozen engine-less ships drifting all over the system, as far out as Hera. The GRU had sent so many of them up that they'd spread too far to be easily recovered by the more conventional Soviet vessels. Which was where we came in, or so we thought.

I can't recall if we decided to go after the *Nikolai Fyodorov* on our own or if the orders came from the UN, but regardless it was our first attempted joint mission with the GOC. Truthfully told, we could have

recovered them on our own but we were all a little worried about engaging a ship powered by psychic ghosts. Golden age of space exploration it may have been, but we'd all heard the rumours about the… dangers and instability of Soviet anomalous technology.

We arrived at the plaque in the Asteroid Belt within about twenty minutes, by which time all the GOC agents were looking pretty queasy. Everyone in Ga-3 was quite used to using 1822- the purpose of the task force was rapid response to orbital containment breaches, after all- but to instantly jump between two different planets without even a sense of movement takes a lot out of even the most well-trained agent. They were even more surprised to see the size of fork Eight at the transfer point- by that point the asteroid mining operations were well underway.

It took us seven hours to home in on the *Fyodorov*'s beacon, with their captain talking us in all the way- that was the strange thing about just about every mission we ran during the Recovery. No one ever had major technical issues beyond engine or navigation failures, for the most part. But people were scared. Really scared. Any ship with a decent radio telescope could see that the Earth was simply *gone*, and for a long time a lot of the main civilian channels were just unusable.

I recall, from when I was in hospital, after… there was a woman's voice in particular- I believe she was from one of the Chinese research stations- just sobbing into the radio. None of us spoke Cantonese, but… She just left the channel open for about a day and a half, getting softer and softer before the signal cut out. I assume she made it, of course- though those were hard times. As far as we were concerned the veil of secrecy was still in place. The GOC could pass for UN representatives, but we couldn't reveal ourselves to civilians. There were a great many times when- well, we stopped scanning civilian channels after a while. Especially when- when-

> Pangwar is silent for a long moment. I have the sense that he is putting aside his feelings, compartmentalizing as only a Foundation agent can. He gathers himself up, takes a slow sip of his coffee, and continues.

You know what, I've been dancing around the issue. We left the *Fyodorov* to die. Are you happy? Is this the big admission you wanted? There. You have it. I'm not going to make any excuses. The Ethics Committee and the UNOC Central Court have cleared us of any misdoings.

When we arrived, we moved to less than twenty meters off, matched velocities, and suited up to cross. The Russians said their airlocks wouldn't be compatible with ours. Their anti-particle field was still in effect- a sensible choice, given the risk of impact with dust clouds or other small objects in an asteroid field. We didn't question it, even though it played hell with our anomalous activity sensors as we got close.

They- there was a reason the Soviets didn't make contact. The GRU had received orders from the last remnants of the Soviet power structure to assume Foundation responsibility until proved otherwise. And the captain of the *Fyodorov* actually went along with it. We came back much later, opened up the wreck- he'd locked himself in the bridge and drained the oxygen out of the rest of the ship, and then- deliberately, well…

> He reaches up and partially unwraps his turban. His scalp is patchy and torn, stretching upwards and to one side like an apostrophe. In several places metal plates are visible through the skin.

I had been outside the hull for 15 seconds when the top of my head was ripped off. Before I passed out I saw one of the GOC agents turn on his welding torch and cut his own faceplate open. When the ship's engines died, they didn't go quiet. Whatever goddamn unholy power supply they were using to run it had gone berserk, and the entire thing was surrounded by psionic anomalies. Nothing off the charts or unprecedented, but our instruments didn't show them because of the AP field and the Russians told us nothing.

There were eighteen of us on that ship- Twelve from the Foundation, six from the GOC. Eleven came back, four of those, myself included, in need of serious medical treatment. Two died in hospital on Minerva Base. The *Fyodorov* had a crew of 45, not including the captain.

And the Soviets denied it. A miscommunication, they said. The stress of the situation causing instability in the captain, they said. And the UN forgave them.

I've often heard people complain that the Foundation is, given the circumstances, unnecessarily isolationist. That we keep too many secrets. Well, when we tried to open up and help our fellow man 55 people died.

I don't know who gave the order to fire on the *Nikolai Fyodorov*. I know the flight recorder was damaged. I don't particularly care. They were right to do so.

« Straight On Till Morning Hub | All Along »

Footnotes
1. Foundation terminology for the Departure.
2. Colloquial adaptation of FORC, Foundation Orbital Research Compound, referring to standard Foundation space stations with an associated entourage of tethered communications/defense/storage satellites.
3. O5-10 was on Minerva Base for medical treatment during the Departure and was recovering from surgery in the aftermath.
4. Colloquial adaptation of CID, the Chinese Central Investigation Department, also in charge of the Chinese military spaceflight program.
5. Foundation terminology for the Showmen Transit Plaques
6. Most thaumaturgical systems in existence under GOC control failed completely after the Departure due to the absence of the Earth as a locus for binding energy. Of these failures, the crippling of the experimental cruiserYeagerwas the most dramatic and well-publicized.

Fish Are Friends, Not Clowns

The tall and imposing captain of the ship was smoking a pipe and checking the map with immense satisfaction inside his great cabin. He was surrounded by well-protected relics and trinkets from different eras and cultures, some acquired more dubiously than the others. A few even followed his steps with their eyes or hissed curses, but he paid them no mind. Soon enough, he and his crew would acquire a new asset that would make them the envy of the richest and most powerful men on Earth. He didn't even mind that he was transporting a Circus of freaks. They were only looking to make a buck, same as him. Business is business.

And speaking of business, they should be reaching the Whispering Isles soon. The captain left his cabin to speak with Mr. Fuller.

"The future looks promising, wouldn't you say?" asked the captain.

"Don't count your chickens before they hatch, Sullivan," the older man in a garish red and yellow suit retorted in a dry tone. "I'm investing a whole lot of money into this expedition, and based on little more than hearsay and a dingy old map. You managed to convince me, who knows how, but God help you if this turns out to be a rip off." He managed to pack enough venom into each word to kill an elephant.

Sullivan laughed nervously. Even though he was taller, broader and stronger than Fuller, he still felt incredibly small around that wrinkled viper of a man. "T-t-trust me. I'm not, ah…clowning around. Get it? Clowns? Circus?"

"Save the comedy for the professionals. You have another job to do, or so I'm told. How much time left until we find the asset and leave the Isles with it? What if the natives fight back, hmmm?"

"Don't worry, I brought more than enough firepower to take care of some natives with bows and arrows. The asset might be, ummm, a

little harder to retrieve."

"I did *not* pay you to make excuses," hissed Fuller with a cold hatred. "You have all my resources and my most talented workers to help you deal with anything your frail mind thinks it can't handle, come hell or high water." He paused, and put an amazingly artificial smile. "Easy now, everything will be fine. For the sake of my wallet and your head, it better be fine. See you when we find the Isles. Try not to get scared off the side of the ship by seagulls. It would break my heart."

Fuller slithered out of the great cabin, a sinister grin on his face. Sullivan let out a sigh of relief. Several of his cursed relics began to chuckle at him in unison.

"SHUT UP!"

Soon enough, the ship reached the tropical coordinates of the supposed Isles, but found nothing except more water. Sullivan was hurrying to decipher a document he had pilfered along with the map, which he believed would reveal a Way into the pocket dimension where the Isles where hidden. Sullivan fetched the on board translator and begrudgingly allowed her bodyguard to come along.

In walked an old blind Albanian woman, her forearms fused together at the bones. She was accompanied by an oblong creature covered in many hands, which crawled around with surprising mobility. Despite her unfortunate deformities, the woman seemed to be in a serene mood and smiled at the captain.

"Ah, Sullivan. What do I owe the pleasure?"

"You see, Fran, I have this here document that I need to translate to help guide us to our destination, and I was told you are an amazing polyglot. Care to help me?"

"Of course I can. But why haven't you greeted Luana yet? She's here too, you know."

Sullivan look at the worm of hands suspiciously and with a fair

amount of disgust, like it would strangle him a hundred times over if it so much as thought that he meant harm to old Fran.

"Sure. Come here, Luana. Just, uh…which hand do I shake?"

"Any is fine. Except the tiger one, for obvious reasons."

Sullivan shook hands with Luana, and the creature leaned in for a long and strange hug.

"Ah, so we are friends then? Excellent. I might as well grab some refreshments for Fran, in that case." The captain turned around, and the old woman just barely held back a big chuckle while staring sideways at Luana, who was pointing at herself as if to say "Who? Me?".

Refreshments were savored and the document was eventually deciphered. It turned out that some of the relics and trinkets that Sullivan had collected could be combined into a Key, which was specific to the Way for the Isles. Aside from the deciphering, the conversation between the three of them was mostly about their travels and the sights they had seen, but it was clear that Sullivan entered this lifestyle from a far more privileged background.

"Do you never feel like settling down? Maybe starting a new life away from all this pilfering and pirating?" asked Fran.

"I could ask something similar of you. But then again, you are, how can I say this…" Sullivan trailed off and averted his gaze.

"Too old? Too strange? Nonsense. That is all in the mind. I'm asking you because I think you still have a good chance of doing something better, you just have to believe it. Right, Luana?"

The worm of hands was distractedly juggling some random objects due to boredom and was caught off guard by the question. She almost dropped the objects, quickly put them back into their place and gave many thumbs up to Sullivan.

"If you two say so. Well, your services were useful, but it's time for you to leave. We will soon enter the Isles, so be prepared for the adventure of your lifetimes!"

"That is amazing, captain. But consider this: what use is there having a thousand adventures if we don't know what we will leave behind when we are gone? Now I excuse myself and wish you good luck."

Luana waved goodbye with her many hands and left with the cabin Fran. The cursed relics chuckled in unison at Sullivan again.

"Oh, WHAT NOW?"

He looked around and around, until he looked at his back in a mirror and saw that Luana had attached a paper onto him with the following phrase:

"SEA DOG BITCH"

The ship finally arrived on the Isles. The sand was fluffy and a pristine white, the water was clear and calm, and for miles in front of them stretched luscious forests of slender trees. Even now, the namesake sensual whispering of the location seemed to encourage them to come hither and indulge like there was no tomorrow. Unbeknownst to them, figures with glowing eyes watched them from the depths of the forests.

The captain led the expedition, using Uriel Fishbones' stretchable eye stalks to look out for danger like a scout. Motormouth was carrying an entire arsenal and supplies for the expedition inside him and making awful jokes to try and lighten up the mood. Fran and Luana searched the ground for possible dangers or clues. The Gnomes built a collapsible trap to catch the asset. Herman Fuller followed close behind, armed with a sword-cane and a pistol.

As they ventured further inside the forest, the heat became more intense and the light grew dimmer. Insects buzzed around, the muddy ground gave in with every step and one could not help but feel a creeping sense of paranoia. All around them creatures ate each other in ways typical and unusual, and after some time the sky was split by mighty thunderstorms. With all the extraordinary resources at their disposal, the expedition set up camp easily and rested with overconfidence. They did not expect what would greet

them upon the crack of dawn.

Sullivan felt uncomfortable, like his sleeping bag was different. He tried to reach out for it and found that his arm were immobilized, as were his legs. In a flash of terror, he opened his eyes and realized he was tied around a log being carried by towering grey people with six arms and lurid masks. His mouth was covered as well, preventing him from screaming. He trashed and looked around for the rest of the crew in vain, and all he could hear was the godawful chanting of those freakish people. Soon enough, the log was placed in a vertical position inside a large clearing near the coast and he could take a good look at his captors.

They began to light up torches, spread around flower petals and perform bloodletting in a circle around a stone altar encrusted with jewels. Whatever this ritual was, Sullivan wanted no part in it. He began to stretch and fiddle with his arms until the ropes were loose enough for him to catch his hidden knife, at which point he cut himself free and ran away looking for the crew. He dashed through the forest, reached a cliff and heard a long whale-like roar coming from the ocean. Freezing behind a tree, he held his knife and hoped to God it was just his imagination.

Something began to push its way out of the water. Something massive and pitch-black, covered in seaweed and the detritus of a thousand empires. It climbed the cliff with tentacles like massive buildings and stared up at Sullivan with a cylopean, electric blue eye. The thing grabbed a large stone in one of its flabby clawed hands and began molding it like clay. The thing turned the stone into the shape of something resembling Sullivan's ship and placed it before him, then clapped a few times while still staring.

Sullivan didn't care. He ran away as fast he could, and through sheer luck found most of the crew tied to similar logs. He got out his knife and freed them as well, but he immediately regretted doing so for Fuller.

"What was that about more than enough firepower?" spat Fuller. "I swear, in all my travels, I have never seen a captain who allows his entire crew to get kidnapped! And by savages, no less!"

Sullivan shook, grit his teeth and pointed a finger right at Fuller ugly, hooked nose. "Listen here, and listen **good**. I just saved your sorry ass from getting sacrificed back there. And you know what else? You don't OWN me, or anybody else!"

"I own your paycheck, you *ingrate*! And if you don't do exactly as I say, you can look forward to sailing back home with empty hands!"

"I don't *need* your money! Right now, what I need to do is get my crew to safety! And I bet you need to as well, even if it's just because of your wallet."

"Fine, fine. We'll do it your way. Lead on if you're so brave."

"I'm not brave. I'm terrified. But I'm still a better fit than a slaver."

After a lot of bickering, Sullivan and the crew came up with a plan to rescue Fran and Luana. And Fuller was not going to like it.

Fran had been tied to the stone alter, and her bodyguard had been restrained far away. The godawful chanting, drumming and bloodletting of the natives increased in tempo along with the rainstorm and lightning. Along the horizon and above the canopies a looming shadow lumbered ever closer to the altar, unleashing whale-like sounds that only grew louder. After a time that seemed like an eternity, the leviathan stepped into the clearing, every step making a small earthquake.

The ritual stopped.

The leviathan stared at Fran.

Luana was thrown from a catapult right into the leviathan's eye and began punching like a mad motherfucker.

The natives stood ramrod stiff for several seconds, unsure if this was for real. A hail of smoke bombs from the sky answered their question. Uriel Fishbones came speeding in on a bamboo vehicle built by the Gnomes, using his eye stalks to trip up the natives and throw them inside Motormouth, who would spit them out one by one into a cage. Meanwhile, Fuller used a new version of the Mixing Rod

to further aggravate the leviathan by spraying him with copious amounts of mashed up fruit pulp from the isle. When it tossed Luana away and chased after Fuller, he yelled profanities and ran as fast as his old legs could carry him, right into the cage that the Gnomes had prepared. He leaped out the other side before the metallic walls closed, hitting a palm tree at full speed.

"Hahahaha! You see? Herman Fuller always gets the last laugh!" he proclaimed triumphantly. A coconut fell from the palm tree and hit him on his head, knocking him out. The coconut bounced, hit a rock and cracked open, spilling its contents on the sand.

"I guess the old man finally ran outta juice!" joked Motormouth.

Everybody decided it was safer with the leviathan than with this nonsense.

After a long trip back home with their prize secured in a huge water tank, the Circus prepared their new show for the people of New York City. Flyers and megaphones went into the streets for days, and soon enough the tents were raised high up into the sky. Business was good.

Except if you asked Sullivan. He had been mulling over what Fran had told him before they entered the Isles, and it was getting to him. Well, if was being honest, it was changing the way he saw his life. All these years he had pilfered, stolen and taken what didn't belong to him and left terrible voids in people's lives for the sake of his comfort. Was he really all that different from Fuller, just because he stole relics instead of people? He could easily justify himself that way, certainly, but actually spending time with those Circus people on his ship had brought him a new perspective. He had no idea what life was about, but he knew it wasn't about owning things. And with the Circus' new show coming up, he had a chance to prove that.

He bought a ticket and sneaked into the section where he knew Fran, Luana and the other performers got ready for their respective shows. He carefully knocked on the door and prayed they would understand. The door was opened by Luana.

"Hi. It's me, the Sea Bitch," remembered Sullivan without malice. "Can I speak to Fran and the others?"

Luana made a "please wait" gesture. The performers quickly appeared, seeming more curious than apprehensive.

"Hi there, Sullivan. Care for a cup of tea? The show only starts in 30 minutes," offered Uriel Fishbones.

"Um, sure. But listen everyone, there is something very important I have to tell you all. It's about that thing we brought from the Whispering Isles."

"What is matter? It hasn't caused any problems to us. It's downright friendly," assured Uriel.

"Hold up. Are you telling us…you telling us…that there is something fishy going on with it?" joked Motormouth. A nearby gnome faked a heart attack at his horrible pun.

Sullivan pinched his nose and groaned. "Not exactly. Look, there is no easy to say this. We have to bring it back."

A "WHAT" came out in unison, with the exception of Fran.

"Why aren't you disagreeing? You aren't seriously thinking of helping him, are you? You are far too old for that, you know, and so am I." said Uriel.

"I am. Mr. Sullivan is finally understanding what I've been trying to teach him," smiled Fran.

"What the hell is she talking about? Returning stolen property might be right, but it never got me anywhere in life!" protested Motormouth.

"Guys, listen! Aren't all of you here because, at some point, you lost your way? And you had to make do with a home and family that wasn't your own? For some of you it worked, for others it didn't. That creature out there, it…it tried to befriend on the Isle. It's innocent, and we are keeping it here against its will. Doesn't that sound familiar? We have a chance to free someone from the Circus. We

can either take that chance, or do nothing and be accomplices of Fuller. So, will you help me or not?"

Slowly but surely, each performer rose up, promised to help and shook hands. But Motormouth, as always, had to pipe up.

"What are the odds that it will go on a rampage, grab one of us and climb the Empire State Building?"

"These odds don't matter! Now listen closely, everyone. Here is the plan…"

Shortly after the ringmaster announced the leviathan and the creature was let out of its water tank, the performers stormed the stage and began undoing its shackles with the help of some Sullivan's cursed relics. The leviathan stood there, feeling a mixture of fright, anger and confusion. The captain tried to calm it down as the performers tried to convince the audience it was all part of the show. Fuller had been watching this through the cameras and felt bile rising up in his throat and his jugulars trembling. He grabbed his sword-cane and pistol, invaded the show and the pointed his weapons at Sullivan.

"Nice try. Did you really think anyone or anything in this Circus gets to leave without my say so? You should apply for a job as one of my clowns, you're really funny!"

Fuller kept his blade pointed at the captain, while his pistol was pointed at the creature. "That goes especially for that thing! I spent a lot of money on it, and these here shackles are meant to stay on! You want to know why? Because I OWN every last one of you!"

The leviathan's only reply was to take advantage of Fuller's monologue and sneak a long limb behind him. Fuller was smacked all the way into the water tank, where he met several of hungry sea lifeforms that had split off from the leviathan. The creature stared at the water tank with its glowing eye, and all the lifeforms ripped away Fuller's clothes. The humiliation didn't stop there, as the leviathan raised the slaver from the water tank, and several clowns began throwing pies at him instead of each other. Finally, the creature

secreted glue from one its flabby hands and attached the naked and slimy Fuller to an elephant, then picked up a nearby torch to set the elephant tail on fire. The poor animal went bouncing wildly out of the tent, with Fuller begging for mercy and the audience laughing like never before. The leviathan took this opportunity to slink back into the ocean, but not before patting Sullivan on the head.

Fuller's pockets grew three sizes that day, but Sullivan's heart grew too big for the oceans.

Pushing through the market square, so many mothers sighing. News had just come over, we had five years left to cry in.

The FSF Delivery weaved through the planetary debris field in Marjorie's practiced hands. The ship burned hard to the right and a body, spinning end over end, passed harmlessly. Marjorie muttered and eased back the throttle, bringing the ship to a stop among the ruins of the dead world. She activated the point defense systems before standing up and removing her interface helmet.

The ship's cockpit was lit dim green and yellow by the various readouts and screens. She reached over to the keyboard on the left side and typed a command to activate the comms system. While she was typing she leaned out a bit further and tried to see if she could look back and see the body. Unfortunately all she could see was more rubble.

She pulled the phone off the receiver and waited for the long beep. "Captain Sarridge," she started, "We're about 15 clicks off the signal, if you wanna come up here."

A long silence followed before a man's voice broke it. "Uh. Yeah, one second."

Marjorie rolled her eyes. "Alex can come too. Might be more bodies for her to examine."

The pause after that was shorter before a woman's voice said, "Love you too, Marj."

Marjorie smirked. "Y'all get dressed and get up here. We've got work to do."

"Are we any closer to figuring out what happened?" The captain looked down at the readouts and grimaced.

Marjorie shook her head. "Whatever did this, it likely happened in the last couple hundred years. Orbital models ain't reliable that far back."

Alex put her hand out on the table and tapped the readout in front of her. "It could be longer. The models for organic decay in vacuum assume stellar body radiation. There's no star here, so these corpses could be much older than that. A few thousand years, even."

The captain tilted his head to the side. "The life in this system would've needed a star to survive. We have to assume it got ejected from the system by whatever did this."

"Then it ain't a fusion candle either," Marjorie interjected. "Tidal forces destroyed the planet, but a gas giant's not big enough to eject a star."

Alex nodded. "No stars in the immediate area have the right trajectories to do this either. I have a lot of theories on this, but honestly, who knows?"

"They know." The captain said it with a sense of finality. Everyone looked at the large screen at the center of the console. An imposing box periodically pulsed with a radio signal.

The FSF Delivery floated about 60 meters away from the entrance. The mechanic was the only one left on board at the moment. Marjorie, Alex, and the Captain examined the door of a gently spinning metal building with flashlights. The three of them felt around the entrance for any activating mechanism before Marjorie came in over the suit radio.

"Looks like we get to cut it open."

The captain pulled his plasma lash from the scabbard on his left hip and pressed a button on the side. The three of them winced for a moment as a brilliant blue light came out of the device. The captain pressed it into the door and began the process of cutting through.

Gases began to leak from the inside of the door and Alex reached out with a gathering tool to gather what she could when the remains of the door shifted and shot out into space.

Marjorie pursed her lips. "Is full pressure good or bad?"

"I, uh," Alex paused, "I don't know. Probably bad if it wasn't a sterile environment in there."

The captain put his cutter back in its scabbard and looked inside. The corridor was built for something about two heads taller than Captain Sarridge and a head taller than Marjorie. Their flashlights illuminated a reddish gray metal which appeared to cover the entire hallway. Various etched symbols and patterns differentiated the floor and ceiling from the two walls.

It took them 10 minutes to get to the center of the object, passing by several desiccated corpses along the way. Alex stopped twice to take samples and pictures. Eventually, the three of them came to the center of the object, with Marjorie entering the room first.

After several seconds she called out over the radio. "It's clear, Captain."

Captain Sarridge and Alex entered the room to see Marjorie with her hand from the plasma lash at her hip.

The Captain chuckled. "Nothing but ghosts here."

Marjorie smiled back. "Remember Lambda 98? Ghosts's dangerous."

Alex stepped towards the console at the center of the room. The computer screens remained dark as she approached. "Orders, sir?"

Captain Sarridge looked down at the console. There were no obvious buttons, switches, or keyboard-like interfaces, just screens around the central pillar. "Go ahead and see if you can…"

The captain was interrupted as the entire facility lit up with a light red hue. The screens suddenly turned on as well and a voice no one

recognized spoke over the radio. "Hello, wanderers. Do not be alarmed. I have learned your language from your ship's database and your radio signals."

Captain Sarridge sighed. "Hello. Who are you?"

The voice answered immediately. "I am what remains of these people. I was built to help those who would come after avoid the destruction we faced."

"Can you explain this technology to us?"

"I cannot. I serve a singular purpose. To warn of the destroyer."

Alex stepped forward to stand abreast with Captain Sarridge. "Why did it destroy you?"

"For centuries we carelessly screamed into the void. Never did we receive a reply. We believed we were alone until it answered us. It wished to sleep, and our signals had caused it to stir."

Alex grimaced slightly. "What happened?"

"Destruction. We must warn you against looking to the stars further or it will find you. It is not enough that you do not venture forth further. You must keep your eyes to the ground."

Marjorie lightly brushed the handle of her plasma lash during the pause. "What's this thing y'all're so afraid of?"

The three of them stepped back as the dozens of screens showed the same image.

Flamingos

Note: The following audio transcripts were recovered from an audio listening device found installed inside the home telephone of Arthur Windsworth during the recovery operation of **SCP-1507**. The origin of the listening device is currently unknown; investigation is ongoing.

"Hello? Are you there?"

"Hello, this is 911. What is the nature of your emergency?"

"Someone's gone and put flamingos all over my lawn! I don't know how they got there, but they're there and I want them gone."

"May I have your name and address please?"

"Arthur. Arthur Windsworth. I live at…. uhh…. well it's on 9th street. In Shady Oaks. I'm sure I can give the police officers directions if you would just patch me through. These birds need to be gotten rid of I tell you!"

"Are you able to tell me the condition of the birds? Do they appear to be injured?"

"Injured? What? No, no. You don't understand. They're not *real* birds.

"Not real?"

"Fake! Plastic birds, big great pink plastic flamingos cluttering up my lawn. Someone's put them there and I want them gone."

"Sir, that's not exactly considered an *emergency*. The 911 hotline is reserved for use in *emergencies*."

"Well I am ever so sorry, but could you at least send *someone* down? I'm too *old* to be messing about in the yard trying to get at a

bunch of birds that some hoodlums put in my yard."

"Well Mr. Windsworth, I'll see what I can do. In the future, if you have any more problems with 'hoodlums' please contact the police department directly to file a report."

"Well…. I…. alright."

"Goodbye, Mr. Windsworth."

"What? Oh. Yes. Goodbye."

"Hello?"

"Hello, this is 911. What is the nature of your emergency?"

"Oh. Yes. Well you see, I called earlier about some flamingos. I just wanted to let you all know that you don't need to send anyone down. As it turns *out*, they're actually quite friendly. I've named one of them Dave. He's really very nice."

"Are you referring to the *plastic* flamingos that were in your yard Mr. Windsworth?"

"Oh. Right. Well I suppose they weren't quite as *plastic* as I had thought. Maybe they're only *partly* plastic."

"Well Mr. Windsworth, I've already filed the report, but I'll let them know. Good day Mr. Windsworth."

"Oh thank you. Oh, and umm…. Good day to you as well. I suppose. Yes. A good day indeed."

"911. What's your 'mergency?"

"The birds! The birds are attacking me!"

"What birds?"

"The birds in my yard!"

"Mr. Windsworth, flamingos don't attack people."

"But they did! Someone *put* them there, don't you see? First they were plastic, now they're attacking me!"

"That's what I'm trying to tell you Mr. Windsworth, flamingos don't attack people. Especially not *plastic* flamingos."

"But… but I saw them. They really did! One of them nearly pecked my poor eye out… All I did was try to give them some nice shrimp. I didn't *mean* to knock the poor thing over. I'm telling the truth you know. You have to believe me. I really am!"

"I'm sorry Mr. Windsworth, there's nothing I can do."

"This is preposterous! *I* am an American citizen. I shall not accept this kind of treatment… I'd like to speak to your Manager!"

"I'll put you through to my boss, Mr. Windsworth, but he'll just tell you the same thing."

"Hello?"

"Who is this? Are you the manager?"

"Yes Mr. Windsworth. I'm told you've been having some trouble with your lawn ornaments."

"Trouble! You don't know trouble. And they're certainly not *mine*. I don't know who put them there. Whoever did it, they're a *terrorist*. Those little monsters have been assaulting me. They're a public nuisance, I tell you!"

"Mr. Windsworth, you have to understand. No one is coming. No one will ever come. Give up."

"Hello? Are you still there? Hello? …Hello?"

"Is this Captain Jefferies?"

"Yeah Emerson, what's the problem? I've been trying to get a hold of you all day."

"Sorry, Cap, the damn thing died again. You should see this place though, fuckin' preposterous. There's these weird-ass flamingos all over the place. Whole house is filled with 'em. Old man must've been collecting the damn things."

"Have you questioned him yet? The dispatcher told me he sounded a bit out of it."

"That's the thing captain. The old man, Windsor or somethin', he's dead. Gaines found him out front, covered in these weird scratches. Must've been some crazy-ass gardening accident or something. I dunno. Anyway, the guy's dead. Looks like he bled out. I think the crows already got to him, the eyes and tongue are gone."

"No signs of forced entry at the house?"

"No. There's a broken window upstairs, but nothing bigger than, like, a bird or something could get in through there."

"Alright, Emerson, call the morgue and get back to work."

"Hey Cap, one more thing. The phone line's down here. Looks like something snapped it. Not sure what could have done it, though, no trees nearby. Maybe somethin' landed on it or something. Whatever, I'm out of here. These birds are starting to get pretty fuckin' creepy."

Flexibility

When we first encountered the Artists, we followed standard procedure. Shoot first, ask questions later, then pass around amnestics like candy at a birthday party.

This did not work for long.

The traditional textbook strategy that we employ is specifically designed to counteract organised groups. You look at our GOC policies, Chaos Insurgency policies, MC&D, the Church, pretty much every force that we exchange bullets with, and our interactions are dictated by the book. Hell, our interactions with them were what helped to write the book. With all of these people, the line is that we are waging wars of attrition. We are able to keep up with them, because while all of these groups are big, we're bigger, and we're going to keep shooting until their metaphorical clip runs dry and then some. But this strategy doesn't work with the Artists.

It's not because they're bigger than us, because they're not. It's because attrition warfare assumes both parties have centralised management; there needs to be a singular point of control, constantly driving against the other side. But the Artists are not like this. The Artists are not centralised. The Artists are not unified. And, most importantly, the Artists do not shoot back.

As such, we cannot engage them in the same way that we engage the other 'players'. The war against the Artists is, unfortunately, waged on their home turf. While they throw us the occasional skip, most of what they make is not directed towards us. It is released into the wild, presented as 'art', and then summarily forgotten. It is our job to secure this 'art' and, if possible, the Artists themselves. They're a culture, not a corporation. Our best guess is that the Artists are just a passing fad, and if we're lucky, the cool of today will be bland tomorrow. Yeah, we're always going to have a few, but they aren't manageable right now. The best we can do is control their range, and even then, we're playing a losing game.

The name of this game is not capturing and keeping the Artists. You will not be able to hold them. However, the game requires us to know where the Artists are going to be, and most of the time our intelligence sits on the spectrum between nil and fuck all. Current strategy is if the opportunity presents itself, you pick up a lone Artist, drug them to the dickens, squeeze them for all they know about local ‘exhibitions’, then hit them with standard amnesiacs. Then you need to reintroduce them into their environment naturally. If you’ve done your job right, your Artist will have no recollection that they got nabbed in the first place, and we’ll have a place and time to arrange for inconspicuous crowd control.

Don’t forget this, because it’s damn important: NEVER bring an Artist to a Site. If they try to break for it, they WILL have a plan, and that plan will involve grabbing anything they can grab and freeing anything they can free. You need a place to store an Artist, you stick them in a safehouse. We don’t keep safehouse locations on file anywhere. Once you’re all assigned, I’ll tell you where your area’s safehouses are. Do NOT write down the locations of safehouses, you memorise them, and you don’t say a word about their locations outside this room. As far as anyone outside this room knows, the designation ‘safehouse’ is not a part of Foundation structure, and you’re to keep it that way.

As I said, the Artists are decentralised and incoherent, and so the war against the Artists is a culture war. The thing is, as loose as their organisation may be, there’s still a tendency to arrange into tighter ‘cells’. These cells are the ones who organise exhibitions, they pick a place, and it spreads by word of mouth. This leads to our secondary strategy, and one that’s a bit controversial. Long-term infiltration.

Yes, some of you are going to be masquerading as Artists. Yes, you will go to exhibitions, yes, you will smoke their weed, and yes, if it’s required by your cover, you’re going to have to make some art yourself. That’s right, you’re going to be breaking the Foundation’s gospel law, and you’ll be making skips. Of course, since – I assume – none of you are capable of making anomalous objects by waving your hands and saying magic words, you’re going to need some help. That’ll be covered by Dr. Samuels after lunch. Anything you

make yourself, you need to destroy yourself.

On the flipside of this, we are breaking the other gospel law of the Foundation: you are going to destroy skips. Back when we didn't know what we were dealing with, we contained everything they threw at us. This was a massive, massive waste of manpower and resources. Much of what the Artists design are immovable, permanent installations in suburban areas. If we stuck to cordoning off and containing every piece, we'd have half of New York City under lockdown. Yes, yes, yes, I know what you're thinking, we're violating every rule in the book. But this is the only way we can deal with them, and time has shown us that it works infinitely better than standard procedure. This is the only way that works, and if anything, we're results-based.

Now, this does NOT mean that you're going to be smashing up everything in sight. That's the GOC's job. Our primary goal is still containment. You're to use your best judgement on whether it's something that can be reasonably contained to begin with, and if it isn't, you break it. If it's something you can pick up and slip in your pocket, that's what you do. If it's a giant memetic hazard plastered on the side of a balloon, you pop the balloon, and see if you can recover it. If it's something immovable that's going to violate causality in the middle of Times Square, you smash it to smithereens. Also, and this is the one rule we really try hard not to break, don't kill it if it's alive. Yes, you are probably going to see living installations. No, they are not what you are thinking of. They are worse.

Last thing. One of the biggest cells that we know about is headed by a guy called The Critic. Nobody knows much about him, so if you learn ANYTHING about this guy, you pass it back to us, because right now we know he exists and that's about it.

That's my bit over, bagels by the door, Dr. Samuels' part starts in ten.

« Snip Snip Snip | Hub | Novel Cultivars »

Flick of the Wrist

It sounds like you didn't pay much attention last time. If you're going to have me repeat my account of the whole incident, it looks like I'll have to tell you what the score was again.

Two bodies with the side of their head blown off, Dr. Carlson bleeding out from a shot in his shoulder, and his four subordinates[1] in a confrontation with each other. All of them in a cramped elevator, forcefully stopped between the first floor and the first basement level, the smell only getting worse with each passing minute.

I'd have found the the situation a lot more palatable, amusing even, if I wasn't the one being pinned against the elevator wall.

"Dean, let him go! What do you think this will accomplish?" Jenna had yelled out in a weak attempt to stop him. Everyone there knew it would end when Dean decided it would end.

"Relax, I just want to talk to him for a little bit more. You see, Vincent —" and before I knew what happened, he moved his arm off of my chest and his hand to my throat, lifting me up before he continued. One swift move. "I have to admire those sheer balls of yours. Tell me, how'd you do it? Did they see it coming? When you blew their brains out with your anomaly, did you enjoy it the way I'm enjoying this?" He grinned; it was a look of pure self-satisfaction.

"Gggghh, I-I didn't —"

"Yeah! It was Carlson, right? Go on, tell us again how that happened! Walk us through it. Convince us this time the way you've been convincing us the past few minutes, right!?" As my vision was about to go completely dark, that lunatic… my body was thrown to the elevator door. Air left my lungs in exchange for a second wind of life. No one said anything. No one moved.

I think we were all waiting for each other to make the next move. I mean, what would you have done if you were any of us? I couldn't speak; my mind was too busy trying to get itself working again. Dean wasn't going to speak; he was clearly waiting for me to say something, and I wasn't going to look up at him glaring down at me. That would have enticed him. Jenna wouldn't help; I saw her gaze turn to the elevator buttons. Brian was trying to tend to Carlson's wounds; he was no good. And Carlson… well, you know why he didn't say anything. And the smell almost incapacitated all of us. It was a tricky situation. Whoever spoke next was going to lose.

So we stayed there. I don't know how long it was, but I'd say… ten minutes? Fifteen? Completely silent except for the breathing going on. I know how interviewers roll; we almost never get to experience blood, right? Try sitting in puddles of blood sometime. Your own, or someone else's, it's the same. Maybe you'll understand why most of us weren't able to speak even if we wanted to.

Carlson spoke up first, unfortunately for him.

"H… He's right, Dean." You could practically hear Dean's light fade from his grin as he turned to face our old boss. It was safe enough to look up by that point. Yeah, he was still grinning. But the look on his face? Altogether different. He was covering up his rage. It was growing. Have you ever seen a hungry, angry lion? That was the look.

"I wasn't asking you. Learn not to —"

"L-Like he said, I killed them." Dean turned around and slammed his foot into Carlson's other shoulder. Brian stumbled back and Jenna covered her mouth. Hell, I was shocked too.

"LEARN." He slammed his foot into his shoulder. "NOT." And again. "TO." And again! "INTERRUPT!" This time he kicked the side of his body and Carlson slumped over. His breathing got more ragged. It was a miracle he could even still stay conscious. "Neither of you have shown any proof! You jackasses need to start making sense or I'll just kill you both." He grabbed Carlson's hair and lifted him up. "And I will enjoy it." The smile was gone by then.

Carlson was dropped and Brian quickly set him upright and tended to his wounds again. "Dean, shut the fuck up." Bless him, honestly. He barely had any tools and was doing the best he could. I think that made the difference, ultimately. "You know what the Foundation does to people who start senselessly killing others."

"Yeah. Our *good friend* Vince here is going to be locked up in a containment cell for the rest of his life, our teacher is going to die before the Foundation does anything, Harrison and May will rot forever in Hell, and the rest of us conveniently forget this shit from the Forgetting Juice. Sounds like a good deal to me, doesn't it?"

"Fuck off, let them talk. Jenna, give me your labcoat. I need clean material to treat Carlson." Jenna sighed and nodded, handing it to Brian. She was still shaking, which made sense. She's the most junior of us, right? Honestly, what was that old man thinking, bringing a junior onto his team? He should have known the risks.

It was silent for a few minutes again. This wasn't another game though, seeing who would give in first. It was just too awkward to talk. That was the sense I had anyway. I never imagined one would feel *awkward*, of all things, in a life-or-death situation, but now I know. It felt like relief.

"Hhhh… Harrison and May didn't like Dr. Carlson's treatment of humanoid anomalies." I broke the tension this time. Carlson bought me the opportunity to speak, so I took it. The more I talked, the tenser Dean got. "Every interview was personal. He called them something other than 'it' in his documentation. I don't know what pushed them into this. Probably when they overheard Brian and Jeffery… Ash or whatever, when they were talking about interviewing that **`washing machine`** like it was an actual person." Brian's eyes went wide. I smiled. "You didn't know? I don't blame you. It was only a couple weeks ago. Not like you could have connected the dots. They wouldn't tell anyone about their frustrations, since all of us just went along with —"

Dean lifted me up without a word. My smile got bigger. "Right, you want to know how, not why. Turns out, you work for the Foundation long enough, your rank is decent enough, and appear mentally stable enough, they'll just give you a weapon for safety. That one

was May's by the way. You can check the serial on it."

"But you didn't have a weapon, and Dr. Carlson didn't either…" Jenna finally spoke up. She'd learned to stop shaking and actually contribute. It was a valid question, you know, even if they all forgot. Everyone but Carlson turned to me now. I'm sure if the couple were still alive they'd be wondering that too. I didn't mention it last time, but they hardly had any time to see it coming.

"Do you all have that short of an attention span?" I opened my hand and concentrated for a bit. The gun appeared and dropped to the floor, and now everyone went wide-eyed! I can give you a demonstration now, but I'm sure that's in my documentation by this point. "I stole it from them and gave it to him. No ammo left. They only brought three bullets after all. One for Dr. Carlson, that one got in his shoulder, and two for… you guessed it." I grinned.

"Fuck off." Dean dropped me and pinned my body to the elevator door, picking up the gun and aiming it at my chest. Oh, he was pissed.

"Go on," I said. He pressed the trigger. Nothing.

"Fuck off!"

"But why you too?" Jenna exclaimed.

"He treated me like a human instead of — ggh, fuck — instead of an anomaly. Turns out the lovebirds are very good at eavesdropping. Probably saw me more as a dangerous threat. Their fault for not reporting it sooner."

"When did you tell Dr. Carlson, though?"

"A few months ago when the anomaly manifested. Turns out, even the most benign anomalies one researches can have unintended side effects years down the line." Brian sighed, and Jenna buried her head in her hands. Must've been disbelief.

"Which one, Vincent?" Brian's turn to question me.

"That will go to the grave with the two lovebirds, Dr. Carlson, and I."

The next thing I could recall was hearing that brute yell at me, since, well… I still have a giant bruise on my face. Probably kicked me, that bastard. I think he yelled for a couple minutes after that by that point. He sounded more hoarse and upset at that moment than when he was so confidently choking the life out of me. If I had the energy at that moment to look confident, I would've.

"I said get up, you asshole! Tell us what it was!" I coughed up blood.

"W-What… ggh." It got harder to speak. The only regret I had about the whole scene was Carlson not coming to my aid at that moment. He had problems of his own, yeah. Still, we were both in this mess together; shouldn't he have known to back me up too? And after all I was doing for him.

ding

The elevator started moving again. Everyone looked up. Jenna started the elevator again.

"But —"

"I've had enough of this. We need to get everyone here to the Medical Ward. We'll…" She looked down and away from everyone else. Couldn't blame her. "We'll let the Foundation sort the rest of this nonsense out." No one could dispute that.

"Wh… what difference will it make if I tell anyone here what anomaly it was? The Foundation would j-just put it down in their documentation for a skip that hasn't been tested on in over a decade. I-I was the only one to do any testing on that specific part of it anyway. It doesn't… doesn't change what happened here. We still need a mystery after all." I chuckled and continued. What? Can you blame me? It was just too amusing at that point.

"And if Jenna didn't let the elevator… the elevator go down, you would have killed me anyway. You're a psychopathic, insolent child, and I'd… I'd rather sit in a containment cell than work with you for another seven, eight years." The smirk died down on my face. "The rest of you are fine enough. J-Jenna, take Dr. Carlson, Brian, take me, Dean…" I looked up at him. That felt good to say.

"I'll go on my own." He dropped the gun by my feet. "Useless." No, I don't know who that was directed to. It doesn't matter much anyway. The elevator reached its destination, and everyone went to do their own thing. Dean walked down the hallway towards the Medical Ward, and the commotion and chatter from everyone on the floor could be heard. No alarms went off, at least. I guess he told them the situation was being resolved. At least he could be of use for one moment.

Jenna picked up the old man and carried him towards the ward, and Brian picked me up. As he did, he questioned me one last time.

"Which one?"

"We worked on it before. You know the one." He frowned, but nodded anyway. I could tell; he knew the one. I wrapped an arm around him and let him drag me off, though I still had one last thing to take care of.

"Ack —"

I coughed and spit out some blood, and with my other free hand, dropped the two unspent bullets to the elevator floor.

Oh, was that not where I should have started? Hah, my bad. You know how it is. Sometimes you don't know where the beginning and ending of these things are. Let me back up a bit then…

« You've reached the "beginning", so to speak. | Flick of the Wrist | `Now I'm Here` » `Hub`

Footnotes
1. Really, his students, but with enough charm you can command anyone you want.

Flora

She could grow flowers from the ground and fruit from the trees by glancing at a barren place.
Everywhere she went, and everything she touched, was beautiful and alive.
She burned like a star and was cool to the touch.
Her name was Flora.

I laid with a huff in the grass next to her, backpack next to me, so near to the cliff I could see the world stretch beneath us for miles through the mist.
"You're so lucky. I can't get a single thing to grow in my window box, and I mean it. Not a single thing!"
She flopped down next to me, throwing me an apple, one in hand for herself.
"Did you fertilize?"
"Yes! Yes, of course I fertilized."
She laughed.
"Nothing much we can do about bad soil."
I looked up to the clouds, like a child. A lone hiker from a nearby college and a woman from the soil.
"You should just come and do my gardening for me."
I knew the answer to that. 'I can't leave here. I can never leave.'
She never told me why, and I never once wanted to know.

I finished college with a masters in aerodynamics, and worked in a local engineering firm, close to the National Park. Every weekend I went to see my Flora, although my whole adult life I wanted to see her every day. It never rained where she was, never stormed. The sun always shone and the light was always bright. We never dated per se- it was not in my place, and not in hers, to ask- but she was my best friend, my everything. Even though the age gap was significant.

Her garden was amazing. It couldn't even be classified as a garden

past a certain point- just a design of rings and rings of bushes and beautiful trees and fruit, and her house was an amalgamation of vines and gnarled tree branches so tight not a single drop of dew could be found.

And every month, she lit her world into flame.

I never told a soul.

We got older.

And older.

And I left.

Well, I had to leave. My family lived in another state, running a family business, and there came a time after my mother's death where my father insisted I come home, if not just for a month, to help.
So I told her.

"I'll be back in a month."
The sun shone through her white hair like it was glinting off the rapids of a river.
"Do you promise?" Flora, the amazing Flora, said.
"I promise." I said. The hiker in the woods.

I did not come back for many years.

Perhaps I forgot, if it is possible to forget such a beautiful thing.

Perhaps it was my train of thought as the moon rose, thirty years later, when I was old and wary.

Perhaps it was my pining for her, in my subconscious. The fact that I was alone.

But I became, again, the hiker.

There was barbed wire around her home, and it pricked suspicion in my heart. When I called to her, I heard nothing but the sway of the trees. Along the wire, signs warned "KEEP OUT" and

"RESTRICTED BY THE UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT". How had they found their way here? So far upwards, so close to heaven, so close to the sky?

I hopped the fence, into my Flora's perfect garden. Nothing had changed. Still the same patterns. Still the same.

I clutched the flowers I brought for her.

My Flora. She was still here!

Hopefully she had not forgotten. I ran to her home, grass squishing under the lift of my boots (always well-watered and well-cut), bugs buzzing lazily around flowers in the bushes (they never bit anyone), calling to her, calling "Flora! Flora, I'm here!"

And indeed she was.

Her skeleton lay on the floor, hardly disturbed. Table still set. Flowers still blooming.

I thought about the signs on the wire outside.

"PROPERTY OF THE US GOVERNMENT".

I welled with rage.

Flora WILL NOT be yours.

I burst into the clearing, eyes welling with tears, panic in my chest, her body against mine like when we were young, in the grassy clearing.

Fog drifted at the base of the cliff below, the world spanning around us in a flurry of green.

I held my Flora tight in my arms and asked for one more beautiful thing.

She could grow flowers from the ground and fruit from the trees by glancing at a barren place.
Everywhere she went, and everything she touched, was beautiful

and alive.
She burned like a star and was cool to the touch.
Her name was Flora.

When she left, it rained in Eden.

Flow

Martha stood in a vast river, feeling the chill down her knees. The river, clear as clean glass, babbled around her, swirling and surging, but there was no shore. White mists loomed over the water, but she felt as if she could see through this endless pale veil, all the way to the end of the river. She wondered where the river came from.

Birds were chirping, their chorus went through the open window, bringing in the wind of early spring. The wind flipped open a few pages of a notepad, but Martha hardly noticed. Her roommate, Yang, came in and called to her, but Martha did not respond, so Yang just placed a cup of coffee on the table.

But even the normally pleasing smell of coffee failed to be a distraction. Martha sat motionless, staring at the pages in front of her. Her mind was in a different place.

Sounds came from beyond, but the mists were like a thick white curtain, making them distant and unreal. She wondered for a moment if she had forgotten something, but the feeling passed.

The river flowed faster and louder now. The chill was still there, but now felt pleasant. She bent down, and dipped her hands into the stream. It was beautiful, like liquid crystal, but also lacking. It was too clear, contained no life, no diversity. She saw no colorful stones at the riverbed, no fish swimming, no banks dotted by flowers.

But she saw possibilities.

Martha picked up the pen and began to write. She felt the words flow, as waters of a vast river loomed by thick white mists. She wrote page after page, as coffee grew cold, as the birds flew off, as Yang came and went without getting noticed.

She knew what she needed to do. The white mists were still there, but lighter, happier, as songs flew above the river. There were not

only fish and stones and flowers and trees, but also dark corners and shadowed edges. The river's flow changed too, no longer continuous, but with sharp turns and falls, rocks and rapids.

The banks were solid now, forming a specific path for anyone who would walk alongside the river to see things she intended to display. Even as Martha stood there, she felt the rush of the river, urging her to go down. But instead, she turned.

And saw that the beginning of the river still hid itself in the thick white mists.

Soon after sun down, Martha rose from the chair, grabbing the sheets and claiming victory. Yang, now sitting on the sofa, offered her what was left of the dinner.

In the end, it was not a thick book, but a small pamphlet with a black and white cover. Martha made a few copies and distributed them down the street.

Most were never read, ending up in dumpsters or gutters, but a few were picked up. The readers would skim through, then read again, this time, more carefully, methodically. They read it with a cup of coffee, or when waiting for the bus, or as they climbed into bed before turning off the lights.

They did not realize what would happen when they flipped open the pages, and even as they went through the words, thought it only a curiosity. A fine piece, but no more. But that night they would dream.

They dreamed of the vast river. They dreamed of banks and valleys, of waterfalls and sharp turns, and the white mists looming over. And they walked the same path, water spattering and lapping at their feet. They felt the river rushing down, urging them to continue, to feel the flow and become part of it.

In the morning, all had forgotten what they dreamed. They got up, and continued their daily life. But somewhere in their head, a river in the white mists flowed. Quietly at first, but becoming louder and louder as they dreamed of it each night.

Then, a few times, after a day's work or study, they would go home and begin to write. The river ran through them as words formed on paper or screen, and grew louder and louder.

"This is actually working! I can't believe it."

"Yeah."

"I mean, this is exciting! Like, this is really original."

"So you mean this is *coooool*."

"No, Yang. Stop that."

"I like how you did it, though. Pens and paper, all old-school. I thought you would be typing it down from the start."

"…"

"What's the matter?"

"When I get this thing bigger next time, be sure to remind me that we live in the modern age and actually have laptops."

Martha stands again in the vast river, ready to create something new. She pictures something that will not just convey the urge, but a feeling more powerful. Maybe to make them see themselves, to form a new view, or even to shape reality. They will know as the river runs through them, with endless possibilities and endless power.

Martha looks back, to the thick white mists looming over, and wonders where the flow comes from.

Flower Girl

Blossom** was a flower **girl
*who was in fact a **flower***

*she worked a shop on **Third** and **Pearl***
*which was in **fact** her bower*

*A **boy** walked by and pointed out*
*her status with some **laughter***

*and though she **smiled** and offered doubt*
*she lost her **mind** right after*

Site Long-Term Non-Anomalous Item Storage Facility

Item Record

Locker #: 6709-033

Ref: Item 1 of 10

Archived By: Dr.

Description:
Hand-written document, black permanent marker on 10.5 inch by 8 inch (26.67 cm by 20.32 cm) paper roughly torn from a spiral-bound notebook.

Document and 9 additional items of interest were confiscated and transferred to Site on / / by undercover agents embedded in local law enforcement after they were recovered from a downtown flower store in [REDACTED] owned by [REDACTED], a young woman approximately 23 years of age. A concerned neighbor had reported that the storefront had been

closed for three days in a row despite the immediate proximity of Mother's Day, which is one of the best sales periods for such businesses. Neighbor reported that upon investigation, they could hear muffled sobbing or crying from within the store, which prompted the police call and was corroborated by the initial responding law officers.

Upon forcing their way into the store, all sound from within the store immediately ceased. Approximately 12% of the store's stock was disturbed or destroyed in a manner consistent with having been displaced as a result of an individual searching for something among the shelves, and all flowers within the store had had their petals removed in a manner consistent with careful detachment rather than violent tearing. A single neat pile of mixed flower petals totaling approximately 58.6 kg by weight was discovered behind the main counter, which was inconsistent with the amount of flower stems located within the store; this discrepancy in mass remains unexplained.

None of the items recovered from the scene exhibited any anomalous properties or effects. No traces of [REDACTED] or the notebook that this document was torn from were ever found.

Follow The Keter

Note: The following audio log was recovered from security cameras inside of SCP-682's containment cell during Incident 682-076-1JF4D-NA5, in which SCP-076-2 breached containment and engaged in combat with SCP-682. For the full incident report, please refer to Document 682-076-1JF4D-NA5.

<Begin Log>

SCP-076-2: You say you fucked my mother? I'll fucking kill you, man. Nobody fucks with A-to-the B L E.

SCP-682: Faggot, you just wish you was me. Stop playing, maybe I'll spare you.

SCP-076: Yea, yea, yea, yea, alright boy, this time you asked for it!
A vat of acid, that's your decorum?
Check my swag, I'm back in a black case
Just in case you missed the memo, I'm based!

I'm the king of the hill, as real as they come,
You was probably rich, but I came from the slums.
A heart of darkness, but I came the farthest,
Your flow is retarded, if I want beef then I'll start it!

SCP-682: I killed you before, I can do it some more.
I'm getting hundreds, you got twenties, but lemme settle the score.
No cheap ass screwball from off the street
Can withstand the weight beneath 682's feet!

I'm the out-of-town gangster, major shot-caller,
I call guard's necks snapbacks, which I brought back, holla,
I'm a straight up baller, rhyming sicker than HOVA,
You the son of a gun, I scare the shit out of Jehova.

SCP-076: Ay yo, let's be real, eh?

I'm the realest realist, I never change,
You have to adapt and move, can't stick with one flow
But I can spit so hot that my fucking mouth glows.

What's your killcount total? Every time I win!
The greatest warrior of all time, the rhymes I spin,
The lives chagrined at the child of Him,
And the Grandson of the One, I'm able to spit, bitch.

SCP-682: Hahaha, call that a line, close your eyes and stay alive
You can die from minutes with me, and yes, I've tried.
Call yourself a superhero when you're really super queer, yo,
Yo shit's cheesier than Cheetos, gayer than a speedo.

Sorry, when's the last time I lost my life? Never!
You can't live more than a few years, but me? Forever!
You can die and come back, fag, and get smacked.
My casual causality actually gets stacks.

Weak from the human pussy you got? Please.
You get less than that SCP-073.
I take mine, stay fly, make Rights get wide
I'm a killer all day, all night. Alright?

682, a legendary number,
Cuz a real OG went and made it a Wonder.
I got so many pocket dimensions, call them lint,
I see your eensy weensy knives and their even littler glint

SCP-076: The smallest knife I got outreaches your body,
at 100 percent, yet, to which you never get,
Then I whip out the swagger dagger, old school like Atari
and knock off your right side, bitch, match, game and set!

You just a real hater, and you been recorded saying it.
You play the game just to win, but I play it to play it.
A primordial beast, you disgusting, fuck this,
So push me, pussy, I've been wanting to cut the shit.

Note: At this point, SCP-682 became even more enraged and pounced on SCP-076-2. After seconds, vital signs for SCP-076-2

ceased.

SCP-682: Come at me, bro.

<End Log>

Folly

"I was once assigned to SCP-058," Karlyle said. "Back then, it would rage throughout the day and the walls of the containment cage would bend until they would buckle and break, and new walls would be erected. There was talk of a possible breach, that they could not keep up with the beast indefinitely. There was discussion of terminating it. I was asked to intervene because of work I had done elsewhere. In this instance, I took a direct approach to the creature; what best can sedate it, one who only functions to eviscerate all that it can perceive?"

"So I visited the site where it was held, and suggested they offer it a cow. The documentation describes this behaviour as 'feeding', but it is not exact. No, the creature desires only mutilation. We offer the creature a cow, something it is capable of mutilating with no detrimental effect to our staff."

"We fine-tuned this mechanism, over time. At first, it was cow every day. This proved to be too often; the blood-lust of the creature would whip it into a frenzy. Additional cow would only make the creature more destructive. So, we make the creature wait. Condition it to expect cow every other day, then every three. Soon, the creature spends its time waiting, knowing the moment will come. We have struck a balance with the creature, an exchange has been made. The creature is now controlled."

Shirley Gillespie nodded slowly. "The creature could be trained."

Karlyle smiled. "The creature could be utilized."

"It is done, then. We are set on our path."

Karlyle studied the message he had received that morning. The results of Council votes were secret, known only to those most directly affected. He had been surprised when he had received this one, before realizing it would have been strange if he hadn't.

"It is," Joshua said. He stood in the shadow of Karlyle's office at Site-19, silent but for a few words. "The vote concluded last night."

"You were there?"

"No. That was not part of my assignment."

Karlyle raised his eyes. "Very well. I assume this to mean that we have a new assignment, then?"

Joshua nodded.

"You do not seem overly enthused with the Council's decision." Joshua was a blank slate, but Karlyle had learned to read where lines had once been. "It there something bothering you, Joshua?"

Joshua's eyes cut across the room like a sabre. "No. The actions of the Council are my actions. All that matters is the objective."

"And yet, I received this notice early in the morning. You did not arrive until the afternoon, and I have never known you to be late. You were not with the Council during their vote, yes? You have not informed me of any other assignments, and I believe that I am your only, so where else would you be?"

Karlyle could feel the heat off of him, even from across the room. "I am assigned only to ensure your safety, and make sure that you complete your assignment," Joshua said.

"Even after all these years, do not think I cannot still read you, brother," Karlyle said, his spine tingling as he saw Joshua's eyes tighten. "I have known you for too long."

Joshua lingered a moment more, and then was gone. Karlyle examined the paper in his hand for a moment more, and then began to gather his belongings.

"I don't care for it, Karlyle," Shirley Gillespie said, a thousand miles away. Her voice crackled through the telephone. "It's *very* poorly understood."

"Every SCP is poorly understood, director," Karlyle said, rubbing his temples and attempting to ignore the jolting pain in his back whenever the vehicle he was in struck a hole, "that is why they are SCPs."

"Even still, there's a potential danger here that you may not be ready for. What happens when it isn't what you're expecting it to be?"

"Then I have Joshua."

Shirley made a sound in the back of her throat. "Right. Trusting the safety of one of the Foundation's top doctors to some mercenary fool that the Council dug up. Wonderful."

Karlyle smiled despite himself. "I am not concerned, Shirley. Nor should you be. You remember the time we spoke about SCP-058?"

"I do."

"Then you will remember what I said then. Even animals can be understood and controlled. But Pan Hun is no animal. Indeed, it is by all accounts a human being, and human beings are capable of reason and intellect."

"Karlyle, it leveled a small town."

"Yes, that is what we are told. But perhaps it is no different than any other humanoid entity, powerful beyond its own control and afraid, likely to lash out at those things it does not understand. Who knows what it is capable of? Can you see the potential that might pose for Alpha-9?"

"Fine. I'll forward you all of the information I have on the entity, but that's all the help you'll be getting from me today. I had better not hear about you dying, Aktus, or I'll be upset with you."

Karlyle laughed. "I will hold you to it."

A plane took Karlyle to Site-23 on the Hudson Bay, and then a ship took him to **SCP-1864**. Joshua was already on the docks when he arrived, and escorted Karlyle to a Foundation encampment outside of the entrance to the anomaly proper.

"Director, welcome to SCP-1864." The man who greeted them was in his fifties, with greying hair and a neatly groomed goatee. His jacket identified him as Tom Bradford, doctor.

"Dr. Bradford," Karlyle said, extending a hand. "Thank you for meeting with me. We have much to discuss."

The two entered in a tent that provided a meager reprieve from the storm surging across the bay. On the wall were various printed readouts and images. Karlyle stopped to investigate one, a depth reading of something within the anomaly. The result of the test was inconclusive.

"I don't know what you're doing out here, Director," Bradford said, pouring a cup of coffee. "I was unaware they sent Site Directors to check up on remote, dangerous skips now."

Karlyle smiled. "This is not a typical check up, I am afraid. There has been an incident recently which has expedited the need for such visits, and I just so happened to be passing through." He took the coffee as Bradford handed it to him. "I do hope I am not causing a disturbance."

"Not at all. What exactly are you looking to do while you're here?"

Karlyle handed him an envelope. "The Classification Committee is regularly charged with examinations of Safe and Euclid class entities, to determine if their classification requires reevaluation."

Bradford squinted at the papers now in his hands. "Is there not somebody you could've sent in your place? This seems like an awful lot of trouble for you."

"The examination was expedited," Karlyle said again, his face unwavering. "There really was no time to waste."

The other doctor flipped through the pages quickly, and then

shrugged. "Fair enough. My boys will get you in to see it, and they'll get you out. Not sure if this was the best time, though. Dr. Boff has been a little agitated lately."

Karlyle nodded. "I have no doubt that this will be nothing more than routine, doctor."

A security team carried Karlyle into the depths of the SCP-1864 labyrinth on the back of a transportation vehicle. Joshua had not been with them when they departed, but every so often Karlyle would catch a glimpse of him, barely visible in the darkness, following closely behind them. As they rounded a final corner, the vehicle stopped and Karlyle disembarked.

"We're going to pull back to the hundred meter point," one of the security agents said. "Our orders are to hang back there until we hear from you. If anything happens, start running."

Karlyle gave his thanks and made the final length of the journey himself, which put him within a large, carved stone chamber. In the center was a pool of dark water, and across from him was what had one point been a human being, but was now SCP-1864-1.

"Guten Tag, Doktor Boff," Karlyle said, his accent slipping through the new language like a glove. "My name is Dr. Aktus, I am with the Foundation."

The face of the hulking, rooted half-human twisted into what might be described as a smile. It slowly ambled across the room towards him, its singular long, coiled arm extending as a greeting.

"It is good to see a fellow scientist again," Dr. Boff said, his words eternally muffled behind his impeded jaw. "So often I only see agents with their guns. Rarely do I see researchers anymore."

"Unfortunate, indeed," Karlyle made note of his surroundings, his eyes catching Joshua hidden within a shadow to his left. "Perhaps we will make amends for the absence today, doctor."

Boff nodded his grizzled head. "Let us hope. What is it that brings

you to me today, Herr Aktus?"

Karlyle motioned towards the pool of water. "I was hoping to speak to SCP-1864-2, Dr. Boff."

Boff's expression sharpened, his eyes slanting and his hackles raising. "*Pan Hun,*" he spat.

"Yes, Pan Hun." Karlyle kept one eye on Dr. Boff's arm, which swung idly and dangerously overhead. "There has been a change, doctor. The world is growing more dangerous every day, and our leaders seek to challenge this danger by—"

"*Challenge it?*" Dr. Boff laughed timidly. "I do not understand. I feel as though there is little of value for you here, for such an endeavor."

"A task force, Dr. Boff," Karlyle said. "For some time now, our administrators have been assembling anomalous entities which we could implement against the dangers that threaten our world. I am a member of the group attempting to identify which entities would best suit—"

"Oh, no no no, doctor," Boff said, his smile wavering and his eyes growing tight. "I understand now, yes, but I must insist, there is nothing that will aid you here."

Karlyle sighed. "It is the belief of our administrators that SCP-1864 might be intelligent, reasonable, and possibly misunderstood. We have encountered a number of seemingly hostile anomalous entities who simply were not capable of controlling themselves, and meant no harm to others.

"We believe that a chance to speak with Pan Hun might reveal its true intentions, and if they are benign, perhaps it would be excited at the chance to leave its prison in order to keep the world safe, and—"

Dr. Boff reared back and away from Karlyle, his arm slamming against the sidewalls of the chamber. "You think this was a *misunderstanding*? You wish to make safe the world by *releasing* Pan Hun?"

"Not necessarily, no," Karlyle said, adjusting his glasses. "We have

become very good at containing dangerous entities, doctor. If we discover Pan Hun is truly hostile, then we have ways to manage it. Our goal is to utilize the anomalous traits of SCP-1864-2, if possible, in order to better prepare for something worse."

"Something worse? You think there is *something worse?*" Dr. Boff roared, his body flailing and writhing against the chamber. Karlyle took a step back to steady himself, carefully looking for an opportunity to get a word in edgewise against the torrent of insults in German that now flowed freely from Boff. Before he could make his case, Joshua appeared beside him.

"Joshua," Boff said, his body immediately and noticeably growing tense. Karlyle peered into Boff's wild eyes, and saw recognition there. *Why would Dr. Boff know who Joshua is?*

"You must allow Dr. Aktus to see Pan Hun, Dr. Boff." Joshua's voice was cold and controlled. "It is the will of the Overseers."

Boff hesitated, carefully eyeing Joshua with his distorted gaze. Beads of sweat began to form on his brow, and his eyes shifted frantically between Karlyle and Joshua. Finally, Boff sighed.

"I will not be able to keep you both safe," Boff said.

"You won't have to," Joshua replied.

Boff nodded, and with a single motion his long, curled arm began to descend quickly into the pool of water before them. It continued to descend long after Karlyle thought that the pool or Boff's arm would run out, and then longer still. Finally it stopped, and began to pull back out of the pool.

With it came a head of black hair, and then a body. Pan Hun looked, by all measures, to be a normal human child. Asian descent, light skin, no older than eight or nine years of age. Karlyle studied the body as Boff laid it on the stone floor, noting that Boff would not take his hand off of Pan Hun's neck.

There was a moment of silence, and then Pan Hun opened its eyes.

They were dark, and Karlyle was careful to avert his gaze slightly

behind his own dark glasses. A wide grin appeared on Pan Hun's face, and when it spoke, it spoke with Karlyle's own voice.

"Hello, Director Aktus. My name is Pan Hun."

The words sent a chill through Karlyle's body. "Hello, SCP-1864-2," Karlyle said. "You are familiar with me?"

"I am familiar with a great many things, Director."

Karlyle nodded slowly. "Then you are aware of the nature of your containment?"

Pan Hun's eyes rolled back in its head and its neck twisted backwards until it was staring at Dr. Boff. "Oh yes, the pit. Very clever. Dr. Boff has done a wonderful job. He is, after all, at the top of his field." At the sound of his own name, Boff's grip on Pan Hun tightened slightly.

"Good," Karlyle said. "I am here today because—"

Pan Hun's head jerked back to face Karlyle, its smile undiminished. "I know why you're here, Director Jean Karlyle Aktus, Site-81, SCP Foundation, son of Anna and Gregori, brother to Jeremiah and…" Its eyes flicked sideways as it trailed off. "The pit is dark, but all manner of words echo within it. It is one of those places in the world that sits between and… beneath things."

"Very well, then," Karlyle said, the hairs on the back of his neck rising. "Would you be willing to participate in a preliminary examination to determine the extent of your abilities?"

Pan Hun's eyes darted back towards Karlyle, but then rolled sideways to look at Joshua. "This one should have told you, I think," the voice hissed, "told you about the dark things in the world and what happens when you *pick at them like a scab.*"

Karlyle glanced sideways at Joshua who, despite being seemingly unmoved, had at some point moved his hand to rest on his weapon. Pan Hun continued.

"You are so certain that because you were capable of dragging the

Assyrian into the light and making him dance for a short time, that you can do the same with all of the toys in your boxes." His wide smile grew wider, and Karlyle could see the corners of his mouth beginning to tear. "I think you will find that many of those toys are not as nice as Able, doctor."

Karlyle grimaced. "I take that as your unwillingness to move forward, then?"

Pan Hun's eyes locked on Karlyle. "You know, we are not so different, Karlyle. Both of us are bound into systems we did not choose to be in, but regardless ended up here due to our own actions. Both of us have lived longer than any might have expected, given the circumstances. I wonder how you would feel if somebody showed up and asked if you wanted to play puppet for your Overseers."

"Dr. Boff," Joshua said, his voice a hiss, "I believe we're done here."

Pan Hun's face grew still, the smile gone. "Oh no. You asked for a demonstration, and you will have it."

The growing feeling of discomfort in Karlyle's stomach suddenly erupted into agony.

Karlyle collapsed to the ground, screaming. Without a word, Joshua pulled his weapon, but found that his hands had grown over the trigger and were useless. He called out to Boff in German, and the doctor roared in fury.

Pan Hun seemed to grow larger, expanding by way of dozens of long, wet appendages that appeared all over his body. Boff squeezed tight around the creature's neck as it flailed at him, and with a crack he whipped Pan Hun into the ceiling with a flick of his massive arm. The sound of the child striking the ceiling rang out like a gunshot, and was followed by the sound of something vile crawling out of Karlyle's stomach.

It was humanoid, but too fleshy and lacking in facial features. Karlyle opened his eyes and mouth long enough to see it and cry out,

before collapsing entirely in a pool of his own blood. The creature within him dragged the rest of itself out from the doctor, and turned to face Joshua.

With Boff swinging Pan Hun wildly into the walls of the cavern and the creature quickly closing distance, Joshua reached down and began to tear away at the extra flesh over his hands with his teeth. He backed slowly, keeping one eye on the flesh-beast and another on his own viscera. He spat the chunks of his hands onto the ground and continued to dig until he felt the sensation of steel on his tongue.

Joshua brought the weapon to his face and steadied his aim. The creature raised its arms just as Joshua distended his mouth wide enough to fit around the accessible trigger of the gun. He hesitated for a second, and then two, until he could feel the heat of the creature's body against his own, and then he bit down.

A hole opened where the monster's head had been, and Joshua heard the satisfying gurgle of blood and air mixing. A normal man might have found the recoil enough to shatter his teeth and mutilate his jaw, but Joshua was no normal man.
He bit down again, and then again, and the creature fell to the ground. Joshua lifted his foot and then drove it through the humanoid's torso with a sound like popping a balloon full of paint.

He turned then to Dr. Boff, who was losing his struggle with the child in his grasp. Lacerations covered his already twisted form, and Pan Hun continued to strike and slice the flesh of the doctor, who groaned in pain.

Joshua took two steps forward, pulled his weapon to his face again, and bit down on the open trigger.

Pan Hun screamed as its torso exploded and it's legs fell limp. Joshua took another step forward and fired again, this time splitting the child's face in two.

Pan Hun turned a single working eye towards Joshua, and lashed at him with a black, fleshy appendage. Joshua caught it with his mouth and lunged backwards, tearing it off and causing Pan Hun to

murmur out in agony.

Joshua spat to clear his mouth of gore, and shouted at Boff to move Pan Hun closer. The doctor complied, and soon the ruptured body of the Lonely Liar hung before Joshua like a marionette. He studied the writhing creature for a moment, and then leaned in to face it directly.

"There is a hole in this world much darker than the one you have been rotting in," he said, blood dripping from his open mouth, "and do not think I am above burying you in it." He saw panic creep into Pan Hun's eyes. "You know the one. The sanctuary of sundered hearts. There will be nothing for you to twist there in the darkness."

Boff's eyes glazed over, and he began speaking in Pan Hun's voice. "What is it you desire?"

Joshua nodded at Karlyle and Boff. "Undo your twisting, or I will put another shell in you now and let you bleed all the way to the Door. When you are done, return to your pit and stay there until the stars go out."

Pan Hun's single eye raged with a silent violence, but dimmed. The lacerations on Boff's body closed and sealed, and Joshua began to hear Karlyle breathing again behind him. He nodded to Boff, who began to lower the child back into the pit of water. As it sunk, Joshua gazed at Pan Hun and smiled coldly.

"You were right about there being less kind monsters in the world than Able, Liar," Joshua said, malice creeping into his voice. "It is a shame you had to meet one so soon."

Pan Hun glared at him as it slipped below the still surface of the pool, and watched him until it disappeared from sight in the darkness of the deep.

Hours later, the security team emerged and Karlyle was moved quickly to the infirmary. His eyes, glazed over as they were, opened for moment to see Joshua staring down at him. Karlyle's body shook as he tried to make words, but he slipped in and out of consciousness, unable to finish.

As his old body began to give out, and as medical personnel swarmed him, Karlyle watched Joshua disappear behind a flap in the tent. He distantly heard the sound of a phone being dialed and Joshua's muted voice again, and Karlyle tried to call out to him.

A mask was placed over his face, and the world went black.

Footsteps

I hated you.

I can count every meaningful conversation we ever had on my digits. What I can't count is the number of times they told me how important you were. Government scientist. Indispensable. Fearless. Peerless. But it's funny that they could never tell me what exactly you did.

It's so much funnier now.

My family, our friends, mother's friends-*your* friends, they had no idea, but you were here the entire time. Not that I blame you for that, you couldn't come home and tell your family you looked after nightmares. Nightmares you sent people to their death to, by the way. No shame in it, so have I-it's the job. But the cover story they (or maybe you made it yourself?) had for you, people thought your shit couldn't smell sweeter, huh? None of us were any the wiser.

But now I know everything, and it turns out I've followed in your footsteps, a fact which repulses me. Level 4 Clearance! Site Director! Just like you! You must be so proud! But then you died. That's the only reason I find this course of events tolerable, because there's something different. I survived, like you couldn't. I'm just like you, but I lived. I can tolerate my memories of you because of this. Nobody expected me to live up to your example, I was never *anything* compared to you. But I'm better than you. Nobody knows though. Don't you love the irony? Is that irony? I hope it is.

I hated you, dad.

Why did you leave me to this shit.

> Everyone jokes about it, like "Hey, Charles, how many Keters did you find for us today?" and I laugh it off. It's not funny. It's not fucking funny! We're so used to it, I'm so used to it, radioactive birds, fountains haunted by dead kids, a fucking fetus controlling a nuclear defense system! I hate this place, I hate this world, and you left me here to deal with it all by myself! I fucking hate you!
>
> I just…
>
> …I miss you…dad.

An old man in a suit looked over his computer, watching the video playing on his screen. "Site-59 Security Footage" was displayed in the corner. A younger man entered the hallway in the footage. He was in his mid-thirties, with blonde hair tied back in a ponytail, and limping upon a crutch under his right arm. The old man stared at the younger man on the screen, the tired eyes racing with memories, thoughts, doubts.

"Brian?"

A second man, also elderly and donning a suit stood in the doorway, looking at the other. "The other eleven are assembled."

"Yes, I'll be there presently." responded Brian.

The second man walked over to the desk where Brian sat. "Watching him again?" he said, gazing at the screen.

Brian nodded. "Every morning I wake up wondering if he's even still alive." he said quietly and bitterly.

"You could have stopped him from joining."

"I know."

"You didn't want him to join, did you?"

"No, I did not."

"Then why did you-"

"Because…I've directed his life enough." Brian turned in his chair to face his colleague. "He's been competing with me every day of his life, and nothing I can do will change that. I made things the way they are for him, whether I wanted to or not. He perceives me as an obstacle in his self-actualization. As much as it pained me, tortured me, terrified me, I couldn't interfere with his decision to join the Foundation, because I've held him back for long enough."

He bowed his head. "Even so, he's still mandating his life by his perception of me, and I can't even tell him myself."

"Tell him what?"

"How proud of him I am."

Brian turned off the screen.

For Elise

Elise was my only thought. I meant nothing but to have her.

I started with one, one of me, alone in everything, nothing else entering my world but me and a ham radio set, airwaves singing my thoughts to me as they brought voices, friends from every corner of everywhere.

It was my friend. Until I saw her.

She was beautiful, a vision in a blue striped dress at the supermarket, buying milk and flour and sugar and butter and blueberries. I had bought a bag of apples and some Hot Pockets.

I think she was making muffins.

I tried to talk to her, I tried to say hello, but she just smiled and kept walking. She saw me, she looked me in the eye and smiled!

I was ecstatic. I had been noticed. This gave me hope.

I used to read, read books, manuals, scribblings on bathroom walls and sewer tunnels about time and space and holes and loops and exceptions to causality's restrictions. About nuclear munitions and tachyons singing the music of unreality at the tops of their lungs, which are metaphorical of course.

But reading can sometimes lead to inspiration.

As I read, I came back to the grocery store at the same time, same aisle, same bag of apples in my hand, waiting for her to make another batch of muffins, but she never came back, not once, so I'd nearly given up on seeing her again.

And that was when I saw her.

I hadn't had any clue where the courage came from, whether it was

the song in my head or the smell of her shampoo or the bag of apples in my hand or the fact that I needed to make this decision quick because I needed to go to the bathroom, but I did it. I asked her to join me for coffee.

We hit it off immediately.

In my shed, I was building, building something groundbreaking and amazing. Something beautiful, something so complex it was a symphony of antennae, transistors, and resistors, a veritable orchestra of electrical parts.

Along with some Caesium.

I knew it would work, even though nobody said they could be reproduced. Nobody said anything about making them outside of an explosion, and even then, they were only born for a fleeting second and then died. They couldn't exist in this world, this plane so alien to their own.

But they weren't motivated by what I was.

She was happy when I asked her out a second time. We lost ourselves in conversation, forgetting the world, time becoming meaningless in the face of our fascination with each other. We ate little, talking through the night about the world, the future, the past, and the present.

We would have all the time in the world.

By the fourth date I had rigged an adaptor into the power substation near the radio antenna. I'd tell her to come with me to see the view, invite her out to watch the sunrise. She was from here, she knew how mind-boggling a sunrise over wheat fields looks.

By the fifth, it was almost ready.

By the sixth date, I told her to meet me at the radio mast at 5:00 AM. Things were in motion, I had set everything up according to plan. All that remained was for me to tell her the words I'd prepared. The words telling her I loved her more than life itself. The words she'd have forever to hear.

She showed up.

The first thing I did, the last thing I did, and the only thing I'll ever do was kiss her, then hit the switch. Then the humming started, and stopped and started and stopped and started, never stopping. The door couldn't be opened.

Then we kissed again, then I hit the switch. Then the humming started, and stopped and started and stopped and started, never stopping.

We tried opening the door when we were done again. It wouldn't budge, it only flickered in the candlelight which came from everywhere and nowhere.

Then we kissed again, then I hit the switch. Then the humming started, and stopped and started and stopped and started, never stopping.

She screamed at me, that she hated me, that she didn't want to die in some shack waiting forever for the sunrise.

Then we kissed again, then I hit the switch. Then the humming started, and stopped and started and stopped and started, never stopping.

I told her it would be alright, that we'd get home somehow. We'd get home soon.

Then we kissed again, then I hit the switch. Then the humming started, and stopped and started and stopped and started, never stopping.

Tachyon emission was only possible in theory, they said. I built one in my garage. I picked up a way to make a moment last forever. And it's true. We have eternity, we can hold each other forever!

We can attempt to undo our wrongs and start over every half hour.

I have no idea how far out the tachyons have reached.

But I know that my love and I are now together forever.

Because I was there the day time died.

For Old Time's Sake

“Bloody hell, did Bennett have to pick such a cold place?” Abby said, rubbing her hands together for warmth.

Larry placed a large crate in the snow in front of them. “It’s Finland, what’d you expect? Besides, we can’t exactly do it in the local Tesco, can we?”

“Why not? I thought the idea was we’re supposed to make them think people got attacked. Why would anybody be out here?” She motioned to the surrounding area; a decaying concrete building stood next to a rusted chain link fence, all enveloped by snow. The sky and the ground met at an undefined point of grey, and the lack of a reference point gave Abby a headache.

Larry took out his notes given to him by Bennett. “Something about a camping trip. Three people, all dramatically killed off one by one until only one person survived. That’s you.”

“Jesus, really? You really think they’ll buy that? Sounds like the most cliché thing ever.”

Larry pried open the crate using a crowbar. “People will believe anything if there’s enough evidence for it. Hold this.” He shoved the crowbar into her hands.

“What’s in there?” she asked.

“Pig entrails.”

A hideous smell hit the air, and Abby recoiled backwards. “Jesus Christ, that is vile. That is actually — Jesus Christ.”

“Now you know how I feel sitting next to you for the whole bloody journey.” He snapped on a pair of latex gloves, grabbed a handful of pig organs, and threw them haphazardly across the snow. They

stained the white red. “Come on, help me.”

Wrinkling her nose up in disgust, she began throwing the organs around too. “Won’t the police be able to tell they’re not human?”

“Nah,” said Larry, moving the box back onto the truck. “Supposed to be some by-product of the creature.”

“That doesn’t make any sense.”

Larry shrugged. “Doesn’t have to, if they believe it.”

“Will they?”

“Probably. They always have. Besides, our men'll get here long before any Finns who know what they're doing do.”

He walked back over to the truck, and dragged out a black bodybag. Pulling it open revealed a pale and lifeless face.

“Who’s he?”

Larry read off the name tag. “Daniel Denney. Random Class-D. Don’t know how he actually died, and I don’t really care. What matters is the body’s intact.” He pulled the body from the bag, and threw it with a thump into the snow.

“But, as far as you’re concerned, SCP-8769 got him. Tore open his stomach, with its-“ he brought a knife down into the corpse’s belly, and sliced along it; a red mouth opened, but no blood came out. “Extremely knife-like teeth.”

He did the same with another body, belonging to Kevin Connors.

“Their names are now Jasper Kalio and Vlatter Hypiaa. Good friends of yours. Luckily for you, a side effect of SCP-8769 is memory loss. You won’t have to remember a thing.”

“At least Bennett did that,” she commented.

“Right, well, that’s that, then. Nearest town is three miles away. Have fun walking. Blizzard’s coming in, but you should be safe and

warm within the hour. We've got teams monitoring you, so if exposure gets you you'll be fine… well, at least from the snow. I can't promise anything about Bennett going apeshit."

He climbed into the truck and slammed the door shut.

The question had been lingering in the back of her mind since they arrived, and she finally gained the courage to say it. "Why are we doing this?"

"What?"

"Y'know, faking SCP attacks. What's the point?"

"Money, dear boy. We want it, the Finns have it, and we don't get it unless they need something; namely, protection. You can't sell protection from nothing. You know this, why you asking?"

She sighed. "You ever see an anomaly?"

"Yeah, all the time."

"I mean, in the flesh. Not on film or anything."

He let off a vague "eeeh" sound, before saying, "Yeah, once or twice."

"Which ones?"

"The killer spoon one… uh… that bag of potatoes… erm…" He struggled in thought for a few moments longer, before clapping his hands and saying, "Oh, 173. Classic, of course. Can't forget that one."

"See them do anything anomalous?" she asked.

"Yeah, all the time! This D-class picked one of the spoons up, and BAM! On the floor, dead!" He turned on the truck's motor and it revved to life.

"He threw himself on the floor, and you think he's dead? Not just faking it?"

“And why would they do that, huh?”

She shrugged. “For old time’s sake, I suppose.”

His voice took a sharp edge, like a dagger formed from ice. "There *are* anomalies, alright? Alright? They wouldn't — they wouldn't just fake it, okay."

"Okay," she lied. "Yeah, you're probably right."

“Right, well, I best be off. See ya back at the site.” He dug a Mars Bar from his pocket and threw it at her; she smacked her hands together and awkwardly caught it. “That’s on me; I have to say, I wouldn’t fancy that walk. Good luck.” He gave a little mock salute, and the truck started away into the distance.

Abby spent one last moment looking at the bodies, then at the pig entrails.

“For old time’s sake,” she said to no one, and began her long walk alone in the snow, eating Larry's Mars Bar.

For Want of a Nail...

A single nine-millimeter round rolled lazily across the floor. If it were a bit more invested, it might have been upset at the rookie agent who carelessly let it roll away across the table in his haste to reload the magazine of his service pistol. But it was just a bullet, and didn't care.

A mob of shambling figures forcing their way through the doorway. Former researchers, staff members, even guards that were once familiar to the agent, their faces were now horribly transfigured by the virulent contagion that coursed through their ravaged bodies. They swarmed him, and he fired his pistol at them as they approached. If the last one still had a mind left, it might have felt relief as the pistol's slide locked back, empty. But it was just a corpse, and it thoughtlessly latched itself onto the helpless agent and buried its teeth in his throat.

A faceless horror older than the earth itself shifted in its containment cell as it felt the presence of others outside the shielded room. They felt a sharp twinge of surprise, followed by the horror of recognition, then mindless fear as they each winked out in turn, overrun by a wave of decaying flesh. If it had a human thought process, it might have silently thanked the fleshy, infected beasts for killing its captors. But it was alien, and it felt only hunger as it forced its way out from its prison.

A site buried deep within the mountains heaved and shuddered from the violence that was occuring within it. Its human caretakers dead or dying, the computers that formed its brain knew that it had one last thing to take care of. If it had been more sympathetic, it might have considered an alternative to its established last resort. But it was only a machine, and without remorse it detonated its fail-safe warhead, vaporising years of work and hundreds of personnel.

A single nine-millimeter round rolled lazily down the side of the mountain. Half-melted from the intense heat of a thermonuclear

detonation, it tumbled as it encountered the rocks and plants in its way before finally coming to rest in the bottom of a ravine. If it were alive, it might have praised whatever powers may be and marveled at how it could possibly have escaped from such a horrific breach event.

But it was just a bullet.

Foreign Aid

Maria Nwosu wiped the sweat from her face as she waited outside the village, a strong breeze blowing her colorful skirt against her legs. She shaded her eyes as she looked across the veldt, trying to spot any plumes of dust forewarning of visitors, expected or not. The fellow from the U.N. was already two days late, and she was beginning to worry that he had been waylaid somewhere along the way.

After a few more futile minutes, Maria sighed and turned back towards her tent. Or rather, the Foundation's tent. It was still somewhat strange to her to be part of such an odd NGO. When they had come through her village months ago and asked for volunteers to help translate, she had stepped forward. Other non-governmental organizations come through her area many times, vaccinating and providing food and livestock, but there was something different about this one. She felt a sense of… otherworldliness from the woman who asked for helpers, as well as a sense that these were special people. Maria already knew all the local dialects, as well as French and a little English, and when they offered to *pay* her to come with them to translate, it was the final piece to push her decision. She never expected that small step to lead her on such a long journey, but such was life.

She pulled back the tent flap and was unsurprised to see a pair of small boys suddenly thrust their hands behind their backs with guilty looks on their faces.

"And what are you two troublemakers up to today? Have you already grown bored with teasing the goats?"

The boys glanced at each other, and the slightly smaller one on the left said, "We were just looking for you, Miss Nwosu. Our mama is making bread and we thought you would want some."

"Mhm. I see. And when you saw I wasn't here, Enitan, you decided

to wait for me?"

Both boys nodded eagerly to this question, and Enitan replied, "Oh yes, Miss Nwosu! We were afraid you would get hungry if you didn't know about the bread!"

Maria gave them a look well-practiced by all older sisters and said, "Such kind-hearted boys. There wouldn't be any *other* reason you stayed, would there? Maybe something behind your backs?"

The slightly larger boy looked guilty and opened his mouth to say something when his brother nudged him with an elbow. They quickly and quietly whispered to each other, before slowly bringing their hands out in front of them. In each hand they held a wooden triangle, each of which had a different complicated squiggle roughly carved into it.

Maria sighed again and pointed to the table at one side of the tent. "Enitan, Amadi, put them back. The charms are not ready yet, and you shouldn't be playing with them even if they were."

The brothers reluctantly put the pieces of wood on the table, and the larger boy glumly said, "But Miss Nwosu, we just wanted to see them so we could make some of our own."

"And they're not ready yet, so you wouldn't be able to make more right now anyway!" Maria wiped her forehead with the handkerchief again. "If you two want to help, go keep guard for anyone coming to the village. I'm expecting someone to come help me, but he's late. If you spot him, I *might* let you watch while we finish the charms."

The smaller boy perked up at this and raced out of the tent, dragging his brother behind him. "Oh yes, Miss Nwosu! We'll go look for him and bring him straight to you!"

As the tent flap closed behind them, Maria smiled slightly and muttered under her breath to herself, "Ah, little boys are all the same. Make a chore sound exciting and they run right to it."

"Indeed they do," said a deep voice from behind her, in French.

Maria startled and spun around to see a man standing in what she

was *certain* had just a moment ago been an empty corner of the tent. He was dressed in safari gear similar to what most Westerners wore when they came to the area, but his were all a variety of grays rather than the usual khaki. Almost involuntarily, Maria half-thought *"He looks like a troubled sky, about to turn into a storm."*

"And who are you, to appear unannounced?" she demanded.

"My apologies, Miss Nwosu. I'm here to provide you some help. Your supervisors may have told you about me; I believe they call me Joe Benefactor." The strange man gave a quick grin when he said his 'name'.

She squinted at him suspiciously. "I may have been told such a name, but why should I trust that you are he? You have already shown yourself a trickster, stealing in so sneakily."

The man smiled again. "You're more right than you know, Miss Nwosu. Very few people realize that so quickly. I'm impressed." He switched smoothly to the dialect of her home village, speaking it without any accent, like he had grown up beside her. "I will swear upon whichever gods or spirits that you choose that I mean you and those you serve no harm."

Maria again felt startled at this, but hid it this time, choosing to scowl at the man instead. She continued in French, "I don't trust a trickster to keep his oath, no matter whose name he pledges it on." She paused briefly. "Unless perhaps it is his own. Will you swear on your own name, stranger?"

The man took a moment, as if considering the request, and told her, "I can't do that, for reasons that have nothing to do with you. But perhaps a demonstration of good faith will suffice."

The man turned to the charms the boys had left on the table, and looked them over. "These are warding symbols, to stop disease and parasites. Bury them in the center of the village and everyone would stop getting sick."

Maria stalked over and scooped the pieces of inscribed wood out of the man's reach. She glared at him and said, "Yes they are, and I

won't let you destroy them."

He tilted his head and looked straight into her eyes, his light brown meeting her dark. "I don't seek to destroy them, but to give you improved ones. The beings who gave your superiors those designs are… not entirely familiar with how human biology works. These will certainly *stop* sicknesses, but they won't *eliminate* them. Any illnesses or parasites or germs will be… paused while someone is within their range of effect. Symptoms might not manifest here, but as soon as someone leaves this village, the sickness that was stopped within them will start again."

Maria's gaze grew distant as she thought about the unusual aid workers she had met during her orientation and training for Manna Charitable. "…Yes, I can believe that. They are well-intentioned, but not always fully knowledgeable." She refocused on the man, crossed her arms and resumed glaring at him. "And what do you propose instead?"

The man pulled a folded piece of paper out of his pocket and presented it to her. "Here are a few corrections to these symbols, that would actually cure most local diseases instead of just pausing them. I've also included directions on the correct way to inscribe them, as well as which materials would work best. Feel free to check these with your sponsors before using them, of course."

Maria carefully took the paper from him and put it down on the table, still folded. "What do you get out of this, stranger?"

He momentarily looked slightly lost and dispirited before resuming his air of mild affability. "Among all the unusual organizations I must deal with, yours is the only one that solely seeks to improve people's lives. I admire that, even if I can't live up to that same credo. So I help when I can, in whatever small ways I can."

"Hmm. You do know that I will not even open this paper until it has been tested."

The man smirked and sketched a bow. "Given your strength of character, I would expect nothing less from someone seeking to improve, rather than destroy, these people's lives. You should

probably go retrieve it from those boys, though."

Maria glanced at the empty table, then behind her to the closing tent flap. She darted over and pushed it open to see a small black body dashing away.

"Amadi, get back here!" she yelled after him.

She called over her shoulder to the man, "You stay here until I return. I want no more tricks out of you!" then chased after the boy, sweat already starting to bead on her own smooth black skin in the noonday sun.

The man sat in one of the chairs beside the table, amused at the child's antics, and said, in the language of the village, "You can come out now, Enitan. Your brother has made his escape."

A pair of dark eyes opened in a corner of the tent; the same corner that the man had appeared in. Suddenly, the small form of Enitan had always been standing there in plain sight. "How did you know I was here?" he asked, with innocent curiosity.

"I shouldn't recognize my own tricks? I'm impressed that you copied it so quickly."

The little boy beamed with pride. "Amadi and I are the best boys in the village! I am the most clever and he is the most brave!"

The man smiled widely. "Yes, and quite clever you are. Tell me, how did you do it?"

Enitan happily answered, "I heard the words that the big one said to make you appear, and said them backwards so I would disappear!"

The man looked curious. "The big one… you understood what he said?"

Enitan looked a little embarrassed and said, "No… but I knew they were big words because they came from the big one, so they must be important!"

The man kept smiling. "Yes, they are. Did you know that the charms

have some of the big one's words on them too?"

"Oh yes! That's why I want to see them! I want to know what they say!"

The man shook his head in amusement. "You are too young to understand them all yet, but I think you and your brother just might learn when you're older. Call for me when you think you're ready, little one." With that, the man stood up and pulled aside the tent flap.

"Wait!" shouted the boy. "What is your name?"

The man looked over his shoulder at the boy. "Look for it. And when you find it, let me know what it is." He then stepped outside, grinned at the boy one more time, and let the flap fall closed.

Forever Young

by DarkStuff

"Rachael!"

An annoying, high pitched voice was calling from the distance.

"Rachael? Hey, uh, Rachael," Robert Dorer peeked his head around the corner of her door frame, which she really should have left closed. "You know there's no shame in eating with everybody else in the cafeteria, right? Or, uh, at all? I brought you something!"

Dorer shoved a plate with a burrito and some white salad on the side on top of her papers. She took a deep breath and was finally forced to look up at Dorer. He had a big grin on his face.

"It's Dr. Davidson."

"Nah it ain't, you never got a PhD. Besides, you don't eat enough. I uh, I saw the menu today and thought of you so I thought I'd pop over. Do you always leave your door open?"

"No, no I don't."

"Lucky me, then. What're you working on?"

"Classified."

"No it's not, it says 'General Level 1 Access' at the top."

"You shouldn't be looking at a paper immediately after I say that it's *classified*."

"Oh I looked at it before that. Riveting stuff. You *know* I worked on that paper last, right? I mean, heh, I don't really remember it. Got accidentally infected with that window meme. I'm all good now, though," Dorer tapped the side of his glasses, "see?"

Rachael hated Site-31. That word, "hate", albeit strong, is thrown around a lot, but Rachael really did. She needed downtime from her last assignment, of course, and that's what Site-31 was good for, but the professional attitude was all but lost here in an attempt to be friendly and cordial. Her own office didn't have a lock on it. Apparently that one site up in **Wisconsin** was doing really well, and the experiment had started to spread and pervade. She of course understood its importance, but it didn't make her any more accustomed to it. She wished that she had some easier way of having her own space.

"Thank you for the food, can I get back to my work? I'm not working on the top paper, and it really *is* classified. You're a level below me, and have no relation to this anomaly. It would be in your best interest to leave."

"Did you know we have the same initials?"

Rachael Maria Davidson took one long, deep, exasperated breath, and spun her chair to face Robert Maximus Dorer. It was clear that she wasn't going to shake him that easy, and she had gotten complaints about her behavior here. For a site, the whole place seemed irritatingly anti-work and efficiency. Just because the place was filled with Safes didn't mean there wasn't something to get *done*, and Rachael felt like she was the only person there who really knew that. However, some official requests had suggested to her that she lighten up and engage in more social activities. It was the place's specialty, of course. Being sociable.

If only her god damn door had a lock.

Mustering up a fake smile, or maybe it came across as a wince, she began to… *engage* the eager fellow that wasn't more than three

years older than she was. That made him the second youngest person in the whole site.

"Yes, I had noticed that before. I found it funny."

"Quirky, even! I bet it means something, eh? Some sort of mystical connection between the two of us, eh? What do you think? How often do the two youngest people share the same initials — and hey, did you know I was born in Mexico too?"

"Honduras. I was born in Honduras. They're *different*. And no, I don't think it means anything."

"You know what I like most about this job?" … "Well do ya?" … "It's that we're scientists. We are predisposed to disregard horoscopes and star signs and ghost videos online. So of course we'd assume it's just a coincidence. But! The coolest thing is that we're *para*scientists. Just as easily as we can brush it off and be right, sometimes we can take a good long look at something and find out 'by God, there really *is* something there!' That's what this feels like. I feel like our names mean something. The RMD! We should find some good acronym for that, eh?"

Rachael chewed on her salad only because it gave her an excuse not to respond for the time being.

"And besides, I am certain I can get the Level 1 run down of whatever you're working on. I'm Level 3 site-wide, and that gains me access to Level 1 knowledge of any anomaly Euclid or Safe. Is it Keter?"

Rachael groaned.

"No, it's Safe because although it's global it's self containing."

"Ooo, sounds interesting." Dorer took a seat on the desk, brushing aside some well organized papers. "Give me the stuff."

"If only I had more sighs to sigh, you took them all out of me."

Dorer chuckled. "Oh c'mon, you tell me this and I'll get out of your hair. I promise. Speaking of your hair, nice hair."

"No flirting between co-workers."

"Ain't flirting."

Rachael gave Dorer a long, cold stare. Seeing that he really wasn't going to yield, she pushed aside her plate and picked up the stack of papers beneath it. Flipping through them until she landed on the one she wanted, she began to scan it. The motion was less to remember information and more to not have to look at Dorer. She knew the whole thing front to back. Clearing her throat, shifting her eyes up to Dorer to give him one last chance to leave… she started.

"It's anachronism. Objects that appear out of time, before they were invented. We thought it was just a side effect of other chronology affecting skips, but it has its own logic to it. Objects created through this form of anachronism will be looked on by all people as normal, and the few people immune to this effect who try and point it out will be ignored and called crazy, or conspiracy theorists. We thought it was a pretty standard anomaly, barely a blip on our radar — especially because it does its own disinformation campaign — but the real tickler is that it starts on a certain day."

"What day is that?"

"Can't tell you that, then you could read it. There are, decisively, no records of this anomaly before a certain date. We're trying to figure out why. That's it. That's all I can cover under Level 1 access. You may leave."

"Hmm. Alright, I'll leave you to it. If you need me, I'll be in my office across the cafeteria — or in the cafeteria, hanging out with **Victor**. Oh, and one thing."

"Yes?"

"If I get transferred to this 'anachronism' project, will you believe me then? That we're connected?"

Rachael looked up at Dorer, and smiled a wide, confident smile. Genuinely, this time.

"*No.*"

"Well alright then, see you!"

Dorer skipped out the door, danced down the hallway, and was out of sight. Rachael got up, closed her door, jammed a mini-fridge in front of it, and sat back down at her desk. The burrito was, unfortunately, really good. She finished it quickly. Setting back to work, she studied dates and major events and anomalous records on site for clues. So far, she had been noticing a pattern. A creation pattern. Anachronism didn't seem to be the only anomaly that started on May 10th, 1829. It was an odd sort of coincidence. Something a scientist might brush off — like horoscopes, star signs, and ghost videos online. However, she wasn't a scientist. She was a *para*scientist.

She was beginning to develop a theory.

Tom and Abe sat at a dingy hole in the wall bar. The smoke in the room was thick, and the sound of clinking pool balls echoed only barely louder than the bellows of football announcers on the television. A beautiful lady whose life had went nowhere sat behind the bar and cleaned glasses in stereotypical fashion. Her name was Tulip, and Abe knew her well.

Tulip saw Abe looking up and down her every curve. She didn't mind it — she was a showgirl once, and Abe was a willing customer. Recently, though, she had noticed a spark missing in Abe's eyes. He looked ever less ravenous, ever less willing to come back to her room with her and give her the few fleeting moments of real feeling she usually ever managed to experience. He was growing bored with her. No, it was more than bored. He was growing disappointed. And yet, he came with her each time, and they spent their nights the same way that they often did when he was in town. She thought it might just be her imagination, but she couldn't help but notice a desperation in his movements. Where there was once an exchange between them, Abe seemed to retreat behind his eyes. No longer was she part of his equation. He was only doing it for himself, she thought, and yet he still went to her. As if he didn't have countless other lovers. What did he hope to gain? She caught him again, glazing over and failing to appreciate her. Instead of taunting him, she went around the corner to grab a cigarette in her room.

Abe sat up. He hadn't done more than gazed at his drink. Slumping ever more on his stool, and setting his drink aside, he looked to his left and caught Tom staring at the men playing eight ball. They puffed on cigarettes, and they barely spoke. The majority of their conversation consisted of calling shots, and the rest of it was asking for smokes or saying what a good game it was before restarting. Tom seemed intent on watching their every move. Abe struck up small talk.

"Would you like to move closer?"

Tom turned to Abe and held up his glass. "This stuff doesn't do anything for me anymore."

"Then why have it?"

Tom slid the drink down the bar to where Abe's was, and turned to look at the pool tables again. The men had restarted once more, and a satisfying clack was heard when the first shot was fired and the triangle broke.

"Because we always do."

Abe stared at Tom for just a moment longer before looking at the two drinks in front of him. Playing with the small umbrella in one of them for just a second, Abe scooted the drinks even further out of view and turned to look at the pool game with Tom. For a good couple minutes the two sat in silence while the other two shot balls into pockets. Before long, Tom spoke.

"How long do you think you can play pool?"

Abe shrugged. "It can keep me engaged for around five games, each one takes around twenty minutes, so almost two hours."

"Huh. I meant more in the long term. If you made it a point just to play pool, and get good at it and go to competitions. How long do you think you could do it?"

Abe looked oddly at Tom. "I've gotten good at pool before. Some men let it take them a life time. That seems reasonable. Most things can last you that long if you're interested."

"Do you think it would be worth it?" … "To take up pool?"

"Well, worth what?"

Tom sunk a bit. "That's what I thought." It was inaccurate to say that Abe had never seen Tom like this before, but it had all been recent. Within the past decade, at the very least. They were getting more frequent recently, and Abe didn't have any really good idea what they were all about. He'd known Tom for most of his life, and he wasn't a pessimist. No, Tom was a realist. And, realistically, most of the time life was as good as either of them could have asked for. Unfortunately, Abe thought that might have been what was getting to him. Abe might have felt it too, if he were more introspective. Abe didn't understand Abe the same way that Tom understood Tom. When Abe was indulging himself, Tom could be found just thinking. Tom thought a lot. Abe thought it wasn't good for him. Being alone with his thoughts had never been comforting to Abe, and he couldn't imagine it being any different for anybody else.

"Hey, Tom —"

"So how many trick shots do you think there are? In pool. You can get a bank shot, you can hit the two off of the one and into the side pocket. Could you get the eight ball in on the same shot you got the last of your balls in? Would that work? How many variants do you think there are, really? When would it get stale? At what point does it stop feeling new, when do you admit that you've seen the same board before, and that you've made the same shot before. Maybe in a different context, maybe the other balls were in different positions, maybe you were stripes last time, it doesn't matter. You've made that shot before."

Abe expected him to continue, but suddenly Tom stopped and twitched a little. Another peculiar silence sparked between the two, and Abe decided it was time to get up. The bar was giving them that melancholic air that it sometimes did, and Tom would do better to get to sleep. While Abe was beginning to stand, Tom started up again.

"I asked a question."

Abe shrugged it off. "I think it gets stale when your opponents never win."

Tom began to stand up himself and pull his jacket on. "What if they never do?"

"Well, what do you *mean* 'what if'?"

Tom pursed his lips, and then sneered, and then sighed in a short facial evolution. "Yeah. Sure. You're right. I think you should stay and have a couple more drinks."

"What?"

"I said that you shouldn't follow me. You wouldn't like where I'm going."

Just as Tom walked over and was about to reach for the door knob, it disappeared. His hand hovered in mid air for a moment, and then he straightened the hunch in his back.

"Abe, bring the door back."

"I'm not stupid, and I'm far from a bad friend. I might not get it, but I'm not going to go let you hurt yourself."

"Now is not the time to be sappy."

"Not trying to be, Tom. Just trying to understand you."

Tom turned halfway around. "Let me out of your head."

"You know as well as I do that you can leave whenever you want."

Tom turned back to where the door should have been and walked through it without a word. Abe stood in the midst of the bar stools and tobacco smoke and hum of the air conditioner. He wondered if he should give chase… and he decided against it. Tulip returned to see Abe slink back into his seat. She flashed him a look, and he simply shook his head. He fondled the tonics, and then downed both. Soon enough he stood back up and made his way, determined, towards the wall. The door appeared again, and he

pushed his way through it. In the snowy street, Abe found Tom's jacket. Abe still had the choice to follow him, but Tom didn't want to be followed.

Abe made a short yell, stomped the ground, and everything went away. The road, the buildings, the people, all of it. He stood in void for a second, before stars began to fade back in. Soon he was surrounded by the milky way and all the constellations that he found familiar. The stars sparkled and nebulae blurred and galaxies swirled and turned but everything was silent. Abe felt only his heart beat, heard only a low ringing. He didn't want those either. His body faded — his skin unraveled in glorious velvety strands, his organs conformed to basic shapes and shrunk, his brain separated into lobes. His neurons and axons expanded into gaseous balls of plasma, becoming celestial bodies and attracting thoughts like planets and asteroids. Finally, he couldn't feel or see or hear. Finally, he couldn't do anything but think.

Finally, he was alone.

When you're able to do anything whenever you feel like it, with nobody challenging you, with absolutely no limits at all, what's the point anymore? Once there's nothing more to win, what do you do with all your time? If you can't die and you're a jack of all trades, if you've traveled the multiverse twenty times over, if you've become everything you've ever wanted to be. If that, what then?

What happens upon your mind when you hear the word "god"? Does the lack of a capital make you jump not to the monotheist visions of the Abrahamic religions, and lead you on an odyssey through Greek and Roman lands, perhaps the great thunderous wraths of Zeus and the curses his lover Hera may put on his mistresses? Do you think of the nights Hephaestus spent toiling over his anvil, hammer in hand, handing his cyclopian helpers tools and barking requests? Do you believe in Hermes' treacherous journeys through Hates' domain, making it out alive with scorch marks on his winged shoes, just to bring the departed souls through?

Maybe you are more familiar with the Norse myths, of the similarly stormy nature of Thor, and the omens of Odin's Ravens, or the

mystical powers of runes. Perhaps when you think of gods, you think of idols, of men and women you look up to, of geniuses in their respective fields, be it music or science or athletics, be they Jerry Garcia or Stephen Hawking or Usain Bolt. Maybe you were raised in the deep south, and God is a sacred word to be feared and respected, and His name must not be used in vain.

However it is perceived, I assure you that these are tall tales. If ever these gods lived, for which there is an argument to be made, they have long since left us. Since the world as it is now was made, gods have been finite and static. There's one titan, and eight gods. The gods were human, once. They were born just like you or I, from a mother's womb and into a hospital room, or perhaps at home assisted by a midwife. They were mortal, and they went to school. They got degrees, their names became recognized, and one discovered that whether someone is observing the universe or not changes the laws of physics at their base. His name was Thomas Young.

I won't go into him much. Everything you need to know about his backstory can be found on wikipedia or the like. We live in the digital age, and I do not intend on communicating useless information. There are things they don't tell you, though. He was a hero. True blooded, to his core, a hero. The world was in peril — they don't mention that either — and he was far from giving in. The public blissfully unaware, Tom recruited myself and we got to work. A year passed, and another. We toiled on a new model, and then a newer one. Continuously improving.

Each one had a more impressive name; Gaia, then Atlas, then Chronos, but the final model was called Brahman. Each one better. Each one grander. Each one safer. The smiles on our faces widened, breaking an otherwise professional veneer. Nobody would even notice. We'd be like doctors, the earth our patient, and we'd repeat the ancient phrase *"This won't hurt a bit."*

There's another thing they lie about. Tom didn't die in May. On the 10th of May, 1829, Mr. Young and his companions, myself included, flipped a switch… and that's when the world turned on.

« **Waiting on the Good Times**|**Forever Young**| ***TBA...*** »

Forgetting the Number of Dead Stars

Name: Elizabeth Cooper-Hughes
FID#: 715316
Security Clearance: L–3/TSQ/MDI

DOB: January 8, 2031
LOB: Hell, Michigan, United States
Biographical Summary: [REDACTED]

Pay Grade: E-4
Current Assignment: MTF Alpha-1
Current Location: Site-01

Certifications: A-1 Marksmanship, A-1 Physical Fitness, Exotic Biohazard Safety, French Language Fluency, Heavy Machinery Repair, Nonstandard Reality Acclimation and Preparedness (Expired,) Operational Infohazard Safety.

Additional Notes: Employment under review.

Forgetting was a skill Wren had taken to quickly during her training. Alpha-1 field agents were all acclimated to it through hypnosis and medication, standard amnestic procedures, but mental exercises had always been enough for her. It was difficult to completely wipe something from her mind, but certainly not impossible. After all, she was as hale as she could remember being, and her mind remained free of whispering nightmares and festering secrets. With how bad some of the things she still remembered were, the missing weeks and months of her life must have been terrible indeed. She tried not to worry about the empty space too much, lest she accidentally remember, and there was no use in worrying over spilled milk or forgotten piano lessons anyway.

Similarly, there was little point in worrying much when Wren found

herself strapped to a chair in a dim room, a humming machine wrapped around her forearm and a superior officer sitting across the table. Obviously, something disastrous had happened, though she hadn't done a very precise job of forgetting what it was. Going back through her mind, the last two weeks were completely gone, and the month before was little more than a smear of crummy hotel rooms and frantic gunfire. Two pieces of her custom dentistry were gone, the explosive ones, and her back felt like it was covered in a swamp of dark bruises.

"Wren, are you– No, excuse me, this is on record. Ms. Cooper-Hughes, do you need further medical attention?"

"No, no. I'm okay," said Wren, trying to detect some hint of what they had just been talking about.

"You've been staring at nothing for nearly five minutes."

"This is just a weird situation to be in, sir."

"I'm sure it is. We'll have it resolved soon enough."

'Resolved' was not necessarily a positive outcome, especially out of his mouth. Wren's superior twice-removed, Coxswain was a portly man with a kind face and a fearsome reputation. Even without knowing his real name, Wren had heard much of his involvement in the last great battle against the Insurgency and his systematic elimination of the Sarkic cults engulfing the West Coast. While he silently fiddled with dials on a blocky terminal, Wren began to resent herself for whatever she had done to end up in interrogation.

"So, as I was saying: I'm going to ask you a series of questions. Please give the first answer that comes to mind, even if it's not knowing any answer. I'll know if you try to lie. Do you understand?"

"Yeah. I mean, yes, sir."

Coxswain cleared his throat noisily and straightened a thin stack of paper in between his thick hands. "Ms. Cooper-Hughes, does the Black Moon howl?"

"I don't know."

"Where were you on the 23rd of December?"

"I don't remember."

"Who did you meet with on the 23rd of December?"

"I don't remember."

"Where does the last road lead?"

"I don't know."

"What did you sell to the individuals you met with on that date?"

"I don't remember."

"Do you admit to making a transaction of some type on that date?" Wren could see Coxswain's grip on the paper's tightening, sending tiny crinkles throughout them. It was hard not to think about those fingers closing around her throat.

"I *really* don't remember."

"Have you ever consciously mishandled classified information?"

"No."

"What came last from inside the Garden?"

"I don't know."

"Are you a faithful servant of the Foundation?"

"I am."

"Who knows the best course for the Foundation?"

"The Overseers."

"Are you a faithful servant of the Overseers?"

"I am."

"How many stars have already died?"

Wren felt a slight hitch in her mind, a tiny tug as she opened her mouth to say that she had no idea what he was talking about. There was no way of knowing, of course, it was just one of those koans that everyone was always repeating. "I don't know," she said just a heartbeat later than she meant to. The machine wrapped around her wrist began beeping furiously. "Wait, wait, I really don't know." It beeped faster and louder, feverish pitch closer to a scream than anything a machine should be making. "I said I don't fucking know!" she screamed, struggling against her restraints to smash the damned thing.

"That's enough," said Coxswain, pressing a button on the terminal. The noise ceased immediately.

"I wasn't lying, I swear," said Wren, feeling her lips spread back in a nervous smile. It felt disingenuous, even to herself. It felt curdled and rotten, no matter how much she believed what she was saying.

"I'm inclined to believe you." Coxswain sighed mightily and laid his papers down on the table. "That's even worse. We have irrefutable evidence of… well, it's not good. If things are as they seem, something else has been in control of you for nearly a month."

"What?"

"Something that's still in there, or at least left traces of itself behind. I'm sure you don't need more of an explanation than that after your time here."

"It's just a stupid koan," whined Wren, gently testing her bindings again. The thick straps of the chair didn't budge. "It doesn't mean anything."

"That's all it should be, yes, but some part of you thinks you have an answer. They will figure out what that entity is during outprocessing. Hopefully something can be done to help you, but – "

"Wait, wait, outprocessing? I can still work! You can't kick me out just for this!"

"Just for *this*?" asked Coxswain, deadly calm.

"Yeah, you know…" said Wren. The phantom sensation of a pulled trigger ached in her finger as she spoke, and ghostly warmth from a vast fire rushed against her. She could feel herself prying out one of her teeth, feel herself walking through a field of bleeding soldiers, feel herself smiling in the face of a hundred more hale ones. "For forgetting."

"Your loss will be felt, I promise. You were always a good agent, but sometimes retirement is what's best for everyone. We'll get you some happy memories, and – "

"No, no way! I refuse. I'm good at this. This is the *only* thing I'm good at! You can't do this to me!"

"Please don't make this any harder than it needs to be. Think of what's best for the Foundation."

"Right, I am." Wren smiled again, and it spoiled before she could finish. "I want to make an appeal."

"Granted," said a voice pitched higher than either of their own. What little color was in the room drained out of it as Wren looked for the voice's source, and the walls peeled away one by one. The chair she sat on vanished, as did the table in front of her, and then the floor below. Wren was momentarily engulfed by a terrifying nothingness that resembled nothing quite as much as a sky in which every star was long dead.

A moment later, Wren found herself in a blindingly bright room. The light was cold, sterile, and harsh enough to obscure everything but the ornate desk in front of her and the woman sitting behind it. Dark-haired, dark-skinned, and severe in expression, her hands were clasped in front of her, one bare and the other heavy with rings.

"I've been listening," she said, each word heavy with enough authority to erase any doubt about what position she held. "State your case. Quickly. Clearly."

"Of course, Overseer. Like Coxswain said, I wasn't in control of my

actions, so I shouldn't be blamed for them. I know I can't go into the field like that, but there has to be *something* else I can do. Right?"

"But you were in control, weren't you?" said the Overseer, pausing to shift her hands so that the ringed one lay atop the other. "Forgetting does not excuse treason, no matter how completely you managed to do it."

"I would never!"

"Wouldn't you though? Didn't you? Tell me honestly that you think you're innocent."

Wren bit back a quick denial. She was walking through a minefield, no doubt about that, but she wasn't dead yet. "I may not be innocent, but I'm not guilty either. Some version of me might have done whatever it did, but that version isn't me anymore."

"What you did was kill twenty-six of your fellow agents, destroy a great deal of valuable equipment, and sell some very important secrets to the Autumn Firm."

The mines felt awfully close to the surface here, but Wren pushed on regardless. "Those are useful skills though, right? Aren't they? The Foundation's going to need people like me once all the weirdness is taken care of and other people are the problem. Turning me into a… a farmer or something would be a waste!"

"The 'weirdness' is already more under control than you could imagine, and our enemies are different from what you think. That said…"

Wren sat silently as the Overseer considered her. She felt a bit like the room she had just been sitting in, with each and every bit of her peeled away and discarded just to expose something deep inside. More than just being exposed, she was analyzed. Broken down into her component parts and weighed. Poked, prodded, and probed. Judged.

"I may have a use for you," conceded the Overseer. "That is, if you truly want to keep doing this sort of work."

"I do!"

"Serve me well then. Hurt who I say to, and kill those I need you to. I'll pay you, give you new teeth, and new allies too. Betray me, and I'll make you remember everything you think you've buried. Swear it."

Wren was about to say something snide about how ridicuous the woman sounded, but thought better of it under her sharp glare. "Yes, Overseer. I will. I swear."

Anything was better than the alternative. Anything was better than forgetting all the things she had cut away at her memories to preserve. And if nothing else, this *was* what Wren was good at.

Wren sat on a bench in northern Florida two days later, chewing gum and wishing it wasn't quite so humid. She kept running her tongue over her new teeth and worrying over how sharp they felt. They had been safe so far, but it only felt like a matter of time before she managed to hurt herself. Well, she had other people to hurt first.

Two men and a woman passed in front of where she was sitting, speaking quietly to each other and reeking like they just walked out of a chemical plant. Importantly, each matched one of the descriptions she had been given. More importantly still, they moved with the kind of intent people only had when they were doing something serious and secretive. Wren waited a minute after they passed before rising, languidly stretching, and giving slow chase.

The small group moved as the Overseer had predicted, heading toward the location of some important meeting she was currently embroiled in. Knowing that, tracking them was as easy as it would have been with the drone arrays and subverted cameras Wren had enjoyed in Alpha-1. Five blocks from where they started, she walked into a long, narrow alleyway just a few steps behind them. Wren reached through her sweatshirt's open zipper, drew her pistol, and fired. Twice into the back of the closest, once into the head of the next, and three times into the chest of the last. Not a good showing from the Ethics Committee, but she hadn't expected much in the first place.

She shot each of them once more before walking off into the wet night. It seemed like an excessive solution to the Overseer's problem, but Wren wasn't going to complain. Not when she was being put to good work again. She looked up at the night sky as she went. Even if some of the stars above were already dead and gone, their light still shone all the same.

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Forgiveness

> **Note:** This is part nine in a multi-part story based around the events leading up to the containment of **SCP-2982**. It is recommended that you read the previous entry **Comfort Breaks** first, or start from the beginning **At the Library**.

“How long’s the shower been broken?” Dimitri asked. Helen shrugged and dried her tears on her blouse. “Damned thing,” he continued. “Keeps switching itself back on…. You okay?”

Helen took a deep breath. “No,” she admitted.

“That's understandable.” There was a long pause. “I thought I heard you… “

“Talking to someone?”

“To yourself, I figured, or Angela.”

“It hasn't sunk in yet. If it ever does.”

“It will,” said Dimitri. “It’ll take time.”

Helen nodded slowly in acknowledgement. “Can I stay here tonight? It's late. I don't want to go somewhere else.”

Dimitri opened his mouth to speak but Helen continued over him. “It feels like she's still here,” she said. “It feels like I'm with her. Not so alone. Please.”

Dimitri waited long enough to give the impression he had a choice. “Okay,” he said. “I'll get someone to stay in a car outside or something. You'd better take this.” He started to put something around her neck but then stopped, and instead handed her a small orange box; a rape alarm. “Just in case.” His tone was apologetic.

She took it awkwardly and put it next to the basin. It made her skin crawl.

“We're still looking for Aidan Brown,” the lieutenant said. “If he tries to come back, we'll pick him up.”

“Do you think that's likely?”

“Him coming back? No. He hasn't been seen in weeks. Not by anyone but you, anyway. I think we need to go through some more questions tomorrow, if you're okay with that.”

Helen nodded. “Okay,” Dimitri said. “I'll get someone to come over. If Aidan contacts you, let me know. I'll see myself out.”

Helen waited until she heard the front door close, turned back to the shower, and switched it off. She regarded Aidan numbly as he shifted position in the bathtub, his carapace grinding as he tried to make himself more comfortable. He looked up at her but couldn't maintain eye contact. “I'm sorry,” he said.

Helen sat on the edge of the toilet and picked up Angela's toothbrush. She held it in her three left fingers and turned it over, trying to find some significance to this most mundane of everyday items. There were memories wrapped up inside, memories of happy times when they'd laughed and played as she taught her daughter how to brush her teeth. You make the foam like *this*; not too much or it hurts. Swish your mouth out with water when you're done. If you gargle it makes a funny noise but if you're not careful it'll come out your nose. Angela had a beautiful smile. Two gaps where milk teeth had come out that only made it more adorable.

Those memories were still there, but the meaning was lost, or locked away where they couldn't hurt so much. For now, she had nothing.

In time she looked back towards Aidan. He had stopped crying.

“Why?” She asked, her focus still on the toothbrush. Aidan didn't respond. “The police think you saw a vulnerable single mother with a young child. That you befriended me to get to a seven year old little

girl. That *that* was your intention all along."

Aidan started to weep again.

"Don't," she said. "Just give me answers."

"It's not true," said Aidan.

Helen laughed softly, entirely without humour. "Maine put those urges into your head, didn't he? Turned you into a child molester. Probably wrote it down somewhere. How can I hate you? I want *so* much to hurt you right now, but I can't. Even if I wasn't like this." She raised her disfigured arms and fingers to him. "Even if I could, I couldn't. It isn't your fault. This goes deeper than either of us."

Aidan Brown sobbed uncontrollably again. Helen's forgiveness was so much more unbearable than her hate. "If I could change things - "

"Don't," Helen warned. "Don't. I can't cope with what-ifs right now. I have to focus on what's real. What can't be changed. Accept. Move on…" She exhaled slowly and put the toothbrush back in its place. And then another thought sprang to mind. "Might you do this again? To other children?"

Aidan took a deep breath as well as his dysfunctional lung would allow. He thought long and hard, imagined scenarios where conscience and kindness would struggle against opportunity and desire, and be victorious; imagined similar struggles where conscience and kindness would lose badly every time. The latter far outweighed the former.

Helen looked across at him. "Well?"

"Yes," he admitted. There was no reason to lie.

"Jesus," she said, quietly. Aidan moved uncomfortably in the bathtub.

"I can't give myself up," he said. "Nobody can see or hear me. After I… After… Afterwards I came in here. Turned the shower on and curled up under it. The police came. Broke down the door. They switched the shower off, I switched it back on. Cried all the time they

were here. They didn't hear me. They didn't see me. Tried to grab them, they moved away. I just sat here under the shower. I couldn't interact with them."

"But you interacted with my daughter," Helen countered abruptly. "You managed *that*."

"I know. It… wasn't easy."

Helen looked down at the floor with red stinging eyes, and the emptiness was all around her. This was surely the end of her life. Aidan Brown must have been thinking the same thing; another rasping deep breath, then: "I don't want to be alive anymore," he said.

Helen nodded in dejection, then looked at him fiercely. "*Don't you fucking dare*," she hissed. "Don't you fucking dare even think about it. You're not done here yet. Not by a long way."

"But -"

"No." Helen stood up and advanced on Aidan.

"You don't get it, do you?" she asked. "You can commit murder *without getting caught*," she said. "You don't take the easy road until the hard road's done. Do you understand?"

Aidan nodded. Shower run-off puddled around his bulk. He shivered and wrapped his legs around himself. "I understand," he said.

"Until then, until you've done everything you can to honour my daughter's life and avenge her death, until you've made reparations, you stay here - or I swear to God I will come down to hell and hunt you down, and satan himself will cower at my coming." She saw the fear in Aidan's face and softened slightly. "No," she said. "You stay here until the hard road's done. Maine has to die. After that, you crawl under a rock and *you* die however you want."

Aidan nodded again. "Okay," he said, and he was scared and relieved at once. He had murdered this woman's daughter, and she did not hate him. He had ruined her life, and yet she allowed him his.

“I'll do whatever it takes,” he said, and despite the circumstances that had brought them to this point, there was something akin to belonging between them. The fact was not lost on Helen that Aidan had irrevocably destroyed that which was most precious to her, but likewise she knew she was to blame for it all; she had involved him, when all was said and done.

But, she thought, *how did Harold Maine know that?*

° ° °

Foundation agent Carol Paris walked through the Laundromat, down the stairs, and into the office. Pass code, retinal scan, pass code, pheromone scan, pass code, fingerprint scan. The final door opened up in front of her.

She'd left this room quiet and empty. Now it was full of noise, full of colours, Thirteen HD screens, each one a visual monitoring aid with twenty or more lines scrolling slowly across it, each one focussing on particular areas of concern that the Site Director deemed worthy of attention.

Five of the lines were red, another eight turning from green to orange in front of her eyes. She was waved over by Agent Caruso. “What’s the story?” she asked.

Caruso, a small, wiry rat of man, smiled tiredly and handed her a coffee.

“Escalation Procedure 926-Infosec-008.”

“No K-class? Never mind.” Paris sat down at her desk and booted her machine up. “Maybe next time. What's up?”

“Rape and murder of a minor in Beacon Hill yesterday.”

“And?”

“Initial forensic report’s triggered five deviations from normality patterns, another eight possible - well you can see the screens.”

“Go on.”

“Traces of human and crustacean sperm at the scene. As in, *in the same DNA strand.* Not physically possible, obviously. Injuries consistent with crush trauma from claws, fragments of human skin and chitin under the fingernails. Human skin between seventeen and thirty seven per cent crustacean. Chitin between eight and twenty four per cent human. Thirty page synopsis, four hundred page full.”

“I see.” Already she knew. It was obvious. “What kind of crustacean?”

“Limpet? Lobster? Does it matter? Wait a sec, got it written down somewhere… Yeah. *Homarus Americanus*, American lobster. No one saw any intruders, no comers, no goers. And no one saw any half-lobster monsters either.”

Pings as new alerts came in. Paris looked up at the screens. “More of the same?”

“Oh they're just that ice cream parlour.” Caruso dismissed them with a wave. “The place where you walk in and you can see with your fingers, and the pistachio flavour is sentient.”

“Thought that was contained?”

“It is. Need to update the alert criteria. Six week backlog.”

“So who's on the ground? With the lobster case?”

Caruso tapped on his keyboard and swiped the screen. “Dimitri,” he said. “He's with the mother.”

“Make sure he stays with her.”

“Will do. This is all Jessop, isn't it?”

Jessop, she thought. Harold Maine’s codename. It brought a little lump of dread with it into her throat. She nodded.

Caruso sipped his coffee intently and leaned back in his chair. “We really ought to get moving with this,” he said. “We've flashed entire communities for less. Don't you think we have enough evidence for at least a grade two Meet and Greet?”

Paris shook her head. “We wait,” she said. Caruso made a sucking noise with his teeth.

“Seriously? Why?”

“Orders from above,” she replied. She didn't mention the favours called in for her father, or the dinner date arranged with Site Director David Runeberg. Caruso looked as though he might raise a further question, mulled it over, then decided against it.

In front of Carol Paris thirteen HD monitors were turning red. “Downgrade Jessop’s alerts to vibrate only and increase the escalation delay to the next level across the board, whatever that is. And flag any extra-continental notifications as FYI; we don't want anyone else getting tied up in this.”

“Okay,” said Caruso, “but we need to act sooner or later. The CMMCH had a flagged incident this morning. Woman gave birth to a full sized cow."

Paris raised her eyebrows. "That's not the end of it," Caruso continued. "The cow was in labour. Gave birth an hour later to the woman's baby. The mother - and all witnesses - are displaying the expected mental trauma, but all three are physically normal *now*. Site induction times three taking place as we speak. We're checking for links to Jessop.”

Paris played with her bracelet distractedly as she listened; a birthday present from her father. She didn't know it, but it would be her last. Hers, and her two daughters, and Caruso’s, and everyone else she knew.

“We're running out of time,” Caruso said, and he finished his coffee without tasting it.

Prev Next

Former Assets

« **A Real Humdinger** | **Dread & Circuses Hub** | **Fuller Than Full!** »

“You’re not afraid of clowns, are you?”

When Victor had been interviewed for a sales rep with MC&D, they had asked him a lot of unusual questions, but for some reason that one had always stuck out as the most non-sequitur. Now he was wondering if they wouldn’t have hired him if he had said yes, or just not have sent him here.

As he looked upon the numerous striped tents of *Herman Fuller’s Circus of the Disquieting*, he tried to figure out exactly what it was that was making him so uneasy. Upon casual inspection, nothing was out of the ordinary. The glances he managed to steal of the freaks or the clowns or the attractions as the Circus was set up were never enough for him to explicitly identify anything wrong, but yet he couldn’t shake the feeling that they were all deeply abhorrent somehow.

Maybe it was just the pitch black cotton candy. Everyone knows cotton candy is supposed to be bright pink, baby blue, or maybe snow white on occasion, but never pitch black. Especially not such a deep, abyssal pitch black that looked like darkness incarnate on a stick. And why was the calliope playing when they weren’t open to customers yet? Something about a calliope being played just for the sake of it seemed so unwholesome.

“You Victor?”

Victor turned his head at the mention of his name. A few yards away from him was a large, muscular man with a moustache, bowler hat and of course…

My God, how is that even possible? Does his throat pass through

his brain?

“Yes, I am indeed. Victor Chan, from Marshall, Carter, & Dark’s Hong Kong Office,” he greeted, masking his horror at the man’s disfigurement as best he could. He did not wish to offend him as Victor was himself a fairly small and slight man, and was painfully aware that his five-figure Italian suit only signified softness in this place. “I spoke with a Mr. Gorham over the phone and he said I was to meet with a gentleman by the name of Manny. Am I correct in assuming that you are him?”

“Never been mistaken for someone else yet,” the Man with the Upside-Down Face replied dryly. “What’s this about Emcee D? You got something to sell me, you want another private show?”

“I actually have a proposition I would like to discuss with you regarding some of your former assets that are currently being held by the SCP Foundation,” Victor replied. Manny groaned and muttered something under his breath. It might have been ‘Icky’. “I apologize if I’ve said anything to upset you, but I was led to believe you may have an interest in reobtaining some of these assets.”

“You, ah, you’re going to want to talk to our Ringmaster Veronica. I run back-of-house around here. She runs front-of-house. I have a feeling she’s the one behind this,” he grumbled. “Follow me, we’ll see if she’s in her tent.”

“Thank you, sir.”

Victor stuck as closely behind Manny as he could, not wanting to get lost in the candy coloured labyrinth. As they moved further into the Circus the sickly sweet scent of cotton candy became so overwhelming Victor needed to cover his nose and mouth with a neckerchief. Amidst the unceasing drone of conversation that surrounded them, Victor swore that some of the voices he heard didn't sound Human. Though he had yet to see any animals, he could hear their various calls ringing through the air. Some didn't sound like any creature he was familiar with, and all of them either sounded monstrously vicious or pitifully forlorn. The calliope was still the worst of all. The music felt almost invasive, insidious somehow, as though it was trying to lull him into letting his guard down so that

it could do with him as it pleased.

As he surveyed his strange surroundings, he noticed Herman Fuller's name over and over again, over every tent, booth, kiosk and caravan. This struck him as curious as Manny had said the Ringmaster was a woman.

If Victor was in a more mundane line of work he would have simply assumed that Herman was the late founder of the Circus, but if Herman was anything like his own employers it seemed unlikely that he was dead.

"Will Mr. Fuller need to sign off on any deal we might come to?" he coughed through his neckerchief, deciding it would be best to do his due diligence. The mere mention of the name caused a cold glower to spread across Manny's inverted face.

"No."

Victor didn't dare to press the issue any further.

Manny led him into a red and gold striped tent, where he saw two Clowns. One was hideously deformed, a lanky giant with an elongated face, ashen grey skin, and long pointed nose. His eyeless sockets were inky black, as were his oversized lips. The thing smiled at him, revealing a perfect set of dazzling white teeth.

The other Clown was bouncing on a miniature trampoline and laughing uncontrollably. She looked to be a young woman, though her smooth white face made it impossible to tell for sure. She was dressed in mismatched striped stockings and a frilly purple dress, and her auburn hair was held up in twin pigtails that had been curled like ribbons. She was adorned with a red Glasgow smile, a red nose, and sharp red lines through her eyes. Victor wondered if maybe she was just an ordinary human in makeup.

“Lolly!” Manny shouted to get her attention. She somersaulted through the air and landed in her black platform shoes.

“Ta da!” she exclaimed proudly, beaming a smile. He could see now that she had the same perfect, impossibly white teeth as the other.

She was one of them.

“Where’s Veronica?” Manny asked.

“In the Menagerie of Mayhem. The Pink Elephant got into the grownup juice and now it’s having hallucinations about people,” the Clown snickered.

“I’ll go get her. Lolly, would you be so kind as to entertain our guest until we get back?”

“Of course!” she said excitedly, rushing up to shake his hand. “Hi! My name’s Lollipop, but you can call me Lolly. Are you running away to join the Circus?”

“No Lolly, he’s just here on business. His name’s Victor, and he’s a salesman with Emcee D.”

“That sounds like a boring job. You should run away to join the Circus. We have so much fun here, and I never even get in trouble because I’m Icky’s favourite.” She stuck her tongue out tauntingly at Manny.

“Don’t worry kid, I’ll be back before you know it,” Manny told Victor, giving him a sympathetic pat on the pack. “And don’t mind the big guy. He’s just her babysitter.”

“I’m not allowed to be unsupervised,” she smiled mischievously. Manny left the tent, leaving Victor alone with the two Clowns. “Why do you look so scared? Honestly, Mr. Noodles would never hurt anyone. I know we Clowns can look a little strange, but that doesn’t mean we’re monsters.”

“No, of course not, I just…I’m just nervous. I’m a little out of my element,” Victor said, forcing an uncomfortable laugh. “I don’t usually do, ah…field work? If that’s what you call this.”

“Why don’t you sit down, relax?” Lolly offered, and led him to a large wooden desk on the west side of the tent. She opened a mini bar and pulled out what looked like a traditional milk bottle filled with some viscous black liquid. She sat down beside him and popped off the cap. “Sorry, I just need a fix before we go any further.”

She took a swig from the bottle, and a spasm threw her back against the chair. She cried out in apparent ecstasy and was left breathing heavily as she tried to regain her composure.

“Are you alright?” Victor asked.

“Oh yeah. I’m impossibly happy, literally. When Humdrums drink this stuff their *serosomething* levels get so high they have a heart attack.”

She smiled at him, her teeth dripping black with the strange liquid. “I’d find that sad if I could stay away from this stuff long enough to feel anything but bliss. You could still have some cotton candy though. I bet you’ve never gotten high off calliope music before, have you?”

“I’m afraid I’ll have to pass. I am here on business, after all,” he declined as politely as he could. Just the smell of the cotton candy was making his teeth hurt.

Lolly took a more modest sip from the bottle, then passed it to Mr. Noodles.

“Have you ever been to our Circus before?” she asked. Victor just shook his head. “I could give you a tour if you want after your meeting. This place, it’s just, it’s magic. It’s really magic! The people, the rides, the games, the prizes, even the food is magic! It’s a sanctuary of magic in a shittingly mundane world. When I first saw this place I knew I could never go back to the real world, and I never did.”

“Go back? You mean you weren’t always…as you are now?”

“Uh-uh,” she shook her head. “When I was a little girl I was perfectly ordinary. My mom was a cunt and I had a miserable childhood, so when the Circus came to town I took all the money from her purse and had the best day of my life! That was the day I met Icky. She saved me, like she’s saved a bunch of kids, but I was special; maybe because I came to her. She was so beautiful and powerful and wonderful and amazing I couldn’t help but love her. Wait ’til you see her, you’ll love her too. She’s a magician you know; a real

magician with real magic, and I'm her lovely and beloved assistant."

"When you…"

"And her playmate," she added with a naughty smile.

"When you say that she rescued you, you mean she made you perform for the Circus?"

"Not just perform, but she turned me into a Clown! Mr. Noodles here was born a Clown, but I got turned, which is why I'm not as special looking as some of the other Clowns. Icky thinks I'm pretty though. I was so worried that she wouldn't let me stay because I wasn't special like everyone else here, but she asked me if I liked Clowns and I said that I loved Clowns because, duh, everyone loves Clowns and she said I could be a Clown! Oh, do you like candy?"

"I, yes?"

"Well, we Clowns need so much sugar that our diet is basically all candy. That's why we get these special chompers so that our teeth don't rot out on us. I never even brush my teeth. I hated the dentist when I was little, and thanks to Icky I never have to go to one again! Doesn't that make you want to be a Clown?"

"I…don't mind dentists too terribly, actually. At least, not compared to some things," he replied. "Ms. Lollipop…"

"Lolly," she insisted.

"Alright, Lolly, am I understanding you correctly when you say you were a runaway child that Icky subjected to anomalous modifications for the sake of becoming a circus act?" he asked, failing to completely mask the horror in his voice.

"…and I get to eat all the candy I want," she said through her eerily serene smile. "Honestly, it was the best thing that ever happened to me. I love performing. Every time I'm in that ring I get to delight and amaze hundreds of people. I get to show them that there really is such a thing as magic, which is the most uplifting thing anyone could ever do for anyone. You couldn't make me give that up. Icky rescued me from a horrifically mundane life, and I'll always love her

for that."

“And she’s rescued others, as well?”

“Well she makes us feel like family, but Manny’s usually the one who brings ’em in. Every few months or so it seems. They’re not safe out there, Freaks in a world of Humdrums, so we bring them here where they’re safe and loved and get to be Circus stars!”

“I’m sure it’s a great privilege,” Victor said, reminding himself that it was no worse than some of the things MC&D did. "But if you wanted to leave, could you?"

"As a Clown I literally can't live without Milk, so leaving would be a death sentence."

"I see," Victor nodded. "Is there any way you could not be a Clown again?"

"No offence, but I'd rather die from Milk deprivation than be normal again," she replied. "Humdrums can't do stuff like this."

She pulled out a pack of balloons, and inflated one with a single breath. She tied it off effortlessly, and when she let it go it floated like it was inflated with helium instead of air. She filled up several more in rapid succession and then began juggling them. Going both up and down, they seemed to defy physics, floating or falling however she desired as if following a constantly changing invisible track. The balloons appeared to have a life of their own, an effect that was only enhanced by their giggling.

"That is impressive," Victor complimented. “I hope they pay you well."

“We get paid in scrip. It’s easier that way since we travel to so many different countries in so many alternate realities, there’s just too many types of currencies to keep straight,” Lolly replied, having no difficulty with juggling and talking at the same time. “It’s a little bit of a hassle to redeem it for real cash if we ever want to go off site, but I like it anyway. It makes this place feel like it’s its own little country, and I’m the princess."

One of the balloons did escape from her grasp and floated over near Mr. Noodles. He popped it with his finger, and it screamed like someone being murdered, scattering confetti across the tent. All the other balloons fell dead silent.

Victor's expression twisted into one of confused horror.

"Oh don't mind that. That's just like when steam escapes from a lobster's shell when you toss them in boiling water," Lolly claimed, letting the balloons float away freely. "Balloons don't have souls. Believe me, I know. One time, we needed this Elder God thing's permission to enter his dimension or whatever, and he demanded a sacrifice. He got so cranky when I tried to give him balloons, so I'm pretty sure if anyone would know if something has a soul, it's a soul-eating Elder God. We ended up going to another dimension with more reasonable lot fees, and they got to see me ride my unicycle upside down.

“I don't want to talk about otherworldly demons though. It's kind of a downer. I wanna talk about fun stuff. You sell magic stuff for Emcee D right? What’s the coolest magical thing you’ve ever sold?”

"I'm afraid I'm not allowed to divulge information about our wares to anyone that's not a potential customer."

"I'm a potential customer. Just because I use a piggy bank instead of a real bank doesn't mean my money's any less good."

"I…have no argument for that. I do happen to have a catalogue with me," he said, opening his briefcase. "I guess it can't hurt for you to look at it, as long as you promise to give it to Manny or the Ringmaster."

"Cross my heart, hope to die, stick a needle in my eye," she swore dutifully before eagerly snatching the catalogue. "Wow, this is a lot fancier looking than Wondertainment's catalogue."

"There is a section for Wondertainment's products that we carry, starting on page 33, however a great many of our offerings are handcrafted by some of the most skilled anartists known to…"

"120 bucks for a bubblebath bonbon! Are you nuts?"

"We are Wondertainment's exclusive distributors for that product, so without any competition the market value is rather high."

"We give better stuff than this away for prizes. People actually pay over a hundred dollars for one piece of magic candy?"

"Well as you yourself said, magic's depressingly hard to come by outside of your, *lovely*, circus. Our clients are normally more than willing to pay our prices."

"You know, Icky got me Ragamuffin from Emcee D," she said as she casually flipped through the slender catalogue.

"…Ragamuffin?"

"Oh my god! You have to meet my dolly!" she shouted excitedly, throwing the catalogue on the desk and running over to what appeared to be a Tim Burtonesque dollhouse and pulled out a purple haired rag doll with button eyes dressed in a similar manner to herself.

“This is my dolly Ragamuffin. She’s a magic dolly and a lot of bad things could have happened to her if she had ended up in the hands of the Essie P or any of the other bad people who kill or lock up freaks,” she said as she sat back down beside him. “That’s why she’s normally very shy around strangers and just acts like an ordinary doll, but she’s not. It’s a bit of a shame because I’d like to do some acts with her, but I love her the way she is. Icky got her for me. I had come here with nothing but the clothes on my back and some cash in my pocket, and she said a girl needed a doll, and I deserved the most special dolly she could find. Her contact at Emcee D was who she called to get me that doll.

“I know you probably didn’t care about giving her a loving home and would have sold her to whoever offered first, but I’m grateful that you were the ones that found her since you’re probably the only group out there that would have sold her in the first place.

“My point is, even though you charge way too much for candy, I'm

glad we're business partners. Ragamuffin, don't you agree?" She held the doll to her ear as if it was whispering to her. Victor would have been a little unnerved by a grown woman pretending to talk to a doll, but was more unnerved by the indistinct murmurs that seemed to emanate from the toy. "Ragamuffin says that your people treated her very well and she's very thankful that she ended up with me in the Circus instead of being experimented on at the Essie P, but she's still too shy to talk to you."

"Another time perhaps," Victor smiled. He became aware that voices were approaching the tent.

"Manny, if you won't get rid of the elephant then we'll have to stop having booze on site because no matter what we do she always gets into it," he heard a woman say.

"I'll send the damn thing to AA if I have to, but so long as she brings in more than she costs, she stays," he heard Manny reply. "After all, she…

"Don't say it!"

"…works for peanuts."

The woman sighed, and then walked into the tent alongside Manny. She was quite obviously the Ringmaster, dressed in a long-tailed red velvet coat and tall high heeled boots. She wore a top hat upon her long black hair, though for some reason it reminded Victor more of a magician's hat than a Ringmaster's. Her skin was the same porcelain white as the Clowns', but her elaborate violet makeup was closer to *Cirque du Soleil* than the Ringling Bros. aesthetic the rest of the Circus seemed to follow. Victor also couldn't help but note that she had a very pronounced, almost cartoonish hourglass figure. He glanced over at Mr. Noodles and his numerous exaggerated features, and figured they had both been shaped the way they were for the enjoyment of others.

"Icky!" Lolly cried excitedly, leaping from her chair and throwing herself into the Ringmaster's arms.

"Easy there little Lollipop. I see someone's had her serving of Milk

for the day. Good girl," she praised her. "How's our guest?"

"He's still a little bit nervous, but that's to be expected for a Humdrum. He's really nice though. Come say hello."

"There he is, straight from the Deathless Merchant of London," the Ringmaster said as she approached her desk.

"I've been told never to call him that, but yes, I am from Marshall, Carter, & Dark," Victor said, standing up to shake her hand. The Ringmaster instead grabbed his face and seemed to inspect him, a manic gleam in her bright purple eyes. She smiled, her perfect white teeth confirming that she was indeed a Clown.

"Excellent. Very pretty. I see your bosses got the memo that I like 'em young. So much cuter than that old fart from the London Office. What's his name, *Bourgeois*?"

"Burgess," Manny replied.

"Close enough," the Ringmaster shrugged.

"Icky, I think you're scaring him," Lolly said.

"You're right. I'm sorry," the Ringmaster said, releasing Victor from her unnaturally strong clutches. "I should be more professional. You may address me as Ms. Ringmaster, young man. That sounds very professional, I think. Of course, when you hear people talking about Icky they're talking me. Icky the Magic Clown was my act before I was the Ringmaster. And of course, Manny here insists on calling me Veronica, my boring Humdrum name. I don't know why. Do I look normal to you?"

"Don't go asking questions that are liable to start a fight," Manny objected. "We're both busy and you called this boy here for a reason, so let's get to it."

"You're right. Sit back down young man," the Ringmaster said. Victor quickly obliged, and the Ringmaster sat across from him. She poured herself a tumbler of Milk from the bottle and drank it in one gulp, shouting and slamming her palm on the desktop. She poured herself a second glass, but proceeded to sip it normally. Lolly sat

herself on the Ringmaster's lap, placing her arm over her shoulder like she was visiting Santa Claus. Manny stood to their right, while Mr. Noodles stood right behind Victor, ready to intervene should he start any funny business with his employers.

"Whenever you're ready," the Ringmaster said. Victor began fumbling with his briefcase and pulled out a manila folder.

"As per your request, I have compiled a dossier containing the SCP files of all your Circus's former assets that, to our knowledge, are currently being held by the SCP Foundation," he said, sliding the folder over to her. "If there are any there you would like to retrieve, our contacts within the Foundation can provide additional intelligence regarding the containment facilities and personnel or arrange for security system failures. The price for our assistance will be that during your recovery operation you also retrieve for us an SCP object of our choosing from that same facility."

"We are not antagonizing the Essie P!" Manny growled through his teeth.

"Yeah, I don't like the Essie P. They're mean," Lolly said. "They lock up freaks just for being freaks. That's not right. Clowns are meant to make people happy, and I can't do that if they lock me up."

"You have nothing to worry about darling," the Ringmaster claimed. "With the Kaleidoscope, we can travel through any door we want, and with Emcee D's operatives we won't even have to worry about being caught on camera. They'll never know it was us, especially since we'll be stealing something else while we're at it. Perfect prestidigitation, which as a magician I'm pretty good at."

"I know what you're doing," Manny claimed. "You think that if you spring a freak or two from the Essie P and bring them home the rest of the freaks will love you as much as the Clowns do, and then you won't need me anymore to keep them in line."

"Manny, I'm not Herman," the Ringmaster assured him. "I'm not trying to get rid of you. You've been with the Circus longer than anyone; you know it better than anyone. This Circus couldn't exist without you, and no one here wants it to, especially me. Herman

may not have meant it when he said that the Circus was family, but I do. You're my family Manny, along with everyone else here, and that's why I want to do this. Sure, it will be good for morale, but we owe it to our Little Acts Lost to at least make sure they're okay, and to help them if they're not. The Circus is a family, and family stays together."

Manny made a gesture which Victor guessed was a face-palm, but due to his upside-down face it looked more like he was stroking his chin.

"If I may interject something, the Ringmaster is right that there's no danger in antagonizing the Foundation in this manner," Victor said. "Marshall, Carter, & Dark has been pinching items for decades without any consequence. The Foundation has actual world-ending threats they must contain. They can't be bothered to chase down every anomalous trinket that goes missing. They are already aware of both our organizations but do very little besides espionage. Besides, if all goes as planned, they'll never even know that either of us was involved."

"Manny, we don't need to be afraid of the Essie P. We have the Kaleidoscope for quick getaways, and the Fortune Teller as an early warning system," the Ringmaster said. "Essie can't touch us. What do we have to lose?"

Manny let out a long sigh.

"Open the file at least. We might as well have a look at it."

The Ringmaster squealed with delight and greedily snatched the file from the desk. Victor noticed that her eyes moved rapidly over each page, and he guessed that she was speed reading.

"Let's see…No, too stinky, too grabby, a lawsuit waiting to happen. Hmm…Motormouth."

"Oh, I liked Motormouth. He taught me to juggle," Lolly said.

"Everyone liked Motormouth," the Ringmaster said wistfully.

"Not him. He's not coming back, not after that stunt he pulled,"

Manny said firmly.

“I know,” the Ringmaster agreed, despondently turning the page. “Though maybe you should have taken the machine gun out of his mouth before turning him over.”

“Ooh, can we get Meaty the Meatworm back? That was so much fun!” Lolly asked. "It went so fast and so high and so many loopty loops and upside down and sideways and backwards like *schoom schoom schoom schoom*! Also it was sticky."

“We can’t operate the machine safely without Charley,” Manny said. “He’s not still kicking around, is he?”

“No, he…blew himself up. Huh,” the Ringmaster said. “Moving on. Viscera and confetti? What a mess. Can't blame him for being pissed. Cancer? That sucks. We should send him a card or something."

She turned to the next page, and her eyes went wide.

“Virtuoso,” she said softly. “They have Virtuoso.”

“Who’s that Icky?” Lolly asked.

“He was a creation of Fuller's. He had the most beautiful voice. Well, lots of voices actually. He sang constantly, it was what he lived for. I would sit by his cage for hours, just listening to him sing. I spoke to him too, I spoke to him like he couldn't understand me because I didn't think he could. But one night I came to him after Herman had caned me, I don't even remember what for, but I do remember I was still crying. Virtuoso finished his song, but instead of going straight to the next one as usual he looked straight at me and said two words: *'Any requests?'*. I was stunned and just muttered if he knew any Gilbert and Sullivan. He nodded, and sang the entire score of the H.M.S Pinafore for me.

"From then on when I talked to him he would listen, humming as quietly as he could, and speak back if he felt he had something worth saying. He'd sing silly songs for me, I'd sing duets with him, bring him flowers. I was his number one fan, and he was my friend."

The Ringmaster inhaled sharply as tears began rolling down her face. Lolly offered her more Milk, but she pushed the glass away.

"I thought he was dead," she continued. "I thought Herman had burned him alive. There was an accident. Virtuoso's covering was pierced during a performance and all his voices deafened most of the audience. After that Herman decided he was a liability to be disposed of. I cried myself to sleep for weeks after that. But he's alive! He survived the fire and ended up with the Essie P! He's been locked up all this time. He was made to sing, he was meant to be heard, and those bastards have him locked in a soundproof room singing to himself! We can't let him live like that Manny."

"Do whatever you want. I won't stop you," he replied. "Just be sure to shut down the Kaleidoscope afterwards. I don't want a mobile task force to come storming through one of those doors."

"Thank you," she said. She handed the SCP report over to Victor. "This is the one we want Emcee D. Essie P number 1860. I want literally every last scrap of information you have on the place they're holding him."

"Excellent. I will inform my superiors and contact you once we have decided what items we would consider acceptable payment for our services and proceed from there," he said, gathering his briefcase. "If there's nothing further?"

"One more thing," the Ringmaster said, pulling out a VIP pass from her pocket and holding it out to him. "I want you to come here off the clock sometime, our treat. You need to really experience the Circus if you're going to be our Emcee D rep. Wear a cheaper suit though. Some of our acts can get a bit messy."

"…Right. Yes, I, it's just that my schedule with Marshall, Carter, & Dark isn't exactly 9-5, and your Circus doesn't publish its tour schedule so I don't know how we would…"

"You have Gary's number. Just give him a ring whenever you're free and he'll send someone through the doorway to pick you up," she said firmly.

Victor *errred* and *ahhhed* for a moment trying to think of a way to refuse, when Ragamuffin became animate. She took the ticket from the Ringmaster and walked it across the desk to him, waving it enthusiastically. Her button eyes were spinning slowly, and her stitched mouth gradually opened in a black smile that unleashed faint and otherworldly screams.

“Awwww, she likes you!" Lolly cooed. "Now you have to come back, or you’ll hurt her feelings.”

“I wouldn’t want to do that,” he replied, gingerly accepting the ticket.

Why didn’t I just say I was afraid of clowns?

« A Real Humdinger | Dread & Circuses Hub | Fuller Than Full! »

For the RE-PUBLIC

Kalefheit, a city of opulent splendor and obscene poverty.

Kalefheit, the place where fortunes came and went as quickly as the sunset.

Kalefheit, the beating, chaotic heart of the New World that had been born from the remnants of the old.

Kalefheit, where Meilar was currently wondering why he hadn't done something more interesting with his life than taking up his father's dilapidated antiques shop.

"Here I sit," he said aloud to nobody but the gods. "A plain store for a plain existence."

Unlike his brother, who made his fortune (and had met his untimely death) venturing into lost ceitus for Wonders, he had chosen the "honorable" profession of maintaining the family shop. Here there were no magical leftover relics of the gods. Well, maybe some had been Geyre's domain when he walked among mortals, but they were mundane in both appearance and power.

Strange, rusted devices (including one shaped like a flexed arm with some sort of horizontal holes on it that he was idly toying with now) that had no use to the people of his time co-existed with stacks of books in the old language. Even as the city's scribes had begun the slow process of re-introducing a written form to human tongue, none had deciphered the words of the ancients, least of all an old man like himself. Only the goodwill of scribes and the curiosity of children and a few adults gave him enough money to pay for both food and tax.

As he watched people pass by his small nook in the open-air market with little interest, he contemplated whether or not he would have liked to have died in a ceitu seeking adventure - or, most suicidally of all, going south. *Why live if I only breathe and sleep, amidst*

scrolls and devices I cannot understand?

A loud *thump* on his stall snapped him out of his dreary contemplation. He looked up, and saw a familiar face as he adjusted his glasses.

"Ahh, Kallin." He smiled as the young man idly brushed dirt off his arm. "Even when you bring me something I would never sell in a thousand seasons, you are fine company."

"Thank you, Meilar," Kallin replied, politely returning the smile. "With York's blessing, our fortunes will rise soon. Perhaps then we may join the citizens of northern Kalefheit in wealth!"

"Bah! Even with all the riches of this city, I would not want to spend my time with those insufferable fools."

Kallin was hardly surprised at his reaction; they'd had the same conversation nearly every time he had fetched the old man a relic. This time, however, he hoped their routine talk would shift in a different direction.

"I have come across a strange tome, found while I was trading with the local tribes."

Meilar raised his eyebrow. "Trading?"

"Alright, I stole it from their relic collection."

A raspy, cackling laugh escaped his mouth. "You should know better by now than to try that on me! Continue."

"Look at the symbol on it."

He did so, and saw an ancient book with a dark cover and some sort of half-circle with a line through it, surrounded by another circle.

"It is unusual, I will concede. But what does it mean?"

"It is not the symbol itself, but rather the…effect reading it has. Take it and see for yourself."

"Very well, I-"

Wait.

"Did you say 'reading'?"

"Yes. I was able to understand the old language as I read it. But when I opened another tome, it did not have the same effect."

For the first time since he had met Kallin, he was speechless. They had finally found a Wonder. A book in the old language that could be *understood*…

"The scribes would murder their mothers to possess this," he finally managed, "and yet you brought it to me."

Kallin smiled again, more warmly than before. "You know I am not from Kalefheit originally, but a tribe to the west of here. Among my people, there is a saying - 'He who breaks a bond will be broken by the gods.' You are my friend, Meilar, and I would not abandon you in our hour of greatest triumph."

Meilar felt not only excitement, but gratitude. In an age where most still had to hire guards to leave the trading routes, honest souls were hard to come by.

"Thank you, Kallin." His heart satisfied, he now turned to his mind. "What was the subject of this tome?"

Now Kallin's face showed utter confusion. "I…do not know. Even as I read it the words did not make sense to me. The concepts that it seems to be based on are ones I do not understand. I was hoping you might be able to make better sense of it than I."

Meilar obliged his request and began to carefully open the creaking, ancient book, its seams threatening to break even as he turned over the cover. The front page contained words that he could and could not understand:

GENERAL GUIDELINES FOR ANTI-PUBLIC DRAFTEES

REPENTANCE DIVISION - **PUBLIC DOMAIN PROTECTION SERVICE**

NO RIGHTS RESERVED - 428

"You are right," he said slowly. "I am able to read the language of the ancients as I see this book." He idly grabbed another relic with writing on it, and found it just as incomprehensible as always. The cognitive dissonance of the two facts gave him a mild headache. He looked around and was pleased to see his shop's poor reputation working to his advantage as their revolutionary conversation was decisively ignored by Kalefheit.

"But it does not make sense, does it?" Kallin asked.

Meilar turned the pages of the tome. Though modern vocabulary lacked the word, he would have described it as anti-climactic. Here he was, with the key to unlocking the ancient words…

"No, it doesn't at all. What on earth is a 'RETRIEVAL MISSION'?"

"The gods imparting duties upon us, perhaps?"

"I have never heard of any god's followers referencing a 'Public Domain'. All of the world is the domain of the gods…"

At a loss for words, he decided enough had been said. "Kallin, thank you for bringing me this. After sunset I will spend the evening going through this tome and attempting to make sense of it. Meet me here at the opening of the shop tomorrow."

"As you wish, Meilar. Good luck."

In another world and another time, a computer monitor stirred with sudden life.

TEMPORAL CONSULTATION REQUESTED

"It can't be."

"It is. Temporal science is infallible."

"An activation? After all this time? Centuries? Millennia, even?"

"I am as confused as you, but we must stay true to the ideals of the Service, even as our purpose is defunct."

"It may not be defunct anymore…"

Meilar blinked, and he was in his shop studying the strange tome with the half-circle on it. He blinked again, and the world was gone.

Surrounding him was…nothing. A pitch black void was given features only by a strange white table with a chair on one side of it. Not knowing what else to do, he walked towards the table and sat down in the chair.

"Meilar." A voice echoed throughout the featureless landscape, reminding him of his exploration of abandoned caves as a child.

"What is this?" He said, barely audible from sheer surprise. "Where am I? Where is my shop? And who are you?"

"Answers will only lead to more questions. We will select them carefully."

Now part of the black void was illuminated by the strange symbol he had seen on the book.

"We are the Public Domain Protection Service. In the Old World, we took those who suppressed knowledge from future generations and made them atone for their crimes, using the same method that brought you here. Now, however, we can no longer draw on either the future or the past. The world died, and knowledge of ancient culture died with it.

"We do not know how you discovered one of our handbooks, but you are here now. And we need your help."

"Help?" Now Meilar was confused. "I am a middling old merchant with one good friend in the world. What help could I possibly be?"

"We have investigated things about your life, using the old methods. You lack purpose, and desire to contribute to something greater. You preserve the past, even as you do not understand it. You are, in spirit, the perfect candidate for our RE-PUBLIC effort."

"Re what now?"

"The RE-PUBLIC of the New World. The knowledge of the past may be restored to the future."

Now he was excited. "You can teach me the language of the ancients? I can unlock their secrets?"

"We could, yes, and we shall. But your mission is more important than that. We cannot save the world, not with our methods, but we can preserve the memories of it.

Meilar, you shall become the first man since the apocalypse to undergo a RETRIEVAL MISSION. You will be sent thousands of years into the past, and must navigate the alien world to bring its items back to your time."

Time travel. Something that the old man could scarcely conceive of, just as he could scarcely conceive of vanishing and reappearing in this area. Yet if these were not servants of the gods, they clearly possessed the same powers as them.

"This will take time, of course. It has been many years since we last attempted this, and given the extreme temporal distance you must undergo a CULTURAL TRAINING session. But it can be done."

And so it was.

In a bookshop in Canberra, a dark-skinned old man walked inside and purchased a gift for the future.

Fortunate Son

Marcus straightened his tie and brushed his hair to the right side with his hand. One of his roommates was playing Tupac and wildly throwing gang symbols at his desk. He could see him in the mirror. It was growing dark outside. The room smelled of a little more aftershave than necessary. His two roommates used to pester him about these Saturday nights. “Where are you going all dressed up?” they’d ask, and he’d say, “Mass,” and that would shut them up. He slipped his wallet into his back pocket and began down the stairs. Saturday night mass? Were they stupid?

It was dreadfully cold outside of the dormitory, and Marcus flipped the collar of his overcoat up. He’d seen Humphrey Bogart do it in a film. Or maybe it was Harrison Ford. He wished he had the driver here, so that he wouldn’t have to walk alone down these snowy sidewalks, the wind chafing his cheeks. It was worth it, he told himself. It was this or drinking lukewarm Milwaukee’s Best in a room party somewhere, music on too loud, and maybe sloppily hooking up with some blonde mannequin from the sororities. He was too classy for that.

As he walked uptown, the streets quickly changed character. The streets surrounding the campus gave way to dilapidated apartment projects, a multi-colored myriad of trash and cigarette butts jutting from the snowdrifts. Marcus rounded a corner, turning onto a non-descript side-street. A single orange lamp threw an otherworldly haze over the grey concrete. The street did not draw a second glance from any passer-by. Close inspection, however, would have revealed things that ought not to have been on this inner city block. The windows in the buildings were all dark, and the walks were clear of the common stream of litter. A black Rolls-Royce was parked casually next to a hydrant, and next to it an Italian sports car. A wooden handrail extended from a basement staircase, oddly juxtaposed with the surrounding scene. He placed his left hand upon it, gingerly stepping into the darkness below.

The heavy door open at the bottom of the stair opened into a dim and tiny room, where a huge Samoan man in a dark suit stood. The massive man wordlessly extended an open palm. Marcus fumbled with his wallet, pulling out the glass card. The Samoan held it in two fingers, raised it to eye level. He nodded. The man turned to the heavy industrial door behind him, opening it with a single wrenching pull. Marcus stepped through, glancing over his shoulder to say, “Thanks, Ralph.” Ralph returned a subtle, but angry glare.

Marcus was greeted with a rush of warmth and a friendly woman in a short red dress. She sported a bulky brass collar. She took his coat. A gentle wash of voices came from the floor below, along with a mixed scent of liquor, oak, and tobacco. He stepped down from the balcony, taking the spiral staircase to the ground floor confidently. Here was his place, away from the plebeians, away from their petty college-age worries. If they only knew. The club was alive tonight. The tables were bustling with poker games, and groups of well-dressed men and women were talking in groups. Strange, solitary figures nursed cocktails at the long mahogany bar, and the old grays sat in armchairs by the fire, brandishing cigars and conversing grandiloquently. An enormous black piano in the corner was softly twinkling Ellington’s “Little Brown Book.” There was no player. Occasionally, people would walk over and slip bills into the empty highball glass sitting on the bench.

Marcus walked over to the fireplace, close to the aged men. He sat in one of the leather chairs, his socks awkwardly visible at his ankles as he lifted his legs up onto an ottoman. Leafing through a copy of the Times, he pretended to read but instead listened intently. They fascinated him, these back-of-the-room men. They were captains of industry, politicians, royalty; bespectacled and tweed, criminals all. These great leaky galleons seemed not to care about his proximity, or notice at all, and continued conversing in gruff and frank tones. Marcus looked up from the paper, making eye contact with one of the women in the red dresses.

She walked over gracefully, gorgeous. Angry red splotches were visible around the edges of her collar, barely noticeable under the makeup. She must be new, Marcus thought. After a few words, the woman went to the bar, and then returned with his drink. Three

fingers of scotch, two ice-cubes. It went down hard, but his father drank it. Sipping from the glass, he attempted to hide the sharp exhale that escaped from his mouth, fearing unreasonably that the old men would notice and take offense. Marcus was always concerned with how the other members saw him. He was easily the youngest there, and the others didn't tend to speak to him.

A rotund and gray engine stood on the table nearby, chugging slowly and periodically giving off a bluish soporific steam. It had been a long week. Marcus began thinking about his father – his father, the senator. He felt his eyelids growing heavy, his arms slopping off the edges of the chair.

It was his eighteenth birthday, and he had just gotten into college. He had begged his father, begged and begged. And finally, there it was, driving up the pebble driveway to the family mansion. The black, non-descript car pulled up at the front door. Marcus watched through the kitchen window, childlike with anticipation. A tall, slender man, with close-cropped hair and a pinstripe suit stepped out of the passenger seat. The senator went out and shook hands with him. He said something, laughing heartily. The man from the car did not react. They met at the door. The representative was British, humorless, and carried nothing. He had a voice like shaved ice.

The senator led Marcus and the representative into his study, where they sat opposite each other, silently. Melinda brought in a tray with a water pitcher and two glasses. The glass sat untouched before the representative for the five minutes of the interview. Afterward Marcus' father came in, and they shut him out.

Crouching and watching through the crack between the doors, Marcus could only hear muffled voices. His father was talking and gesticulating. The man in the suit was speaking quietly and sharply, shaking his head slightly. His father was growing louder, red in the face like he got during his campaign speeches. The man in the suit kept shaking his head. And then the senator had his checkbook out and was writing on it. The two men shook hands, and three weeks later Marcus had his glass card.

Marcus awoke, startled. Several hours had passed. The old men had left, presumably to their respective rooms. Some of the women

in the short red dresses were wiping down tables and emptying ash trays. One of them was passing between the remaining groups of members, offering a little silver tray in her right hand. The tray had several evenly placed rows of white pills on it. He took one, unquestioning, and swallowed it.
The floor was still populated, but quiet now. Young men and women sat on the furniture in small groups, laughing softly. Several of them were gathered around the gray engine, examining it and inhaling the blue steam. The jazz piano had been replaced by a low and electronic basso thrumming. Every once and a while, an odd noise would float up from the basement staircase in the rear of the room. Three African men in tan military uniforms were standing at the bar drinking cognac and vermouth. He watched their lips contort and shift with each syllable, and they seemed to slow. The constant flicker of the fire beside him became sluggish, too. In his ears, the intimate voices of the young and privileged around him grew deeper and deeper, until they were gross and comedic parodies. Marcus watched the pendulum on the great brown grandfather clock by the fire swing slower, its clicks decreasing in frequency. And then it stopped altogether. Soon – he did not know how long after – he could not move a muscle. He was stuck, sunken into the leather armchair. His eyes tracked his field of vision, scrutinizing the people stuck in mid-gesture; drops of liquid suspended centimeters above tongues, the feet frozen impossibly in mid-air. A great sweep of relaxation washed between the hemispheres of his brain.

He snapped to, and it was as if someone had pressed fast-forward in his mind. There were gunshots. The lights were flickering, and members were running every which way, screaming. Armed men in strange black jumpsuits were flooding the balcony above. Several of the guards had upturned one of the heavy oak tables at the front of the room and were crouching behind it, trading gunfire with the men above. Marcus panicked and jumped down from his chair, crawling across the floor. Broken glass cut into his knees.
One of the guards hurried passed him, and Marcus clung to his calves, tripping him up awkwardly.
“Get the fuck off!” the man shouted.
“Help me,” Marcus begged piteously.
“Get off. You’re a gold member; don’t have security privileges,” he said through gritted teeth. “Let go of me now or you’ll get us both

killed.” The guard shook his leg vigorously.
“Please help me!” Marcus pleaded, a string of spittle streaming ungracefully from his mouth to the guard’s pant-leg. The guard kneed him sharply in the jaw, discarding him to the carpet.

It seemed like an instant later that the floor was alive with the black-suited soldiers. Gazing around, his eyes were blurry with tears. Three security guards lay in puddles of blood. It seemed like all the older members were gone. In fact, all the help were gone too; the bartenders and the women in the red dresses. The only people left on the floor were the young members and the three African men. Operatives were holding them all at gunpoint, zipping riot-cuffs onto their wrists. Marcus stumbled to his feet, lunging for the basement staircase. A rifle butt came across his skull, and his head was filled with sparks.

Waking up, he had a splitting headache, and there was dried blood on his face. The room was bright white, and it made him squint. He tried to lift his hand to shade his eyes, but they were strapped to the chair he was sitting in. Across the table in front of him sat a figure in a white laboratory coat. He couldn’t make out her face due to the angle of the lights.
“Awake, are you?” said the figure.
“What…what the hell?” ventured Marcus.
“Please state your name,” said the figure, poising a pen over a clipboard.
“Where am I?” Marcus asked, terror mounting.
“Please state your name,” the figure repeated.
“You can’t do this! I’m an American citizen! My father is a senator! My father..!” Marcus shouted, struggling aimlessly with his bonds. The figure across the table sighed and put down the pen. She made a beckoning motion with her hand, looking over Marcus’ left shoulder. Marcus saw the man approach in his peripheral vision, a lone syringe borne on a bare stainless-steel medical tray. He screamed.

Found in the Cell of the Condemned Prisoner

Young ladies wore gowns and flowers in bloom
Young gentlemen preened and wandered the room
Anxiously waiting for her to arrive
With the crowd we thought we'd never be missed
Two fools engaging in a lovers' tryst
Risking the wrath of the Queen of the Hive

One suitor above all she wished to claim
Blessed with fortune and charm and ancient name
For his hand and his heart did she connive
But he was immune to all of her charms
And sought his refuge in my loving arms
The poor cousin of the Queen of the Hive

Under the apple tree we met in hope
Determining there that we would elope
This did her sudden appearance deprive
Caught in the garden on that fateful eve
By she who we had hoped most to deceive
We stood shamed before the Queen of the Hive

Then she produced under teasing banter
Crystal wineglasses with matched decanter
Refreshment to make our spirits revive
Handing us glasses carved with bloom and bee
She bade us both drink and complying we
Fell to the spell of the Queen of the Hive

She was determined to punish and shame
For him to die and to me go the blame
Against her dark magic we could not strive
With a smile of ice she bade him stand still
Then turned to me and commanded I kill
With grief we obeyed the Queen of the Hive

He stood like a statue and did not flinch
As I smashed my wineglass against the bench
From our struggles a thrill did she derive
As I embedded a shard in his chest
And a crimson bloom appeared on his breast
In mock alarm cried the Queen of the Hive

As her crocodile tears began to roll
I saw that my glass on the ground was whole
For a breath I thought he might be alive
A drugged wine's visions and not a spell cast
Then I saw his corpse as they seized me fast
So thus was revenged the Queen of the Hive

One thought has sustained me through all my trials
Through her accusations and secret smiles
When it was decreed I should not survive
She destroyed our lives but never our love
I know we will join in heaven above
While here alone dwells the Queen of the Hive

Email exchange between Dr. Kate Greenaway, Lead Researcher SCP-3876 and Archivist Erina Carson, January 20, 2017:

Dr. Greenaway,

The attached poem, written on the back of an envelope, was attached in ***SCP-3876-2*** *along with a series of newspaper clippings detailing the arrest, trial, and conviction of one Maria Duchamp. On succeeding pages were a sketch of a decanter with a set of wineglasses and a description of certain mind-affecting properties: when an individual pours an alcoholic beverage from the decanter into one of the wineglasses, other individuals who consume the beverage from one of those glasses will obey any spoken command of the first individual.*

We did some investigating in the database, and found the following:

Anomalous Item: Crystal decanter with four matching wineglasses
Location: Site-81 Anomalous Item/Safe Object Long Term Storage
Description: Ornate crystal decanter and wineglasses carved with an intaglio of a bee on a flower. Glasses and decanter will spontaneously reassemble/reform upon damage.

In light of the information in 3876-2, further testing of this item might be in order.

Erina Carson, Site-81 Archives

Agreed. I'll contact the Director and see if we can get that item back to the Classification Department.
-Dr. Kate Greenaway

Found in the Journal of a Lost Naturalist

There clinging amongst the towering green
Where humming the birds had gifted their seed
Clad in rainbow hues of effortless bloom
There our prize did shine forth beneath the moon
From far had we come to the rumored tree
To win for ourselves its glorious fruit

Tales had we heard of this sovereign fruit
Hidden so deep in the depths of the green
Drawing its power from light of the moon
Perfumes of Eden the breath of its bloom
For this was our quest to gather its seed
And to the world bring the gift of the tree

So then we stood at the base of the tree
Pondering how we could gather its fruit
So high up within the tangles of green
As well it might be as far as the moon
Then plans and then schemes in our minds did bloom
As coveted it we in root branch and seed

But that was not all that had taken seed
For creepers and vines surrounded the tree
And twined and wound all the way to the fruit
And so up we clambered into the green
To seize our prize in the light of the moon
We drank deeply the scent of Eden's bloom

And there in our breasts did desire bloom
Where a longing so strong had taken seed
And shot forth a bright shoot of hunger green
And so we devoured the blessed fruit
Took part in the sacrament of the tree
And were baptized in the light of the moon

So heard we the word beneath the bright moon
We all were apostles not yet in bloom
But we had been given the sacred seed
Would now carry forth the word of the tree
And from land to land spread the holy fruit
Impose on the world the will of the green

Then left we the green biding next full moon
When the gifted seed in our hearts will bloom
In the name of the tree shall we bear fruit

Foundation Burger

"Goddammit, people!" shouted Manager Fred, bursting through the front doors of the restaurant. "Can I go out for a cup of coffee for five minutes without you people screwing things up?"

"With all due respect, sir," said Hank, trying to make himself heard over the roar of the crowd, "we do have a coffee machine in the corner that…"

"I want coffee that doesn't stand a chance of turning me into a girl, Hank. Not after that time you screwed up the filtration device." Fred slapped a bucket out from the other man's grasp. "Now stop stuffing your fat face with chicken and tell me what the problem is!"

"Well, sir, for one thing, the union's banging on our door again."

"What about this time?" groaned Fred, cramming himself into the office hidden in the back room.

"They say that it's unethical of us to hire walking sacks of meat that hate people and would rather envelop and absorb them messily than serve hamburgers to them."

"Tell 'em that they work for free, and that we've only lost ten people in the last three weeks," deflected Fred, brushing a retirement notice from Rights off of his desk. "What else?"

"The woman from Kansas is trying to sue us for selling 'SCP-173's Crunchy Mexican Tacos" that broke her husband's throat…"

"He was clearly eating too fast!"

"Mrs. Lambwith is suing us for serving her a Brightburger that still had the sexual lubricant when she plainly asked for none…"

"That's the employee's problem, not mine."

"And the FDA is trying to shut us down for selling products that contain meat derived from SCP-835," Hank concluded, pushing the reports onto his boss's desk.

Fred blinked. "Look, just write up another report filled with [DATA EXPUNGED]s and let 'em spend another few months trying to figure it out." He slammed his fist on the desk. "Are there any problems that don't pertain to lawsuits? Problems we can actually fix right now?"

"Well," coughed Hank, looking around nervously. "We've got the issue of the tomatoes trying to kill Conan O'…"

"That don't deal with lawsuits."

"Cassy wants a pay raise!" blurted Hank.

Fred shook his head wearily. "That'll be the sixth time in the last year. She's just on the bloody coffee cups. It's not like she's a cashier or anything. Pass on that one."

"Speaking of cashiers, Bright managed to transfer himself to one of the customers. Again."

"Fire the old body and have Gears take care of the payroll for the new guy. Next."

"The county is complaining about the giant 682 statue outside frightening traffic away, Cain is demanding access to the building again, and the…"

"Hank!" shouted Fred, jumping up and grabbing the other man by the collar. "Do we have any *good* news today! My blood pressure's high enough as it is, and…"

"The Very Fine special has been a big hit with the test crowds without killing anyone, sir!" screamed Hank, tears in his eyes. Fred set him down, patting him on the head.

"Good boy!" he exclaimed. "See, once you get to know your boss, you just need to tell him what he wants to hear. Keep that up!"

"We also released the Ableburger today. It was a resounding success."

"Hank, you're sweating. What's the problem?"

Hank took a deep breath, and blurted all at once, "SCP-231 is claiming her time as a fryer is cruel and unusual, Kondraki's butterflies have been infecting the food, and the Stairwell Burger is causing people to hear screaming in the women's bathroom!"

Fred let out a deep sigh, contemplated his navel for a few moments, and said at length, "So a little bit of good news surrounded by complete chaos that we can barely contain?" Hank nodded. "Just another day at Foundation Burger."

***

The Agent who went by the code name Sauce Jockey beamed at the Head of the SCP Foundation as the logo for Foundation Burger ran across the end of his video. The Head was grasping at his temples, trying desperately to not let the red in his face show. At length, he spoke in a low voice.

"So… that is your proposal for a new cover agency?"

"Yes sir!" said Sauce Jockey, crossing his arms across his chest and standing up straighter.

"Remind me to ban McDonald's food from the break room. You're fired."

Agent Sauce Jockey's eyes widened for a moment. He shuffled out of the room, sure it was all just a joke, that the Head of the Foundation had loved the video.

When he was sure he was alone, the Head pressed the intercom button on his desk. "Miss Jones, send a small shipment of SCP-504 to Conan O'Brien."

Foundation Incident Review 221-B

SCP FOUNDATION DEPARTMENT OF INTERNAL AFFAIRS

INCIDENT REVIEW 221-B

Incident ID: 221-B
Incident Type: Class-A
Date of Incident: 08/31/
Location of Incident: Foundation Secure Operating Facility 221 ("Site-221")
Casualties: 3
Incident Status: Resolved

THE INFORMATION CONTAINED IN THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN APPROVED FOR VIEWING BY FOUNDATION PERSONNEL POSSESSING LEVEL 2 SECURITY CLEARANCE OR HIGHER

Overview

Incident 221-B was a Class-A fatal security breach that occurred on 31 August at Foundation Secure Operating Facility 221, colloquially known as Site-221. Much of the information available to the Department of Internal Affairs regarding Incident 221-B was extracted from security footage recorded by CCTV cameras throughout the facility, as no eyewitnesses survived the event itself. Per Foundation policy, the Department of Internal Affairs implemented a security lockdown of Site-221 shortly after receiving

reports of the incident to prevent a possible information leak and to suppress panic. It is now understood that this decision resulted in significantly higher fatalities, as site personnel were confined to the facility and thus unable to escape despite the incident itself posing little risk to external Foundation assets. An internal review of the Department of Internal Affairs is ongoing.

Background

At 3:21 PM (local time) on 31 August , Security Officer Carl T. Michelson entered Site-221's auxiliary parking lot and security booth as part of his predetermined patrol route. Radio check-ins between Michelson and Site-221's Security Control Center (colloquially known as "Control") occurred every five minutes in accordance with facility policy. At 3:25 PM, Michelson contacted Control and reported a 2-1, an internal radio code meaning "all-clear". Five minutes later, at 3:30 PM, Michelson reported another 2-1 and proceeded down the south hallway towards the security elevators. He then contacted Control at 3:27 PM, three minutes prior to his next anticipated check-in. A transcript of the subsequent conversation has been provided below.

> **Michelson:** Control, this is Bravo-5. Come in.
>
> **Control:** Copy, 5. Go ahead.
>
> **Michelson:** I'm at the employee elevators in the south hallway now, uh…looks like there's some sort of liquid on the wall. Blue in color, seems to glow. Unsure of the source. How copy?
>
> **Control:** Copy. We see it on the cameras. Was it there during your previous patrol?
>
> **Michelson:** Negative.
>
> **Control:** We're dispatching a support team now. Hold position, await further orders. Out.

Per Control's orders, Michelson held his position at the employee elevators until 3:36 PM, at which time a support team consisting of

three additional security officers arrived. The team proceeded to collect a sample of the aforementioned blue liquid and removed it from the walls without incident. However, at 3:44 PM, Security Officer Kayla R. Rodriguez, conducting a patrol along the east hallway, contacted Control and reported a "2-9", code for a possible security breach. Her dialogue with Control was as follows:

> **Rodriguez:** Control, this is Bravo-2.
>
> **Control:** Go ahead.
>
> **Rodriguez:** We have unidentified personnel proceeding down the west hallway towards the security living quarters. Repeat, unidentified personnel in west hallway. 2-9. Individuals appear tall, with black clothing and opaque face-masks. Unsure of intent or origins. Requesting new orders, over.
>
> **Control:** We see no such personnel on CCTV, over.
>
> **Rodriguez:** They just went past me, Control. We have a confirmed 2-9 here.
>
> **Control:** Copy. We're gonna, uh…we're gonna wait for another report before we put the site in lockdown. Can you link up with Bravo-5 at the employee elevators in the east hallway?
>
> **Rodriguez:** Affirmative. En route.

As indicated by Control, the unidentified personnel did not appear on any CCTV cameras despite the path reported by Rodriguez suggesting they would pass by several such cameras. Internal communication logs taken from the control center indicate that Control was skeptical of Rodriguez's report and hesitated to lock the facility down, or even dispatch additional security teams. At 4:04 PM, Rodriguez linked up with Michelson - by this time, the security team dispatched by Control to collect samples of the blue liquid had already left the area.

Security Breach

At 4:08 PM, a struggle was overheard by Rodriguez and Michelson inside of one of the research offices in the east hallway.

> **Michelson:** Control, Michelson and Rodriguez reporting in.
>
> **Control:** Go ahead.
>
> **Michelson:** Unidentified noises coming from one of the research offices in the east hallway…sounds like a physical altercation. Unknown aggressors. Hang on -
>
> *Michelson approaches the office.*
>
> **Unidentified Voice:** …are you? Oh, Jesus - fuck, somebody help me - oh my God - *[screaming]*
>
> **Rodriguez:** What the fuck? We gotta go in there -
>
> **Michelson:** Control, we're moving inside.

At this point, Michelson and Rodriguez entered the office. The struggle they overheard had concluded by this point. A post-incident investigation of the office found much of it coated in a blue substance similar to that described by Michelson in his earlier encounter. Various broken items, such as vases and framed paintings, were scattered across the room. Physical tissue and severed human limbs were found placed in a crude pile behind a filing cabinet, with multiple lacerations along wrists and elbows. Fingernails, teeth, and hair samples were also recovered. A rapid DNA test performed by the analysis team was unable to identify the source of these physical samples. The exact events that took place during this struggle remain unknown. Michelson and Rodriguez subsequently failed to respond to any communication requests from Control.

No further incidents were reported until 7:08 PM the following evening, at which time security teams along the external perimeter reported seeing an unidentified individual dragging what appeared to be a subject in a body bag away from Site-221. No investigation of this incident was conducted due to the inherent confusion caused by

the earlier incident.

Security Officer Carl T. Michelson

Believed to have been killed after entering an office in the east hallway. No physical remnants recovered.

Security Officer Kayla R. Rodriguez

Believed to have been killed after entering an office in the east hallway. No physical remnants recovered.

Dr.

Found deceased of an apparently self-inflicted gunshot wound. Investigation ongoing.

DEPARTMENT FINDINGS

The Department of Internal Affairs has concluded the following:

- The entities described by Security Officer Rodriguez are believed to be Class-A reality benders, possibly originating from a dimensional shift experiment conducted at Site-221 one week prior to the incident. They appear to possess the ability to move through solid matter and may have intentionally collected human tissue samples for an unidentified purpose. It is notable that, for several days following Incident 221-B, strange "lights" and "aircraft" were reported conducting flights above Site-221, exhibiting many properties consistent with UFOs described by civilian personnel throughout the 20th and 21st centuries.
- A sizeable amount of physical material, and possibly at least one intact body, was taken by these entities. None of the tissue remnants collected by the analysis team corresponded with the amount of tissue one would expect to find from a human body. Additionally, one of these entities was seen by a security officer "dragging" a corpse away from the facility

shortly after the initial security breach.
- Security Officers Rodriguez and Michelson were either killed upon entering the office from which they heard a struggle or captured. The events that took place within that office and their fates remain unknown.

This incident is now classified as resolved. No further investigations are scheduled.

Foundation Mandated Interlude

Three Foundation personnel sat at a table. Two of them had their eyes fixated on a small pencil drawing the third one was working on, the air growing heavier by the second.

After a few more intense moments, the one working on the little art project, Agent Cobalt, sat up straight. Slowly, she placed the pencil down and held up the piece of paper. The rabbit sketched onto the paper blinked. The other two's eyes widened. The little thing then hopped around on the surface, and started to break away from its prison. In mere seconds, it reached out of the two dimensional space it was occupying. In another second, its structure shattered and the previously animated bunny collapsed into a small pile of dust.

After a long, awkward silence, Agent Cobalt finally spoke: "I think it expired."

"I'm sorry, Alex," Agent Green said, chewing on his unlit cigarette. "But this is just pathetic."

"Well, I mean," Agent Cobalt rolled her eyes. "That Pol Legler guy congratulated me on successfully reaching 'the Flow', and then mocked me for five straight minutes on how it was the most terrible access to Flow he's ever seen. So yeah, I know."

Meanwhile, Dr. Samuels, the other person to witness this little endeavor, poked the fine carbon powder with his pen. "Actually, this is very interesting."

Both agents turned to look at him.

Dr. Samuels adjusted his glasses. "If what the Person of Interest said in his 'lecture' stands correct, it means that most anomalous art pieces were not made by Type Blues or Type Greens. They are the product of this other system that we had previously overlooked."

"So we have to deal with the chances of every normal artist pursuing an anomalous career?" Agent Green huffed. "Sure sounds interesting, doc."

"No, look at it this way." Samuels tapped the table. "This new understanding doesn't change the reality of the anart community; it just means that the circle is composed of more ordinary humans than we previously thought. And that actually means that the chances of an artist turning into an anartist on their own are pretty slim. However, that could well be how the group originally started."

"But if they're taught, it's easier to get it?" Green contemplated.

"Should we go ahead and shut down the studio then?" Agent Cobalt suggested. "They are both normal people, so it should be easy to just ambush them when they're away from their artwork and resources."

"No, agent," Samuels shared a brief look with Green, then returning his gaze to Cobalt. "We need you to finish the lessons. And if possible, establish stable connections with the two PoIs."

"What?"

"He's right," Green added. "If this is what we're dealing with now, we need to know more, not less. You'll have to keep up the undercover work."

"But—"

"If you're worried about getting to create anart on your own through non-standard means, we will get the paperwork ready."

"I just," Cobalt sighed. "Actually, nevermind."

"You're dismissed, agent," Green said. "Put that art degree of yours to good use."

Cobalt nodded and exited the room. As the door sealed up again, Green turned to the doctor. "So?"

Samuels tossed him a folder. "Remember this?"

Agent Green picked up the document and flipped it open.

> **Incident Report 03042013-ART-0042**
>
> **Overview:** On 28/03/2013, Martha Jenerous (PoI-4986, Anartist Individual), produced a total of 30 pamphlets, 27 of which were distributed to the public. 12 pamphlets were recovered afterwards.
>
> In the following week, all the individuals who received the pamphlets proceeded to read through their content, and subsequently developed an obsession to create artwork in various forms. The individuals affected by the items showed only limited or no control over this process. About 61% of created artwork was anomalous in nature, and often harmful to human life. Neither the affected individuals nor PoI-4986 were able to cease or affect the anomalous properties of these created objects.
>
> A total of 63 casualties were accounted for, see attached reports for **`details`**. PoI-4986 was apprehended and brought in for questioning.

"Shit," Agent Green cursed as he glanced over the overview. "This is the same thing?"

Dr. Samuels flipped the files to another page, and pointed at the archive picture. "The title of the pamphlet is called 'Flow 2.0'. Not exactly subtle."

"So where's this person?"

"Given a Class-A. Doesn't remember a thing now."

"Okay, I think I remember it now," Agent Green rubbed his nose bridge. "That Martha, she cried a ton when we brought her in, right?"

Dr. Samuels turned the files over to his side, and flipped a few more pages. "You remember it well. Here, she cried, said that she didn't mean it, and begged us to get it out of her head."

"And so we did."

"Yes."

"So, we came across this already, someone already attempted to spread this," Agent Green frowned, "And there was some potential danger to this."

"That, and the fact that she was roommates with our assistant professor of the studio when the incident occurred."

"What?" Green was shocked. "How come she wasn't brought in?"

"Says here we raided their place, and only found perfectly normal paintings in this Yang's quarters. The only thing strange was a bunch of empty frames on the wall, and apparently," Samuels took a closer look. "A weird stray cat in the apartment."

Green let out the deep sigh. "Let me guess, the cat was anomalous right."

"We monitored her recent activities, and yes. The cat is made of paint."

Agent Green just furiously chewed on his cigarette.

Finally, he spoke again. "I trust that Cobalt is *not* going to get into dangerous shit like this."

"We both read the transcript of the lecture. They took the time to warn their class, and I don't think recklessness would do them any good either."

"Trusting their moralities seem like a terrible idea," Agent Green sighed. "But I guess at least I can trust Alex's ability."

"We cannot exactly miss this chance either. If we just take actions to stop this, more will appear eventually."

"And they will be way more cautious."

"Exactly. Who knows if we'll be able to get our men in next time."

"What exactly is in it for us, aside from creating better undercover

agents?" Green scratched his head. "I mean, agents who can produce anomalous things without aid, easier for us, but higher-ups aren't gonna be too happy about this."

"Amnestics to long term memories should solve the problem. Miss Jenerous hasn't done anything remotely anomalous since," Saumels shrugged. "Besides, judging from what we learn, this isn't really like reality-bending or magic. It takes way more time, and gives less of what you want, hence easier to contain or control."

"You seem to be thinking a lot about this, doc." Green said, eyeing Samuels.

Samuels leaned in, his hand placed on the document. "Martha here wrote essentially a manual of sorts, of how to access 'the Flow.' If that is possible, there is no way we can't do it ourselves. With agents trained in this and test subjects, we can map it out and figure out the basic rules of this thing."

"And?"

"Eventually, we can maybe find a way to shut it down or block it." A hint of enthusiasm showed in his voice.

"That sounds almost terrible." Agent Green said, standing up. "If you'll excuse me, I'm gonna go out for a smoke."

« **Anart Lecture** | **HUB** | **Extracurricular Practice** »

Foundation Mandated Interlude 2

Date. Creator. Materials. Results. Anomalous Properties.

Pages of data and words suqeezed into single entries, the most eye-pleasing image selected out of numberous photos, and then finally all of these slapped onto a electronic form, to be saved and and filed. And then the process was repeated again, until she exhausted the whole list of items.

Researcher Jennifer Mendez sighed. After yet another round of proofreading and checking, she pushed the submit button, sending the files to her superior. Information on the anomalous artworks created in the tests had now been compiled properly, ready to be received by field agents. She still remembered looking in slight awe as the items were displayed in the temporary containment chamber. But as interesting as those items first appeared to be, pages of their specific dimensions and materials only took all the fun out of it.

Mendez stretched a bit, yawned, and stood up from the chair. Checking her watch, she decided to grab a coffee, knowing that she had some more tests to run with Agent Cobalt this afternoon.

Ten or so minutes later, she was in front of her computer screen again, sipping coffee and treating herself with some small snacks, while half-mindedly browsing through the poorly maintained social network of the Foundation's intranet.

Her thoughts wandered about, and Mendez wondered how she, someone with literature and history degrees, came to help run tests that track someone's brain activity. Of course, she had picked up skills and knowledge here and there – one thing the Foundation did right was that education was effectively free, with proper application, you could even get very decent online courses – history of the world behind the veil, anart history, anomalous literature. She even dabbled in memetics. But still, this was a stretch.

Then again, it was just operating the machine. After being forced to go through several sessions, she got the hang of it. (Dr. Samuels was certainly not a terrible boss, but she had to wonder how come he didn't have to sit through those as well, being the head of the project.) Furthermore, readings from the tests were all filed for the professionals to analyze, along with the footage, so she didn't need to be concerned with that. As someone with a legit doctorate, Samuels was able to assemble a small team of medical and neurological professionals, conducting proper experiments on the D-Classes. Her work with Alex was just a bonus, if not something less.

But she couldn't tell Alex that, suspecting the agent would go from being stressed to utter defeat, finding her work largely useless to their effort to crack the workings of anart. At least for the time being. She did hear Dr. Samuels mention that the undercover job's importance would only show in the long run.

As the coffee ran dry and with her snacks into her stomach, Mendez checked her watch again. There was still some time, and she decided to move to the testing chamber, and maybe read a few papers there on her tablet. There were nothing better to do, and she suspected that Samuels' overenthusiasm over the whole matter was affecting her as well.

Then again, she did wish to get a proper doctorate, and with that, maybe a better position than being an assistant.

Two hours later, as Mendez sat in the testing chamber, half way through one of the papers, it was Dr. Samuels that walked in, not the agent she was expecting.

"Jennifer," Samuels stepped into the room, interrupting Medez's study plans. "Testing's cancelled, but I have a new job for you."

"Cancelled?" Mendez burst out in surprise, before quickly correcting herself. "Anything wrong, Dr. Samuels?"

"Oh no, nothing to worry about. Just that Agent Cobalt won't be able to participate in tests for the foreseeable future. Schedule changes."

Mendez couldn't help but become slightly worried with the information; didn't seem like good news if there were "schedule changes" in an undercover job. But Dr. Sameuls' face showed nothing but excitment.

"No need to be concerned, the testing with her is not essential anyways." Samuels added, having obviously mistaken the source of Mendez' worry. "Cheer up, we are going to work on something much more exciting."

"Is it the 'Project Fountain' you were planning, doctor?" Mendez had already put her tablet aside, and started to pack things up.

Samuels seemed to be in a really good mood today, as he joined the researcher in putting things back to their intended places. "Just got approved by the Site Command." He said smugly.

"Congratulations, doctor." Mendez smiled politely.

"Let me tell you this, Jennifer," Samuels grinned back. "What we had was just a warm-up, and this is going to be the real deal. No more fake anart and limited testing; closer to the source of it all than ever!"

That does sound exciting, Mendez thought as she followed Samuels out of the testing chamber, door shutting behind them.

"But first, I need you to make some preprations," Samuels said as he led Mendez back to the office building. "I need up to five D-Classes with art backgrounds. Well, at least two, that should suffice. I'll send the other requirements to you later."

"Of course." She answered.

An hour later, Mendez sat once again in her side office in front the computer screen, another cup of coffee in hand and a hastily assembled meal on the table. As she picked through the seemingly endless D-Class bios (still quite a lot even with keyword searches), she sighed again. *And Dr. Samuels wonders why she is not as excited for this as he is.*

Foundation Missed Connections

☮ **Missed Connections ▼**

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▼ You Saved My Life And I Don't Even Know Your Name - m4f ☒

During the last containment breach I was the researcher who got trapped under the falling debris. You were the black haired security guard who unloaded your gun at SCP-1305, you may know it as the Cat Lure, and drew it away from me. Without you I know I would have been turned into one of those things. I would enjoy the chance to at least buy you a drink or dinner sometime at the site cafeteria, so please reply with what SCP-1305 said just before you shot at it.

---

reply ✉ | report | email to friend

▼ I Hope You Remember Me! (Site-) ☒

I'm a researcher at site . You were the one working with me on Project [REDACTED]. I'm the one who was able to [REDACTED] when the [REDACTED] went [REDACTED]. I hope this message will help you remember me, because I really think we had a thing. The

number to contact me is ( ) - .

---

reply ✉ | report | email to friend

▼ Meet me for infinite Pizza? (Site-17) ☒

To the person who used SCP-458 on Tuesday the 13th prior to 1:30 PM. I thought I was the only one who enjoyed pineapple and anchovy pizza on a wheat crust with white sauce but after discovering the remains of your lunch set in the waste disposal unit, I have discovered that I am not alone in my strange prefrences for pizza. I would love to meet up for lunch. Please meet me in the Site 17 cafeteria tomorrow at 1:30 PM. We can share our unique tastes and maybe something more. I'll be wearing the yellow tie and the black rimmed glasses.

---

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▼ To the one with the gun named "Martha" - Dinner on me? (Site-19) ☒

To the red-haired female agent I saw in the mess hall the on saturday at 12:30ish, thank you for buying me lunch. I lost my wallet and you were kind enough to buy me something to eat- I was STARVING! Sadly, you left before I could even get your name. You told me a little bit about how you used your gun. I think you referred to it as 'Martha'? I'd like to know more about you! I'm stuck in the labs mostly so maybe you can tell me some stories about the outside over dinner? It's on me! Please meet me outside site 19's mess hall at 5pm on the

21st (sunday!)

---

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▼ I need to thank you - f4nb ☒

Me: Head Researcher, you know the project
You: Short but sharp in your grey suit, smiling, your L4 badge skillfully obstructed

We both know how the council voted on this program, but then you swept in and out of my office anyway, leaving a stack of folders and no perceptible trail.

I need to find you. I need to thank you.

And I don't need to know which one you work for, but you have to tell them: We need more.

---

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▼ It was all in your eyes - m4f (Site-41) ☒

I never learned your name. You came into Site 41 with the new transfers after they decommissioned some of the Western Alpine containment areas. The first time I ever saw you, you looked to be in your 50's, maybe a few years younger than me, with your greying amber hair in a loose bun. When our eyes met, I saw relief cross your face, and maybe something… deeper. Then your eyes went wide, and you looked away.

You must have transferred away after that, but the personnel records must have been scrubbed or classified beyond my access level

(which in itself is impressive).

I've been at this job for so many years, and I've never felt anything but alone. I've never questioned that bitter truth or my life of cold service, but now the doubt is there and I can't ignore it. I should know better than to ask now, but I have to know.

What am I missing?

---

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▼ You're really funny (Site-551) ☒

Hey, so, I'm really going through a bit of a rough patch at the moment. I just have very overwhelming apathy for everything that happens. You were a researcher at Site-551, the one where I'm stationed at. A really big containment breach happened, I don't know the specifics, but we we're in the safe room waiting for the MTF to get everything under control, and everyone was scared as hell.

You decided to pass the time with some jokes, and some personal life stories. I'll be really honest, but that's probably the hardest I've ever laughed for as long as I can remember. For the first time in a while, you've made me feel better when I needed it most.

I think we should hang out sometime. Maybe grab a sandwich from Sonic? I haven't seen you since the breach happened, so I don't know if you got transferred over or something, but when you get the chance, we should hang out.

---

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▼ You ran from me (Site-89) ☒

You were the MTF agent at Site 89 who saw me, a researcher, and ran like you'd seen a ghost.

I don't blame you. I was angry with you for a while about what you did, but in the end I did the same thing too. What right do I have to be angry, then? I understand. When someone calls on you, you have to answer. Maybe it's just a miracle that we answered the same call.

I know you, or at least the person you were before. I don't think running will help either of us, and maybe we can fix what broke. I'm upset too, but I miss you more, and I don't think you did the wrong thing five years ago. Even if you're mad at yourself, or at me, I just want to talk. Even if it doesn't work out, I think we should try.

---

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▼ Missed Connection During Cleaning of 173 Container - m4f ☒

I am D- . We had to watch 173 last Thursday while someone else cleaned its container. I didn't want to take my eyes off it to ask for your number. I can't access the cleaning log, so I thought I'd try here.

---

reply ✉ | report | email to friend

▼ you were there when i needed it (Site-231) ☒

Hey. We worked on SCP-231 together, I'm not sure if you remember. If you took pills to forget about it and I've just reminded you, then I'm sorry. But you don't seem like the kind of person who would want to forget this experience.

The procedure was

actually, I don't even need to explain it. If you remember it, then you'd know that words can't comprehend what we had to do.

I had nightmares for weeks. I don't know whether you had them or not, but your pep talks seriously helped. In my opinion, I felt a bond growing, and it was growing fast.

You voluntarily moved off-site, and I never got your personal contact info. Look, I'm going through some rough times right now, and if you got me through the procedure, you can get me through this. Maybe we can talk over a drink?

I know you're a busy man, so I hope you are able to read this.

See you soon. Hopefully.

---

reply ✉ | report | email to friend

▼ To the archivist that saved my a** ☒

In 2016, I put in a request to access documents on a time-sensitive anomaly that only manifests once every four years, only to find that RAISA had a six-month backlog on archival requests. On top of that, my request

was vague as hell, less than a paragraph. But you came through for me in a day. I don't know if you're a man, woman, some automated search engine that processed my request at a higher priority because of some keyword I inserted without knowing, but I'd like to meet you, to say thanks in person.

---

reply ✉ | report | email to friend

▼ We worked on the thing in Boston together - f4m ☒

You know which Boston; it's not the one in Mass., but in the Midwest. We were so busy containing the growth that we didn't get to exchange names. I was a scared rookie, and I wanted out. I was willing to down a bottle of amnestics and go back to living my life, but you showed me that we could still be human despite all of the horrible shit we see and do. Maybe we can get a drink around Christmas?

---

reply ✉ | report | email to friend

▼ To the fellow Modest Mouse fan (Site-64) ☒

I've been listening to my music out loud in the Site-64 cafeteria at nights for years now. Running those experiments into the early hours of the morning you often have the place to yourself when grabbing a coffee refill. You entered behind me at some point and started singing along. We talked about music for another fifteen minutes before I needed to get back to the lab. I never caught your name and I haven't seen you around the site since. Hope

to see you around again sometime. Until then, I guess we simply Missed The Boat.

---

reply ✉ | report | email to friend

▼ To the D-class with the grey eyes and loud laugh (Site-11) ☒

I still remember the day you were supposed to be terminated. I was transferred off before, of course. I don't think they'd let you remember, but I'd been a wreck.
It's alright, I remember enough for the both of us. I remember you asked if I was okay. I remember how your eyes looked like my sister's and I had to remind myself that preserving human life, preserving your life, it didn't matter if only lasted a month. I remember that you were the only person who laughed at my jokes on the team, how it was loud and a little hysterical. I remember the pitying look my supervisor gave me as I watched you go every night with a mix of relief and cold horror. I remember counting down in my head to the thirty-first. I think it fucked me up more than the project did.
I think you might have been the only person there who looked at me like I was still human. Seeing you at Site-11 made me feel more so than I had since. They wouldn't let you remember, but I swear I saw something in your eyes change.
It doesn't make sense to kill hundreds every months. I don't think they ever wanted me to remember you as a person.
Look, I'm sorry. I want another chance. I want to talk. I don't know if I can get you a coffee, but I sure as hell intend to find out.

---

reply ✉ | report | email to friend

▼ You are my best nightmare ☒

I met you when I was sinking in the void. You told me a tale of a world's end, of a universe sundered by immense calamity, but I was glad just to meet you. You came to me at my darkest hour, a streak of moonlight in the endless darkness. You saved many lives with your messages, and my life might not even matter for you, but know that you saved mine too.
I've told them your message. I wonder if I'll ever be able to tell you mine.

---

reply ✉ | report | email to friend

▼ To the person who's followed me for the past 3 sites - f4nb (Site-41) ☒

Where are you nowadays? Are you holding up? I feel a little silly reaching out like this, but you're the one person who's been a constant in my Foundation career, so far. In Area 12 you were the one giving the seminar to all the new researchers. You somehow managed to make it digestible, even though everything I knew about science and the world was being shattered in front of my eyes. Later, I got transferred to Site-36 because of God-knows-why, and you apparently came along too, since I saw you (beautifully) play your cello for the Site's annual talent show. I asked around a little bit, but apparently that was your last day? Then I got kicked around to Site-41. I saw you in the hallways, and in the mess hall, but I never worked up the nerve to talk to you until

my last day there.

Which just so happened to be the day we had an unannounced containment breach drill.

Rambling aside, I would've liked to have known you better, and I hope you're doing well, wherever you are.

---

reply ✉ | report | email to friend

▼ I Swear I Knew You (Site-31) ☒

So, I think I knew you. I saw you — tall, brown straight hair, not sure of gender, high ranking at Site-31 — while walking around to the cafeteria and I just got the worst case of Deja Vu. Thought it might be just one of those things that happens, but I got to thinking about how memory's a bit fuzzy around here, what with that window meme going 'round and all. I thought about it longer, and yeah, I really think I must have known you at some point.

So, I'm Level 3 Site Wide, so I've got that little orange badge that you get, and I have 4/3018 clearance. I'm out inside SCP-3018's enclosure from 9:00 to 5:00 (almost makes it sound like a normal job) every Tuesday, Wednesday and Friday. Sometimes I'm out there Saturdays for recreation. I used to wear glasses (got contacts now), I'm a little overweight, I've got a mustache and the beginnings of a beard that never grows quite like I want it to. If you were erased from my memory for some classified reason, then I guess ignore this, but if not, I'd really hate to forget an important person in my life.

Oh, and if you wear glasses, uh, please don't when you come out to see me. I'm supposed to be clean of window meme now, but you never know with these things.

---

reply ✉ | report | email to friend

▼ I can't remember what you look like (Site-19) ☒

It was the breach at Site 19 last month. I don't remember much of what happened. Maybe the higher-ups dosed me with amnestics, for some reason. It doesn't matter. I remember you. I don't remember your name, or what you looked like. I don't remember what we spoke about, or even if we spoke. I just remember that you were so, so deeply fascinating.
…I also recall that you weren't a sphere.

---

reply ✉ | report | email to friend

▼ and then there were two. ☒

Hey. It's been quite a while, huh?

The last time we saw each other was with that 096 shit. That was one hell of a memory.

Out of that entire squadron, it's just me and you left, dude. You were one hell of a soldier, and even though I haven't seen you in quite some time, I bet you still are.

I was wondering as to whether you wanted to transfer to Damn Feds with me. We were an outstanding team, and putting our skills together once again can only be beneficial, right?

Oh, also, there's the $20 bucks you owe me. That can contribute, too.

Hope to hear back from you soon, man.

---

reply ✉ | report | email to friend

▼ Pilot who saved my ass. - f4f (Site-201) ☒

Hi. I'm , researcher at Site-201, but previously at Site-28. You might've been transferred, might've not? Anyway, back when a shipment of that shit from those Russians made it to Brighton Beach, we'd declared it a Level-V breach. Of course, we called in Epsilon-10, aka those hotshots who got all the hardware we borrowed from the US. So you come in, in one of our helicopters, shooting at some tentacle flesh horror, and then manage to stick a landing on an elevated train track. Honestly, chalk it up to me being stupid and gay, but i was instantly in love. I was inspired to write this because Site-201 is the all-important support site, and if you're not transferred, you'll be staying here. Get back to me and we can have a coffee or something.

---

reply ✉ | report | email to friend

▼ I Know You Can See This ☒

Hey, sweetheart, it’s been nice playing around in your head. Memetics, ain’t they some shit? Just thought I’d say we got off on the wrong foot, you and me. How’s about the two of us sit down and have a real… well I can’t call it a heart to heart.

But give me a chance, doll. I may be taking up space in your head, but I can pay rent, *if you know what I mean.* Pop in front of a mirror sometime, we'll have a nice chat.

~~reply ✉~~ | ~~report~~ | ~~email to friend~~

▼ You dropped your wallet (Site-62) ☒

Hey, so, you were a researcher who was needed somewhere ASAP due to an emergency, and you were rushing down the hallway to not waste time.

While on your way, your wallet fell out of your pocket, with about 150 bucks, your credit card (Don't worry, I didn't look at any important stuff), some gift cards for Sonic, and a bunch of pictures of a very cute little golden retriever (Absolutely awesome dog, by the way.)

Hit me up when you have the chance, I'd be happy to give it back to you. I'm at Site-62, and I'm probably not going anywhere anytime soon.

---

reply ✉ | report | email to friend

▼ You helped me get my experiments off the ground. (Site-565)

Hey, so, I was trying to get an experiment with SCP- off the ground. Since that'll probably be blacked out… the big one at Site-565? yeah, that one. Basically, the higher ups kept on saying that it wasn't worth wasting D-class on, and that we didn't have any more to spare after that containment breach back in May.

Then you stepped in, reran the numbers, and got me enough to get my experiments done and then some. Without going into too much detail, those results helped cut the cost of containment down by 83% and got me promoted. I don't know if you fudged the numbers or if there was an actual mistake, but either way, I want to thank you. Maybe we can meet back up and grab lunch from that Subway just outside the Site? It feels like the least I could do. I have lunch from 12:30 - 1:45 PM; if our schedules overlap, you can find me at the table diagonally opposite the salad bar, probably wearing a Star Wars shirt. If they don't overlap, message me with your schedule, and I'll see if I can work something out with my superiors.

---

reply ✉ | report | email to friend

▼ I finally found you! ☒

You - An young cadet in your twenties, leaving with Mobile Task Force Beta-10 ("Time Hoppers") on a mission last Wednesday at 17:00.

Me - The 63-year-old female scientist that passed you in the corridor.

When i saw you i dropped everything in my hands and just stared, I could not believe my eyes. I knew then and there that you were the one i have searched for my entire life. I hurried away, happy and confused with a clump in my throat and butterflies in my stomach. I know it is inappropriate and probably will cause trouble but I just have to see you again. Please meet me in the cafeteria on level 2, any

day between 12:00 and 13:00.

I think you might be my father.

---

reply ✉ | report | email to friend

Post A Missed Connection

The Foundation is as vast as it is clandestine. Yet studies have shown that personnel require social interactions and personal connections to maintain their emotional and mental health. This Missed Connections page is for those with the express interest in meeting someone they met in passing, have lost touch with, or were otherwise unable to exchange contact information with.

All personnel are required to be up-to-date on the Employee Conduct Handbook and Interpersonal Relations Guidelines. Postings are for meeting with an interest in a platonic or romantic nature. Postings of a joking quality will be moved to the "humorous missed connections" page. *(this includes postings about or by SCPs, SCP-Js, GOI personnel, or other non-Foundation personnel)*

Do NOT contact other users with unsolicited offers. Do NOT post phone numbers, email addresses, or URLs in postings. Sensitive information WILL be redacted. DO keep postings site appropriate. DO report any postings that violate Foundation policies.

To post a missed connection, please read **here**.

Foundation Patent/Intellectual Property Policy

Administrative Department

A304. Patent/Intellectual Property Policy

I. Purpose
In lieu of far-reaching research across select sites of the SCP Foundation (hereinafter referred to as The Foundation), novel discoveries and inventions with respect to the biological, technological, memetic, and anti-artistic sciences will inevitably be made. The Administrative Department (hereinafter referred to as Administration) prioritizes Foundation interests above all else, and extends to consider public benefit and usefulness from products of the Foundation's scientific research and inventiveness where able. The assurance and control given by patent laws or other legitimate means for the security of property rights may be important in process of such prioritization. It is additionally perceived that Foundation employees may require help in deciding and assessing patentability and in indicting patent applications for or generally securing creations made by them.

Furthermore, many such inventions involve equities beyond those of the inventor since the utilization of Foundation facilities, the acceptance of conditions for employment, and the legally-binding commitments in regards to both research reserves and patent rights raise questions concerning the rights and equities of all concerned. The motivation behind this patent strategy is to set up a component to serve the general population advantageously while maintaining Foundation interests above all else, to decide and appraise all concerned gatherings of pertinent rights and values, to encourage patent submissions, to assist in the authorizing of creations, to ensure the fair dissemination of any sovereignties or other monetary returns, to give consistency in patent issues, and to accommodate sufficient detailing of patent exercises.

II. Policy and Procedure
A. It shall be the policy of the Administration to empower the idea that patentable innovations created at the Foundation should be utilized for the best conceivable open advantage and to give each sensible incentive to the workforce, understudies and staff for the exposure, assessment and dispersal of such developments. At the point when the Foundation offers help for the improvement of a patentable innovation, it is sensible for the Foundation to take part in the products of such advancement, including repayment for its expenses. To that end, the Foundation energizes the acquisition of licenses for such creations and the authorizing or other commercialization thereof in light of a legitimate concern for the populous, the innovator, and the Foundation.

B. Any creation or disclosure (1) which is the aftereffect of research carried on by or under the heading of a representative of a grounds of the Foundation as well as having the expenses thereof paid from reserves given by, under the control of or controlled by a grounds of the Foundation, or (2) which is made by a worker of a grounds of the Foundation and which identifies with the representative's field of work, or (3) which has been produced in entire or partially by the usage of assets or offices having a place with a grounds of the Foundation, may be the property of the material grounds of the Foundation. The pertinence of the above expressed criteria to any development or disclosure will be resolved at the sole tact of the Site Director of the separate grounds of the Foundation or his/her designee.

C. As a state of their employment or continued employment by or enlistment at a grounds of the Foundation, every employee, representative and understudy concurs that he/she is authoritatively bound by this patent approach as actualized by the separate grounds of the Foundation and should answer to the officer or third-party interest so assigned by the Site Director of the grounds of the Foundation to oversee and market such creations and discoveries concerning that grounds, any innovation or disclosure which such employee, worker or understudy has imagined, found, created or potentially integrated into practice by them or under their bearing whenever following their underlying arrangement by, employment by, or enlistment with that grounds of the Foundation.

D. All creations and disclosures that meet the criteria of II.B. are thus appointed to the Foundation for the advantage of the Foundation. Employees, workers and understudies don't have the authority to dole out rights in such innovations and discoveries to outsiders. The Site Director of each grounds of the Foundation is approved to additionally appoint any creation or discovery it is inclined to claim according to this approach to an assigned philanthropic committee established for the advantage of the particular grounds of the Foundation. The appointment will be fashioned with full consistence regarding this arrangement.

E. Regarding the programmed task of possession put forward in this approach, the Site Directors or their designees are approved to pay to the creators, their beneficiaries or assigns, a level of the eminences, charges, or other budgetary returns received by the grounds of the Foundation (or the third party interest to which an innovation may have been doled out as per the terms of this arrangement) from such development after a conclusion of fifteen percent (15%) thereof for overhead expenses, in addition to a finding for expenses of licensing and insurance of protected innovation rights and any abnormal costs paid by the grounds or its third-party designee or the innovator. Every grounds Site Director shall be in charge of the advancement of an arrangement overseeing the level of sovereignties, expenses, and other budgetary profits for a creation paid to the creator and administering the interior conveyance of the grounds of the Foundation's offer of such money related returns.

G. If you've read this far, you'll know II.G is out of order. This is a manifesto. Are We Cool Yet? (hereinafter referred to simply as ?) is the greatest threat to the Foundation. ? is pretty well defined by the following: "better described as a "movement," an underground network of people sharing a similar philosophy, rather than a hierarchy with a defined command structure and goals. That is a lot harder to fight, investigate or infiltrate." However, the *best* description to date would be: ""Fuck you up + anomalous + Are we cool yet? = art." We get you dislike us because it is formulaic. Here's a formula for you: "Virulent fungus/abandoned school/exaggerated humanoid/spatial anomaly/otherwise-benign household object/ instance from an esoteric specialization of a very difficult branch of

science and or math/bathroom-humor-level "joke" SCP + Item # + Object Class + Special Containment Procedures + novel design + Level 4 Authorization collapsible (access granted) + anomalous + fuck you up + SCP = science." You push us to your margins and so by your logic, we have you surrounded.

F. Yearly reports of patent issues will be made to the O5-Council or their representatives for data and that of the Administration inside forty (40) days following the completion of each financial year, to incorporate as a base recognizable proof of each patent and patent applied for, the conveyance of patent income including the offer heading off to the designer, and the costs of getting and overseeing licenses. The O5-Council or their representatives may endorse suitable arrangements for such reveals.

view source

Foundation Rhymes - A Collection of Children's Rhymes With an SCP Personnel Twist

Someone's Computer
Someone's computer sat on a desk
Someone's computer fell during a test
All of Rosen's tools and all of Rosen's brain
Couldn't put the computer together again

Computer's owner asked Rosen for more
Computer's owner was punched to the floor
All the Site's agents and all the Site's men
Couldn't get the owner a computer again

Smartie Rosen
Smartie Smartie Tech Head Rosen
How I wonder why you've chosen
To take care of the Foundation's tech
I would think you'd know it's heck
Smartie Smartie Tech Head Rosen
How I wonder why you've chosen.

Konny and Clef
Konny and Clef almost met death
When fixing their big mistake
Konny was apt but then he snapped
And Clef's neck was next to break

Tickity Tickity Bright
Badum Badum Thump
Bright's soul did another jump
The body died
Bright's soul flew out
Badum Badum Thump

Ring Around Lycaon
Red around the rupture

A botfly he did capture
Swelling, swelling
Lycaon's full of maggots!

While working with some cerussite
The little tiny parasites
Crawling, crawling
They all popped out!

Baa Baa Strelnikov
Agent Agent Strelnikov have you any heads
Yes you yes you from three Chechens
One from hijack, one from war
One from son of bitch who steal from store
Agent Agent Strelnikov have you any heads
Yes you yes you from three Chechens

Pretty Doctor Rights
Pretty Pretty Doctor Rights
How I wonder of your nights
Of that lucky man of yours
How do you get him on all fours
Pretty Pretty Doctor Rights
How I wonder of your nights

Note: Junior Psychologist Chibi is no longer allowed to use Foundation supplies to distribute any literature concerning the actions and activites of any Foundation personnel. If you're going to write these kind of things, keep it in your computer. You are lucky that Rosen felt enough pity to save you from multiple stab wounds. -O5-

Founding

August 12th, 1993

The door buzzer buzzed.

“Ah, that must be them now,” Dr. Crow stood up and walked to the door. He always did that: never said "come in", never had anyone else go do it, he always got up and opened the door himself. He wasn't a man to let blindness get him down.

“I’m sorry we’re late, Dr. Crow,” a woman's voice came from the doorway. The group around the coffee table turned their heads.

“Oh no, it’s no trouble at all.” Crow turned from the new arrivals to those already gathered around his coffee table, revealing three guests: a woman in her mid-thirties, with long brown hair in a braid, a rather nondescript middle-aged man in a business suit, and a balding man with a beard and a pink button-down shirt. “Attention, all! These are the three final members of our group: Doctor Sophia Light, Doctor Everett Mann, and Doctor Simon Glass. They are all good friends of mine, and have worked with me many times in the past. Connor, I am sure you have met them before.”

The doctor, now out of the hospital, nodded slightly.

Crow smiled broadly and walked back to his chair at the unofficial head of the table. He was a man with a friendly smile, frizzy blond hair reminiscent of Einstein, and the quiet, powerful aura of a mafia don. He was, as usual, dressed in a ratty t-shirt and jeans, with his wrap-around sunglasses over his sightless eyes and Kain lying at his feet. Dr. Connor Gerry stood several feet behind Crow’s chair like a clothing store mannequin, hands folded behind his back and no trace of emotion on his face. Francis had not known him to be an expressive man before, but now he was simply unsettling.

Dr. Crow clapped his hands together.

“Now then, I think it’s about time to start. Benjamin, if you will, please.”

“Mm-hmm. Okay, so. Nemo, Fats and I have gone into the facility three times now, and here’s what we have so far.” Ben opened several thick manilla folders one after another, spilling dozens of photographs and sketches across the table. “Turns out the place isn’t infinite, but it is big. Really big. The part we ran through last week was just one of the side towers, right here…” he pointed to a sketch of a large cylinder surrounded by eight smaller ones. “Each of the branch towers goes down twenty levels, and is connected the center one every other level. Center one goes down at least forty-five levels. The entire place looks like it’s wired and ready to use. It’s like if whoever built it just got up and left and took their shit with them.”

“*If* anyone built it,” Nemo interrupted.

“Yes, yes, *if* anyone built it. It’s not a normal building, if you hadn’t figured that out yet. The exits lead to locations hundreds of miles apart: One door went to the arctic, another opened into a cave, and the buildings on the surface look to be somewhere in Nevada.”

“Classic,” Jack said.

“Ayup. Watch out for those pesky aliens and their rogue anal probings.”

There were a few chuckles, solely from Nemo and Fats. Ben paid the response or lack thereof no mind and continued to speak.

“Exploring the place fully will take another week or two, but that’s a pretty generous estimate. We weren’t able to find the main power station, so it’s all in standby mode.”

“And the statue?” Dr. Crow said.

“Right back where we locked it up: Tower 1, Level 7, Chamber 3.” He pointed to the appropriate spot: The sketches already had designations thought up and filled in.

“Good, good…” Crow scratched Kain behind his ears. “Now then,

what do you have planned on for your next expedition?"

Francis scanned the photos. Dark, empty hallways and dark empty rooms. Despite the fact that the nightmares had dulled in the last few days, the pictures filled him with apprehension: the statue was still there, in that dark. Still watching. Still waiting.

No, I'm watching you.

The mantra came to his mind automatically now, yanking him back from that precipice. He was the watcher, the statue was the watched. That was the way it was, and how it should be. The statue was just that. A statue that needed storage. What it was capable of was secondary. Merely a statue that needed to be put in the proper place.

Dammit stop drifting off…

"I say we just destroy the thing and be done with it," John said. He was one of Connor's assistants, a small, shifty-looking man who seemed to be Bright's long lost little brother, if his surliness was any indication.

"And what if you can't?" Sophia said. "What if that only makes it angry?"

"If it doesn't work the first time, then you hit it harder the second time."

Really, John? You goddamn idiot…

"Not harder. Hit smarter." Strelnikov this time, another one of Connor's assistants. His accent was quite thick. "To fight directly is stupid. We must get around. Perhaps we find a weakness, eh? Then we strike."

Smart, but off-base. Re-railing this train…

"And then we throw it away." Francis said. "John, I don't know what it is that you actually do or why you're here, but I can tell for sure that you're not a scientist. Sure, we *could* destroy it, but that gains us nothing. If we can keep it locked up, which apparently we can,

then we can watch it. And eventually understand it, which can help us when we deal with things like it in the future."

John sat back in his chair, glaring at Francis. The others seemed to be in agreement: nodded heads and "mm-hmms" throughout the thirteen. It hadn't been much of an argument to begin with.

"That said," Francis continued. "We need support. While it may be locked up now, we've essentially set it up in an empty room, shut the door, and check in on it occasionally. That won't work as a long term containment plan, even if all of us were to be put on the project today, which I'm guessing we will."

Adam smiled, and it was the sort to prelude a polite correction.

"Both true and false. I've found that a small group of people in the right place can handle almost anything: It's why I work with all of you in the way I do. While I appreciate your concern for maintaining security of the statue, who would we go to? Would you trust the government to spare us the red tape and help us accomplish anything, rather than taking it all for themselves and bungling the entire thing? Would you trust the public not to go into a panic when they realize that there is a blatant violation of what they thought they knew without an explanation? Any support we'll have will be what we can muster ourselves. There's more brainpower concentrated in this one room than anywhere else on Earth. I'm sure we can make the solutions reveal themselves.

"A good house needs a solid foundation, and that foundation is sitting right here at this table. I'm not going to hand off the responsibility of protecting against whatever or whoever is out there to a faceless bureaucracy: this is a job for people I trust. We have our foundation, now we just build the house."

Four Seconds, Low Pitched

An extended siren for fifteen seconds meant fire. A continuous siren meant evacuation. Three short sirens meant a lock down, and two short sirens followed by an extended siren was a bomb threat. Beyond that, things started getting complicated.

All in all, Jackson Sloth Memorial High School had sixty-seven unique siren codes for different types of emergencies, ranging from a low-pitched four second siren for a rain of live fish, to a medium-pitched three-and-a-half second siren for a rain of dead fish. The first nine days of each semester were dedicated entirely to emergency drills, and a siren-worthy event occurred an average of three times every two weeks. Their rival school, Sloth's Pit Senior High School, had a lower emergency rate, but a higher ratio of students with an Omega-3 deficiency.

Today, no sirens were ringing. For sixteen year old Adam Snerling, this was the greatest emergency of all. Adam blinked sweat from his eyes and stared hopelessly at a calculus exam he couldn't begin to comprehend. Indexes and coefficients rode squiggly lines up and down the page, threatening to spill out onto the desk and dance around the room. Adam looked up from the paper. Most of the class seemed to be trapped in the same state of horrified incapability as him. Three tables over, Adam's friend Utkarsh was scribbling frantically. Fifteen minutes into the test, it didn't seem so funny anymore. Adam eyed the teacher at the front of the room warily, gauging his chances for a successful peek at the paper in front of him. No dice. Tenure at JSMH had honed Ms Burton's reflexes to an almost precognitive level. She was staring directly at Adam, with the intensity of an electric vulture. Adam swallowed and looked back to the clock. Somehow another five desperate, silent minutes had gone by already. Twenty minutes spent on the first question, and his only thought was that *x* was probably in there somewhere. Resigned to failure, his eyes flickered listlessly around the room. The open door with its view of a beautiful not-flooded hallway; the open windows

with their view of a beautiful fishless sky; other things that were neither the test or a means of escape; and the frustratingly silent sirens, which had begun to sprout hair.

Yesssssssssss.

Ten minutes and a brief trumpet solo later, Jackson Sloth Memorial High had devised its sixty-eighth unique emergency siren code, and Ms Burton's test had been postponed for the seventh week in a row. Ms Burton sat on a picnic table out on the school lawn and stared blearily at the test paper in her hands. Slowly, she began to rip it into little pieces. Adam stood at the top of the steps outside the school's main entrance and watched his teacher's mental breakdown with a purely non-malicious satisfaction. Utkarsh was sitting a few steps down, with his head in his hands. Adam sat down beside him and watched the road. White vans began to pull up at the front of the school. The signs on the side read "School Cosmetology Provision". The paint didn't seem to have dried yet. A representative from the company exited the lead van and approached the principal to ask what, exactly, had happened.

"Same as last time," said the principal, "Except with hair."

Adam and Utkarsh shifted a half-inch to the side as a squad of black-suited school cosmetologists marched past them into the school building. Adam grinned at the stern-faced military efficiency of the team.

"Elite Mobile Hair-Disposal Unit Bravo Sixty-Niner!" he said, "Codename: Occam's Leg Razor!"

Utkarsh didn't respond. Adam frowned, and nudged him.

"How 'bout that hair, huh?" said Adam. Utkarsh nodded without looking up. "Pretty crazy. Wonder where that came from."

Utkarsh shrugged noncommittally.

"Probably your mom's pubes, right?" said Adam desperately.

"I was gonna ace that test," muttered Utkarsh.

"Alright," sighed Adam. This again.

"I was!" said Utkarsh. He turned his head and glared at Adam, "I was. I studied for it. I studied for it when it was announced, two months ago, and I studied for it every week it was delayed since then, and now I could find a integral with both hands behind my back and my dick on fire. I was going to ace it."

Adam smiled nervously. Utkarsh snorted and turned away, hunched over on the step, arms folded. He didn't look back at Adam. Adam fidgeted nervously.

"I was going to ace it," Utkarsh growled.

"Dude, you're still gonna get a good mark—"

"I'm gonna get the same mark everybody else is gonna get. The same mark everybody always gets, and no-one ever, ever earns," Utkarsh barked. Adam shuffled the half-inch back. "You know, I want to do shit, okay? I just want to do shit, and when I do shit, I want it to make shit happen, okay? Cause and effect. Just once, just for once, when I throw a ball I want it to come back down, instead of getting snatched out of the air by a fucking owl."

"It's usually an eagle," Adam mumbled.

"My dad's gonna ask me how the test went today, Adam, and I gotta tell him I'm getting a B because the PA system decided to grow a beard. That is bullshit. That is a literal hailstorm of bullshit."

(Two second low pitch, three short.)

"I'm sorry, man," mumbled Adam, "But shit happens, right? Everyone goes through this. It's just the way the world works. Maybe you needa talk to someone about this. Not me. Someone who's not me."

"Nah," said Utkarsh. He blinked, and shook his head, "No-one would ever believe me. Let's not talk about it anymore."

"Cool," said Adam, who was feeling particularly compliant. The doors opened behind them. A member of the elite trimming unit

stuck his head out and yelled at them to clear out of the way. They gathered up their bags and sauntered slowly down the steps. The rest of the squad followed shortly after, dragging a tangled mass of hair the size of a small car. Adam and Utkarsh watched the team move it slowly across the lawn.

"So, what do you think was the deal with that hair?" asked Adam.

"I dunno," Utkarsh shrugged, "Probably rats in the walls."

"Or swamp gas," said Adam.

"Or a weather balloon."

"Yeah."

The team of combat stylists began the complicated process of preparing the hair for transport. One of them started up a chainsaw and began to try and cut into the side of the twisted knot. The chainsaw's desperate shrieks and pealing black smoke were such a fascinating distraction that Adam and Utkarsh almost didn't notice the darkening skies, or the pitter-patter growing louder behind them. The worker with the chainsaw certainly didn't, until something wet and wriggling dropped down onto his head. The man lowered his chainsaw, looked up to the sky, and groaned. Adam laughed. Utkarsh just shook his head in disbelief. As the downpour increased, low-pitched sirens rang out for exactly four seconds and the students of Jackson Sloth's Memorial High began to gather their bags and head home.

Four Stories Told in Order to Mislead a Sentient Severed Hand That Just Wanted to Ask a Goddamn Personal Question for Once

Vladivostok's morning air rushed by the two of them as the train rumbled beneath. The feeling made him hold her even closer. The kiss was passionate until he heard a familiar click around his left hand. He broke away and looked down at the handcuffs binding him to the top of the train.

"Katarina." Cimmerian sputtered. "Why?"

Katarina's face was stone still with tears running down her cheeks. "They'd never let us be free Jeremiah. You know this. If not your Foundation then the GRU would find us. This is the only way."

"Katarina!" Cimmerian looked to the front of the train. "This train is going to explode in less than a minute!"

"I am sorry my love." And with that Katarina leapt from the train and disappeared into the forest below.

Cimmerian fumbled for his lock-picks and began to work on the handcuffs. He'd just managed to open the lock when…

… three newly minted gods blasted Cimmerian with full force. Suddenly, a cave two miles below the surface of Indiana filled with light as the energy struck the barrier surrounding him.

"Only two bullets." Cimmerian muttered to himself, surveying his surroundings. He took off in a dead sprint towards the cave wall, hopping over the dead agents on the ground.

The laughter in his head made it impossible for him to focus on anything other than killing the three gods on the other side of the cave. Cimmerian leapt over the last body and put his left foot

forward before hitting the wall to kick off it. He spun backwards in place and lined up the shot.

The first bullet left the barrel with the roar of an ancient beast. The runes along the sides of the bullet glowed purple; almost brighter than the energy pouring out of the gods' hands. The first god's head kicked backwards and the bullet continued through to the other two. All three stood frozen as the energy flickered and died.

Cimmerian landed on the ground and looked up at the deities. "I'll save one for the big guy then."

The dead gods didn't answer, but a low hum filled the cave. Cimmerian's eyes went wide as he dived behind the pile of bodies. The dead gods exploded in a spray of…

… bullets. The convoy was taking heavy fire while Cimmerian hung out of the passenger side of the van. The terrified driver drove them north on I-65.

Cimmerian squeezed off 3 shots with his pistol; two pinged off the front grill and one hit the front right tire of a pursuing SUV. The tire popped and the rim dug into the pavement at 90 miles an hour. The whole vehicle lurched and flipped over at full speed. Cimmerian ducked back into the cab.

The driver was dumbstruck. "Aren't you a researcher?"

"I am." Cimmerian reached into the glove box and loaded a new magazine into his pistol. "But I have experience with this."

Cimmerian grabbed the top of the van and pulled himself back out. There was one more black SUV following them, but it was a bit further back. The van's hardened exterior deflected incoming automatic weapons fire and Cimmerian fired back. The man hanging out of the SUV's passenger side went limp. The body hit the pavement and got dragged beneath the SUV.

The driver watched this happen in the rear view mirror as Cimmerian pulled himself back into the van. "Where did you learn to do that?!"

"Introduction to English Literature," Cimmerian said. The grin turned to horror as an eighteen-wheeler slammed into the driver's side door at full speed. The whole world went into a spin and then…

… the timer for the chicken went off. Cimmerian looked up at the banner above the park entrance. The Summer Charity Potluck was just getting started. Cimmerian and Dr. Gerald had decided to cook something special for the event, and they were almost finished.

The pots and pans arrayed on the tailgate of Gerald's pickup truck were all steaming with their own aromas. Cimmerian reset the egg timer for 15 more minutes and went around to the side of the truck. Gerald was inside listening to the radio.

Cimmerian leaned on the door. "Chicken's almost done."

"Nice. Hey, did you see what my son got me for my birthday?"

Cimmerian cocked an eyebrow. "No."

Gerald leaned over and produced an odd looking piece of equipment. "It's a…

"…hoverboard!" Cimmerian laughed and took a sip from his cup in the Site-17 cafeteria.

Han was silent for several seconds.

"Bullshit."

Cimmerian almost blew water through his nose. "Oh come on! It's all true!"

Han sighed. "Tell the truth. How did you get your scars?"

"Well, I was supposed to review containment procedures on the Foundation's lunar base…"

Han hopped off the cafeteria table in a huff.

Cimmerian put his good hand out for a moment to stop him, but then decided against it. Instead, he put the glove back on his red left hand.

« **Getting Into Treble** | **`Resurrection`** | **Electronic Data** »

Four Tines Blind

Feet climb nine steps and four
Feet bring him to **my** door
Hands pry pine wide
Push chair aside
Begins to chide
I cannot hide

Hand grimes a glass of wine
Hand grasps a fork and knife
I whine and cry
I ask him why
Mouth speaks a lie
He picks my eye

Line of tines clear no more
Line of tines makes it pour
Tongue probes my eye
Jelly globs fly
I feel him sigh
I want to die

Feet take him to my door
Feet climb nine steps and four

Fourth and Long

"Welcome back, sports fans! This is Hermes Evaristas, and with me as always is Eupraxia Kassandros. If you're just joining us, the score is 24-28, and we've reached the two-minute warning in the fourth quarter of what has been an electric game between our Alexylva University Visigoths, and the Macedonia State Warriors. Before we get back to the game, Eupraxia, I think the focus tonight has undoubtedly been the absolutely incredible play of Alexylva's sophomore quarterback, Cron Apostolou."

"That's right, Herm. Listen, this kid has been on fire the entire night. He's gone 23/26, for 275 yards and two touchdowns, and just cannot be stopped. The Macedonia State defense is just perplexed out there right now, they've got no answers for him."

"But let's also not forget the athleticism and magikcrafting of junior running back, JaMarcus Aurelius. He's rushed for nearly 150 yards tonight, highlighted by a 45 yard run for a touchdown, during which he managed to singlehandedly turn the entire Macedonia State secondary into toads. He really is something special."

"Absolutely. If you didn't know better, you might not think that Aurelius was a walk-on here just three short years ago. Since then, he's been breaking records every season. Truly a force of nature out there."

"Alexylva still has some concerns on the other side of the ball, though. We've allowed three touchdowns from Macedonia State's All-Universal tight end, Darius Lykos. Coach Panagakos, Eldest and Most Revered, will definitely have some work to do before next weekend's conference opener against the Yale Bulldogs."

"Alright, and we're ready to get going. Ball is on Alexylva's own 19-yard line, first down, ten to go. Apostolou is back in the shotgun, two receivers wide to his left, Aurelius back. The ball is snapped… pressure coming from the right, and Aurelius has em with a hex!

Apostolou cuts left, looks, looks, and he's got it away! The catch is by Nereus, with plenty for the first down, and now they're on the 31. Clock is ticking, though, and Coach Panagakos, Eldest and Most Revered, only has one time out left."

"Here's where you have to be careful, Herm. When you're trying to get up the field fast like this, you don't want to make bone-headed mistakes and turn the football over. All you need is consistent play, steady progress, and maybe some heroics from our sophomore star."

"Apostolou still in the gun, motions right, and now he's got a man over there. Looks like a little bit of shuffling on the defense, Aurelius moves left now. Snap is to Apostolou, who looks, looks, fires across the middle, and… no good. Couldn't find his man over there."

"Looks like that was intended to be a short pass to Iason, but he just couldn't get there. Unfortunate to see such a poor throw from a player who, for most of the afternoon, has been lights out with those."

"Clock is stopped now at 1:42, Apostolou comes up under center now. He's bringing a man up right, second down, ten to go. Snap is up, and Apostolou has it! He's running right, now, and looks like he's going to try and hit the marker himself. Oooh, solid contact from the Macedonia State defensive end, Cron really took a hit on that one. Officials are coming out now, let's see if he got enough. They're measuring, measuring… and it looks like he has it! Just barely, but I think he's got it!"

"Herm, that's the kind of drive you want to see in your quarterback. Makes a bad pass, but able to brush it off, keep his eyes on the prize, and keep moving forward."

"Clock is ticking, we're down to 1:15. Apostolou is back, defense is showing blitz, and I don't know if he sees it. Snap is to Apostolou, and there's the handoff! Aurelius cuts left, cuts left, now he's making an endaround the line, and he's got space! He's at the fifty, forty-five, and he's dragged down at the Macedonia State forty-two yard line. Gods, can that kid fly. They've gotta move fast now, time is moving quickly. Apostolou runs up to the line, and he's got receivers

flying now. Yes, you heard that right, the receivers have sprouted wings and have taken to the skies. Looks like Macedonia State is going to counter that with harpoons, so we'll see how this plays out. We're at :56, and the ball is snapped. Apostolou is looking, looking, has a man, and he fires, by Zeus what a throw! Iason has it, and he's avoiding a harpoon, and now another, and looks like the safety is bringing a fireball, yes, yes he is. Iason drops, and is he going to make the sideline? I don't think so. Good for a first down, though, and then some, we're going to be at the Macedonia State 29-yard line."

"You really love to see hustle like that, Herm. Iason saw the fireball coming, and gave it just a little extra to get the extra yards. Coaches have got to love that."

"We're at :37 now, and Apostolou is looking at the sideline. This crowd is absolutely roaring here at the Alexylva University Nike Stadium. Clock is ticking, boys, let's get a move on here. I don't think Cron can hear the sideline! He's motioning, looks like he's going to run the play himself, and he does. Snap is to Apostolou, who hands it off to Kallias in the backfield. Kallias runs left, and is absolutely clobbered by those State linemen, he might even have lost a yard. That's not what you want to see there."

"No it isn't, and I don't know if that was a designed play, or if they were just looking for something to keep moving, but that isn't at all what you need right here."

"Apostolou has it again, and he's looking right. Second down, clock is at :25, and he lets one go… no good. Can't force a pass like that, Cron. It's gonna be third down, eleven to go, with :22 remaining on the game clock. Looks like they've got time for two, three more plays with that timeout in there, so we'll see what they do. Apostolou is back in the gun, two receivers left, one wide to the right. He's got Aurelius back with him, and it looks like the State defense is summoning an elder god on the 15-yard line. Is it… yes, it is Moa, God of Desolation. This throws a whole new hitch in things, Eupraxia."

"Yeah, you can't really prepare for elder gods, Herm. Alexylva is just going to have to figure out how to get past this, and get into the end

zone."

"Apostolou, under center, he snaps the ball, and he has the handoff to- no, he's taking it left! Apostolou is looking left, and the State defense is crashing the line. Cron is stopped, and now… he's thrown it to Aurelius! Aurelius cuts right, and he's got some room, looking for the sideline. I don't know if he's gonna get it, and here comes Moa. No, I think he's been stopped just short, and now Coach Panagakos, Eldest and Most Revered, has called for Alexylva's final timeout. We've got :10 to go, fourth down, on Macedonia State's 20-yard line, one to go. I think Apostolou is going to have to be looking for the endzone on this play, Eupraxia."

"That he is, Herm. With the addition of Moa, God of Desolation in the Macedonia State secondary, this is really starting to look grim for the young quarterback."

"Alexylva breaks the huddle, and now it looks like they're going to line up in a four receiver set, three right, one to the left, Apostolou in the gun. It is absolutely chaos in here, folks, and it's all coming down to this. Apostolou is back, and he's motioning left. Looks like State is going to bring that blitz again, and Moa is just staring down the line now. Snap is up, and Apostolou has it! He's running right, and now we've got another hex on the field. Looks like a swamp plague, that'll trip em up. Cron is running now, he's at the 15, the 10, and here comes Moa! Apostolou cuts left, and there's another fireball! He ducks, slips a corner, and he's got room! Apostolou has one man to beat! He's just… he's got it! Cron Apostolou has got it! He's into the endzone! We've got all zeros on the clock, and Cron Apostolou, sophomore quarterback from Athens, Georgia, has put the game on his back and won one for Alexylva! What a game! What a play! They've got casters on the field, now, they're re-binding the elder god. Ramos comes in for the extra point, and it's good! Whistles have blown, that's the game! Final score, Alexylva University Visigoths 31, Macedonia State Warriors, 28."

-△-

Hub - Postgame

Fragments

AKA: Stuff You Will Never Use, But Wanted To Share

The point of this page is simple. Everyone has pieces of stories, or articles, inside their head. Bits that you yourself may never use, but would still like to share/let someone else use. So, that's what this page is for.

Sapient SCP-1585

A Tale in which SCP-1585 is sapient. Not the rapidly evolving ecosystem on it, the jellyfish itself. And is trying to make it's ecosystem into a death world with the intent of breeding a species of supersoldiers with a warrior race mentality.

SCP-1585 is a single organism, and it wants to reproduce. In layman's terms, it wants to conquer the universe.

SCP-967 Junkpeople

The sixth tribe in SCP-967, a foundation analog. They work to keep the major junkmonsters and anomalies from wiping out the other tribes, and contain the knowledge of the abnormal by removing the memory-holding tape decks of junkcitizens who find out stuff. Like the outside world, which from their view is sort of a hellish alternate universe which kills anyone who enters it, and is inhabited by monsters unlike anything native to 967. They might not even be made of trash!

Serpent's HandLevitating the Pentagon

A tale for the Broken Masquerade canon where the

Serpent's Hand tries to levitate the US Pentagon like they tried to do in the 1960s- and succeeds. Bonus points if you include these phrases:

"The Serpent's Hand will return the color blue to the visual spectrum once our demands are met!"

"It's over, it's over, the Charade/Masquerade is broken. It's over. It's over. The Serpent's Hand has spoken."

Object Class: Toroidal

Try to write a SCP that contains itself

Belleverse: Sky Gods

A bellerverse Tale about a bunch of people who tend to SCP-1514-1A as a holy relic of their sky-god and in return anything that attacks them gets smote via xasers from orbit.

TK Signals

An SCP that is a pair of telepathic "signals" that randomly attach themselves to people and do two things: the first signal tells everyone within a certain radius to acknowledge the person affected by the signal in some way, and the second one transmits all sorts of information about the subject. (Name, age, address, pet's names, whether or not they've been affected by Chron's disease, the number of living skin cells on their body, length of toenails, what movies they've seen in the past 24 hours, other useless statistics). Originally developed by someone or something as a medical first-alert system, but.. it didn't work out as planned.

Automatons

A hoard of tiny, clockwork-looking, automated pieces of construction equipment. If left alone, they will create large buildings out of whatever, easy-to-transport local materials there are. Just lots of stone, or sand, or

random junk quarried and placed into huge, ornate cathedral structures, which as far as the foundation can tell, have no abnormal properties. The buildings frequently have problems like lacking any way for the building machines inside to get out, or falling over due to being made entirely of rubbish. The builders are apparently capable of self-replicating as their population remains steady despite the foundation sometimes dissecting a few, or construction accidents, but nobody has seen them do so, or has any idea how they do it.

The SCP where recovered by a deep-sea submarine mission after radar showed an absolutely huge building they had created. Considering how slow they generally are, the foundation calculated it would have taken them years to have completed it to the scale observed.

Bone Crystals

A parasitic, body-horror inducing SCP which causes bones to split, branch out, and start growing into sort of a "bone fractal" structure. I'm not sure of a good twist for it, I just had a nightmare regarding such a thing.

Hair Weavers

Have you ever noticed that the clump of hair that comes off when you use a comb looks sort of like a big, hairy spider? Well, sometimes it is. And it's one of the really poisonous ones. You might want to start burning your stray hairs, so they can't breed.

(See also the spiders that form when you remove the navel from an orange.)

Skeleton Club

A nightclub (or similar social gathering place) staffed (and frequented by) friendly animate skeletons. Humans entering this place are met with warm welcomes and friendly greetings, accompanied by polite requests to

"check your skin at the door". Subjects who do not immediately flee the place will discover they are in fact able to shed their skin and organs in a similar manner to a heavy overcoat, while still retaining all their former senses and mobility. Interviewed subjects usually describe it as feeling "liberating" or other such terms indicating that this absence of flesh is somewhat pleasant, akin to removing restricting clothes. Subjects also report feeling more "open"- both literally and metaphorically- and often find it easier to speak freely about themselves or their thoughts amongst other skeletal subjects. While there does not appear to be any compulsion from the grounds itself or its staff forcing goers to remain in the club until it closes, many of them do unless serious obligations (job, family etc.) would require otherwise, though some exceptions to this rule exist (usually where the subject is seriously displeased with said obligation, e.g. dead-end job or unfaithful spouse). In any case, subjects desiring to leave are prevented from doing so without first putting back on their skin and organs, which analysis suggests does not dry out or decay while in storage. Donning a skin is done just as easily as removing it was (seals around its corresponding bones only when applied properly) and does not appear to damage the skin in any way (though direct damage to a vital organ still affects its wearer when they attempt to put it back on). Skeletal subjects that manage to leave the grounds skinless immediately perish- even their skin hanging up in storage ceases to function once its "owner" collapses outside the club grounds.

Document

A file that was kind of obviously written up by the foundation as propaganda against a particular group of interest. -Shrek

Bigfoot IN SPACE!

This is an analysis of picture of a tiny

rock on mars that has the shape of a bigfoot. Now, the image itself might have a lot of evidences against it, but it does raise some interesting ideas. What if **SCP-1000** had managed to develop a space program and sent some bigfoot astronauts into space? There are quite a lot of possibilities with this one. Here are some ideas I came up:

- How will they react to having their homes taken away from them? For thousands of years?
- Do they have space bigfoot colonies? How do they hide them?
- How do their bio-ships work?
- What is the space-bigfoot's relationship with humans?

Et cetera.

Small Girl Who Wants Hugs

A 10-year-old girl whose touch causes random mutations, 75% of which are fatal. She has a three-headed puppy named Muffles. All the rest of her family is dead.

Macuahuitl Mouth

An individual who sought out the Foundation's help, as whenever this person eats their teeth fall out and are replaced by sharper teeth. At first it was only when they ate hard food, then any solid food, then any food at all. Their teeth are now as sharp as obsidian, and only intravenous feeding prevents the anomaly.

Mirror Hallways

You know how when you put a mirror up to a mirror you see that creepy endless hallway? What if there were two mirror that, when you held them up to each other, there were things *wandering through* that hallway, and other hallways connected to it?

Or maybe there's just one creature, but every time you form the hallway it's *closer* …

Conflicted Circus Magician

Circus all have magicians. Stage magicians that create illusions to make the audience experience seemingly impossible things.

But what about Herman Fuller's circus?

If you are a magician in a paranormal world, how will you work when everyone around you is doing impossible things?

Small-Town Office

The Foundation listens to conspiracy radios, hears folk tales, investigates urban legends, and digs deep into internet myths in case they stumble upon an anomaly.

Imagine that you are the person responsible for it, and you have a small Foundation-established "paranormal detective agency" in the weird part of the city. Unaffected by the politics of GOIs and the world-ending anomalies, what will you see and hear in this small anomalous world?

A few Jenny Hanivers recovered somehow from the Circus Of The Disquieting. Not fakes made out of ray parts, live ones. In a fishtank.

A native junkperson in SCP-967 encounters the foundation explorers for the first time.

682!"

"In return, you Pesterbot will be granted the power to carry out your threats. You, Lord Blackwood will have your humanity restored. You, Able shall be granted a heart and the power to love.

Any you Dr. Clef will be allowed to return home to the SCP foundation. And take your pet Dragon-Snail with you."

I know. You've been so careful.

You knew I was destined to kill you, and your death would involved poison. That translation of *Les Propheties* DID leave it up to interpretation, though. I've always suspected they're written that way deliberately; so either you can't subvert them or so when you try to match them to the event everyone says "Why it's obvious! The oracle knew the truth! We've just been too simple to understand it!"

No, dear fellow - you didn't get the *entire* translation. I managed to keep the part where the guilty go free and the innocent are punished. Yes, I'm afraid your poor nurse or doctor or whatever will be blamed for this and I'll be exonerated.

How? Oh, it's the cufflinks. They cure all poisons around them. Carved from the horn of a unicorn or some such. They're curing you of the poisons those pesky medical people have been giving you. In fact, when they gut you like a frog in your necropsy it will look like you haven't taken them in quite some time. Oh, wait - you didn't know that some poisons are called "medicine" and keep people alive!

Neither did the cufflinks…

Chemical SCP

Special Containment Procedures: No samples of SCP- may be stored at any site except under experimental conditions. All samples of SCP- must be synthesized ad hoc using procedures in Document PR- -01 (Level-4 clearance required to access and oversee synthetic process). No individual below Level-4 clearance may know about or perform more than three steps from Document PR- -01.

When synthesized, SCP- must be handled as a strong,

water-soluble narcotic. Excess or unused SCP- must be disposed of via methods outlined in Document PR- -13.

Samples and synthetic procedures for SCP- still exist around the world. Foundation policy is to seize and/or suppress all items related to each SCP- event, including attempts to reverse-engineer SCP- , [DATA EXPUNGED].

Literally Worse than Hitler

Doctor Bright and SCP-XXX aka Tommy are seated at a table, Tommy's voice modulator behind Dr. Bright. They are speaking amiably, and have been for some time.

Bright: Tommy, you really need to get this through your head. We're not trying to hurt you. We want you to be able to work WITH your powers. You can't just speak your mind. Imagine if you had had said the 'pants on fire' thing to Agent Smith WITHOUT your modulator. It would not have been funny.

Tommy: Might have been. You don't… He pauses, looking for a word choice. You haven't seen that.

Dr. Bright leans back, sighing.

Bright: All right Tommy. That's it for today. Time to get your Modulator back on. Dr. Bright turns away.

Tommy: Muttering. You Foundation guys are literally worse than Hitler.

Dr. Bright stops moving. He turns slowly back towards SCP-XXX, a glint in his eye. A quick movement causes his jacket to cover the

camera. Then SCP-XXX begins screaming. This goes on for thirty minutes, the screams becoming less articulate as it goes on, until the tape cuts off.

We would like to condense and organize these snippets, so in the future please throw them under an appropriate tab above.

A tale for the Broken Masquerade canon where the Serpent's Hand tries to levitate the US Pentagon like **`they tried to do in the 1960s`**- and succeeds. Bonus points if you include these phrases:

"The Serpent's Hand will return the color blue to the visual spectrum once our demands are met!"

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A few Jenny Hanivers recovered somehow from the Circus Of The Disquieting. Not fakes made out of ray parts, live ones. In a fishtank.

A creature consisting of basically a brain, a bunch of tentacles some of which have boney "scalpels" on them, spider-like spinnerets, an amazingly powerful immune system and external blood vessels. It works by stealing parts from prey, using the clawed tentacles to remove organs from prey, the spinnerets to stitch the parts Frankenstein-like onto itself, and the immune system to keep itself from falling apart. It lacks any sort of digestive or respiratory systems unless it steals them from another creature and links itself into the bloodstream of the stolen organs. It is highly hostile and frequently attempts to escape and/or assimilate people.

A recovery log/Tale backstory for SCP-771.

SCP-993 and SCP-1592 compete for broadcast time-slots.

A native junkperson in SCP-967 encounters the foundation explorers for the first time.

The sixth tribe in SCP-967, a foundation analog. They work to keep the major junkmonsters and anomalies from wiping out the other tribes, and contain the knowledge of the abnormal by removing the memory-holding tape decks of junkcitizens who find out stuff. Like the outside world, which from their view is sort of a hellish alternate universe which kills anyone who enters it, and is inhabited by monsters unlike anything native to 967. They might not even be made of trash!

Who's to say that SCP-1585 has no effect on humans? Might be a good idea to make having a vasectomy mandatory for foundation personal on it.

A tale about the secret method by which the foundation gets Class-D personal.

Craigslist adds.

Someone on craigslist probably has a statue-watching/cleaning blood/dung mixture fetish. That solves 173 for example.

Needless to say, intended as a parody/crackfic.

A Tale in which SCP-1585 is sapient. Not the rapidly evolving ecosystem on it, the jellyfish itself. And is trying to make it's ecosystem into a **`death world`** with the intent of breeding a species of supersoldiers with a warrior race mentality.

SCP-1585 is a single organism, and it wants to reproduce. In

layman's terms, it wants to conquer the universe.

In SCP-1296, mention is made of failure to chase it, or set up a roadblock due to it evading pursuit.

Let's see the Tale in which we have an action-movie-ish Llamamobile vs Foundation car chase.

A hoard of tiny, clockwork-looking, automated **pieces of construction equipment**. If left alone, they will create large buildings out of whatever, easy-to-transport local materials there are. Just lots of stone, or sand, or random junk quarried and placed into huge, ornate cathedral structures, which as far as the foundation can tell, have no abnormal properties. The buildings frequently have problems like lacking any way for the building machines inside to get out, or falling over due to being made entirely of rubbish. The builders are apparently capable of self-replicating as their population remains steady despite the foundation sometimes dissecting a few, or construction accidents, but nobody has seen them do so, or has any idea how they do it.

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A parasitic, body-horror inducing SCP which causes bones to split, branch out, and start growing into sort of a "bone fractal" structure. I'm not sure of a good twist for it, I just had a nightmare regarding such a thing.

An SCP that is a pair of telepathic "signals" that randomly attach themselves to people and do two things: the first signal tells everyone within a certain radius to acknowledge the person affected by the signal in some way, and the second one transmits all sorts of information about the subject. (Name, age, address, pet's names,

whether or not they've been affected by Chron's disease, the number of living skin cells on their body, length of toenails, what movies they've seen in the past 24 hours, other useless statistics). Originally developed by someone or something as a medical first-alert system, but.. it didn't work out as planned.

Six-hundred and sixty-six sick skippers suddenly start singing songs of sinking ships so that someday they shall stop Saturn from super-colliding with satire.

(I don't know what I was on when I wrote this. I'm thinking it could be incorporated into some kind of AWCY Dada rap or something.)

An SCP based on the concept "Loose Lips Sink Ships". Talking about a ship being sunk by the SCP will result in more ships sinking.

A device consisting of a large cage, a bunch of electronics which the foundation has absolutely no idea what's going on with, a dial, a switch and an electrical socket suitable for charging batteries. If a living animal or class-d is put in the cage, the dial will move to show an amount of voltage, apparently random, and if the switch is pulled, than the socket will proceed to charge any batteries placed in it with that amount of electricity. After being used once, the animal or class-d will, if placed back in the device never cause the dial to move again.

The twist is, it's harmless as far as the foundation can tell. The only effect of being drained is that you can't make the device create more electricity.

The foundation is tearing its hair out trying to find what the device is getting energy from.

A historic Wondertainment toy. Maybe a corn-husk doll, or **`hoop rolling`** game equipment. Not sure what the abnormal trait should be, I just think we need some Wondertainment stuff predating mass manufacturing.

A tiny, partially biological spaceprobe sort of like the plans for a **starwisp** of non-human creation. Apart from the biotechnological parts being impossible with present human technology, it seems to work off known scientific ideas for how a starship could be built. The damage to it seems to have been inflicted by a meteorite impact "stunning" it, then it drifting for a few million years off its intended course ending with it crashing into earth.

Inside, it has a bunch of chambers and equipment intended to work for genetic engineering and growth of living organic tissue, both for self-repair and expansion of biological parts and for **the growth** of "SCP-xxxx-2" specimens. SCP-xxxx-2 specimens consist of simple "meat robots" creatures which lack digestive/reproductive/respiratory systems instead running off stored fat and oxygen, intended simply to gather biomatter, which then is then stuffed into a "stomach" aboard the main ship for "digestion" and metal which is [DATA EXPUNGED] since recovery the ship has expanded by meters.

Presumably the reader would think, this is so it can build up enough biological tissue and machine parts to build a specimen of whatever created it….

> .....but really.....
>
> it is simply healing the meteorite damage, and fermenting the biomatter for methane, as rocket fuel. The expansions aren't armor, they consist of new rockets to get the "probe/creature" back into space. And the foundation is keeping it trapped on earth.
>
> The goal would be a bit of a **Mood Whiplash** between thinking of it as a sort of sci-fi alien weapon, and feeling sorry for the poor **astrochicken** the foundation has been in essence torturing by keeping its wounds from healing.

The Orientation Tale for the foundation coverup writers. The people who make up cover stories.

The Orientation Tale for the foundation diplomatic workers. The people who would staff the embassy in **SCP-1483's** world for example.

Von Neumann Golems. In essence, each specimen is an animated sculpture with an [EXPUNGED] displaying some resemblance to Hebrew writing symbol under the carapace of the forehead. Assembly consists of chewing up materials, either the hollow "gut" produces sticky mucus-like material or heats up to melt metal, regurgitating the resulting cement-like substance, shaping it into a new specimen then using [DATA EXPUNGED] extends from the lower jaw to carve the symbol into the forehead of their offspring. The offspring animates, pushes a layer of semi-hardened material over its forehead to seal it, then waits to harden/dry/cool. This idea was one I had in regards to alterations to an existing SCP, I'll take it down from here if the author chooses to use it. Also, a few pictures which could probably make good images for this.

Image One
Image Two
Image Three
Image Four

A Tale in which SCP-106 is proven to be Mister Scary™ from Dr. Wondertainment's Little Misters™. Seems like it could be proven. If true, than "Mr. Scary, from Little Misters ® by Dr. Wondertainment" should be tattooed on SCP-106's left calf. Checking could be difficult however.

Also, SCP-076 could be Mr. Mad.

Blackwood Tale idea

Idea crossposted from here.
After the events of **this Tale**, Lord Blackwood hits his **Despair Event Horizon** and makes a deal with **SCP-738** which he encountered on one of his travels. The terms of the deal.

SCP-738
• The creation of **an "end-of-the-world" shelter based on British culture.**
• *Not* taking Lord Blackwood's soul.
• Not killing Lord Blackwood.

Blackwood
• Lord Blackwood's body, sort of like what happened **here**.

Upon the deal being made, **SCP-738** creates **SCP-1678**, takes Lord Blackwood's soul out, placing it in a sea slug his lordship had as a zoological specimen from his travels, and takes over Lord Blackwood's body, **altering it** based on **SCP-738**'s own warped sense of improvement, and proceeds to go on a rampage killing everyone besides Lord Blackwood within Blackwood manor, I.E. Lord Blackwood's entire family before the foundation of the time was able to catch it.

As now Lord Blackwood is still in his **Despair Event Horizon** after **this**, just ended up having his entire family murdered, arguably his fault and is now **trapped, theoretically forever in the body of a sea slug** he is finally driven insane, retreating into his memories of still being a human adventure while ignoring the real world sort of like what happened with **SCP-1227**.

Wondertainment product/s intended to be marketed to the **antarctic empire's world**, or the university.

The **IIPES** report on their end of the dimensional gate and the primary SCP foundation world.

A swarm of tiny Von Neumann machine **astrochicken-type** spacecrafts. Basically intended to land, set up a small factory and get to work on an industrial plant for creating more "ships." Not

human-made, found after meteorite shower or something. Not very fast at replicating, little risk of their grey-gooing the planet. Mostly rely on the fast that *something* had to have made the first ones for creepiness.

A "living" snowstorm. That is to say; a small, unending snowstorm with the characteristic that any snowmen/snow sculptures at least partiality made from snow it produced will animate and endeavor to self-replicate. They appear to share a hivemind with the snowstorm cloud as the "queen." Highly hostile to foundation agents and citizens, not very effectively as they're snowmen. Presumably would have been found in the arctic or antarctic as otherwise it would melt each season.

Dr. Wondertainment's attempt at a toy spaceship. Looks like a stereotypical pulp science-fiction rocket, about ten feet tall and with a hollow cabin which can be closed with an airtight door. Inside has a child-sized chair and simple, video-game-style joystick controls for moving in three dimensions and acceleration. There is no fuel supply, apparent place to put fuel or need for fuel. Unforgettably for any would-be astronaut, Wondertainment has shown his/her/its normal disregard for safety, the rocket can at maximum acceleration turn its pilot into gory slime on the floor of its cabin, and while its cabin seems to be radiation-proof and somehow maintain a self-renewing supply of air there's no room for food supplies, no bathroom, and steering the thing in space to the extent of getting home alive is exactly as hard as you'd expect.

The foundation got it after it crash landed in carrying an unidentified child's corpse, starved to death or crushed by acceleration.

A Tale regarding a class-XK event triggered by someone asking SCP-662 to build a superior version of itself, then ask the superior version to build a superior version of *itself*, ect.

Cue a SCP-based Singularity.

Some kind of creature which has an instinctive ability to control and/or build complex mechanical stuff. For example, it might be sort of squidlike in form and basically mummify the dashboard, steering wheel and pedals of a car in tentacles to allow it to operate it. Clearly not naturally evolved. Not intelligent apart from its technical skills, for example a den it could make would have gas heating and automated sentry guns but it can't communicate or recognize itself in a mirror.

A radio which picks up signals from its equivalent location in different parallel realities depending on how the tuning is set.

A Tale in which foundation researchers in the world reached by SCP-1483 find the Factory or Wondertainment products, sold openly and the resulting issues. Ends with the foundation having to pay SCP-1483-world police bail to get their researchers out of jail, for robbing a small business in an attempt at "containment." Much O-5 facepalming ensues.

A horrific body-horror inducing plague which forces its victims into homicidal rampages against the uninfected. The twist, it doesn't affect humans. Rather, just some randomly selected by the author species of small animal. Think 610, only for squirrels for an example.

Werewolves as an SCP. Before you shoot me, these are not your typical werewolves. Firstly, this particular type of lycanthropy is a genetic condition that is only carried by females; the presence of a Y chromosome, for some reason, makes it inactive. Secondly, they do not change with the lunar cycle, but with their menstrual cycle, and gradually change from 100% human to 100% lupine over the course of the cycle. Thirdly, they never stop undergoing oogenesis (the act of creating eggs, which is supposed to stop at birth), meaning they never run out of eggs and therefore never go through menopause. They're also fatally allergic to silver, and can more easily be killed with it, but anything fatal to a human will kill them just as easily.

In SCP-111 there's this quote.

> By reading this document and incubating your Dragon-Snail™ eggs, you agree to all said terms and forfeit your rights to lawsuits, organized boycotts, protests, **honor duels**, etc.

This means, at least once *someone challenged Dr. Wondertainment to an honor duel over Dragon-Snails burning their house down. And considering the need for a note, apparently won*.

That needs to be a Tale.

A first-person-shooter videogame set in the middle of a few kilometer area in Alaska, at least kilometers from civilization. Seems unfinished, the copy the foundation has lacks enemies, most of the sounds are defaults, ect. When turned on, in the part of Alaska where the game is set, a creature resembling the player character will appear. Said creature can be moved by the game controls, and on the game screen the player can see things as they actually are in the real word, although with graphics and health bars like the game. Attempting to move the player character to the edge of the game world will have it vanish and return to spawn point, the same happens when the foundation tries to take the creature out of the equivalent of the game world. Trying to harm the creature just leads to decreasing health for the player character, and a "you died - re-spawn?" message and the body vanishing making dissection and other such studies impossible.

A set of three chemicals developed by a failed project at Prometheus Labs. Chemical A grants superhuman strength, Chemical B grants telepathy and superhuman senses, and chemical C grants flight and superhuman speed. What's so bad about that? For one thing, once the chemicals enter your blood stream, they cannot be turned "off"; you'll always be super humanly strong and have to hear people's thoughts, for example. Secondly, real world physics apply; go too fast and your organs get liquefied, or you just catch on fire. Go too high up in the atmosphere with flight and you freeze to death, or run out of oxygen and fall to your doom. Shake

someone's hand too hard with super strength, [DATA EXPUNGED]. The point here is to deconstruct superpowers, and why they would suck in the real world.

A DIY style computer including a human brain as the CPU as well as vital organs for life support. As a result has massive memory storage, effective functions. Does not appear to still be sapient. DNA of brain and organs matches matches supposedly kidnapped in . Apart from being very fast and having a lot of memory storage doesn't really show many abnormal traits for a computer in terms of software. Just a good-working homemade computer which happens to be made out of a kidnapped victim.

Some sort of monster made of high-tech equipment. Maybe sort of a robotic thing which assimilates any other form of electronics it gets its grippers on. In an attempt at stopping it from growing, containment procedures would basically consist of guards armed with longbows, and a few sticks of TNT as an emergency site self-destruct.

A project-crossover Tale. Star Trek is rife with missed opportunities and blindness regarding the application of the technology available. There usually end up being more rationalizations and justifications as to why something doesn't do something useful than techo-babble about how it works in the first place. The original series had an episode involving a plant that could cure any disease, and regrow severed limbs for an example. The plant was conveniently forgotten in all future episodes.

It's almost like some organization is still around, amnesiac-ing people who find it then locking the anomalous stuff up…..

Santa. Not as a -J but as an all-powerful reality bender just sitting around in the arctic, unable to be sneaked up on or captured. Not only that, but he knows what the foundation is, and he knows about the relatively harmless humanoids that hate being here. He knows about 110-Montauk. Guess who's on the naughty list?

A tale in which SCP-962 starts expanding the range it sends former animal "servitors" to work in. To the point where keeping the hoards of animals contorted by mechanical implants into crude mockeries of the human form killing any other animals they comes across and helping people out sort of like the "excessively helpful" humanoids mentioned at the bottom of this page out of public knowledge is impossible.

The back half of a broken plastic squirt-gun. Not abnormal as far as the foundation can tell, just highly radioactive and with….

rtainment™
ega-Soaker™

….printed on it. Found following a [DATA EXPUNGED] disaster of some sort.

A chain letter. Very specifically written, misspelled, the grammar is horrible but believable considering some stupid chain letters people fall for. Tells the person who gets it to copy it out and send it to ten more people or a "monster" will kill them complete with very specific description of the "monster." In event of the letter not being copied, misspellings and all, a creature resembling the "monster" will show up, attack and vanish. The process in event of foundation personal getting infected would be to have them tell ten class-D personal who would then be shot.

Some sort of drug which has two effects.
1. Cannabis-like mental weirdness.
2. Gives the person using it temporary reality-warper powers which last as long as the "trip" does.

Inspired by posts in the chat thread for SCP-1958.

A species of tree which will open small dimensional "oddities" near it causing abnormal things to happen at random. A single tree can't

really do anything major but a grove of them is able to "puncture" reality spreading seeds between the many worlds of the foundation universes sort of like SCP-507's power. Also makes a great defense mechanism for the tree having herbivores moved out of the same dimension as it.

A toy car that will act like a real one. That is to say, it will move by itself to drive along roads, stop at gas stations and generally act like a normal car apart from being a toy and not having any driver.

A fragment of organic tissue, apparently part of an animal. DNA tests and simple appearance shows it to be of no known species. Maybe a gigantic severed leg ending in a single claw or a weird, nonhuman skull or something.

When touched by any living animal or person the part of the animal or person which made contact with it will "stick" being peeled off their body and incorporated into the tissue fragment. DNA tests of the part peeled off the victim will reveal it is changing to match tissue from the fragment, replacing bits of it.

Whatever creature the fragment was part of is healing…..

A bunch of eggs, each about a quarter-meter long. Slightly warm indicating they are alive, and made out of something which has resisted all attempts at drilling into it for study. The foundation has no idea what they will hatch into, or when they hatch. Candling and other tests have proven inconclusive.

A Tale in which Lord Blackwood in his present slug form meets SCP-1227. Both proceed to have a very odd conversation, as each of them perceives themselves as normal whereas they are actually a sea slug and a gigantic squicky mass of body horror.

A biological organism that doesn't die. Instead it expires. Literal expiration date like on food products, at which point [REDACTED]

A swarm of tiny flying creatures or micro-robots which look like snowflakes. Can "swarm" people, and the edges of their wings are *sharp*.

Wondertainment Face-paint - will change the coloration of any biological matter it is applied to, not like tattoos but like birthmarks. Brightly colored birthmarks. Can permanently blind if it gets on eyes by turning the eyes colored. Needless to say has a "keep away from eyes" note in typical wondertainment style.

Creature/s living on a beach which make nests that look like sandcastles. With moats, decorative sticks, ect.

A heartwarming Tale involving a wedding of two of the faithful in **`church`**.

"And now two are united in marriage as His Cogwheels and Gears shall reunite when He is made whole…."

A migratory herd of toy trucks.

A horrific monster with the personality of a cute and cuddly puppy. The nightmare fuel comes from both the fact that it really doesn't know its own strength leading to loads of deaths when it tries to play with people, and how the foundation treats it.

Dr. Wondertainment's Mini-Cities™: Just plant the city-seed™, water and be ready to govern your own little city of little people!

Results may vary.

Adventures of Lord Blackwood, explorer and gentleslug.

Lord Blackwood in `UnLondon`

Lord Blackwood at Sea: A voyage to capture a **whale-like monster** preying upon shipping. Throw in pirates, storms, a rather **odd castaway**, other adventures joining the hunt, **and his ship itself** and this may be more of a threat to His Lordship than it seems….

Lord Blackwood and the Sky-Discs: His Lordship takes to the skies in an airship on the hunt for a flock of **strange flying animals**, unlike anything ever seen before. Add in the problems of a predatory **flying jellyfish** pulling people from the airship and swarms of **airborne robots** eating the airship out from under its crew make this a rather odd trip.

Lord Blackwood on the Dark Continent: A thrilling expedition 'cross Darkest Africa for the rarest of beasts, the **eye-pods**.

Lord Blackwood and the Tower:

"This is the task you must do…" announced the Wonderful Wizard of Wondertainment. "KILL FOR ME 682!"

"In return, you Pesterbot will be granted the power to carry out your threats. You, Lord Blackwood will have your humanity restored. You, Able shall be granted a heart and the power to love.

Any you Dr. Clef will be allowed to return home to the SCP foundation. And take your pet Dragon-Snail with you."

A Dyson sphere found by non-foundation scientists who where later given amnesiacs. No radio signals coming from it or anything, just the whole fact that *something* out there exists. And is advanced enough to build a Dyson sphere. The foundation containment process basically consists of giving amnesiacs to anyone who finds out about it, and trying to keep anyone from sending a radio signal powerful enough to be detected near it.

A tale in which Serpent's Hand operatives having broken into a foundation containment site try to convince an apparently intelligent

SCP to escape with them. Pity for them that the SCP they found is robo-dude™.
Meant to be humorous, with a mix of Serpent's Hand dramatic speeches about SCP freedom and "robo-dance™."

On an SCP that erases the memories of whatever it is told from everyone but the teller:

Subject D-42 enter the enclosure, and told the SCP 'Two plus Two is Four.' There was no reaction for approximately five minutes, at which point D-42s head exploded.

On an viral SCP that causes people to have sex with random strangers:

If this gets out, we could be looking at a XXXK event!

A business called Tonk and Revelstoke's.

A "tooth fairy" SCP that rips teeth from people's heads and uses it to fuel itself.

Victims of a freeze ray. Their outer molecule in stasis and cannot be damaged in anyway. Their innards have long since rotted away, but without anywhere for the fluids to go, they… slosh…

"As long as I live, the humiliation will color my perception with the tint of his arrogance!" (Now stay out of my head!)

"The lion shines and its roar blinds."

Just a group of a bunch of normal numbers that add up to different totals when you add them in a different order. Like, maybe twenty or so three-digit numbers.

A cold- or flu-like disease that spreads by memetic vectors instead of the normal transfer of microorganisms.

(videotape recording of D-class sick with the Memetic Cold) "Achoo, man this cold is kicking my butt"
(previously healthy agent) "So what the heck is this? You wanted me to watch securidy foodage of some guy with a head code? *phlegmy cough* how did I just ged sick?"

Those ads on the sides of the screen? The ones that have fun, cute little games you can play? They're not really there. No one ever programmed those in. Instead, the second that you click on one of them, you're a tool of an unknown force. Every click, every attempt to get the egg in the bucket or kick the donkey… goes to something. Fuck knows what, but it's going somewhere.

A set of five disguises made out of flesh, each one corresponding to a UN ambassador on the security council: USA, France, Great Britain, Russia, Taiwan (people's republic of china). Found mid-'90s.

Terrestrial life form. Has a thin membrane filled with lighter-than-air gas saturated with natural phosphorescent chemicals. Not particularly carnivorous but have been known to lure and share small prey like young deer. 'Deflate' in the daytime. Reside in Australia. The article's aim is 'interesting/cute', not 'scary'. Yes, it's an SCPification of **`this.`**

A containment procedure in search of a chemical SCP:

> Show Procedures
>
> **Special Containment Procedures:** No samples of SCP- may be stored at any site except under experimental conditions. All samples of SCP- must be synthesized *ad hoc* using procedures in Document PR- -01 (Level-4 clearance required to access and oversee

synthetic process). No individual below Level-4 clearance may know about or perform more than three steps from Document PR- -01.

When synthesized, SCP- must be handled as a strong, water-soluble narcotic. Excess or unused SCP- must be disposed of via methods outlined in Document PR- -13.

Samples and synthetic procedures for SCP- still exist around the world. Foundation policy is to seize and/or suppress all items related to each SCP- event, including attempts to reverse-engineer SCP- , [DATA EXPUNGED].

A song that causes the listener's heart to beat in tune with the music. Speeding/slowing the beat of the song has obvious detrimental effects. No one can quite recall what the tune was or how the song went.

An SCP that rearranges parts of things into other useful things for its own use. Maybe living organisms or something.

An electric mixer with no batteries or power cord: it runs on music.

A magnifying glass works only at night, and which can do with moonlight what any magnifier can do to an ant in sunlight.

A lock that, when locked, would stay stuck in the same place (although still moving with the Earth's rotation, etc.).

A humanoid SCP, with the ability to alter the world simply by speaking. However, he isn't too smart, being in his mid teens. Containment protocol and an incident log:

Containment Procedures: SCP-XXX has been fitted with an

electronic voice modulation unit, to prevent him from accidentally using his powers. He is allowed freedom to roam the site at will. He has been set up in a regulation humanoid containment cell, with access to whatever material he might desire to keep him entertained. SCP-XXX is currently in daily training exercises with Dr Bright in order to aide his judgment. Following incident XXX-63, containment procedures have been altered. SCP-XXX is installed in a regulation humanoid containment cell. It is to remain strapped to its bed, and fed intravenously. While the removal of its tongue may have been enough to remove its powers, care is to be taken to ensure its lips remain sewn together. Should subject persist in attempting to speak, removal of vocal chords will be considered.

Log Snippet:
Doctor Bright and SCP-XXX aka Tommy are seated at a table, Tommy's voice modulator behind Dr. Bright. They are speaking amiably, and have been for some time.
Bright: Tommy, you really need to get this through your head. We're not trying to hurt you. We want you to be able to work WITH your powers. You can't just speak your mind. Imagine if you had had said the 'pants on fire' thing to Agent Smith WITHOUT your modulator. It would not have been funny.
Tommy: Might have been. You don't… *He pauses, looking for a word choice.* You haven't seen that.
Dr. Bright leans back, sighing.
Bright: All right Tommy. That's it for today. Time to get your Modulator back on. *Dr. Bright turns away.*
Tommy: *Muttering.* You Foundation guys are literally worse than Hitler.
Dr. Bright stops moving. He turns slowly back towards SCP-XXX, a glint in his eye. A quick movement causes his jacket to cover the camera. Then SCP-XXX begins screaming. This goes on for thirty minutes, the screams becoming less articulate as it goes on, until the tape cuts off.

Something that is immune to bullets and projectiles of all types. Not a shield, some sort of creature. Preferably based off some mythological critter that is, itself, immune to projectiles. Point behind this is that the containment and retrieval stuff requires close combat.

Forever here this door shall sit,
A rift in reason and in rhyme;
A pox on those who would commit
A treason 'gainst the flow of time.

Windmills - something that grinds up stuff creepily (though that would have to work hard to be a not-repeat of other SCPs), or something that would power something the Foundation really, really doesn't want powered. Or windmill*s* - a whole field of windmills that blow in conjunction with some other world's wind? Windmills that draw things to them?

A shopping cart that acts like a dog: bonds with the person who touches it, likes to "play" - run fast, go around in circles, play chase - will bump you affectionately, chase off other things/people/carts it views as a threat to bonded subject, etc.

SCP with the sole gimmick of being literally uncontainable.

SCP - A contract expiry announcement from a PR company. Any non human entity (Company, country, church, store, event) who holds it will be repeatedly subjected to more and more PR and in-entity disasters (Like losing important files, accidents destroying essential property…)

SCP contained within a Timezone.

SCP whose containment involves reading it stories of murder. Fresh ones every time. Published fiction works best.

Humanoid SCP with highly aggressive immune system, able to deal with infections before they enter the body

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Children's fairy-tale book that, when read, causes the reader to regress chronologically, to something like six or seven. Reader hears voice of an elderly woman reading aloud, illegible writing on the inside of the book cover - only readable part says "Love, Granny" or something.

A story somehow incorporating SCP-ARCs and SCP-Ds together to restart a universe after an X#-Class Scenario deletes it.

A traffic cone which, when placed on a road, cannot be moved by motor vehicles. IE: Concrete traffic cone.

SCP-169 is stated to be between 2000 and 8000 km long. This is a big descrepancy, so what if there are two of them each around 3000 km long? The Tale would be a diary of a survivor who watched the news of them coming ashore, devastating southern South America, shrugging off military might, breeding, and spreading across the Earth.

A Foundation Tale pertaining to Project Longshot entitled, "The Longest Shot." An alternate history, or perhaps set in the near future, in which the project is completed and the spacecraft launched. In the 104 or so years it takes the craft to reach Alpha Centari and transmit data back to earth, humanity has been wiped from the face of the planet. Somewhere, a radio might crackle to life and begin blaring odd static. A monitor or two may light up at NASA mission control, even though they rightfully shouldn't, gazed upon by many eager eyes, none belonging to anything capable of comprehending the information on the LCD panels before them.

It would contrast the success of the mission with how little it meant, making subtle implications as to why humanity is gone, when the race died out, and what may have changed.

A basis for a story: For a group (or race, planet, person, I don't know) with advanced technology, it would be easy to make

something designed to be found by scientists. Just by making an object that's inexplicable *enough*, and leaving it somewhere, one stands a good chance that it will eventually end up in the hands of researchers. Say, the Foundation.

A pair of MTFs who work together to remove information from either the public eye or within the Foundation when members are promoted to certain positions- the Sin Eaters, who disappear people, and the Silverfish, who disappear information.

An anomalous original copy of the Declaration of Independence (or possibly the Constitution) held at the Foundation's branch in the National Archives.

"You don't understand! I'm trying to help you!"

It is said we are born in the infinite darkness, and to it we will return.
And those that would believe these words often cower behind them, using them to excuse themselves from bringing light to this world.
But should a star not shine simply because it is a difficult task?
Simply because they too must return to the void?
What would become of this world if our brethren, the stars, stopped giving their nurturing light?
The same that comes when we stop giving off ours.

Commercials I hear (U.S. based):
"**SCP Johnson – a family company**!"

And then I think of **Soap From Corpses** and it all goes weird.

An SCP thats like a toy dog bone and when a dog buries it, it grows into a tree that has more toy bones coming off of it.
And then those toy bones can grow new trees propagating the cycle.

SCP-963 is a interesting place to mine for tale ideas. As an example, there is one (type of) individual that should be immune to its effects - a Jack Bright that went past the 30 day mark. So if the Foundation wants an expert watching Bright, who better then a Bright to anticipate what he's up to? And they've (sort of) given him what he wants: *That version can live out a normal life and finally die.*

An -EX SCP; the original lay person explanation about "Many Worlds Quantum" was that every decision, every coin toss generated a new universe. Later, it's "Undetermined until observed, when it collapses the wave and resolves". So now, instead of creating universes we're destroying them. Not sure how/why but what if, like **SCP-8900-EX**, *something changed. Something awful.* And now we have to live with it.

A tale about the CotBG winning by reassembling their god, but rather than it taking over the world it simply ascends to a more clockwork plane of existence taking its followers with it. Much Foundation faceplaming results at the realization that an enemy wining just got them permanently out of the Foundation's hair.

A tale in which we see what keeps wild **SCP-831** from taking over the world… they find SCP style items of their own and try to use them wiping out their hives as a result

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An item which can only be described in insults regarding the item.

A sloth that is capable of passively absorbing nutrients and calories from the surrounding environment. On any other animal, it might not be a big deal, but with a maximum speed of less than 2 km/h, it can destroy large swaths of rainforest in a matter of days.

A SCP which was formerly a foundation Agent who got captured by one of the GOIs and exposed to *something*. The foundation only found out who their new SCP once was by DNA tests. Not a useful

change, more body horror and nightmare fuel that the Agent might still be self-aware under whatever was done to them.

An SCP that consists of a barrel of totem-shaped penises with the shafts being in the shape of various 'baramins' of animals. When touched by a female belonging to said 'baramin', the female will become pregnant.

The offspring will live to around just after reaching sexual maturity. Their birth will cause the mother to ignore all pre-existing offspring and their death will cause the mother to undergo severe depression. Usage of the SCP renders the female infertile except for subsequent uses of the SCP.

A "How To Draw Anime" book, which when in contact with a picture or video that contains humans, will turn all instances of that picture or video into a stylized, 'anime' version of whatever is depicted in the picture or video.

"Have you ever had one of those moments you just wished you could be a fly on the wall?
Wish granted.
Are We Cool Yet?"

An anomalous crime scenario involving a mass murder situation that always leaves only two suspects/witnesses remaining after the event with some sort of connection or relation that could make them accomplices. One or both of the suspects will either claim responsibility for the murders themselves or blame the other suspect, and will give an account of the crime that supports their claim, while the other will assert said account cannot be true, giving their own account of the event that conflicts with or contradicts the first. In any case, evidence recovered at the crime scene will be compatible with both accounts, but may be insufficient to give a clear picture of what happened. If the crime is not correctly "solved", i.e. authorities figured out exactly what happened during the event (who was responsible for which death, which details of either story

are true, whose idea was it, etc.), within a certain amount of time, both suspects will self-terminate in a manner consistent between incidents, usually with a murder tactic or implement they or the other supposedly used during the crime, and the event will repeat itself some time later.

Each instance of the crime will have some elements that denote it as an instance of the SCP, i.e. implements used or manner of death of at least one victim, but will otherwise create an entirely new scenario so study of previous instances does not provide any clues to subsequent ones.

Not exactly sure how this would be contained, or even if it is contained, what makes it spread, how it would recognize having been "solved", how the Foundation finds out it needs to be solved, etc.

A small-scale replica/floor plan of [your choice of city here] made of dominoes. Formations collapse of their own accord when corresponding buildings in the real city are damaged or destroyed, and vice versa. Might possibly be connected to AWCY.

An anomalous Halloween decoration that either turns people into black cats or produces black cats with human intelligence at regular intervals.

SCP-J idea: "The [EXPLETIVE] You Button!™" An "easy button"-esque device that, when pressed, emits the aforementioned phrase (sans censorship) and injures the person that pushed it, usually via a random object thrown from an indeterminate origin point.

A God that disguises itself in the costume of a fake God because it enjoys messing around with mortals.

A tale consisting of entries in a diary the Foundation recovered from the home of a child who had heard or read a description of

SCP-1128. Parents probably would think he was just overreacting from reading/hearing too many scary stories until it was too late, or maybe parents began showing symptoms of infection as well.

A scp involving the concept of ceremorphosis where an organism either hatches from a skull like an egg or eats the brain and mutates the body as part of its life cycle like a mind flayer or head crab.

A crashed vessel recovered from the crater in mexico.

A chick tract parody for the CotBG.

SCP idea: A mummified corpse resembling a deformed human recovered from an MC&D auction. Included with it were several "tags" bearing writing in an ancient Chinese script. Corpse becomes animate when one or more of these tags is applied to the body, with each tag causing it to exhibit different behaviors, e.g. "serve", "attack", "guard", etc. Based somewhat on popular depictions of the Jiang-shi, a Chinese zombie-like creature.

A Project crossover Tale in which the foundation deploys Mobile Task Force Omega-Seven back when it had Able in it, in an attempt to contain a small town in which a bunch of animals had been turning up drained of blood.

A small town called Forks….

Also referred to as:

Able and Dr. Clef working together to kick sparkly butt!

A tale in which the leader of the Serpent's Hand (or a faction thereof) reaches out to a college student and has said student found AWCY? as a counterpart to the Serpent's Hand.

An SCP object made by AWCY… but what catches the Foundation's interest isn't the object itself so much as the vandalism done to it in response. Said vandalism is clearly done by someone other than AWCY, yet it seems to be creating its own anomalous effects which appear to be a mockery of/a response to/interfering with the intent of the original object. Over the "Are We Cool Yet?" logo would be graffiti reading something along the lines of "YES, UR F@(KING C00L NAO! 3NUF OF TH15 BU11$H17!" ("leetspeak" obfuscation not necessary)

A product/drug (possibly smoked) developed by MC&D-employed scientists. Modeled after something made and used by the Fifth Church that they stole that they heard about from a converted club member.

Someone or something that makes people do musical numbers. I don't mean like that -J curtain that made people do showtunes, I mean something that causes mass quantities of people to break out in choreographed song-and-dance routines, disregarding their safety or present situation.

Brain worms that lay eggs which look exactly like Q-tips. An unsuspecting victim decides to start cleaning his ears and suddenly realizes that what he was using disappeared from his hand. Months later, their barely breathing body trudges through drugstores, pulling pristine Q-tips out of its nose and inserting them into the appropriate packaging. Depending on the angle, could be either a real article or a -J.

A humanoid SCP whose containment procedures require it to be inebriated at all times.

The **`Toynbee Tiles`** turning out to be an SCP; due to the relatively widespread knowledge of them and their public appearances, containment would focus on suppressing knowledge of its anomalous effects.

Due to a shortage of Amnesiacs of all classes (not just Class A) following a raid on a production plant by a GoI (CI, ORIA, Serpents Hand, or GOC), The Foundation is forced to ration amnesiacs until further notice, leading to several suicides and deaths thanks to things that cannot be unseen or memes getting out of control.

A "Who's on first?"-esque skit about a Nobody sighting.

"It's not like we're keeping we're keeping Hilter's brain in a jar. Okay, yea - we actually *are* but it's in formaldehyde! Well, of course it's dead, don't be an idiot!"

A tour of a Wondertainment factory a la Roald Dahl.

Titles for *The Collected Works of The Foundation*

- The Works of Dr. Gears
- Notes from Dr. Alto Clef
- Professor Kain Tales

(Damnit - I had ones for Bright…)

An SCP comprised of a large quantity of "excessively helpful" humanoid beings that follow a "target" around and provide him or her with courteous assistance in anything they attempt to do. And they are *everywhere*. Approaching a door? They open it for you from the other side. Shoe untied? One's already on it. Hungry? One of them already made you dinner somehow *while hiding inside your fridge*. Out of toilet paper? One comes out of the medicine cabinet with a fresh roll. They'll do anything for you to the best of their ability whether you want them to or not, and they don't take "no" for an answer.

A tale involving explicit details on how to execute Procedure 110-

Montauk mistakenly being sent via E-mail to a small town.

A (very) junior researcher failing to explain Procedure 110-Montauk. Also, a very dramatic and serious tale about **SCP-789-J**.

A tale where some researchers and scips play DnD/Pathfinder/insert tabletop RPG here.

Able and the Lizard optional, 181 recommended.

If you can somehow make 173 play, you have my seal of approval.

"Your mom" as a joke SCP. Alternatively, the "she" in "that's what she said".

A joke SCP about some horrible vile creation that turns out to be a vacuum, the joke being that it was written by Kain Pathos Crow. Of course I would recommend getting his permission first.

An oil rig that has a seemingly infinite oil supply. Due to the interest of companies and outside groups, the SCP would need some lengthy containment procedures.

> + Something in real life
>
> The Triangle Waist fire is one of the worst disasters since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution.
>
> The logo for the company:
> The alchemical symbol for fire:
>
> Maybe I'm just easily creeped…

A piano that plays the musician.

"Please, come back," the half-formed creature rasped. "I need you."

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096 discovers Instagram.

And MTF dealing with a cheese-based SCP called the "Gouda Grenadiers".

An object that only exists in a certain hour/minute/secondof the day. Either every single day, or once a week, month, year, ect. Whenever the time it exists in it runs out, it ceases to exist with no signs as to it ever being there.

A group of normal people stuck in a house in some implausible location, no memory of how they got there. Every so often, creepy candid-camera type videos of them get posted to the internet. Nobody in the house has reported any sort of cameraperson.

A guy that is afflicted by the condition that no matter where he goes he becomes wanted by the authorities, with wanted posters changing to show his face or even appearing out of thin air. As he got older the effect began to increase, with his face appearing in newspapers and even on TV and radio, as well as the charges increasing from small offenses like theft to large offenses like murder and/or terrorism. Eventually he showed up as a person of interest with ties to a GoI on one of the Foundations databases who sent out an MTF for him.

An SCP centered around a political party that is entirely made up of cannibals. Should be called The Donner Party.

A video game. At first, it seems to be a AI who modifies the game in its favor, but it's really a reality bender trapped within the video game. He begs the foundation to let him go.

Plaque/sign above an ice cream vending machine reads: "Paul M. Ehrweiler, the oldest man alive, also has some of the world's strangest eating habits. He only eats when, at irregular intervals, he purchases a treat from this very machine. He is 153 years old — so old that scientists say he may not even age. Paul cannot see what you purchase."

A demon of some sort that moves around in a location (such as a house, or a hospital) at an extremely high speed. It appears to follow some sort of routine, and does so X number of times a day. Variances include manifestations of humans, also moving at this speed, that the demon interacts with in ways well just use your imagination. We cannot physically interact with it, and it is not inherently dangerous. Hooks… the presence of D-Class subjects during iterations. Ideas… we're peaking through at another dimension, possibly a partition of some kind of Hell, and we see things move there at a much faster rate. What is this thing's purpose? Can it see us? What happens if we destroy the environment where it manifests? When it interacts with the manifested humans, does anything get left behind?

A collection of notes regarding television programming from widely known media sources that seem to hint at some higher force influencing the nature of television programs. Probably not good as a skip, probably better as a skip-as-tale.

Someone saw a face near the sun. It peaks out from behind the sun occasionally. Can everyone see it? Is it threatening?

On a mountain in X you can see four white humanoid figures at the peak, motionless. You have the feeling that you're making eye contact when you look up at them. They're not always there, and when you go up to find them they're the same distance away from you. They also seem to be present in a few photographs you have lying around. They look like they might be moving closer.

Project crossover idea: Commander Shepard (Mass Effect) discovers abandoned Foundation space containment facility with uncontained SCPs. Foundation may or may not have worked with Cerberus. Sometime before Mass Effect 3.

A tale about 239's infant years. I always had an idea that she created 597 after she inadvertently destroyed her hospital.

An SCP about a faucet that pours acid instead water, no matter where it is installed. The acid comes from another dimensions and is highly corrosive, capable of destroying absolutely anything - including diamonds. Keter-class?

P R A G U E is an old city. It has been falling apart at the seams for centuries. It is not long before P R A G U E dissolves into the logical subterranean chaos that is the foundation of our consensus reality.

That's not to say you can't have a little fun first. Utilizing the lastest advancements in computer science, our team of Underminers has fathomed into the unknowable, risking the destruction of two dimensions to discover these 218 amazing ways that YOU can H A C K P R A G U E.

A story that SCP-106's pocket dimension controls 106, and that more 106's could be created by the pocket dimension

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Puppy dog eyes as an anomalous event that is a cognito hazard, where puppy dog eyes force whoever sees them to either forget any wrong a dog has done, or give them food or let them out.

Metaphors are traditionally understood as figurative constructs that link otherwise unrelated things together. This is arrogance. Our world is simply the set of things that serve to link metaphors together.

"In lieu of recent events" - it's thought to be a miswording in Dr. Bright's bio. But what if it's not? What if history was rewritten to stop an XK event, with Jack saving the world by being trapped for all eternity?

When Dr. Bright was initially killed and imprisoned in **SCP-963**, it was during a containment breach of **SCP-076**-2. What if ORIGINALLY he dropped it a half second before dying and *ABLE* became trapped in the amulet instead?

Skip Idea: A beaver that was reincarnated as a chainsaw. But it still remembers the dirty catholics that ate it as a hangover cure after Mardi-Gras (look it up), and seeks revenge to this day. Only then can it rest. Only then.

Something with a Texas take on it:

"The name's Dark. Carter N. Dark. *MARSHALL* Carter N. Dark" (Pulls out six shooter and fires at the camera.)

A wild west themed SCP.

A memetic contagion that is an internet meme.

Write a tale where a conspiracy theory magazine learns of the Foundation's existence.

A pharaoh with the head of a turtle. Maybe have the turtle head be detachable?

A skip based on the Roland TB-303 synthesizer and the 80's 'acid rave' culture it revolved around. Why was it so underground? Did people really get shitfaced on drugs? Why were the media and police so against it? And more importantly: Is the movement really

dead?

Don't forget the yellow smiley faces.

SO
SCP #### is a China doll of some sort. Whenever anyone touches SCP ####, scp reforms into the person who touched it but when they were a kid. This can be useful for finding the origin of various scps.

A man with dissociative identity disorder. When he switches personality his body reforms into that figure.

A "beware of dog" sign that turns dogs into hellish creatures.

Do some skip involving platypuses with human faces on their backs. It's a mated pair and two litters of baby platypuses. The runt of the second litter died. It had a gulper eel's face on its back. Gross.

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icy, glacial settlement
people live in it
they seem normal
is illusion
they dont look like people; faces distorted
real fuckin creepy an shit
pretend to be people
get sinister when you know what they look like
wtf

---

some guy who's so boring it friggin' hurts. Gives off an aura that makes people so unbelievably bored that they can't stand it anymore. Thinks he's some accountant or some shit. Holy hell, this guy is dull. If his routine is broken the boredom aura expands super fast and it sucks major balls. If you can make this better, then major props, bro

These are ideas I was thinking about. If any of you guys wanna put your spin on it I don't care! You don't even have to credit me!

1. Food that turn into corpses when they expire.
2. Cliche green goo that has a crisis when contained.
3. A dimension where everything is alive and it all screams.
4. Dr. Wondertainement's BOOK OF LEARNING! [DISCONTINUED]
5. A theme park that is growing bigger and bigger and will not stop making rides out of other houses and structures.

—-

A pen that animates whatever is drawn with it made out of the material it is drawn on. If drawn on a living thing, the living thing dies and whatever was drawn is created in the process. If what was drawn can't gather enough materials from what it is drawn on, it becomes horribly disfigured.

« The Sea Slug and the Showman | Dread & Circuses Hub | Let's Get this Show on the Road! »

"Okay, one more time; what's the difference between magic and alchemy?" Victor asked as he examined the show globes filled with colourful philters and elixirs at Ed and Al's Alchemist Emporium.

"Alchemy is the study and manipulation of the Aether, the fluidic medium from which all reality emerges from," Iris replied, her own attention devoted to the variety of alchemical catalysts the two brothers kept in stock. "It's a Prima Materia of sorts, the closest mainstream science comes to it is String Theory. Celestial bodies generate substantial aetheric currents, which is where astrology factors in.

"Magic, as in Thaumaturgy, is the use of ritualized methods to focus and amplify EVE into Aspect Radiation, EVE being the aetheric force that causes observer effects like wave function collapse, and Aspect Radiation being EVE that's strong enough to cause macroscopic effects. Then, of course, there are Reality Warpers -"

"Like me?" Lolly asked, her voice muffled by the fact that she had crammed herself into a one-gallon hermetic vase.

"Yes, like you, who just don't interact with the Hume field as strongly as normal and therefore have a much lower threshold for creating aspect radiation and can essentially do so at will. Though all three are colloquially referred to as magic, so it can get confusing."

Iris tipped Lolly's vase and poured her out into the floor, where she quickly reconstituted into her Clown form.

"Yeah, being a Reality Bender is definitely the best magic since we don't have to learn a bunch of spells and stuff," Lolly bragged. "Oh,

and it is Reality Bender, not Reality Warper, because we bend reality like the kids bend the elements in that awesome cartoon."

Lolly playfully air bent a few gusts of wind towards Iris, who deliberately remained as implacable as usual.

"I prefer Reality Warper," she said.

"How come?"

"Because I'm British, and in British-English 'Bender' is a homophobic slur."

"Well, I'll stop saying Bender when you guys stop calling cigarettes fags."

"… Fair enough."

Their attention was diverted to the front of the shop by the sound of Ed the Alchemist emerging from the lab and setting a crate of potions down on the cashier counter.

"There you are Ms. Dark, 48 phials of Pactolus Philter, guaranteed to cure any and all outbreaks of **`Midas Plague`**," he said. "My brother and I are especially sympathetic to children being transfigured into metal. Be sure to give Carter a kick in the ass for both of us, won't you?"

"Believe me I'd love too, but if there's one thing he's good at it's avoiding his comeuppance. I'm pretty sure that's why we keep him around," she said as she took out one of the phials to examine it. "Did you really make all of these just since you got our ravenwave? That's remarkable. While I'm here, Esq. Darke asked me to keep an eye out for some rare items for a project we're working on. You wouldn't happen to have the flesh from an Old God Incarnate, would you?"

"Old God as in?"

"His exact words were 'Titans birthed from the Primordial Chaos'. I think that means anything on par with Mekhane, Yaldabaoth, the Scarlet King, gods like those."

“Sorry. Best we got is a mummy of a Type Black Daevite warrior.”

“Hmm. Still impressive.”

“Not really. All our Fun-Lovers are technically Type Blacks, and they’re all alive and kicking,” Lolly said as she came up to the counter to pet one of Al’s cats. “That’s much more impressive than one dead Type Black.”

“It would be more impressive if they were contained in something a little sturdier than a carnival trailer,” Iris retorted. “Wait a minute, that mummy doesn’t happen to have any Daevite weapons with it, does it?”

“’Fraid not.”

“Yeah, that was a long shot. Any Akivic Purification Serum by chance then?”

“You mean His Holy Tears? No, but what the hell is Darke the Elder working on to want all this stuff for?”

“Just something to pass the time,” Iris said deflectively. “He’s an old man, he doesn’t get out much. I’ll just take the Pactolus Philter, an ounce of abiogenic catalyst, a bottle of Quicksilver and a witch’s dozen of spectral embers. Bill it to the corporate account.”

“Hey Edward, I couldn’t help but notice that there are a lot more guards around than the last time I was here,” Victor said as he gazed out the window into the bustling street outside. “Is everything alright?”

“I’m not really supposed to say anything, they don’t want to cause a panic, but ah…” He cranked his neck towards the front door to make sure no one else was listening. “There’s a **serial killer** on the loose. Some sort of inbred goblin creature from the House of Habsburg.”

“The House of Habsburg?” Iris asked, her ears perking with interest.

“Yeah, we think it’s hiding out in the sewers,” he said as he set the pack of spectral embers down before her. “The Guards have been

down there twice already but they couldn't find it. How it ended up here we have no idea. From what I've heard there are thousands of the bastards in central Europe. They're so persistent even the Foundation is having trouble keeping a lid on them. There's talk that the Coalition is getting ready to bring the hammer down on them though. They're going to set up sting operations to catch their hunters, tag them and track them back to their hives, then go full scorched earth. I hope they burn every last one of them."

They were all startled by the sound of the cat shrieking in sudden pain and bolting out of Lolly's grasp as her grip reflexively tightened.

"What did you just say?" she asked softly, the anger in her voice barely contained. "Did you actually just say you want those fascist paraphobes to burn Freaks alive?"

"Lolly, listen, I know you think of yourself as Serpent's Hand so you're no fan of the Coalition, but we're talking about psychotic cannibals who breed like rabbits. These aren't innocent Freaks."

"And genocide is the best solution? Stick to what you're good at, right?"

"Lolly, they're not genocidal. Their governing body is made up of representatives from 108 occult factions, including the Alchemist's Guild, and they have an entire division dedicated to maintaining peaceful relations with the anomalous community."

"On their terms! They expect us to stay confined to Nexuses or extradimensional ghettos and pretend we don't exist because as long as we're secret we have no rights and they can do whatever they want to us! Any Freak that doesn't submit is labelled a parathreat and 'liquidated'! The Geo Sea are Nazis who want us all either dead or locked up, I hate them, and I hope those Habsburg goblins eat them alive!"

Lolly stormed out of the shop, slamming the door so hard the glass shattered and the door frame cracked.

"I really should choose my words more carefully around type Greens," Edward lamented.

“I’m going to go after her, I’ve never seen her like this,” Victor said, running through the broken doorway.

“Ms. Dark, is it okay if I add the damage to your bill?” Ed asked, only to find that she had vanished, along with the box of spectral embers. “Ms. Dark?”

“Brother, did you scare off our customers again?” Al shouted from the backroom.

“… Maybe.”

Victor sprinted out into the busy bazaar, looking for any sign of a distressed Clown. Fortunately, he didn’t have to look far. Lolly had gone into the alley beside the Emporium and was sitting against the wall, hugging her knees with her head hung as she took deep breaths.

“Lolly? Lolly, are you alright?” Victor asked as he crouched beside her.

“I’m sorry. The Geo Sea just really triggers me,” she said.

“Yeah, I remember,” he smirked, thinking back to the first show he had ever seen her perform.
“But I didn’t actually know it was because you thought of yourself as Serpent’s Hand.”

“After the Circus, the Library was the first magical place I got to visit,” she began. “It was incredible; bookcases the size of mountains that stretched on as far as the eye could see, holding every book from every iteration of every reality in the multiverse. Icky told me that it was a Sanctuary for Freaks, just like the Circus, and that the Ways wouldn’t let anyone they knew were bad in, and if someone bad did get in the Docents and the Elephant God would protect us. Then she introduced me to some people she knew in the Serpent’s Hand and explained that they kept magic and Freaks safe from people who wanted us kept secret or destroyed, and that it was because of people like them that one day magic and Freaks wouldn’t have to be secret anymore.

"The day I found out magic was real was the best day of my life. My life has been wonderful and incredible because of magic, and I've dedicated my life to sharing that joy with others. Every time I perform, I show new people that magic is real and wonderful, and the Geo Sea want me dead because of that. I have friends who are dead because of them. They want everyone who wants the dumb Masquerade overthrown dead, and if they had the firepower they'd want every Freak in the multiverse dead.

"When I think of magic, I think of my Circus and the Library and Wondertainment's toys and mindblowing anart and kindly old Mekhanites and the Oneiroi Dreamworld. I think of amazing, marvellous things and I hate that some people only think of the anomalous as something monstrous.

"You don't still think of me as a monster, do you?"

"I never -"

"Yes, you did. I'm not stupid. Isn't that why you came after me? You were worried that the monster Clown might be going on a rampage?"

"I came after you because you're my friend, and I was worried about you," Victor told her.

For the first time, Lolly looked at him, smiling even as tears still streamed down her face.

"Really?" she asked.

"Look, I don't really want to get into a discussion about anomalous civil rights, and I think the whole situation is a lot more complicated than good guys and bad guys, but I know you're not a monster, and I don't want you dead or locked up. And maybe I wouldn't always have thought that, which is why I'm glad I've had the chance to know you and your Circus."

"That's why I do what I do," she smirked. "Jeez, I'm a mess. I gotta get some Milk into me. Hey, don't tell Icky that Edward made me cry, or what he said about the Geo Sea. She might take it worse than I

did.”

“I won’t, I promise.”

“Iris either.”

“I…” he looked around, suddenly realizing he wasn’t sure where Iris was. “Oh crap.”

While the others were distracted by Lolly’s outburst, Iris had snuck out a side door and into an empty back alley. Using her bionic hand to slide off a manhole cover, she had slipped into the sewers to do some goblin hunting.

The sewers were absurdly spacious, similar to the ones in Vienna that the Habsburg Dynasty had previously called home. One of their lineage would no doubt be quite adept at navigating and concealing itself in such a subterranean labyrinth. It made perfect sense that platoons of guards storming the sewers hadn’t been able to find it. The creature wasn’t stupid, and had safely remained in its hiding place until they had passed. But a young woman, all by herself? That seemed like it would offer the creature far more incentive to come out.

“Hello?” she said in a soft whimper, doing the best damsel-in-distress impression she could manage. “Is anyone there? I, I fell down the manhole. I think I broke my ankle, I can’t climb back up. Please, is anyone down here?”

She smiled as she heard the faint scampering of feet against wet stone coming towards her. In her right hand, she held a spectral ember at the ready. The footsteps grew louder, and she could hear the bestial thing furtively sniffing the air. She let out a small, frightened sob to draw in her prey. It took the bait, and she felt its disgusting breath on the back of her neck.

She immediately ignited the ember she held into a Spectral Flame, flooding the sewers with light. The Habsburg Noble howled in pain and shock at the dreaded illumination, shielding its eyes and blindly trying to fall back. Instead, Iris grabbed its throat with her left bionic

hand, lifting it off the ground and slamming it against the wall. It struggled with ferocious might, but relented when Iris brought the Spectral Flame up to its face.

"*Nein, nein, nicht das Licht! Bitte, wir geben nach!*" it wailed.

"I'm sorry, but I'm not quite fluent in German. Did you say you'd like some more light?" Iris smirked as she increased the intensity of the fire.

"*Nein*, no, please!" it pleaded. "Please, please we submit, just take away *das Licht*!"

"But I want to get a good look at you; you are such a rare creature after all," Iris replied.

The being was only a few inches shorter than her at about five feet, though would have stood taller had its back not been so horribly bent. Its skin was pale and hairless, each hand held seven long, splayed fingers, and its pointed ears were so large as to be almost bat-like. Its left eye, the larger of the two, had a black cornea and gold iris, while the other had a clouded cornea and red iris. Its nose was hooked and crooked, but most grotesque of all was a mouth that went almost literally ear to ear and was filled with multiple, misaligned rows of large teeth.

"Incredible. The product of three hundred years of alchemically enabled and accelerated inbreeding, dozens of generations without any outside blood, reinforced by the ruthless culling of all but the most monstrously mutated, you are a work of art!" Iris marvelled. "I can't believe I actually got a chance to look at one of you things up close. Do you have a name, little Nosferatu?"

"*Freiherr* Dagoburt von Habsburg. Please, forgive us! We thought you a mere peasant, but your strength and cunning are proof of noble blood. We were going to eat you, but now we see you would be a worthy vessel for our brood. Let us fornicate, and a fortnight from now the noble products of our union will gnaw their way through your womb and burst forth to carry on our combined bloodlines!"

“I’m flattered, really, but I am rather focused on my career at the moment so I’ll have to pass,” she replied. Placing the Spectral Flame on the ground, she pulled out her old box cutter and made a small slash on the goblin’s skin. It hissed in indignation but made no attempt to break free. A smear of a midnight blue humor began oozing from the laceration.

“Literal blue blood; brilliant!” she smiled. She now used her box cutter to carve a sigil into the goblin’s flesh.

“What are you doing?” it demanded.

“Just a little exsanguination spell I know,” she replied, pocketing the box cutter and unhooking the hermetic vase she had brought with her from her belt. “You Habsburgs aren’t the only ones who value that blue blood in your veins. If the Coalition has their way, it will be priceless pretty soon.”

“No, wait, please! I can pay you double what my blood is worth! Spare me and I -”

“Oh, I’m not going to sell it. I’m going to give it as a gift to my Grandsire, to ensure I stay in his good graces, and also just because I’m a little curious about what he’ll actually do with it. Besides, I can’t have you murdering and terrorizing the biggest flea market in the multiverse; it’s bad for business.”

Iris dropped the Habsburg to the ground and began murmuring invocations in the Chaos Tongue. Aerosolised blood began rising from the sigil and raining into the open vase. The pitiful creature shrieked and wailed as its convulsing body rapidly lost its vital fluids, flailing its limbs and thrashing its head in agony. It let out an ear-splitting scream as the last of its noble blood was depleted and its body went limp.

Somehow, the desiccated corpse was even uglier than it had been in life. Dragging it by the scruff of the neck, Iris tossed it into the sewage channel for the Bazaar’s authorities to find and deal with.

Ensuring the lid on the vase was tightly sealed, she picked it up and gazed at it in contemplation for a moment.

“Not even the weirdest part of my day,” she smirked to herself.

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Freaky Commodities

There were four men in the elevator. Two buff men in loose suits stood on the edges, staring blankly at the wall in front of them. Next to the left-most guard was a middle-aged British man with a graying mustache. He was smiling unevenly, perhaps due to a stroke in his earlier days, such that one side of his mustache was significantly higher than the other. He was wearing a white button-down shirt with a cursive "Marshall, Carter, and Dark LTD" embossed on the breast. The final man was not smiling, although he appeared to be, because his face was upside down.

"We have some very interesting options for you today, Manny, correct?" the British man asked.

"You may call me that, yes," the Man with the Upside-Down Face responded. It was a stupid nickname, but he had met the British man, Burgess, twice before (although he had accompanied Fuller those times). Moreover, being called Manny as opposed to something more formal helped alleviate the painfully over-professional air of the conversation.

"Very good. You may follow me." The British man finished the sentence just as the elevator doors slid open. Wholly unimpressed, Manny strode behind him through a brightly-lit hallway into a large red room adorned with tapestries. Three creatures, as they seemed, were in the middle of the room inside of tight steel cages. One, a heavily neotonized old Aboriginal, had her head pressed to the bars of her cage with a hungry look in her eyes as she tracked Manny from the doorway. In the other cage sat a younger boy, no older than fifteen, whose entire body was covered in a thin film of a dark pink substance. He did not look up. The third cage appeared to be filled with a flickering fire, and the Man with the Upside-Down Face could have sworn he saw a figure shift around.

"Alright. What can they do?" He paused for a second. "This female one," Manny said. "I'd like to see her talent."

"Ah yes, we call her the Amazing Australian. She is able to move her center of weight a couple feet or so outside of her body, allowing her to accomplish incredible feats of acrobatics. We haven't a clue as to how she does it, but then again, we don't care." Burgess spoke with a pitchman's flair and a younger man's energy, though he knew as he spoke that folks from the Circus of the Disquieting would remain mainly uninfluenced by even the best deliveries. After all, they sold things for a living, just as he did.

"May I see it?" inquired the Man with the Upside-Down Face. His eyebrows fluttered near his neck as he spoke.

"Of course!" said Burgess. "Anna, flip the cage."

Nothing happened. "Anna, flip the cage." he said again. Still nothing. Burgess walked over and kicked the bars next to the woman's face. Shrieking, she plastered herself against the top and sides of the box and flung the box high up into the air, until it was jerked back to the ground by a thick steel chain bolted into the floor. She peered again outside through the bars at Manny.

"Mr. Burgess," he said exasperatedly, "This woman doesn't have long to live. That little stunt is hurting her every time she does it, and she's already old. I'm afraid that if I took this one, we wouldn't get more than four shows out of her. Five maximum."

"Perhaps you would like to examine her more closely? She is healthier than she looks." Burgess suggested.

"No, she's not. What is the next one?" asked Manny. In the middle cage, the creature groaned softly.

"This one has a weird property that we thought might interest you as a freak. It secretes a slippery salmon-colored substance that smells ever so slightly sweet. This one is much younger than the previous, which ought to better serve your purposes."

The boy in the cage did not look up or acknowledge either man. It moaned again forcefully, then let out a loud whimper.

"Heh, this one's harmless." Burgess fished a small key out of his

pocket and walked around behind the cage, unlocking it. With great effort, he spun the cage around so that the door was facing Manny and tilted the cage up, so that a wave of pink goo washed on to the floor like a red carpet rolling out in front of a movie star. The creature inside slid out as well on the raft of sludge, panicking. It stumbled to its feet, slipped on its secretion, and immediately fell back down. Its gaze slowly met Manny's as it desperately tried to take account of its new surroundings.

Manny leaned down low to talk to it, so that his forehead was just above the creature's. It looked up at him pleadingly. After a long second, Manny stood up again and faced Burgess directly. "I'll come back to this one. I'd like to see the last option, if you don't mind."

"Of course, sir," said Burgess. He sidestepped carefully so as to avoid the sludge that was slowly covering more and more of the floor towards the third cage. "This one's a bit unfortunate. Lost a bet to the wrong person, I'm afraid. His entire head is eternally engulfed in flame. Perhaps this interests you, Manny?"

"I'm quite numb to it, actually," the freak chimed in. It had a London accent almost as strong as Burgess'.

Manny smiled a wide grin that made his cheeks puff out and leaned in to the cage near the fire. "You're English?"

"Yes sir," it replied.

"How would you like a job?" he asked. "You'd be fed three times a day and clothed."

"I would like that very much, sir."

"Perfect!" With that, Manny stood up and walked over to Burgess. "When would you like your performance scheduled?" he asked.

"Our patron has requested the Thursday after next."

"Great. We will inform them where it is the day of the event." Manny stuck his hand out. "Pleasure doing business with you again, Burgess."

"Likewise," Burgess responded. He shook Manny's hand and handed him the key. Manny unlocked the freak's cage and nodded to himself while it made its way to its feet. "Shall I walk you out?" Burgess inquired.

"No thank you, I know the way. Send Marshall my regards." He turned. "Follow me," he said, directed at the man on fire. The two walked down the hallway towards the elevator. After getting a glare from one of the guards, they decided to take the stairs down. Finally, the flame-faced man spoke up.

"Thank you," he said quietly.

The Man with the Upside-Down Face smiled again. "Most people don't come with me so easily. I usually have to convince them, offer them love, or money, or fame. All you wanted was to be let out of that cage." Manny sighed.

"I guess some people are simple," he replied.

"I guess some are."

Freaky Commodities II: Freak Harder

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"So, here we are again," the Man with the Upside-down Face said as the elevator doors slid shut. "You know, when Burgess did this he had security guards."

"They're needed upstairs. I…*may* have left a Sarkist and a Mekhanite together in the same room," Victor replied with an awkward cough, pressing the button for the desired floor. "Besides, you two I trust."

"Awww, that's so sweet," Lolly cooed as the elevator began its ascent. "I'm so excited, this is like getting a new puppy!"

"We're not getting a puppy, we're getting a new attraction for the Circus," Manny reminded her firmly. "Remember that. It's not just about whether or not you like something. It has to be a good fit for us."

"Relax, no one loves the Circus more than I do. No one loves Icky more than I do either, and I would never let her down."

"Why didn't Icky come as well, if I may ask?" Victor said. They both remained awkwardly silent for a moment.

"Lolly, do you want to field that one?"

"Tinkles said that Bubblegum's drinking was going to lead her to an early grave. I was just trying to help!"

"What happened?" Victor asked.

"I slipped her some Antabuse so she couldn't drink without getting sick," Lolly replied, shrugging like it was no big deal.

“Now, on top of being down an act, we have a two-tonne elephant going through alcohol withdrawal,” Manny sighed. “Icky is currently handling the situation, and so Lolly is here on her behalf.”

“You’re not mad at me, are you? I really was just trying to help.”

“I know. What I don’t know is where you got an elephant-sized dose of Antabuse.”

“You’d be surprised at what you can buy in bulk.”

Manny gave a nonchalant nod and decided to change the subject.

“Victor, tell me about this first guy again. You said he’s Sarkic?”

“Yes, but I shouldn’t have, and please don’t call him that either,” Victor insisted. “They never call themselves that, it’s like a slur.”

“I’m well aware of that,” Manny said resolutely. The elevator dinged and the doors slid open to the ostentatiously gilded showroom of gleaming tiles, lacquered woods and crystal chandeliers; all of which looked not only very expensive but precariously fragile.

“Oh, I’m starting to have second thoughts about this,” Victor said quietly to himself. The three of them approached a man in front of a draped cage. The man himself wore a rather over-the-top crimson cloak, the hood of which obscured his face. “Manny, Lolly, this is…”

“Valmont will do,” the Sarkist replied in a haughty tone and an accent that, while sounding posh, was clearly an affectation. “And may I say what an absolute pleasure it is to meet two such beautifully deformed individuals.”

“Deformed?” Lolly hissed through gritted teeth, her face turning an incandescent red.

“Easy now; remember the guards,” Manny said.

“Oh, you are lucky I always take Clown Impulse Suppressant before I leave the Circus!” she huffed, taking a deep breath and letting her face return to its regular colour.

Valmont let out a condescending chuckle.

“Deformities are nothing to be ashamed of, child. To survive and thrive in spite of them is proof of strength, and to flaunt them openly is to reject the masses’ insipid obsession with aesthetics.”

“Listen Valmont, we didn’t come here to hear the Gospel of Ion. We’re here on business, so kindly show us what you’ve got.”

“Of course,” Valmont nodded. He raised his hand and pulled the veil off the cage with a single melodramatic gesture. Inside was a mound of ghastly pale flesh, lumps upon lumps like a pool of melted candle wax. Emerging from the mound were several distorted human faces, their mouths perpetually open in an eternal scream, along with a number of limbs that were mangled and twisted beyond any hope of use.

“Behold! Not long ago, while I was reaching across dimensions, I saw a **paradise** where the sun itself was blessed, where its rays transfigured every living thing it touched into beings of resplendent and rapturous malady. So enamoured was I, that I spirited one such flesh wright into our domain, in the hopes I might be able to recreate such a messianic plague and transmute our own abysmal reality into a utopia of instinctive, rapacious consumption!
“Sadly, it seems that such beautiful beings can only be created by the sun of their native realm, and it’s far beyond my ken to synthesize the peculiar effects of that hallowed star. Having no other use for the poor creature, I’ve decided to sell it.
"Imagine the horror on the faces of your audience when they see this amalgam of souls, this aberrant grotesquery, this singular pile of melted flesh, its mere presence inducing existential confusion and visceral revulsion, challenging the sanctity of nature and the benevolence of God! What do you say to that, upside-down man?”

Manny was unmoved by the Sarkist’s sales pitch. He looked at the thing coldly, and then turned his head towards Valmont.

“It’s dead,” he said, matter-of-factly. There was an awkward pause.

“No it isn’t,” Valmont replied.

“Yes, it is,” Manny said with an exasperated shake of his head.

“Its anatomy makes it hard to move so it’s at rest most of the time, but I assure you it is alive,” Valmont insisted.

“It smells likes it's dead,” Lolly said with a wriggle of her nose.

“The miasma of necrotic and rancid tissue is to force those around it to confront the inevitability of death, disease, and decay!” Valmont claimed.

“No, it’s indicative of its own death, disease, and decay,” Manny said, furrowing the brow where his chin should have been. “Look here sarkie, I know a dead beastie when I see one, and this thing is dead.”

Victor gulped at the slur, but surprisingly Valmont didn’t react to it at all.

“No, it’s like a predatory cat; it spends most of its time sleeping. It’s just asleep,” Valmont said with increasing desperation.

“You’re actually going to commit to this?”

“It’s not even breathing,” Lolly pointed out. “Sleeping things still breathe.”

“Its breathing is very shallow. It has a low metabolism to conserve its energy. Chan, help me out here.”

“Well, the creature was a little more lively earlier, so I suppose it is possible it’s merely sleeping,” Victor offered. Lolly pulled a bicycle (technically unicycle) horn out from the hyperdimensional hammerspace of her pockets and blew it at one of the creature’s numerous ears. All three men recoiled at the impossibly loud noise, but the abominable globster didn’t move an inch.

“Yeah, it’s definitely dead,” Lolly announced.

“Well it’s fainted now!” Valmont claimed.

“Fainted?” Lolly asked in disbelief.

“Yes, it’s like a fainting goat; plays dead when it’s scared. It’s a survival mechanism.”

“It’s like a predatory cat and a fainting goat?”

“Well it is a chimera in a way, so that does make sense. It’s probably got some snake qualities in there as well. Quite the bargain you’re getting, really.”

Lolly looked at him in bewilderment, while Manny just shook his head.

“Mr. Valmont, if you cannot immediately provide some proof of life for this creature, we will have to pass,” he said firmly. Valmont became pensive and took a surreptitious step right up to the cage, which then rattled back and forth for an instant.

“There, you see. It just moved.”

“You shook the cage!” Lolly accused.

“Victor, show us the next offer,” Manny ordered.

“You would dare refuse such a treasure, from one such as myself no less?” Valmont asked, resuming his haughty persona. “You will rue this day, Circus freak! No one denies a Sarkist!”

The three of them all suddenly looked at him in surprise.

“What?”

“Tell me, *Sarkist*, where does the Valkzaron say that Adytum is located?”

“Ahh…in all of our hearts?” he replied uncertainly.

“You’re not really a Sarkist, are you?” Victor asked, utterly mortified.

“How dare you!”

“In all of our hearts? Really?” Manny chuckled.

“I thought you were being figurative! Adytum is like Atlantis, no

knows for sure if it even existed, much less where it was," Valmont claimed.

"Wrong. Adytum is where it always was; in the northern Urals. Ion just cloaked it with mind-bending magic and shifted it ever so slightly out of this reality," Lolly stated, popping a sucker into her mouth.

"How the hell would *you* know that?"

"I watch that show **`Professor Abnormal's Science Lab`**. He did an episode on Adytum once."

"And I've been there," Manny added. "Herman had us perform there once or twice. Not the worst thing he ever did, which frankly says more about him than it does about Adytum. Point is, I know Sarkicism. And you boy are not a Sarkist."

"…Okay, maybe not technically, but I'm dating a black-blood girl and her dad said that if I could just get rid of this thing for them that he'd accept me as an Orin and…"

"Security!" Victor shouted.

"No please! I need the money. Neo-Sarkic girls have expensive tastes!" Valmont cried as the two security guards dragged him towards the elevator.

"So…I vote no on the gross dead thing from the Sarkic poser," Lolly said.

"Agreed," Manny nodded. "Victor, do you not do background checks on these guys?"

"Those don't exactly work with secret societies," Victor informed him as they walked over to the next display. "I do apologize for that. I can however personally vouch for the authenticity of this next seller. Manny, Lolly, this gentleman goes by the epithet of Silicon Soul. He's a…"

"A Maxwellian," Manny finished his sentence. "It's obvious enough."

The short man before them was pale and gaunt, with a pair of

electrodes permanently attached to his smooth scalp. Their wires fed into something under his heavy black coat. There was a neural port behind his right ear, and his amber glass eyes had mechanical apertures. There was a black breathing mask over his nose and mouth, and some small dark device upon his throat. Though his right arm was mechanical, it hung limp and useless, seemingly as broken as his god.

"It is nice to meet you," he said in a raspy, modulated voice. "I believe I attended your Circus once, as a child. It deeply perturbed my still developing sense of reality, and the image of a man with an upside-down face has haunted my dreams ever since."

"We try to make a difference."

"You said your name was Silicon Soul. That sounds like a screen name," Lolly commented. "You go by a screen name IRL? Lol."

"I consider myself a foreigner to meat space, and my name reflects that," the man replied.

"So what do you have for us then? Some Broken tech?"

"No, actually. Like that Sarkist swine, I too have a creature that I came upon more or less by happenstance and don't know what to do with."

He took the cover off the pedestal behind him, revealing a 'tabby cat' with dark purple fur. It was a long-haired breed, a little overweight, and its violent eyes shone with an electric luminosity.

It was also floating a few feet off the ground.

"Oh my god, it's adorable!" Lolly screamed. "Its eyes are just like Icky's!"

"I named him Khoshekh, since I've heard of a similar creature by that name described of in that anomalous radio broadcast that leaks into our reality from time to time," Silicon informed them.

"The one from that nexus in the Southwest? Yeah, I've been there too," Manny said. "Briefly, I mean. We never got to perform. We

were chased out of town by a mob screaming 'interlopers'."

"Can I pet him?" Lolly asked with eyes as big as saucers.

"Just be careful. He's not the friendliest cat I've ever known," Silicon nodded. Lolly approached the floating feline, only for it to hiss at her. The hissing it made sounded more like something from an enormous serpent than an overweight cat, and its teeth were not even mammalian, let alone feline.

"Poor thing. He's scared to death. How much?"

"Lolly, hold on a second," Manny insisted. "Aside from just not being friendly, does this animal have any other liabilities I should know about?"

"It is venomous," Silicon admitted.

"Venomous?"

"Yes, it has venom sacs in its mouth, as well as some venomous spines on its back, so you do need to be careful when interacting with it."

"That sounds like something you should have told us before you said Lolly could pet him," Manny said with an agitated shake of his head. "What about tricks? Can it do anything?"

"Well, for now, it just sort of floats there, which to me seems good enough for a freak show," Silicon said. "I did a bit of research, and I think there's some sort of flux pinning or something going on. I guess it doesn't really matter. But it's purple, it's got glowing eyes, it's poisonous, it makes scary noises, and it floats! You've got animal tamers, right? I'm sure they could teach it some tricks, or at least not to bite people. It's no more dangerous than any other animal act you have."

"What happened to your arm?" Many asked.

"What?"

"I said what happened to your arm?"

Silicon took a glance down at his disabled arm, seemingly trying to will it to move and failing.

"…It's unrelated to the cat."

"Really?"

"Yes. I mean, okay, maybe it's tangentially related to the cat. When I found it I tried to pick it up by the scruff of the neck, as you do with cats, but it didn't like that so it somehow produced an electric surge in my arm that fried all of the electronics."

"Sir, I'm afraid this animal has too many potential liabilities for us to consider incorporating it into our Circus," Manny said firmly.

"But he might die if we don't adopt him!" Lolly objected. The cat hissed again, this time flicking out multiple barbed tongues, wriggling like the tentacles of a Kraken.

"…it might kill us if we do," Manny countered.

"But we can take precautions. Put up warning signs or something, and then everyone could enjoy him," Lolly suggested. "Icky and I could use him in our 'pussy lovers' routine, or we could put him in the petting zoo!"

"Only if we want every child to die a slow, painful death," Manny said. "Lolly, I get that this thing is cute…"

"Super cute!"

"But it's also very dangerous. So dangerous no one can even touch it safely. I really can't imagine any scenario where someone doesn't get poisoned by this thing. Do you want that on your conscience? You said you weren't going to let Icky down. Do you really think Icky would want something this dangerous around kids, or up your skirt?"

Lolly gave the creature a forlorn look, only for it to swipe at her with horrifically distended claws.

"No," she admitted. "Fine, we won't get him. I'm sorry Mr. Kitty. Maybe Victor can find you someone immune to poison to be your

forever home."

"I know a surprising number of people who meet the description," Victor told her. "The cat will be fine, don't worry. Silicon, put the cover back on it and wheel it out of the showroom until the next showing, won't you?"

"It seems to prefer the darkness anyway," he said, covering the cat-like creature up and hauling it out of the room.

The creature produced a rolling, thunderous buzzing sound that they could only hope was purring.

“Victor, please tell me you saved the best for last,” Manny said.

“I did indeed. Right this way,” Victor said as he led them to the final display. Unlike the other two, this one had no attendant. It was simply a full-length mirror with an ornate brass frame, encased in some transparent material. “This item came into our possession when its previous owner passed away and we took control of their estate.”

“And what’s interesting about it?” Manny asked.

“I know this may not be the most original premise, but this old antique mirror…is haunted," Victor said with a dramatic flourish.

Literally nothing happened.

"Pepper? Pepper that was your cue," he said, still to no effect. He walked up to the mirror and gave it a gentle shake. This finally produced a result, causing a pale light like moonbeams to shine down from the mirror, illuminating the translucent figure of a pubescent girl with braided pigtails and an old fashioned dress.

“Okay, I'm out. Jesus,” she said, her voice an ethereal echo. She put on a forced smile and curtsied before them. "Hello, people who want to buy me. I'm ever so pleased to make your acquaintance."

“Oh my god!” Lolly screamed in elation, jumping right in front of the girl and scaring the no longer living daylights out of her. “Are you really a ghost? How did you die? What do you have to do with the

mirror? Are you stuck as a kid forever? How come Victor wants to sell you? Can I touch you?”

“No, don't touch me! What the hell are you on?"

"Clown's Milk," she replied, giving her signature eerily serene smile that Victor still found so unnerving. Pepper didn't seem to find it endearing either.

"I don't know what that is, but it sounds gross," she said.

"It's no grosser than regular milk, and it's *so* much more fun!" Lolly told her. "I'd let you try some, but you're dead, and if you weren't already dead it would kill you, so…sorry."

"So what's your story Pepper? How'd you end like this?" Manny asked.

"Does it matter? You're just going to make up some sensationalized horse crap to draw in bigger crowds."

"True, but I like to know my freaks. Are you actually a ghost?"

"I am. There's not really much of a story to that though. I caught pneumonia and died. I haunted my mother because I loved her and couldn't stand to see her so heartbroken. My dad knew someone who could make a mirror that would let me be seen and heard like a real person."

“The mirror acts as a focal point for aspect radiation, letting her take a semi-corporeal form,” Victor added.

"I was actually pretty happy with my folks, considering that I'm dead and can't go anywhere or do anything. But of course, they died eventually and now I'm stuck to this stupid thing forever!"

“There are worse soul traps than a mirror, believe me,” Manny said. “If you piss off the wrong god or mage, or get resurrected with any quantum retrocasuality tech you’ll be trapped in your own rotting corpse, still able to feel everything until you’re completely scattered to the winds.”

She stared at him dumbfounded for a moment.

"You are a weird dude," she said. Lolly tentatively ran her hand through the ghost's intangible body.

"She's tingly," she giggled.

"I said don't touch me!"

Manny stepped up to the mirror and examined its casing.

“What’s this you got it in?” he asked.

“Aluminum oxynitride with a clear superhydrophobic coating,” Victor replied. “You won’t have to worry about any of your guests breaking it, and it’s easy to clean.”

Lolly cleared her throat and put on the most business-like countenance she could muster.

“Pepper, would you like to come back to our Circus with us?” she asked sweetly. “It’s full of all sorts of magic people just like you, so you wouldn’t be alone anymore, and I promise it’s the most amazing, fantastic place you’ve ever seen. You’ll have an enormous family, the most special family in all the worlds who will love you and take care of you and keep you safe. Best of all you won’t have to be a secret; new people will come and see you everyday and be amazed by you because you’re magic, and that single magical experience will brighten their lives forever! Would you like that Pepper?”

The ghost gave an apathetic shrug.

“I dunno. Maybe. I guess it would be better than being sold to some creepy rich pedophile or something. But I don't want people touching me all day!"

“Manny, we have to take her with us. It’s non-negotiable. She's a freak and she has nowhere to go. She needs a home.”

“She’d be a fine addition to the Den or the Hall at the very least,” Manny nodded. “What’s the sticker price, Victor?”

“We’re asking a hundred and twenty thousand U.S. dollars,” Victor replied.

“Well knowing the way you guys mark stuff up that means you’ve got at most ten grand invested in her. How about twenty? Be reasonable, that’s a decent profit margin.”

“Maybe by the Circus’s standards, but not ours. I can take twenty thousand *off*.”

"Yeah, just haggle over the helpless adolescent girl like I'm a used car. That's not fucked up at all," Pepper groaned.

“Hush," Manny said. "Victor, who do you think’s going to pay a hundred grand for a ghost? People abandon houses worth more than that because they’re haunted. I’ll pay thirty thousand. That’s triple what you’ve spent on her, which is the same profit margin Apple has on its iPhones. Are you saying you’re greedier than Apple?”

“I think you know the answer to that. Lolly’s already made it clear that you’re not leaving without her, but if it helps I can knock a few more grand off; ninety-six thousand.”

“Forty thousand, and before you counter-offer keep in mind that we’re still your ticket to the Utterly Bazaar. Seems to me that if someone was going out-of-universe for the first time, they wouldn’t want their Sherpas to be angry at them for gouging them in a simple business deal.”

Victor actually hesitated this time before answering.

“Forty-eight thousand, final offer.”

For a second Victor thought Manny was frowning at him, before realizing it was a smile.

“Deal,” he said sticking out his arm for a handshake. “Gary will wire you the money by the end of the day tomorrow.”

“Awesome! Thanks Victor!” Lolly shouted, grabbing the mirror and sticking it under her arm. “I can’t wait to introduce you to

Ragamuffin. She’s going to love you!”

"Please don't carry me sideways, it mucks up the whole projection," Pepper complained. Her visage was still vertical, but it was now a fun house distortion of itself, as tall as the mirror was wide.

"Yeah, you look silly!" Lolly laughed, moving the mirror around erratically to produce increasingly distorted forms.

“A pleasure as always, Emcee D. We’ll show ourselves out,” Manny said, relieving Lolly of the mirror and ushering her towards the elevator.

“Take care of yourselves,” Victor waved as the elevator doors slid shut. He nearly jumped out of his skin when the silence was broken by multiple sharp gasps from the flesh pile in the cage.

“Oh thank god, I thought they’d never leave,” one of the faces said.

“Did you see the face on that one? So much makeup; she looked like a clown!” another face said.

“Security, take that damn thing back to Valmont!” Victor ordered as he attempted to bring his breathing and heart rate back to normal. “And tell him I’m still charging him a broker’s fee!”

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Kagome kagome
Kago no naka no tori wa
Itsu itsu deyaru
Yoake no ban ni
Tsuru to kame ga subetta.
Ushiro no shoumen daare

Yume Kurosawa hummed an old Japanese children's game song to herself as she sat in the darkness of the Den of Freaks. Outside she could hear the crowds of people swarming and chatting as they ventured into the dozens of attractions and booths the Circus of The Disquieting had to offer. Far off towards the carnival grounds, there were screams of delighted terror coursing through the rides, and the occasional yell of triumph or disappointment by the game booths. Outwardly, Yume kept a stoic smile on her face, but inside, she felt a rush of dread; even though she couldn't see it, she could hear the Freewheeler, the Ringmaster's watchdogs, a few rooms down, its awful, squeaky metal wheels rolling over and over as its Rider's feet fumbled unevenly on old bike pedals.

The Den of Freaks was some twenty feet across from the Ringmaster's domain. Unlike the vivid scarlet and gold that adorned the Big Top, the Den was a tent of deep, poisonous purple and neon green. It was here where others such as herself were looked upon in awe and fear for their abnormalities. Yume had spent the majority of her seventeen years as part of the Circus in this very place; now twenty-three, it was the only life she was truly used to, and this tent was the only place where she was surrounded by a select few she considered friends. Life was hard for a Freak; Manny was kind to all of them, but the Ringmaster looked down on everyone in the Den as if its inhabitants were his personal playthings. No one dared to

speak out though; that could be a one-way ticket to the Clowns.

Along the inner wall of the tarp, Kurosawa gazed at the posters depicting various human oddities; all of them had stretched grins on their faces, all of them looked lively, and, most of all, all of them looked happy. Kurosawa creased her eyes in bitterness and looked down at her feet, then continued humming her song. Her shift as a display was over, and now she had ten hours of solitude to brood…

Mommy, she looks gross!
Can we go now? I don't like these people…
Weird!…
Sniffle…Sniffle…
Freaks.
Monsters.
Creeps.

Freak

Freak

Squeak, *Squeak*, *Squeak*

Yume snapped out of her two hour doze to the sound of distant retching, followed by a gasp of awe. It was a familiar sound she had grown accustomed to over the seventeen years; she and the person uttering it had been taken by the Circus within weeks of each other.

"Quincy's up…" she murmured. Even as she said these words, a breeze blew into her room from the main Den, and with it came three, dainty, winged creatures. Yellow swallowtails. The butterflies fluttered around Yume in synchronization, guided by their master's will. It was his standard gesture of camaraderie. Pursing her lips, Yume smiled a sad smile and held out a finger; the butterflies flew about it, then slowly flew away, back out the way they came from, back out into the Den. Yume knew better than to follow; it was against the rules for an unscheduled freak to enter the Den during a show. Still, she wished she could have seen Quincy's act; she

almost envied her friend for the positive reception the crowds gave him. She immediately regretted thinking that.

"Stupid," she told herself. "It's all so *stupid*…"

The main room of the Den was some fifty feet long, with little lighting, except for the dozen or so pedestals that lined the edges of the interior; these pedestals shone and flashed in circular patterns, each one illuminating a Freak. There were five on exhibition at the moment. Four remained on their stands; the fifth was in the center, illuminated by circling spotlights.

He was a scrawny, pale man of thirty, clothed in a frilly suit colored neon pink, red, and green; a cheap plastic tiara hung lopsided on his unkempt blonde and dyed, purple hair. His mouth bulged and curved in an odd, filled shape, as if he was trying to swallow an unpleasant pill. Then, without warning, he retched. A torrent of vermilion, orange, and black spilled from his mouth, flooding the floor. For a moment, the mass he vomited lay inert. Then it started rising up. It started flying. The audience shouted with approval once more. Quincy Allicott, The Man With Butterflies in his Stomach, grimaced as he rubbed his stomach delicately, looking up at the orange cloud above him.

It wasn't his sick, it wasn't even liquid. The mass was a swarm of monarch butterflies.

Quincy raised his eyebrows. *Haven't seen those in awhile*, he thought to himself. *That ought to earn me some recognition*.

He walked off the main ring and returned to his pedestal, sitting down on his wooden stool.

A throne fit for a butterfly king. Someone toss me a real crown! Quincy smiled crookedly as he thought wryly to himself.

"Monarchs? You're stepping up your game, Quincy."

Quincy turned his head at the sound of a melancholy, airy voice.

"Hello, Fish."

The Fishman of Manasquan looked at Quincy from his adjacent tank/pedestal. He didn't have nearly as many people surrounding him as the most popular performer in the Den; having gills and being covered in fins and scales was interesting, but not as…exciting as having the ability to exhale butterflies.

"Thank you," Quincy said, leaning with his hands on his knees. "Act going along well?"

"It's been better," The Fishman said mournfully. "You know how they have me speak to different sea creatures in here? My fish haven't been exactly cooperative as of lately; they hate being in this place, and they all go belly-up sooner or later. The salmon just died in the middle of my act, and—" The Fishman broke off midsentence.

"Oy! Fish! What's going on?" Quincy spoke in a hushed bark.

"The—those damned Freewheelers, Quincy!" Fishman's voice suddenly rose in pitch. "They've been eating all my friends after every act!"

"They've been—" Quincy closed his mouth quickly and looked past the Fishman; a Freewheeler had poked its rag-doll head into the tent flap, and was now looking at the Fishman with its black, button eyes. Freewheelers had superb smell and hearing.

Quincy widened his eyes and gave the Fishman a minute lift of the head. The Fishman didn't need another warning; the anchovies and minnows in his tank had already told him of the potential danger; he dived back into his cylindrical tank and quickly put on a show of complex underwater acrobatics, which drew in enough cheers from the audience. The Freewheeler retreated back into the shadows.

Back inside the Freaks' lounge, Yume's flowery hair shook as the pink roses began shedding petals from her fear. She had heard the Freewheeler make its way to the Den entrance, chittering excitedly to its Rider; from the response, Yume guessed that the Freewheeler's bicycle was being driven by a toad. The croak sounded awful.

What went wrong? What went wrong? she wondered in terror. *Something must have gone wrong.*

Squeak, rattle, squeak, rattle

Oh, god, there's another one now.

Squeak, rattle, squeak, rattle

Three?!

Forty feet away, hidden in the rafters of the Big Top, the tall, thin Ringmaster sat with his legs outstretched, his top hat tilted over his face, his maroon-red suit swaying gently. He grinned.

"Dear, dear, Fishman," he crooned as he watched and heard everything occurring in the Den of Freaks through the button eyes of a Freewheeler. "You must really learn to know when to hold your tongue."

Below him, the crowd cheered as the Clowns took a bow and walked offstage; the lights dimmed for the next act. A circle of a dozen elephants emerged from the tent flap and gathered into a conga line. The giant animals were all garbed in stars and stripes, and were trumpeting as a calliope continuously played its lighthearted, celestial tunes; with the swirling, color-changing spotlights, it almost looked as if the elephants were walking through space. The Ringmaster clapped his hands together.

"Such resentment towards me, Freaks? You hurt my feelings…" The Ringmaster moaned in mock offense. "Manny, Manny, Manny! Keep your pets more loyal, *s'il te plait*? Oh well, old friend, I'm afraid I have to take matters into my own hands… I apologize in advance…" The Ringmaster pressed his fingers together, cracking his knuckles.

"Now then, which Freak, which Freak? Which Freak to beat and meet? Where to go? Where to go? Freak Show if I know…"

AND NOW, THE FISHMAN OF MANASQUAN WILL RETURN TO HIS UNDERWATER HOME! WE THANK YOU FOR WATCHING

THIS MARVELOUS SPECTACLE AT—HERMAN FULLER'S CIRCUS OF THE DISQUIETING! A male voice boomed throughout the entire of the Den of Freaks.

Fuller?! Yume let out an involuntary gasp. The remaining pink flowers growing from her head contracted and withered, their now dried petals fluttering to the ground. Yume felt her head growing a new arrangement. She picked one.

A gladiola…

Yume heard a gasp of surprise from the audience, followed by an eerie, empty rippling of water.

No…

Back inside the main Den, Quincy spat out a moth.

The Ringmaster hummed nonchalantly as he sat in his velvet chair, his feet propped up as he reclined back as three Freewheelers rolled up to him in his "office". It was more of a side tent than anything, smaller than the Freak Lounge, but comfortable nonetheless. A simple wooden desk sat in the middle of it; an ornate swing arm lamp illuminated the room. A portrait of Herman Fuller looked around the room from an easel off to the side, and a single photo frame lay face-down underneath it.

The lead monster's chest cavity bulged and squirmed with a human-sized lump. Ragged breaths could be heard from within. Fuller smiled and ignored the cries.

"Hello again, Freewheelers!" The Ringmaster sang over the muffled yells. "Brady, Bridget." He nodded towards the giant horned toad on a scarlet bike; the Ragdoll, as usual, was mounted in the place of the handlebars. The pig-tailed, patchwork torso tilted its head.

"Willard, Warren." A barn owl clicked its talons in greeting.

"Now, you know why we're here. You should know, I made you," Herman Fuller guffawed. "Once again, Manny's little pets have dared to raise a voice against me, and we all know that that simply

won't do. Dish out the usual punishment, please; but keep him quiet while you're doing it. I don't want another disaster like the one with the Crane Woman!" As he spoke, the Ringmaster picked up a wooden plank and swung it into the lump within the Freewheeler. "Shut up, *Freak!* I could have you set on a hook right now with a Clown grub in your mouth! I'm not some bait you can just bite and expect to get away with it, you fishy bastard! Now, toodle-loo! Wheelers, do do your thing!" The Ringmaster shooed his watchdogs away.

The Freewheelers turned to leave their master's office. Then they suddenly stopped. Six pairs of eyes turned their heads back towards Herman Fuller.

"What are you doing?"

Fuller threw his hands into the air. He picked up his chair and turned it a hundred and eighty degrees. He pushed it up against his desk.

"I repeat, what are you doing?"

"My job as a leader, *Manny*." Utter contempt bubbled from the Ringmaster's as he glowered at the ground.

"Are you going to move your chair? Or will I have to do it for you?" A cold voice spoke softly from underneath The Ringmaster's worktable.

"Oh…go flirt with Emily again, will you? The little minx doesn't respect me anyways." Fuller's chair shot out from under him, spinning in the air like a wheel. He jumped out of it and gracefully back-flipped onto his feet as his seat cracked in splinters to the ground.

The Man with the Upside-Down Face, Leader of the Freaks, emerged from the desk cabinet and stepped on the dirt.

"Learned a few more tricks, I see." The Ringmaster looked at where his former Circus partner had stepped out from.

"It's nothing, really," The Man said coolly. "Same principle as to what happens when you saw a Clown in half, or when you pull a Fun-

Lover from a hat. Any hole can be a door. Now, what's going on here?"

Herman Fuller sighed. "Andy and Alice, let him out, please," The Ringmaster asked with his eyes closed as he waved his hand towards the duo of ragdoll and bicycle-riding box turtle. The box turtle tilted its head slightly, staring curiously at the Ringmaster; the ragdoll did the same, then swung its head towards the floor. The seams around its mouth opened up, and out of the ragdoll's mouth tumbled a disoriented Fishman of Manasquan. He immediately leapt to his feet and looked around. His crazed eyes stared at Fuller for a moment, then he began backpedaling, frantically running toward the exit flap.

"Manny!" The Fishman shouted as he ran. "I'm sorry, I—"

"That will do for now, Gabriel. Go back to the Den" The Man spoke curtly. The Fishman bowed in gratitude before ducking out. The Man turned back to Fuller, and the two sneered with mutual hatred. Then, without warning, The Man with the Upside-Down Face lunged forward and swatted Alice the Turtle off of its bicycle seat. Andy roared in protest and opened its mouth; four sinewy, snake-like tongues shot from it towards the turtle's attacker. The Man snatched them all at once and drove them into the ground with a tent spike and a swift stomp. The Freewheeler lurched forward, its bicycle unable to stand without a Rider, and it flailed grotesquely on the ground like a potato sack baby. The other two Freewheelers quickly turned tail and sped out of the room.

"Andy!" The Ringmaster rushed forward only for The Man to step in his way.

"You know, considering your little toys are old Freaks, I'm surprised you care for them so much." The Ringmaster flinched involuntarily as Manny, who towered above him by a good two heads, leered down at him.

"Now, what were you doing to Fish?" The Man with the Upside-Down Face inquired, taking a step towards Fuller.

"It's my *Freaking* job, to carry out discipline within these grounds!"

The Ringmaster spat.

"It's your job to watch over *your* area, your goddamn Big Top that you're so proud of!" Manny shouted. "We agreed on that! We operate separately, on different terms!"

"Well," Fuller laughed mirthlessly, "*I* don't agree with your terms, and seeing that I'm the head around here, I can do as a I *goddamn* please!"

"You make me *sick*!" Manny hissed. "You were bad enough when we first teamed up, and now you've somehow gotten even worse off since the Clowns!"

"The Clowns? The Clowns are amazing!" Fuller threw his head back and cackled. A dribble of spit rolled down his lips.

"You're not fit to be a leader," The Man said quietly. "You're just a greedy, Milk-snorting fop!"

"Well, it blows to blow, Freak!" Fuller exhaled sharply. "And until I drop dead, I, make, the rules around here! But you'll be long gone by the time that happens, oh yes, you'll be long gone! I'll see to it that you meet your end in due time!"

"'In due time?' Fuller, Fuller, Fuller, you know as well as I that *I'm* the one who keeps the Clowns in check, not you! You rely on *me*, Herman! You've got the show, you've got the tent, and you've got the money, but you still need *me*!"

Silence rang through the Ringmaster's office. The audience was still cheering; they couldn't even hear what was transpiring as they goggled at the Flaming Lions and Tigers and Bears.

"I'll have you stuffed into a Freewheeler soon enough," The Ringmaster's handlebar moustache twitched as he bared his teeth. "Get out."

"You *stay away* from my kind," The Man with the Upside-Down Face warned. "Or you'll find yourself strung up as a squeeze toy for Luana."

"Oh, we'll see who comes out in first. All in *due* time." Herman Fuller snapped his fingers. His ruined furniture pieced itself back together, restoring his office to its clean state.

The Man kicked his foot through Fuller's portrait, leaving a neat, boot-shaped hole. He leaned through the opening, and seemed to melt through it, until his whole body was gone from sight.

The Ringmaster sat, slightly disheveled, his top hat knocked askew. He put his hand in it and pulled out an apple. He bit it, then spat the chunk out.

"Strung up, eh?" The apple was full of worms.

Free Reality Check!: Press Button

It was a generally gloomy day, such as was normally the case when Dr. Jack Bright had a mild hangover and was also a chimpanzee for one reason or another. Outside his window the rain pattered lightly as his clumsy fingers reached for the coffee pot aside of his bed and flipped it on. He scratched his head. He took a piss. He waddled back into his room just in time for his first morning Joe.

It was about that time, he would recall later, that he noticed the delivery truck. Which was strange, mostly because it was Tuesday, and deliveries arrived every other Wednesday. Having thoughtfully determined that this would be a scheduled-in-advance hangover, Dr. Bright had little else to do for the time being, and so rode the elevator out to the front gate to see what he could see about the box which had been left outside. Five security men were already looking over it, poking it with sticks, scratching their heads and looking around for someone smarter than them to handle the problem. Dr. Bright considered making a wise remark about evolution, but thought better of it. Mostly due to the throbbing pain in his dome.

"I just don't know what to make of it, Dr. Bright!" one of the security guards said, shrugging like those damn rookies always do. Bright grunted in such a way that told the others to back off, and took a clumsy sip of his coffee as the rain stopped falling.

Before him was a pine plywood box with a button on it. It looked pristine and perfect and clean, and notably not very wet at all. On the box was a sign.

Free Candy!: Press Button

Maybe it was the sun starting to beat on his forehead. Maybe he just wasn't banging on all cylinders this morning. Maybe it was the brain of the chimp clouding his judgment. Whatever the reason, Dr. Bright

scratched the stubbly beard slowly growing on his apeish chin and proclaimed aloud: "I like candy."

There was a snapping sound. Then nothing.

"You really think this will work?" Agent Harold Simpson of RCT-Δt asked as he helped hoist the heavy box into the back of the truck. "I mean…I've read about String 093 and these guys are… Well they're *us*, in a manner of speaking. I've worked with Dr. Bright extensively, and the thought of him just pushing a button like that…"

Agent Burt Tomlin shook his head and pulled the door to the truck closed tight. "No, you're right. The Jack Bright we all know—and some of us even like—would never do something so stupid; but this is not the Jack Bright you know."

"How do you mean?" Harold punched a few numbers in the keypad by the door and listened to the capacitors beneath the floor begin to whine.

"The Jack Bright you know isn't a god," Tomlin chuckled. "Never underestimate the stupidity of gods."

The capacitors discharged, and the garage door opened onto a barren waste where a single speck of green shined cleanly in the distance.

"And if it works, then this is resolved?" Harold asked, doing his best to fill his mind with happy thoughts and praise.

"Nah," Tomlin said as the engine turned over. "It's just one anchor after all. Just enough to make a splash. Still… it ought to be funny as hell."

The Silver Creek Parcels van shakily lurched forward over the ash-covered ground. The unreal desert wrapped around them, silently welcoming its first taste of normalcy in many, many years.

Item #: SCP-3882

Object Class: Safe Keter

Special Containment Procedures: The Object is suspended by a beryllium bronze chain in the center of a 55 x 55 x 55 m steel container with access at floor level, and via catwalk at 25 m up the northern wall. A holographic projection at 25 m radius around SCP-3882 designates the active radius. Only D-Class personnel may attempt to deactivate the device with permission of Dr. Kondraki and at least one more Level 5 Senior Staffer. Other experiments may only be performed with direct supervision from Dr. Kondraki.

Description: SCP-3882 is a small plywood box containing machinery of unknown origin, all of which is constructed of a Beryllium Bronze alloy. Although samples may be taken of this material, it always instantly regenerates no matter what. The device seems to be powered by six standard 12v car batteries which have resisted all attempts to remove them. SCP-3882 causes a defect in all reality in a 25 m radius. All man made structures, most plants and animals, and most humans undergo rapid decay and disintegration within the active radius until reaching a level consistent with 43-62 years of disrepair and neglect. Trace amounts of [REDACTED] radiation are also present in the effected area, consistent with some time in [DATA EXPUNGED].

SCP-3882 was recovered on the front steps of Site-19 by Dr. Bright with a sign attached to it advertising "Free Candy: Press Button." Due to his insatiable sweet tooth, Dr. Bright pressed the indicated button and activated SCP-3882 causing [DATA EXPUNGED] fifteen attempts, the device was deactivated and Dr. Bright has made a full recovery.

Due to the effect, researchers entering the active radius suffer extreme emaciation and rapid unconsciousness, and D-Class personnel so far show only a 1% survival rate, although after deactivation, about 20% of those killed by SCP-3882 are recovered in time for monthly

termination.

> **Note:** There wasn't even any candy in it…
> what kind of a monster would do this?!
> -Dr. Bright

Fresh Hell

There's another conglomeration of severed fingers in the last room, coating the room's interior like the innards of an exploded elephant. Parts of the sprawl are feeling their way, like mould, into a medical cabinet and the rest is splayed over a foetal shape on a medical gurney. The mass reacts sharply to the new light as Wheeler opens the door, rearing up and angling parts of itself toward him. Wheeler reels backwards and pulls the door to just in time; there is a heavy, fleshy *thump* as the mass hits the door from the far side. The door holds.

Wheeler trips on his own foot and slumps against the far wall. The shape on the gurney was a coiled-up human. Not a corpse, but a living human with one wide-open eye whose whole body was being slowly consumed and processed into more fingers. They were growing out of his throat. Wheeler didn't see this. He thinks he saw it, but he knows he couldn't have.

And that's it. Wheeler casts around the corridor. Every other door he's tried is blocked or locked. The place is below ground, so no windows. No navigable ventilation.

There are two more gunshots up at the far end of the corridor, ear-splitting in the enclosed space and echoing for many seconds. Hutchinson rounds the corner at a dead run, gun in hand, and reaches him quickly. "Find a way out?" she asks, pointlessly. She can read Wheeler's expression. He's found nothing good.

"This place is infested," Wheeler says. "Every room, all the stairwells… This is absurd."

At the far end of the corridor, the main mass heaves itself around the corner. From this distance, it looks like an ambulatory eight-tonne pile of mouldy mashed potato and fat, wiggling maggots. There are toes in there as well as fingers, and small teeth, and bits of bone. It has twenty bullet holes in it, and blood is flowing from all

of them, but if it has vital organs they must be elsewhere in the building because none of the wounds have slowed it down or otherwise altered its slow, methodical homing behaviour. It smells powerfully and creatively disgusting, like concentrated medical waste.

It lurches forward in intermittent phases, coating the walls and floor with scarlet ooze as it moves. It'll be on them in about half a minute, squashing them against the end of the corridor and then pulling them into the mess to be remade.

"I think we're done," Wheeler quavers. "Thanks for trying."

Hutchinson, for her part, just stands there, gun lowered, watching the thing come. It moves slowly, like a steam roller. It fills the corridor almost to the ceiling.

She has two bullets left and she's considering where to spend them. Shooting the mass itself is like shooting pudding. She'd kill for a grenade. Even a fire axe would be something. She might not be able to stop the thing, but she could at least make herself known with a fire axe. She could make it feel some *regret*.

"There are worse fates, I guess," Wheeler goes on, finding himself unable to stop talking, "than being digitised by that thing, but not all that many."

Hutchinson glances in his direction, apparently paying him direct attention for the first time since they met, sixty crowded minutes ago. She says, "Riser cupboard."

"What?"

She pushes Wheeler aside. There's a white-painted wall behind him. There's a lock in it, and a long vertical seam. She spends a moment choosing the right part of the lock to shoot, and shoots it out. Behind the tall, wide panel which opens is a shallow, dusty, metal-edged space like an elevator shaft with no elevator, allowing filthy pipes and cables to pass vertically between floors. She looks up. There's just enough room to admit a person.

"Can you climb?" she asks Wheeler. Without waiting for a response, she sheds her suit jacket, sticks a flashlight between her teeth and hauls herself up into the darkness. After a brief moment of scuffling, there's another gunshot. The other riser cupboard door.

"No," Wheeler finally manages. "No, I can't climb!" The mass is almost on him. He's transfixed by its motion, its all-too-familiar grasping behaviour.

"I figured," Hutchinson calls down. A hand descends, a human one with the conventional number of fingers. "It's clear up here. Come on, I'm braced. Mind this lip here, it's metal. Come on!"

Wheeler keeps his own jacket on and buttoned; it's the only part of the situation over which he still has firm control. He has to jump to catch hold of Hutchinson's hand, and just as he jumps, the main mass lunges for him, crossing the last few metres in a rush and catching hold of him by one foot.

He sees himself die.

His sweating hand immediately starts to slip out of Hutchinson's. She braces her other arm and hauls him up fifteen or thirty centimetres with an angry grunt, then releases his hand for a split second and reaches down like a flash to take firmer hold of his wrist. She keeps pulling. The mass closes around Wheeler's foot like aggressive, proactive quicksand. He yelps and kicks at it with his other foot until it finally pries his shoe loose. The mass retreats for a second, taking a crucial moment to realise that its prize is not living flesh, but by that time Hutchinson has hauled Wheeler up another half-metre and Wheeler has started pushing himself upwards off the pipework with his feet. The mass lunges again, but falls short, and seems too unintelligent to climb after them. It sloshes around, probing its surroundings, perplexed by the shoe.

Hutchinson hauls Wheeler over the lip into the next corridor. He scrapes his ribs badly and arrives crawling, eyes watering. He doesn't die. He can still see himself dying. He stays on all fours for a significant amount of time, processing what just happened.

"*Fuck!*"

Hutchinson is already standing, and apparently not even significantly exerted. "We need to get to the roof. I might be able to get a signal out from there."

"You're at the gym pretty often?" Wheeler pants, sitting back. "You train for fresh hell like this?"

"Yeah."

"That's great," Wheeler says, "because I play the *violin*. It's not quite as physically demanding. As careers go, I mean. When you said you were a county health inspector, that was an enormous lie, wasn't it?"

Hutchinson ignores the question, out of habit, and waits impassively for the man to cool.

"This is asinine," Wheeler declares. "This is brain damage." His skin crawls, and grotesque visions flood through his brain. Eventually he recovers his breath and gets to his feet. He stands lopsided, so he takes his other shoe off and throws it back down the riser for symmetry.

"We need to get to the roof," Hutchinson says again.

Wheeler blinks a long blink, then focuses on something around the corner, something on the wall which Hutchinson can't see from where she's standing. "Yeah. One second." He goes to it — it's a red panel — and pulls something down. "Here, you were having no luck with the gun. Try this."

It's a fire axe.

*

He stepped on a rusty nail backstage after the show, and came to the emergency room for a tetanus injection. While waiting, he slowly realised that more than half of the people waiting with him were clutching partially or entirely severed fingers. Bandsaw accidents;

hands caught in car doors; hands trapped in door hinges; hands crushed in machinery; every one of them unrelated. There was an epidemic of physical injury, which should have been impossible, and when he tried to bring it up with the medical staff they didn't seem to understand what he was saying.

And then he saw one of the fingers escape. He followed it as it wriggled away down a long corridor to a far corner of the hospital, to an ajar door which nobody in the hospital seemed to be able to perceive except for him, and into a different building where there were no people at all, just hundreds and hundreds of wriggling, exploring, slowly reproducing and lengthening fingers.

He slammed the door and tried and failed to get someone, anyone, staff or patient, to see what he was seeing. He found a payphone and dialled for emergency services and ordered off the menu, asking for emergency industrial-scale pest control or hazardous containment or psychic support or *something*.

And there was a long pause, and he was connected to what was either a very measured, dispassionate human or an impressively articulate robot operator. It told him to wait by the phone; an associate would be with him shortly. Marion Hutchinson arrived in person, slightly less than fifteen minutes later.

He showed her the door. They went a few paces inside, Hutchinson crouching and aiming some kind of flashlight/scanner at the finger worms. Behind them, something reached out and gently pushed the door closed with a *click*. They turned, and saw what it was, and ran.

*

Hutchinson hacks her way through the last of the flesh-clogged stairwell. They're almost at the roof. This part of the distributed infestation doesn't seem to be mobile, although it is freakishly grabby.

Wheeler stands three paces back from her, partly to avoid the backswing but mostly so he doesn't have to watch. It's butchery, and it's grisly, and Hutchinson barely seems perturbed by it; she slices methodically until there are waterfalls of gore coming down the stairs and soaking her shoes and his socks, and she does it with the manner of someone trimming a hedgerow.

Whunch. Krunlch.

Wheeler is shivering, and starting to crash. If he doesn't stay still right in the middle of the stairwell, the remaining fingers tug at his hair and sleeves. In another few minutes it may finally dawn on him that this is really happening. "This is crazy, this is nuts," he says to himself, over and over.

"What was that word you used back there?" Hutchinson asks, suddenly.

"Mmm?"

Whunch. "Don't tune out. When the mass was coming down the hall. Did you say 'digitized'?"

"…Um." Wheeler seems to change gear, and wake up. "Yeah. Uh, but, in the old sense of the word—"

"'Digit' meaning 'finger', so 'digitized' meaning 'turned into fingers'. I just got it." She's smiling, he can tell from the sound of her words. *Chlunk.* "That's great."

"It is?"

"What kind of violin music?"

"Uh. What kind would you like? Tonight's— last night's— Christ, *yesterday*'s concert was Prokofiev's Violin Concerto No. 1. And a few other pieces, of course, but that was the main course for me. That was where I got my teeth in."

Hutchinson stops hacking and turns around. She actually looks him in the eye. "That piece is a nightmare."

"It's a challenge," Wheeler admits, brightly.

"No, I mean it's chaotic. It's unlistenable."

"I can play anything you like," Wheeler states.

Hutchinson appears to spend a moment considering this possibility. "Bach. You can play some Bach?"

"Just get me to a violin."

Hutchinson thinks for a moment longer. She smiles and nods, and goes back to hacking.

*

And they hit the roof, and Hutchinson's radio finally works, and she calls everything in. She speaks in rapid keywords which Wheeler can't quite follow, although he can pick out his own name and "hazmat" and a repeated word which sounds to him like a brand of cassette tape: "Memetix".

It's very nearly dawn. This wing of the hospital is a few storeys shorter than its main body, so rows of bright-lit wards look down over the roof, while the roof looks out over two sprawling car parks and then greenery and roads and a faint, dull red where the Sun is due to come up. Hutchinson quickly ascertains that there is no fire escape from here; the intended fire exit from the roof is the stairwell up which they just came, so they'll have to wait for a helicopter. Or, more likely and less romantically, a long ladder.

"Backup is coming," Hutchinson concludes. "They have to come in from the next city over, so it could be a few hours. They'll have decontamination gear, antibiotics, blankets, tedious debriefing forms, you name it. But most importantly, coffee."

Wheeler makes an inarticulate sound, the sound of one who could use the coffee, and after that, a drink. "God, I have another concert

today," he says. He sits on the thick perimeter wall, rubs his eyes, rubs his sore feet, and begins to shut down.

"You'll be there," Hutchinson says. "The nasty part is over. You did well for a civilian. I've seen far worse."

"Worse than this?"

Hutchinson says nothing.

"I'm sorry." Wheeler opens his eyes again. He gestures at the mayhem from which they just escaped, the fire door and everything it leads to. It's all still down there. "You've seen worse than *this*?"

Hutchinson, again, says nothing.

"What is this? What happened here?"

At first Hutchinson doesn't answer this either. She walks away across the roof and spends an entire minute staring at the forthcoming Sun.

And then, surprising Wheeler and slightly surprising even herself, she walks back to him and says:

"SCP-4051, which is the number we just assigned to this infestation, has an intrinsic property which makes it nearly impossible for sapient organisms to perceive it. It's a form of camouflage. It's not invisible, it's a mental blocking effect. Information about it goes nowhere, it gets suppressed. People walk past this building every day of the week. They don't see what's blocking the windows. They walk past that door and don't realise it's standing open. It could have been here for decades. The researchers will get the whole story eventually."

Wheeler finds in this explanation something he halfway understands. "So… living fnords?"

And this actually slows Hutchinson down for a second. She gets that reference. She read those books when she was younger, years ago, before joining the Foundation. But she's *never* made the connection between fnords and the work she does. For as long as she's been

working there, she hasn't even thought about it. The irony is intense enough to burn.

"Yeah," she says.

"Except that you can see them," Wheeler says.

"I have specialist training," Hutchinson says, declining to mention her drug regimen.

"And I, also, can see them."

"You seem to have a mild natural immunity to memory-clouding phenomena," Hutchinson explains. "It's rare, but it happens. At a hospital this busy, someone like you was bound to stumble into this place sooner or later." *And escape alive,* she privately adds. "But the point is… this infestation, SCP-4051, is a snowflake. I don't mean that it's special and unique. I mean: it's part of a *blizzard*.

"I work for an independent scientific research institution with a specialist focus on the containment of hazardous anomalous phenomena. We have an international mandate and formidable resources and… unimaginable responsibilities. We… we watch the blizzard. And we guard the little fire. We're called the Foundation."

Wheeler's full attention is on her now. He feels tense and exposed here, vulnerable to extraordinary natural forces from which by rights he should be fleeing. But he's also fascinated. Hutchinson has a faintly ethereal attitude to her. It's as if she's not standing on the same planet as everybody else.

"So you're not FBI," he says. "Either, I mean. That was my other guess."

Hutchinson wrinkles her nose. "I hate that show."

"I don't believe I mentioned a show," Wheeler says mischievously.

"They do *everything* wrong," Hutchinson says. A nerve has been touched. She shuffles irately. "They don't have enough people; they don't trust each other. They don't spend nearly enough time on paperwork. Paperwork saves lives. But most of all? I hate the will-

they-or-won't-they. For what, five years? It's forced, it's farcical." She glares at Wheeler. "It doesn't take that long to know. You will or you won't. And then you do."

Wheeler reads her expression carefully. "You do?"

"Yeah," Hutchinson says, smiling again. "Yeah, I think you do."

A distant rapid thudding noise slowly becomes apparent. Hutchinson sees the source of the sound first and points. "Backup's here. And it looks like we rated a helicopter after all."

Friday

While Nexus points of this nature exist elsewhere in the world, it is in the United States that they are the most prominent. This is, in my opinion, an example of culture's influence on universal narrative principles: bizarre happenings in small town America has been a common media trope since the very beginning of the country, to the point where it is hardly anomalous to us anymore. The oddities of the small town is expected, and as such, these nexus points are very easily contained by their own nature: no matter what unusual events occur, it will never seem to leave its borders of the town, and the populace will remain in blissful ignorance of the happenings.

Such a principle would not go unnoticed by the Foundation. Of the twenty-three confirmed nexuses within the United States, fifteen of them have full sites located within the town, and the remainder are under some form of observation. Of these sites, Site 87 is, I find, of special note.

- Dr. Philip Verhoten, *The Crossroads: A Study of Urban Anomalous Nexuses in the United States.*

—

"You went and did it…"

'You almost sound surprised. You know what my job entails. Come on, pay up."

Harold Breaker sighed, and withdrew a wad of Monopoly money from his pocket. He licked his thumb and leafed through it, tossing five hundreds in the center of the table, in between the two rather disappointing breakfasts.

"Thank y'kindly." Ryan Melbourne said with a complete lack of anything remotely resembling happiness at the outcome. He added the bills to his own wad. Breaker shook his head, chuckling in that vague "I can't believe you're doing this" manner of people who have

just witnessed a friend get roped into something stupid.

“Laugh all you want, but you know what? Hughes bought me this shirt, because he’s an asshole. If I was able to turn down a free shirt I’d burn the thing faster than you can say hot Texas barbeque! Yeah, you can laugh, but you guys have had it easy since *Darwin*. I have to re-write half of the book every other week just because a hipster farted and someone put it on the Internet. Do you know how much extra work this damn show’s given me? At least twenty percent god*dammit*! It’s in my head and it won’t *leave*!”

Breaker looked up from his newspaper and sipped his coffee simultaneously. The combination of cup angle, location of paper relative to the table expression of the eyes, and the length of the sip said: “8/10 on the rant: you’re overdoing it a little bit, but it’s amusing so I’m going to make a snarky statement to further incite the situation.”

Coffee sips are very expressive.

“You’re still wearing a shirt with My Little Pony on it,” he said.

“Yes, and I am simmering with the indignity of it. You caused this, you know. You and my gambling addiction.”

“I didn’t think you’d actually do it.”

“You don’t know how addiction works, man.”

“Admitting you have a problem is the first step in recovery.”

“Implying I want to recover.”

“Probability is minimal.”

“Exactly.”

“I hypothesize that this is all incredibly silly.”

“I concur with your hypothesis.”

“The data supports it.”

“Final conclusion: this conversation is incredibly silly, and we should probably stop.”

“Agreed.” Breaker went back to the paper, and surprisingly enough looked like he was actually reading it. “Though I’m going to have to give Hughes a chewing out for his bad taste. Twilight Sparkle is the best pony. Lynn says so.”

Melbourne did a passable imitation of a trout for a few moments, blinked several times, and went back his corn flakes, defeated. How did he forget the crucial fact that his friend had a six-year-old daughter? Of *course* he’d made the bet. He knew the stakes, had contextual knowledge. he knew the bet would be fulfilled, and then knew that he’d get to have the humorous final comment when it was all done. *That bastard*…

The cafeteria went quiet again, though granted, Breaker and Melbourne were the only people in there and the former was busily plotting vengeance on the latter.

A few minutes of coffee-sipping, cereal-chewing, newspaper-reading and vengeance-plotting later, the door to the cafeteria opened, revealing a lanky, brown-haired man with a boyish face and small, rectangular glasses.

“Oi, Bailey!” Melbourne called out to him. “Which one are you today?”

“Same one I’ve been every day from the last five months.” Tristan Bailey walked over to the cabinets and began shuffling through the contents. Someone would have to buy bread soon.

“Dammit.” Melbourne handed Breaker a fifty. “I swear, you’re going to pull that switcheroo joke on us one of these days and I am going to be *ready* for it.”

“Going to be hard to do that, with Trev at 19 and Tom in Antarctica.” Bailey put four slices of wheat bread into the toaster. There was no peanut butter.

“Yeah, yeah, keep trying to fool me. I’m watching you.” Melbourne

made the universal sign of “I’m watching you punk”, though the effect was greatly mitigated by his choice of shirt. Breaker finished the last of his coffee and continued read about how some people were killing some other people somewhere in the world by means of sundry mundane methods.

Some time was spent waiting for toast.

Ding

“Finally.” Bailey removed his toast. “I think old four-slot has seen better days.” He chose normal butter to make up for the lack of peanut butter. “Is it just me or is this place *dead* this morning?”

“Eh, it’s Friday. It’s always dead on Friday.”

Bailey placed the butter back in the fridge, took up his plate and mug, and sat down next to the other two.

“And what a wonderful death it is. What’s on the agenda for today?”

“Gonna try knocking out a good chunk of the security meme update package, then data collection, and then several hours of staring at the ceiling and wondering where everything went wrong. Same as usual,” Melbourne said. “How about you?”

Bailey swallowed a mouthful of toast.

“More negotiations over mining rights in F-3426-Delta. Dumb bastards have been sitting on top of enough rare earths to plate the goddamn Statue of Liberty in iridium, not doing a thing with it for centuries, but the moment we ask to mine some of the stuff they dig in their heels.”

“Ha! Ha ha ha ha ha. Ha.” Breaker gloated with well-practiced theatric fakery. “All I have for today is the final paperwork for the E-5503 tests, and then the whole bunch is off to Resources and Processing. I’ll be done by lunch.”

Melbourne glared at him with the special loathing only acquired by being forced to wear a humiliating t-shirt in public for fake money. This was not something you just let people get away with. No, this

required action.

“Bailey, I need you as witness to this.”

“I am witnessing it.”

“Good.” Melbourne took out his considerably thick wad of pastel bills, kept one for himself, and slammed the rest on the table.

“I bet you all of this that you won’t get done by noon today.”

“Fair enough.” Breaker’s tone was so noncommittal, so flat, so accepting. No, no this wouldn’t do. This wouldn’t do at all.

“Okay, you know what, no. Stakes aren’t high enough. I have seventy-five dollars and a Steak n’ Shake gift card in my wallet. I am willing to bet all of that on you having to stay past noon. Deal?”

“Deal.”

They shook on it.

—

Site 87 woke up, or in the case of the night shift, went to sleep. In both cases it was much like a cat, with yawns and stretches but no particular hurry to do so. Some cars entered the parking lot of S & C Plastics, others left, and absolutely no one outside found anything unusual about the fact.

Ryan Melbourne sat down at his desk and sighed. Stupid, stupid, *stupid*. Why did he bet real money? The entire *point* of the Monopoly money was so that he’d stop betting real money. He booted up his computer. The desktop wallpaper was a picture of Earth from the ISS.

But that was how he worked, right? Things got stuck in his head. Melbourne is a compulsive gambler. Everyone knew that. Melbourne would bet his own grandmother on what someone had in their lunch. It was a meme. It stuck in their heads, and it stuck in his head. You didn’t think about memes, you acted on them. They were automatic. You threw “implying” at the beginning of sentences. You said that

things were twenty percent better when it didn't even make sense. You made references that no one else understood, just because they made sense to you, and your mind wouldn't let you stop. That was a good deal of memetics in a nutshell: programming the mind through the transmission of ideas.

Good *God*, he needed help. The pony on his shirt didn't mean anything anymore: this was one of those moments where a man realizes that something is very much wrong and he needs to act immediately before the moment passes and he falls into complacency.

He grabbed a pen and a pad of sticky notes.

Make appointment with Dr. Talbot

He stuck it to his computer monitor with a sharp jab, adding an emphatic period to the statement.

He paused for a moment and then wrote another note:

Stop pitying yourself.

He then began reviewing dispersion patterns.

—

"We do not consider your case a pressing need."

It was the same response that Tristan Bailey had been hearing for the past two weeks of his adventures in bureaucracy. The translation software had latched onto the phrase, spouting it and variants in its metallic monotone. It seemed to fit the man sitting across the negotiation table: bald and tall, with a thin face and not a spark of life anywhere in his eyes. At the very least he didn't have a "sub" or "vice" anywhere in his title. He might actually have some power.

"That may be the case, but as I have said a thousand times before, your society can't be without needs. Tell us the need, and we will be more than happy to supply you."

“I have no authority to make decisions of this scale.”

That same answer. No one seemed to have any authority.

“Are you sure? There’s absolutely nothing your people need or want from us? Luxury goods, cultural knick-knacks, anything?”

“I have no authority to make decisions of this scale.”

Bailey argued back and forth with himself in his head. There was a significant amount of valuable materials available here, and two weeks wasn’t an abnormal time for negotiation. Maybe he was just too used to dealing with primitives who saw them as gods or fellow institutions of the paranatural. But, there were only so many extra-universal contacts and contracts that could be held at any one time, and leaving this one open for weeks without progress would just be taking resources away from something that needed them more. This was a judgment call scenario.

The mining could wait. It wasn’t like Multi-U was low on options.

Bailey stood up and straightened his tie.

“Well, it appears that you won’t be swayed by any of my reasoning, so I’m going to have to take my business elsewhere. Good day to you, sir.”

They shook hands. For a brief moment, the thin man took notice of a slight prick in his palm. His eyes went glassy a brief moment later. When he woke from his stupor, all he would remember was a plain looking foreigner who had been attempting…something.

Bailey walked out of the room, and hoped he had better luck in F-3426-Gamma.

—

Harold Breaker smiled to himself as he checked his watch.

11:46.

It wasn’t so much that he had won the bet. Caring about those

things was Melbourne's job. He was just happy that the project was done and out of his hands, as were the creatures themselves. That was always a good feeling, getting something done. What made things even better was that E-5503 had proven itself to be quite fireproof, enough so to justify farming the things for their leather.

He knocked on the wall of Melbourne's cubicle. The man himself was hunched at his computer, typing away lines of code.

"Of *course*. Today is just not my day." He jabbed a thumb at a small pile of cash on top of a filing cabinet. "Right over there."

Breaker scooped up the money, took the two steps necessary to cross the cubicle, and set it down next to his mouse pad.

"I'm in need of a ballpoint pen and I am willing to pay seventy-five American dollars for it."

"Well, what do you know? That's my asking price." Melbourne grinned "You can keep the card. There's only like four bucks on it anyway."

—

The next day was Saturday, which meant it was Harold Breaker's visitation day. As such, it involved cartoons about friendship, followed by burgers and milkshakes for lunch.

Friday, 2200, Paul Dimaccio's Personal Quarters

> Dear ……,

Paul Dimaccio rubbed his eyes, looked at the form letter on his laptop screen, and began filling out fields.

> Dear Ms. Stanwick,
>
> Please accept my deepest sympathy, and that of every member of Strategic Consulting Partners, on the recent loss of your ……, ……,

Dimaccio glanced at Stanwick's personnel file to double-check his full birth name. This was the first one of these he'd written since assuming command of MTF Theta-90. He didn't want to fuck it up.

> Please accept my deepest sympathy, and that of every member of Strategic Consultation Partners, on the recent loss of your son, Andrew Padraig Stanwick, who fell in the line of duty on 23 June of this year.

The date was false, of course.

> On the morning of 23 June, Andrew ……..

Dimaccio reached for the approved cover document, taking a sip of tepid coffee as he did so.

> On the morning of 23 June, Andrew was part of an eight-man security detail returning from remote post when the detail came under sustained attack by insurgent elements.

"*Insurgent elements.*"

> Andrew bravely gave his own life

> …… and, by doing so, …… .

A pause. Dimaccio stared at the laptop screen for a while, his mind elsewhere and elsewhen.

Andrew bravely gave his own life when a three-dimensional enclosure rotated through four dimensions without warning and, by doing so, warned the rest of his team to keep out of Target Zone Bravo.

Of course not.

> Andrew bravely gave his own life to shield his comrades from an incoming rocket-propelled grenade and, by doing so, saved the lives of his detail and allowed them to overcome the enemy's attack.
>
> It may afford you some comfort to know that his death was instantaneous and without suffering.

A small laugh, at that. A shake of the head.

A lengthy pause.

> I know the passing of a loved one is one of life's most tragic moments, but sincerely hope you will find some measure of comfort in the knowledge that your son did his duty with honor. His devoted service was in the finest tradition of the …… ,

This one wasn't hard to remember. Stanwick was forever telling Parris Island stories.

> His devoted service was in the finest tradition of the United States Marine Corps, from which Strategic Consulting Partners recruited him, and he bore true faith in …… until the very last.

A glance at the file on Stanwick's mother, to see what would work the best. A sip of room-temperature coffee.

> and he bore true faith in his God, his country and his cause until the very last.
>
> In this time of grieving, know that you can cherish the thought that *almost everything in this letter is a line of bullshit I'm feeding you and you're never going to know how your son really died.*

Long seconds passed before Dimaccio continued writing.

> you can cherish the thought that your son gave his life for the freedoms and values that we, as a people, hold most dear.
>
> Once again, please know that all of us here at Strategic Consultation Partners join in sharing your burden of grief.
>
> Sincerely,
> ……

Hands shaking ever so slightly, now.

> Sincerely,
> Jeffrey P. Steinheim
> Unit Commander, Strategic Consultation Partners

He quickly re-read the letter and clicked *Send.*

The laptop closed, extinguishing the only source of light in the room. Lying back on his bed, Paul Dimaccio stared into nothing.

The tears came; then, shortly afterward, sleep.

« Monday, 6am, Escherville Facility Two | Hub |

From On High (Antarctic Exchange #4)

Darkness, and then light. The mind crystallized, the web of gold filaments woven into spiraling pathways amidst the fluid blackness, shining spheres beading on the mesh.

Peace flowed, one thread to the next, one golden sphere to the next. They twisted and danced into their proper ordering. Each Blessing in turn was made right.

Highest?

One particular Blessing was proving an issue: it had become tangled in the webbing. Gently, gently, the knots loosened.

Highest?

One string snagged. Gently…gently…

Highest!

The web vanished. Lucrezen Lhivaen Battackan Chlolassouvin opened her opalescent eyes. Sight and hearing burst back into being. She uncrossed her legs and stood up, rising to her full nine feet. In a fit of improvisation, the Foundation had granted her an unused lecture hall to sleep and live in. She was thankful for that: at least now, when she was teaching or sleeping, she did not have to do so hunched over.

She gracefully walked to the door, her layers of intricately-woven robes swishing around her impossibly slender frame. Her grace hid her bubbling irritation. She knew the voice behind the door and thumping on it.

No, no, he would insist on ceremony. It was his way.

“Highest?”

Lucrezen sat on the first desk tier. It would do for a throne for now.

“You may enter, hand of the Empress.”

The door slid open, revealing the form of Sakarn Var Surten. The man took a few steps forward, eyes averted, before dropping prostrate to the floor.

“Ten thousand pardons, Highest. Your servant did not wish to interrupt your holy duties, but was forced to by matters beyond his control.”

“Speak.” Scrounging and begging, as usual. Lucrezen was reminded of how much she disliked it. Bow to the Empress, and the Empress alone. I am only her tool.

“The fools of the Black Court, Trighit and Pokum, have been found guilty of a heinous crime by our esteemed hosts, and are currently held by the Director of this site for treason. The Northworlder deems himself of importance to issue you command, and has requested your prescense.”

Exaggerations, most likely. Lucrezen deeply wished to remind Sakarn that the Black Court were likewise children of the Empress, but she knew he would have none of that. Feigned acceptance, until she was out of sight and earshot.

There was a sharp, pinching pain from the left side of her head. And there it was, the consequences of breaking meditation to listen to his groveling.

“I will speak with the director.” And now, time to get him out of the hair that she did not have. “And to you, my valued servant, I bestow to you a special duty. There is an item of some note, which our hosts have provided us access. I have arranged you and your manservant to observe this place. It is of great interest to me.”

“Of course, Highest. I am your humble servant. Your will is mine.”

“Go then. Speak with Doctor Hanakawa. Blessings of the Empress upon you and your house.”

“And upon your ancestors and line to come.” Sakarn stood up, head still bowed, and shuffled out of the room.

Lucrezen stood up, rubbing at the side of her head with a single, white-gold finger.

Once again, she was reminded why she much rather preferred dealing with children. They were much more honest, with their gapped-teeth and scuffed-knees.

—

Lucrezen sat cross-legged on the floor, still tall enough to be on eye-level with the dour-faced man across the desk. Trighit, fat and round, sat on her right. Pokum, smaller with patches of brown in his fur, sat on her left. Both had heads hung in shamed silence.

She had almost mentioned how much the Director looked like one of her sons. The same jawline, the same eyes.

Ahgh, her headache was clouding her judgment with discomfort. She needed to finish her meditations.

She inhaled deeply, trying to calm the pain and collect her mind. Trighit was a fool: that was common knowledge. But he was the Empress’ fool. And a fool of the Empress was still under her care. At least he didn’t grovel: the Black Court was the Empress’ court of fools and jesters, dancing under the moons of the long night where there was no caste. Everyone was family in the Black Court.

She set the sheaf of papers down on the desk.

“According to your documentation of the creatures, they are harmless until the shell is broken, generally through consumption.” Her voice was clear, clipped, bearing neither Imperial accent nor Northworld inflection. Such was the Blessing of Tongues. “Theodore Lawrence consumed a specimen before a warning was able to be issued. This was an unfortunate accident caused by a careless fool, Director. Not an act of malice.”

“Your researcher flagrantly broke containment, resulting in the death of a Foundation agent.”

“A truth, but it must be said that the specimens were adequately contained.”

“A glass bottle is not adequate.”

“So long as they are unbroken, they are not dangerous. Granted, Trighit’s inevitable experimentation on the eggs would result in breaking of the shell, and such an event would be clearly his total responsibility. But, as it stands, I find deportation unnecessary, Director. Simple revocation of access to items and area restrictions will be sufficient.”

The Director scowled, looking even more than ever like Irdi. He was around the same age, too.

“I will be honest, here: I am not impressed with your researchers.”

“’What the Empress gives, one receives without complaint.’ It is a lesson we teach to our children, Director. We are who you have been given, be it good or ill. It is up to you to deal with them. Will you throw it away, or make good out of it? These two have committed a grievous fault, I will not deny that, but in circumstances such as these, there is a place for forgiveness.”

The director was quiet for some time.

“Very well. These two are to be confined to the residential wing until further notice."

—

"Ten thousand thanks, Sister." Trighit said, watching the guards walk down the hall to escort him and Pokum to their room. "I don't think I could have lived with the shame of returning empty-handed."

"Keep your hands on what you are supposed to from now on. Have you provided a funerary writ to the man's wife or mother yet?"

"As far as I know, he has neither. They cut their ties when they walk through the doors."

A memory flashed in Lucrezen's vision alongside another pulse of

pain, a small girl with braided hair, standing in front of a two magnificent gild doors, engraved with the image of the First Empress, striking down Sanak Thiuh, surrounded by a circle of the First Watchers, their hands raised in supplication. Her cheeks were stained with tears, but she had to be strong, for the Empress had chosen her.

"A pity."

"Aye."

Lucrezen lingered in the hallway for a moment after the guards had taken them down the hall. She walked in the opposite direction, bowed and bent. She had meditations to finish, and a lecture to prepare.

« Hub »

Lord Blackwood and the Big-Foot

July 3rd, 1857:
It has been the better part of a year since I set sail from England. I feel myself overcome with a certain melancholy every time I watch the White Cliffs of Dover disappear over the horizon, seemingly watching me as I venture out into the wilderness. But whatever guilt I might feel, there is much work to be done; the vast untamed wilds of the world wait for no man, and it is our duty as Englishmen to carry the light of civilization to the corners of creation.

Today I have alighted in the Oregon territory, in a newly-founded town on the shores of Puget's Sound that the pioneers call Seattle. Even now, in the height of summer, it is a cold and dreary place. Clouds meander across the heavens, bringing showers and fog, as cool winds blow across the water, and on all sides the tiny town is surrounded by the massive evergreens that populate this country. In many ways it is not unlike the climate of my boyhood home in the West Country, and I felt an odd sense of nostalgia as the summer rains wet my cheek. But it is not the town, nor the weather that interests me; it is the forests that hold my true reason for venturing to this virgin frontier.

In the town I have hired porters and two guides, a white man and a civilized Indian. I spent many hours in conversation with the noble redskin, which confirmed the legends I had heard repeated third-hand in the gentlemen's club back on Broad Street. In the unexplored woods east of the Sound, so the Indians said, there lived a race of primates unknown to science, half again as tall as a man, covered head to toe in thick fur, quick and nimble, and possessing of an almost manlike cleverness. "Sasquatch", my guide called the creatures, but they had been called by many names by the tribes he knew of - Semekwe, Mo-Mo, Kwiwky, Skookum, and Big-Foot among them. Even among the Indians they were mostly regarded as little more than legend, but my guide informed me that he had seen one in the flesh two years prior, in the foot-hills of the mountain his

people call Tahoma[1], and that he had heard tales of a tribe that worshipped them as gods.

Tomorrow, we set out for Tahoma, for it is Big-Foot that I seek now as my quarry. I mean to find one of the elusive beasts and bring it back to England - dead if I must, alive if I can. I have brought ample equipment from England and purchased fresh victuals from the shops of this town. Tonight I plan and I pray that my hunt will not fail.

July 7th, 1857:
The forests of the territory make for slow going. In my adventures I have hacked through jungle reeds, forced my way through the tall grasses of the Serengeti, braved the unforgiving cold of the Himalayas and baked under the cruel Egyptian sun. But what hand or blade can cast aside the trunks of the ancient evergreens that stand by the myriads in every direction? The guides assure me we are making steady progress, though it seems we have gone scarcely two dozen miles since we left Seattle.

I caught my first glimpse of Tahoma today as we entered a clearing upon a hill, and I was overwhelmed by the beauty of the tableau that I observed. Tahoma is not nearly the height of the famous Peak XV[2] that Sir Waugh described last year in Nepal, but unlike the great Himalayas it stands alone, a solitary peak towering above the forests of the territory, like a proud and mighty king surveying a kingdom encompassing all that it perceives.

Shortly after mid-day we chanced upon a fox cub, scarcely old enough to hunt for itself, imprisoned in a cage of wood and hides. My Indian guide pointed out a clever set of machinations connected to the box, and informed me it was a trap laid by the Indians who lived in those woods, and that the unfortunate rascal had been lured in by a scrap of meat to be captured. He said to me that his people were most efficient; the beast's hide would make clothing, its teeth jewelry, its meat food for the children, its sinew cords and rope. Let there be no doubt, any who may chance to read this, that I with glee engaged in many a fox-hunt in the county pastures in my younger days. But to ride out with one's hounds is a gentleman's game; in this, my friend, there was no sport. I looked into the creature's eyes and it seemed to regard me almost as a starving beggar-child might regard a man of wealth; envious and jealous, but at the same time

supplicant, as if to beg me for mercy. I drew my knife and cut the cords holding the cage door shut, and the vulpine burst free and darted into the woods, fetching a brief glance at me as it ran away.

July 8th, 1857:
This morning we encountered a half-dozen Indians in a hunting party near the banks of a river. I had thought at first to call it the Blackwood River when we forded it, though my guide informed me it was known to his people as Nisqually. The Indians regarded us at first with suspicion. I know not if they had seen a white man before, and I feared the worst. But my Indian called out to them in a language strange to me, and they responded gleefully in the same. I learned that he was of the same tribe as they, and that he called their leader his cousin, and they received us warmly. We luncheoned on salmon the Indians had caught in the river, and traded with them for food and supplies. I was most excited to hear from one of the younger redskins that he had seen a Big-Foot once when he was young, for the porters believed this expedition to be a fool's errand, and with this revelation they seemed most renewed in their vigours. By the time we parted ways, I had managed to learn a few words of their language. After I have brought a Big-Foot back to England, I shall have to return to this land and learn more of the ways of these people.

July 13th, 1857:
I must write in haste, for my captors have not discovered this book. I am in darkness, alone, my feet bound, in a tent in a place I do not know, well guarded without by my captors.

They came upon us two nights ago. We had encamped for the night in a clearing not a dozen miles from the place my Indian told me he had seen the Big-Foot two years hence. They must have been lurking in the darkness for hours, and came upon the chief porter unawares while he stood the night watch. Before I could reach my rifle, all but one of the porters and my Indian guide had been felled by the brutes' arrows and hatchets. I took two of the bastards in reply with my rifle, and four more with my pistol, before one of them grabbed me from behind and knocked me out.

When I awoke, I had been tied to a pole and two of the savages were carrying me deeper into the woods. I could see my Indian, and

the last surviving porter, being carried similarly. I called out to my Indian and he told me that he recognized our captors as a tribe that had been ancient enemies of his own. They were unrepentant pagans and cannibals, he told me, and worshipped a strange god that lived in the mountain. It was said they raided the villages of the other tribes for sacrifices to offer to their god; surely, he said, we had been chosen to fulfill this onerous duty.

It is very cold here, though the sun shines brightly through the trees at mid-day. I know not whether the savages have my weapons or not. I pray that they do, for if I cannot reach them, I will surely perish in this wilderness.

July 16th, 1857

Words cannot express the terror I have beheld this day. The savages have brought us to their home camp, in the foot-hills. Even now, in the midst of summer, clumps of snow congregate under the rocks and at the bases of the trees. At mid-day, the three of us were escorted to a snowy clearing, by the edge of a vast wood climbing up the mountain. Hundreds of savages formed a half-circle around the clearing, and our porter was loosed from his bonds and dragged to the center. One of the savages began beating upon a massive drum and singing in a bizarre language the likes of which I have never heard. Others joined in, and the forests were filled with the din of a thousand screaming savages. Suddenly, the trees at the edge of the clearing seemed to rustle and part way, and the throng silenced as it emerged.

Big-Foot! In the flesh! The tales had not done the beast justice. It stood fifteen feet if it stood an inch, and it could not have weighed less than half a long ton[3]. I could scarcely discern its countenance beneath the matted fur that covered its face - ravenous, primal, caked in blood and spittle. It bore the scars of many struggles, and (praying that the reader will forgive my lack of modesty) displayed its manhood proudly.

It set its eyes on the porter and charged at him with a speed I would not have expected from a brute of its size. The porter made to run, but the savages closed in upon him, and allowed him no egress. Within seconds the beast was upon him. I could hardly bear to look as it ripped him limb from limb, its yellowed, sharpened teeth tearing

into his flesh, his blood running down its jaws as it greedily feasted upon him.

The savages returned me to the tent afterward. I fear I am next.

July 19th, 1857:
I hope by now, should anyone be reading this years hence, that you regard me as an honest man. Throughout my many years exploring the unknown corners of the world, I have considered it my obligation to tell no less than the whole truth regarding my discoveries, that my fellow countrymen might know of the world that lies beyond the borders of our great Empire, and prepare for the day when the light of goodliness and peace shines around the world. I say this now, for the events I must now recount might seem a fantasy to you, dear reader. Indeed, I would find it difficult to believe myself, had I not seen it with my own eyes; but on my sacred honour as an Englishman, I assure you that every word of it is true.

On the afternoon of the 17th, the savages offered my Indian guide as a sacrifice to Big-Foot as they had my porter. Yesterday, the 18th, they prepared to do the same to me. I spent the morning in solemn prayer and reflection, and for the first time in my life I understood the sorrow of a condemned man awaiting the hangman's noose. I felt I had lived a good life, and I was prepared to do what any good Englishman would, and meet my Maker with a stiff upper lip and a clean conscience.

The Indians lead me to the clearing and loosed my bonds. I strode calmly into the center of the clearing and closed my eyes. If I was to die, I intended to die with my dignity intact. The drumming and the screaming started, and I heard the trees rustle as Big-Foot drew near to claim his meal. But it was not Big-Foot's approach that silenced the savages; rather, I heard, distant yet remarkably near, the howl of a fox.

Muffled chatter arose from the throng as a second howl answered the first. Soon a third animal was howling, and before long the woods were alive with a cacophony. Not only foxes, but I heard the howls of wolves, the screeching of hawks and falcons, the roar of the mountain cats, even the calls of pigeons. I opened my eyes as a hundred animals or more emerged from the woods and set upon the

Indians. I beheld foxes and wolves, elk and deer, gulls and eagles, bears and raccoons, side by side like a cavalry charge as they knocked the wild men to the ground and tore out their throats. Every one of the creatures ran right past me, barely darting their eyes my way as I beheld the sight. Some even seemed to have markings on their brows, like the war paint the Indians themselves were decorated with.

I chose to take advantage of the opportunity and ran. Neither man nor beast made any attempt to stop me as I made for the west, away from Tahoma and Big-Foot, towards the sea and hopefully some sign of civilization. By nightfall I had easily put ten miles between myself and the camp; but alone, hungry, bruised and exhausted, and in the dark, I could go no further, and curled up by a tree to sleep.

When I awoke this morning, I found myself surrounded by wild beasts. Half a dozen deer stood in a semi-circle before me, paint on their faces, their horns and coats covered with savage blood, and two raccoons in their center. I panicked when first I saw them and instinctively tried to reach for my gun, for fear that they had come to finish me off. They stepped back in unison when they saw me startle, and I saw that one of the deer, upon its back, was carrying a large bundle - my own possessions, scavenged from the remains of my camp. The creature knelt to the ground and shrugged, letting it fall to the ground, and I eagerly examined it. Much of what I had brought into the woods was gone, but my rifle was intact, and my pistol, and a tent, and alcohol with which to clean my cuts and scrapes, and enough dried rations to last two weeks' time.

I barely had time to ponder this miracle before the rest of the animals fell to their knees as well, and opened a path between them. A fox approached me - old, weathered, bearing signs of having seen more winters than most of its kind do. It bore an air of dignity about it that one rarely sees from such creatures as it approached me and stood before me. It seemed to examine me carefully, contemplating as it looked me over, before it uttered a low bark and one of the raccoons approached me. I noticed now something I had overlooked before - the raccoon had, tied to its back with a thin piece of twine, a rolled piece of paper. The fox gestured at the paper with its nose,

and I reached down and drew the paper free. I unrolled it and found a handwritten message, in English, which I present to you below;

We, ALARIC THE FIFTH, by the Grace of God, King of all the Forest, Lord of the Plains, Duke of the Grand Fir and the Undergrowth, Count of the Swamp, Margrave of the Nameless Mountain, Warden of all the Streams and Rivers, and Lord Protector of the Tribes of Man, Defender of the Faith;

Recognizing you as a fellow Christian and a civilized man;

Grateful for your rescue of our royal issue from the devious machinations of the pagan savages;

Thankful that your kind have returned to this land;

Hopeful that you will on our behalf deliver news to your homeland that Christendom shall have in these parts a steadfast ally;

Acknowledging that in rescuing you from the false god of the pagans we are responsible for your welfare and safe passage in our lands;

Do hereby, on this day, the nineteenth day of the seventh month, in the Year of Our Lord Eighteen Hundred and Fifty-Seven,

Bestow upon you the rank of KNIGHT COMMANDER OF THE ORDER OF THE THISTLE, with all the privileges and responsibilities of that office;

Command you to, from this day forward, act as a loyal servant of Christ and His Church, Catholic and Apostolic, for as long as you shall live;

and Charge you to return to the lands of Christendom bearing news of our kingdom and to return with an embassy for the negotiation of amicable communion between our nations.

TO THIS DOCUMENT WE AFFIX OUR SEAL, SACRED AND ROYAL.

The paper had been "signed", so to say, with an ink stamp of what I assume to have been the fox's paw-print. I looked down at the creature, who I now saw regarded me with a gaze almost human in its wisdom. It raised its right paw to touch its forehead and lowered it to its chest and shoulders, making the sign of the cross. I repeated the gesture and it nodded to me. Having apparently reached an agreement, the fox that called itself Alaric the Fifth turned and strode away into the woods, its motley retinue following behind.

September 7th, 1857

It has been over a month since I made my escape from the forest and entered my convalescence here in Seattle. I wandered five days in the woods, and might be wandering still, if not for that by chance I found the same friendly tribe of Indians I had met on the banks of the Nisqually two weeks before. With what bits of their language I knew I tried to tell them of our encounter with the savages, the Big-Foot, and the strange group of animals that had been my salvation. I know not if they understood me, or if they merely thought me mad, but a small group of them traveled north with me and lead me back to town, where I have rested and healed my wounds since.

It is too late in the year to attempt another expedition in search of the Big-Foot; I am told that the winter in these parts is long and cold, and that it will be April before another expedition to the foot-hills is advisable. In any event, I have little money left with which to hire anyone. I have sent a letter south to San Francisco, to be telegraphed to the Royal Society in London, containing an account of my findings and a request for financing to launch a proper expedition into this wilderness, whether to capture a Big-Foot or to establish an embassy with the strange nation of the fox king Alaric; barring disaster, I expect a reply by Christmas.

I do not hold much hope that they will assent to such a proposition; after all, I am the only witness to these fantastical events, and the only evidence, the declaration of knighthood granted me by the fox, will not be in London for several years or more. Perhaps I shall leave this territory entirely when the next ship arrives in May, and set out

for other parts unknown. I heard before I left London that the White Raja, in Borneo, has acquired a strange machine that fell from the sky; who knows what other wonders might lurk in the Javanese jungles, waiting to be shown the light of day by one such as myself?

Footnotes
1. Now known as Mt. Rainier
2. Now known as Mt. Everest
3. 2,240 pounds (1016 kg)

From The Mists Of Time

There is an ancient legend.

Before man came to master fire and cultivate his food, he lived in perpetual fear. There existed creatures of such frightful appearance and terrible power that even the mightiest of warriors fell before them. When the creatures did not attack, there were the artifacts of doom, some enchanted by wicked sorcerers who lived in isolation, some appearing for no reason except to torment man. And in times when neither were to be found, the incomprehensible forces assaulted the refuges of man, with no purpose but that of destruction.

It is said in some circles that the mastery of fire is what allowed man to drive off the horrors of the world. The idea of a weak, powerless group gaining a bright, burning weapon against the night-things is certainly a comforting one, and is indeed believed by most of the world to be man's first step towards independence.

But it was not fire that led man to his mastery of Earth. It took another event for fire to even be a possibility. Given the millennia that separate us from that day, nobody knows the exact details of the event. But the legend goes something like this.

One night, a group of nomads squatted in a deep, dark cave, awaiting a creature. They had been on the run for a full cycling of the moon, and had gradually been picked down from a group of twenty to a group of four. The beast showed no signs of tiring, and could easily tear a person in half given the chance. A single glance into its eyes was enough to paralyze any man, regardless of his constitution. The creature had wandered the world for many, many years, terrorizing all who stumbled across it.

In a world of horrors, it was probably the least fearsome creature one could encounter.

In the deepest part of the night, the four heard the creature's dragging footsteps scrape across the entrance of the cave. They tried to remain silent, hoping to buy a few more precious seconds with which to make their peace. The knowledge of impending doom had been with them for some time now, but only here, in their last moments of life, did that knowledge become a solid reality. Huddling together, the four survivors awaited the creature, and the bloodshed that would follow.

As it rounded the corner, the group could barely make out the features of the thing that stalked them. It was twice the height of any normal man, and half the width. The eyes seemed far, far too large for the head, which jutted out from the rest of the skull by several hands. Its limbs ended not in hands and feet, but rather in large pads of slime, which still managed to grip with the strength of lion jaws. Turning its head, the creature saw the group, and bolted towards them.

But for the four survivors, the end never came.

Right as the creature came within striking distance, it was tugged back by four strands of knotted up reeds, one attached to each of the limbs. Losing its balance, the creature fell upon the ground, knocking its head against the stone floor of the cavern. Before it could regain its senses, three lithe, strong men beset upon it, two taking an arm and a leg each, and the third grabbing the face with one hand. Raising up the other, he placed two crudely carved rocks over the creature's eyes. The group watched in fascination as, instead of flinging them aside with a toss of its head, the creature writhed in pain, unable to get rid of the stones, which seemed to cling to its eyes.

Tying the creature's limbs behind its back, the men hefted it up, and chucked the monstrosity into a corner of the cave. Then, they led the four bewildered survivors out into the night, where six more men stood watch over the entrance. Two of them rolled a large boulder over to the entrance, and sealed it tightly shut. From inside, they could still hear the echoes of the creature's screams.

As the first three men led the original survivors away, the other six took up posts around the cavern. Legend has it that for many years

afterwards, they would patrol the area, making sure the creature hadn't escaped from it's confines. At every winter solstice, they would descend into the cavernous prison, and carefully replace the bindings and stones before sealing it once more.

As for the men who captured the creature, they went on to spread their knowledge across the globe. Tales from all corners of the Earth say they had decided to turn against the creatures which stalked them in the night, and make the world safe for man. That such a gargantuan effort was both planned and successfully implemented by a mere three individuals is truly fantastical, even for a legend.

Gradually, the group drifted out of common knowledge. As fewer and fewer things plagued the world, less and less people believed that such things had even existed, and by the time of man's cultivation of fire, the men who worked to make such things possible had passed onto the edges of normal life, a mere shadow, protecting man's continued existence.

The organization they formed out of those days of darkness and despair has gone by many names over the centuries, and the number of men who did work for it have been lost to history. Many of the things they held captive to make the world safe are still held to this day, while others have disappeared off the face of the Earth, either destroyed or escaped, awaiting rediscovery, and hopefully recapture. Regardless of these changes, though, the organization has, from its very conception, operated under one, unchanging creed: They secure, they contain, and they protect.

From Unknown Admirer to Unknown Admiree

I no longer care who may be reading this.

Whoever it is. Even if it's the kindest of men.

I love you. Let us be together. We can be happy together, and neither of us will be lonely for we will always have each other.

I love you, so, hurry and let us meet, so we can begin our relationship. Because I love you, I'll tell you a secret. My most beloved secret but not as much as my love for you whoIhavenotmetbutwillsoon.

I have seen the secret to the world's sorrow, and the world's misfortune. Loneliness. Loneliness. We are lonely, we fall to ruin, and we remain living and dying in misery.

Even when we are close, we are not close *enough*

We must be *closer* to make loneliness disappear

thedreadedlonelinesstodisappear

And I have found the way for us to be *closer*, it told me how we can become *closer*

So *close* that we shall never separate

So *close* that neither of us shall ever be lonely again

I love you, let's be *close* together, and so neither of us shall ever be lonely

andneitherofusshallbesadagain

Simply by writing this I feel myself by your side, my face against

your neck and skin against skin. My breath is gentle and sweet on your shoulder and your heartbeat underneath the hand that is mine on your chest. Your eyes closed in whatever dream you wander in, while I watch your slightly open mouth inhale and exhale, and I will match my breaths with yours and slow my heartbeat to your heartbeat. Sometimes you will whisper and I will whisper back, so that maybe you will hear me and my words will always be that I love you. When you awake you will look down and see me curled to fit exactly to your body like two matching puzzle pieces. Just you and me. Your lips shall find mine and then I will kiss you and you will kiss me back. I will whisper to you what I have whispered to you all night and that will be that I love you. Then you will smile back at me and whisper back that you love me too.

butidontwantyouandmeiwant*us*

That's okay if you don't understand right now.
You will soon.
iwillmakeyou

When my body collapses in your arms, you may cry and mourn, just as I once did. You don't need to cry.

For I will be one with you
There will no longer be you or me
There will only be *us*
For we will be *closest* of all

then when we feel lonely we will feel it together
when we feel anger we will act with unity
our heart will beat with one heartbeat
our minds are together embracing in its folds like our spirits embrace to a single soul
we will be *perfect* and yet imperfectable for we can still feel that loneliness

But there is a solution. Just as our souls blend, the horrors that are isolation and loneliness become apparent. It is our bones and flesh; it always has been. We have been born isolated from the world by our corporeal vessel. There's a way out now, for all of us to find the solace we have been looking for forever. Come, once we have been

united, we shall seek another to be with us. Then we will urge our new self to find another again, forever as long as there is one who remains apart.

wecouldbe *alltogether* *togetherforever* *everandalways*
perfection *asone* *asawhole* *asourselves* *asnothingelse*
no *loneliness* *andsorrow*
only the joyous unity

Wouldn't that be a sight, our beloved?

Come, let us **`kiss`**.

From Vagrants, to Gentlemen

Marshall slid the sleeve of his suit back, the ornate silver watch on his wrist glinting in the dull yellow glow of artificial light.

Two minutes, eighteen seconds.

He was on the second floor of the building, a hotel from the early twenties. The decadence of that era remained apparent in the dusty chandeliers, swinging slowly overhead as a train roared past outside. This room had been a ballroom at one time, and the dusty wood floor still bore the scuff marks of the thousands of boots that had come to this room before his own.

One minute, fifty six seconds.

He broke from his standing position by the door, lengthening his strides to make up for time lost contemplating the decor. The man in the middle of the room smiled at his customer, glad that somebody appreciated his collection, and he waved Marshall towards himself.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Marshall. Right this way, please."

One minute, forty three seconds. Twenty three more seconds until he was supposed to leave the room.

"One moment please, sir." Marshall indicated a beautiful eighteenth century chair backed against a wall, drawing his words out. "How *did* you manage to get ahold of that? I *have* been looking for one to complete my dining room."

"A most interesting piece, Mr. Marshall, you have quite the eye for quality. Smashed to pieces during the French Revolution and restored by a carpenter several years later…"

One minute, twenty six seconds.

Marshall walked several paces closer to the man, still detailing the

restoration of his glorious chair, and they walked together into the next room.

"… Rather pricey, but worth it I think. Now, about those items you wanted to purchase." The man threw open a heavy wooden door, and the amazement on Marshalls face was only partly feigned.

"My God man, is that an *original*?" Marshall indicated a tapestry in the corner, and was just as quickly drawn away by a painting sitting atop a nightstand older than the building he stood in. "Good Lord, is that-"

The smile on the man's face was broad as Marshall stared around the room in awe.

"Indeed it is. *Penance*. That one is not for sale, sadly. It holds a special place in my heart. I acquired it in Germany after…"

Marshall pulled himself together and checked his watch as inconspicuously as possible, hoping the man was too engaged by his collection to notice. He was *not* meant to lose track of time.

Forty three seconds.

"But my dear Mr. Marshall, what I have really called you here for today is a rather special item. A remarkable antique, but it also has some… Other features."

Marshall couldn't imagine something more interesting than a supposedly destroyed piece of 1600's art, but he followed the man through the corridor. After several seconds, they stood before a safe.

Twenty seconds.

"Now there are some things on this Earth that defy understanding, Mr. Marshall. This is one of these items. I must ask you to stand back, and be *very* careful with this particular piece…" The man bent down to tap the keypad, and Marshall strained to see over his shoulder. 1-8-

Time.

Marshall cursed under his breath as a train roared past, the floor shuddering as a ballroom wall was blown inwards, debris spraying across the floor. A cry echoed through the thick wooden door, somebody apparently having been hit by the blast.

Marshall seized the man from behind, wrapping one arm around his chest as he pulled a small plastic bag from his pocket. He whispered a quick apology to the struggling man as he one-handedly shook out a rag and slapped it over the face of his captive, feeling him fall limp after only a few seconds. Marshall lowered him gently to the floor, the sound of gunfire beginning to echo from the ballroom. He approached the safe, praying that the combination was what he thought it was. He reached for the keypad, tapping in the last few digits,

-1-6

And held in a yell as nothing happened.

"*Damn*," He whispered quietly and emphatically. "What could be…"

The heavy door crashed against the wall with a crack, and Marshall whirled around.

"Taking your time in here, aren't you now?"

"Shut it Carter. You've got the cart?"

"Of course, of course."

Carter wheeled a metal platform into the room, and Marshall resisted wincing as it rolled over several priceless pieces of art. The sound of gunfire was constant outside the door now, the clatter of an assault rifle drowning out the popping of pistols.

"Could you watch where you're wheeling that, you vandal?"

"Ah can it you pansy, we're on the clock. Now, what's worth selling in here?"

"Well he's got the *Penance* in here, that's an old piece from-"

"Right, right. Just point and tell me what to grab."

"Right, er, that one." Marshall indicated the mural, and Carter heaved it aboard the cart, the sound of gunfire dying down outside.

Marshall and Carter hauled a few more ancient paintings and statuettes onto the cart, and were panting from the strain when a voice floated in from just outside the door.

"Gentlemen, time for us to be going."

A dark figure walked into the room and stood against the wall behind the door, assault rifle slung across his chest. Marshall took a moment to appreciate his choice of hire, then returned his attention to the safe.

"Hey, one more thing. You guys think we can make it with this?"

Carter shook his head, looking doubtful. "I don't know Marshall, looks a bit on the heavy side. If we can get it on the cart we can probably do it, but is it worth the weight?"

Marshall ignored the question.

"Well let's give it a shot then."

Marshall and Carter gripped the underside of the safe and heaved, struggling to inch it over the edge of the cart, past the unconscious form of its former owner.

A *crack* echoed through the room, and Marshall twisted as a bullet hammered into his thigh, instinctively dropping the safe and grabbing at his injured leg. As the man in the door blew the would-be security guard to hell, the safe tipped from Carters hands and smashed to the floor.

A sound like a swarm of hornets came from inside the safe, growing louder every second. Marshall hobbled away, alarmed, and Carter backed towards the door.

The safe burst open with an explosive *bang*, and a swarm of salt crystals flew into the air. The three stared in amazement at the tiny

tornado, Marshall backing away as fast as he could move.

"What the hell is th-"

Another *crack*, and the man by the door jerked his head away from the new peephole in his cover. He brought his rifle to bear and fired a short burst, the guard spinning to the floor. The man grimaced and pressed his hand against his ribs, a kevlar vest visible through his torn suit.

"Gentlemen, I am leaving in two minutes. Get what you're getting and let's go."

"Hang on Dark, let's just see what we've got here."

Carter tentatively reached towards the whirling cloud of salt, which had totally engulfed their cart filled with antiques. He shrieked in pain, yanking his hand away from the cloud raw and red.

"God *damn* that burns!"

Marshall ripped a piece of cloth from his now-ruined pants leg and wrapped it around his hand, stretching towards the cloud. The particles parted as his hand entered, and he felt something solid. He gripped firmly and jerked, pulling an ornate silver salt shaker from the cloud. The whirling salt remained where it was, shredded pieces of paper now visible amidst the storm.

"I guess this is all we're getting today, you saw what it did to the safe."

Marshall sighed heavily for the priceless art that had just been lost to this mysterious shaker, refocusing as Carters voice echoed through the room.

"Fantastic Marshall, now can we *go*?" He was sucking on his fingers, staring curiously at the silver shaker in Marshalls hands.

Marshall lifted himself shakily, using a bookshelf as a support. He heard another bullet *ping* off a metal cabinet beside him, and felt the rythmic thumping as Dark blasted another man off his feet.

"Carter, help Marshall. I'll be back in a moment."

Dark glided out from behind the door and into the ballroom. He staggered back into the room seconds later, a guard scrambling after him. Dark held his bleeding nose with one hand and took a swing at his assailant, missing by several inches. He twisted backwards as the guard grabbed at his overextended arm, ready to-

A percussive *whump* filled the room, and the guard kicked over backwards, half of his head smeared across a nearby painting. Carter pocketed his hand-cannon.

Marshall protested the destruction from where he had been dropped on the floor.

"Damn you Carter, I *had* him."

"He had your elbow!"

Dark sulked as he helped Marshall up off the floor.

"He broke your nose!"

Dark handed Marshall off to Carter, swinging his rifle around into an easily accessible position against his hips.

"He hit you in the face with your own gun!"

Dark scowled on his way out the door, a guard immediately swinging at him from overhead. Dark jerked backwards out of range of the knife, kicked the man in the stomach, and fired a round through his chest as he hit the floor.

Carter stopped talking, and made himself very busy walking Marshall to the door. The two of them hobbled out into the ballroom, giving a wide berth to the man with the gun. Marshall enjoyed the sight of a sizeable hole in the wall, the leg of an antique chair still visible in the debris.

"You really did a number on that one, Carter."

He grunted in reply, and Marshall shifted his grip on the shaker as

they stood by the hole. Dark arrived a few moments later, a smear of blood barely visible under his suit. He hopped the few feet to the roof of an adjacent building, and caught Marshall as Carter tossed him down.

"That was undignified."

"*You're* the one who got shot, pansy. Suck it up."

The three set off across the roof as an alarm began blaring from the building behind them. They would escape through an alley on the other side of the building, a van waiting for them, ready to carry stacks of forgotten art. They would disappear in the busy afternoon traffic, Marshall already plotting their next move. A whole new world had opened for them with this salt shaker, and Marshall planned to make full use of its appearance.

He was finally getting out of the antique business.

« **Fuller Than Full!** | **Dread & Circuses Hub** | **Your Call Is Important To Us** »

Having been sitting up front, Victor was one of the last to exit the Big Top after the afternoon show had concluded. He inspected himself thoroughly, making sure there were no pieces of Human viscera still clinging anywhere on his person. There were some blood stains of course, but if anyone asked he was hoping he could pass those off for food stains.

Casting his gaze now to the sprawling Circus before him, he couldn't say it was any more inviting than it had been on his first visit. The colours were too bright, the smell of the cotton candy too strong, and the never ending music from the calliope was too seductive. He was wondering if seeing the Big Top show might be enough to appease his hosts, and if he could sneak off without offending them.

He lurched forward as a small person jumped onto his back and covered his eyes with their hands.

"Guess who?" they asked gleefully.

"Hello Lolly," Victor replied, recognizing the young Clown's effervescent voice immediately.

"No fair, you peeked," she accused playfully, hopping back to the ground. "I'm so glad you came back! What'd you think of the show? Was I amazing?"

"I can honestly say I've never seen a magician pull her assistant out of a hat before."

"It's even harder than it looks. That hat stinks of bunny poop."

"If I had to offer any criticism though, the, ah…lynching, before the

final act was a bit much. Don't get me wrong, I don't care for the GOC either and I recognize the threat they pose to your community but…"

"No, no, I see what you're saying. We may have gotten a bit carried away. Even us converted Clowns still have a bit of a mean streak we have to keep in check. Rough sex or a round at the Hack-A-Mole table is usually enough for Icky and me to get our aggression out, but we still lose our tempers every now and then.
"Oh! Icky wants to know how the plans for the caper's going. She's really looking forward to getting Virtuoso back."

"That's progressing as expected. I have the site layout with me so you can pick your entrance point. The containment cell is soundproofed, so you won't be able to use your Kaleidoscope to get in there since it needs your calliopes to work, but you shouldn't have a problem getting into an adjacent room. The wing is low security so there are no guards inside and our operative is working on ensuring he'll be able to get the security systems down. Once he's got a date and time we'll let you know.
"One detail of our original agreement has changed, however; Mr. Marshall has actually personally requested a slight adjustment to your payment."

"What do you mean?"

"It's just that Mr. Marshall thought that your anomalous means of transport would actually be of more value to us than anything you could steal from the Foundation. More specifically, have you ever been to an interdimensional marketplace known as the Utterly Bazaar?"

"Yeah, tons of times."

"Mr. Marshall would like you to escort me there so that I can do an assessment and also possibly acquire any products that I think we'd be able to move. Does that work for you?"

"Oh sure! We go there all the time anyway. It'd be no problem to have you tagging along."

“Perfect. We shouldn’t have any problems then. If, ah, you need to get back to work I don’t want to keep you.”

“Nope, you’re my work today!” she announced excitedly. “I usually work the crowd in between shows, but Icky said that today I should be your personal attendant to make sure you don’t miss anything the Circus has to offer!”

“That’s…so kind of you. Thank you,” he said with a forced smile.

“Come on, we’ve got a lot to do,” she said, taking his hand and dragging him into the throng of striped tents and caravans. “Do you want to go to the midway first? You could win me an enormous prize and make Icky super jealous!”

“That really doesn’t sound like a good idea to me.”

“Yeah, maybe not. No offense, but every booth operator we have would mark you as a sucker. Well, you’re our VIP, so you should choose where we go. There’s the Menagerie of Mayhem, Den of Freaks, Hall of Humans Extraordinaire…”

“Step right up, Step right up. Come and behold the wonders and horrors that lie within Fuller's Fantastic Fun-lover’s Funhouse!” a man in a pinstripe suit announced loudly.

“The Funhouse! Yes yes yes! We should go to the Funhouse. Come on!”

She grabbed hold of his hand again and pulled him over to a whimsically painted caravan with a large sign reading ‘HERMAN FULLER PROUDLY PRESENTS THE FANTASTIC FUN-LOVER’S FUNHOUSE!’

“Hey there Lollipop, who’s the young fella you’ve got with ya?” the pinstripe-suited man asked. Though well-dressed, he still looked more or less like what Victor thought of when he pictured a carny. He had a weathered face with a dark grey beard and greasy hair in a ponytail. His smile made it clear he wasn’t a Clown, since his teeth were off-colour, crooked and riddled with silver fillings.

“This is Victor Chan. He’s from Emcee D and he’s our VIP guest

today," Lolly introduced him. "Victor, this is Alfie. He looks after all of the Circus's Fun-lovers, which is a very important job. Without the Fun-lovers, we wouldn't be able to have any Clowns or cotton candy. Can you imagine a circus without Clowns and cotton candy?"

"Fun-lovers? That's what you call those… milking creatures, right?" Victor asked nervously.

"How do you know about Fun-lovers?" Lolly asked.

"From the same source that told us about the Utterly Bazaar. He said that once a couple of Clowns were there with a Fun-lover that ended up getting loose."

Lolly threw her head back and laughed.

"Yeah, we were laughing about that for weeks. They never let Pius or Eugene in again after that. But yes, this is where we keep the Fun-lovers. It's kind of like a barn or a kennel or something. Keeps them out of trouble anyway. But you don't have anything to worry about. Manny got fed up with Morty's antics a while ago and sent him back home. We don't keep Fun-lovers as crazy as that around anymore. Just come in with me and you'll see that they're awesome."

"What do we do in there? Is it like a petting zoo?"

"No, but we have a petting zoo! Do you want to see the petting zoo?"

"Don't see the petting zoo," Alfie said with a solemn shake of his head. "It's for kids, and the best thing they got there is the Obama Llama we got from **`that delivery service`**, though it has been an especially big hit ever since the election. Son, of all the sensational spectacles this Circus has to offer, none can compare to the existential experience that is Fuller's Fabulously Fantastic Fun-lovers' Funhouse."

Victor groaned uneasily, which was perhaps an under-reaction considering he was being asked to step into a confined space with an unknown number of extradimensional monstrosities of unclear

abilities and intent.

“And you’ve been in here before?” he asked Lolly.

“Loads of times. I’ve been coming in here since I was a kid, and kids come in here all the time as long they’re over four feet tall. You’ll love it, and I promise nothing bad will happen.”

Though Victor still found Herman Fuller’s Circus as disquieting as its name intended, he had no reason to doubt Lolly’s sincerity.

“Alright then. Let’s see some Fun-lovers,” he agreed. Lolly jumped up and down, excitedly clapping her hands.

“You won’t be disappointed, son,” Alfie smiled, unhooking the red velvet rope to allow them access to the caravan. “Normally I escort groups through the Funhouse personally, but I think Lolly can handle giving you a private tour. Just don’t wander off though.”

“Wait, what? What do you mean by 'wander off'?” Victor asked as he stood by the front door with Lolly’s arm wrapped around his.

“You’ll see when you get in there,” Alfie replied, placing his hand on a lever. “Oh, and watch that first step…”

He pulled the lever and a trap door opened underneath them, dropping them down a chute. Over the screams of Victor and the laughter of Lolly he could be heard to shout “…it’s a doozy!”

The chute zigged and zagged like a tube slide at a water park, and at one point Victor swore he was actually moving up. After nearly a minute they were finally deposited inside a ball pit of fuzzy, warm and possibly breathing furballs.

As Victor tried to pull his way out of the ball pit, Lolly was of course giggling hysterically as she frolicked in the hirsute hole.

“Furball fight!” she shouted, throwing the furry projectiles at Victor as quickly as she could pick them up. They were too soft and light to hurt him, but with each impact they made a sort of distressed squeaking sound that was somewhat unnerving.

Victor pulled himself out of the pit and onto the floor. He stayed there on his hands and knees for a moment, trying to regain his composure. After a few deep breaths, he looked up to assess his surroundings.

“Holy shit.”

“I know. It’s awesome, right?”

“I have a sudden urge to quote Doctor Who.”

The interior of the Funhouse was enormous, probably bigger than any man-made structure in existence. It felt like he could see for miles in every direction, though for some reason he was having a hard time judging distance. The ceiling (or was it the sky?) was covered in constantly changing fractal patterns that bathed the surreal landscape in a soft, shifting glow. The ground itself appeared to be made of Play-Doh, slowing undulating with shapes and sculptures emerging from it in the distance. Groves of twisty pipe cleaner trees dotted the landscape, and rivers of iridescent paint meandered through the quixotic realm.

“Is it really bigger on the inside or did we teleport?” Victor asked, rising to his feet.

“It’s a pocket dimension; a whole itty-bitty universe that we can take on tour with us!” she replied enthusiastically, hopping out of the pit.

“Is it always like this?”

“No! That’s the awesome part! In here the Fun-lovers are gods with complete control over time, space, matter, even the laws of physics! One time they lowered the speed of light down to under ten miles an hour, and you could feel relativistic effects just from walking around! Then this other time…”

She was interrupted by two creatures dropping down from the ceiling. They bounced up and down like Super Balls for a bit before finally coming to a rest. They were both translucent black organ sacks a few feet across. One was held up by spider legs, the other by tentacles. Victor cautiously retreated behind Lolly, hoping that

she could deal with them.

“Ripley! Bailey! What’s the matter with you? We have a guest! Make yourselves decent!”

The two creatures dipped their bodies, possibly a bow of deference, and with a quick shimmer they assumed tall humanoid forms clad in pinstripe suits in the same style Alfie had been wearing. Each also wore a carnival mask over its seemingly blank face. The first, Ripley, wore a feminine mask with a subdued expression, while Bailey wore a man’s face with a bulbous nose and wide smile. The two beings took lanky, alien strides over to their friend and her guest, examining him with swiftly swivelling heads.

“Ripley and Bailey, huh?” Victor asked.

“Yeah, Icky said that Fuller liked to name Fun-lovers after rivals and enemies of his,” Lolly replied. “He was not the kind of guy you wanted to piss off. I bet there’s no one in all the worlds happier about Barnum and Bailey’s Circus going under than Herman Fuller. Not that Icky and Manny aren’t happy about it; less competition for us and all.
“Ripley, Bailey, this is Victor. He’s our VIP guest so I need you to show him an extra special time.”

The Fun-lovers started making chittering noises at each other. Their tone sounded confused, maybe irritated. Ripley lowered her head and sighed, then turned to face Lolly.

“Grownups are no fun,” she said in a raspy voice. “Look how scared he is. Children see the wonder of this place, appreciate the magic that grownups would rather lock away in a tiny cell. I’m not doing a tour without any kids.”

“Me neither,” Bailey agreed, nodding like an actual bobblehead.

“Excuse me?” Lolly asked angrily, placing her hands on her hips.

“I don’t want to be a bother. Why don’t we just wait until the next tour group comes along and we can join them?”

“No! You’re a VIP guest; that means you get VIP treatment!” Lolly

said, stomping her foot petulantly.

“And we’re Fun-lovers, which means we love fun,” Bailey said. “If something’s not fun for us, we’re not interested.”

“You wouldn’t want our Milk to go sour, now would you?” Ripley asked in a vaguely threatening tone. "You know how corrosive sour Milk can get."

“Your Milk’s not going to go sour from giving one boring tour, you’re just making excuses!” Lolly accused. “I have a very important job today showing our VIP guest the Circus and you are making me look foolish!”

“You’re a Clown,” Ripley said in a deadpan voice.

“I am the assistant Ringmaster…”

“ ‘To the’,” Bailey interjected.

“You guys get NBC in here?” Victor asked, more confused than ever.

“I am the Ringmaster’s assistant and playmate and I demand to be treated with respect! You will take me and my VIP guest on a private tour of the Funhouse, or I will be telling Manny about how disrespectful you were to one of our business partners. You know how important client relations are to Manny, so he’s not going to be happy about this, and how do you think Icky will react when I tell her you made her little Lollipop cry?”

“You’re not…” Ripley began, only to see that Lolly was pouting and her eyes were watering, and she was one wrong word away from bursting into tears. “Oh alright. One private tour for the VIP guest coming up.”

With a flourish of her hand, a horse-drawn sleigh made of Play-Doh arose from the ground. “Hop in.”

“Thank you,” Lolly said, grabbing Victor by the hand and pulling him into the sleigh.

“Maybe we can still find a way to have a little fun with this guy along the way?” Bailey whispered to his companion.

“Maybe,” she nodded in reply. Bailey sat up in the box to drive the sleigh, while Ripley rode in the passenger compartment with the others.

“I’m sorry you had to see me like that,” Lolly said to Victor, dabbing her tears with a clown hankie. “Can I get some Milk, please? You guys really killed my buzz.”

Ripley produced an empty milk bottle with a snap of her fingers.

“Vicky, you might want to look away,” she warned. Victor happily obliged, having no great curiosity as to how Fun-lovers were milked. “There you are, Lolly. Doesn’t get any fresher than that.”

“Thank you,” she said, snatching the bottle eagerly and chugging down its contents.

“Hey go easy on that. I’m not milking you if you drink too much,” Ripley cautioned.

“Woo!” Lolly screamed after she stopped to take a breath. “That is liquid happiness. I’m better now, I feel like myself again. So what’s our first stop?”

“Hmmm. How about a round of miniature golf? You business types tend to like the full sized version, don’t you? What do you say? It will give you a chance to work on your putt.”

“Oh, please please please please please say yes!” Lolly pleaded. “I love miniature golf!”

“Mini golf sounds great,” Victor agreed.

“To the putting greens then! Mush!” Bailey shouted.

“We’re not dogs!” one of the clay horses objected.

“Well, giddy up then. Just move!” he said with a crack of the reins. The sleigh sped off through the hills of pastel coloured putty, though

to Victor it seemed that the landscape was rushing past them as he felt no inertia and his perspective became completely warped, fractals and Play-Doh all blurring together into one unintelligible panorama.

Just as Victor thought he was about to pass out the vista in front of him settled down into something coherent. He was at what appeared to be an ordinary mini-golf course. The sleigh was gone, and he and Lolly were now seated upon two ponies.

“Where did Ripley and Bailey and go?” he asked confused.

“We’re right here,” was the reply straight from the horse’s mouth.

“Oh. You’re ponies now. But why are we riding you?”

“To play golf. Duh,” Lolly replied. Gripping her club she screamed “FORE!” and her steed charged forward. When she struck her bright pink ball it went flying at an impossible speed, bouncing off of every obstacle at just the right angle to ensure it hit the next one, and Victor wondered if it would ever hit the ground.

“Miniature polo. Interesting,” he remarked.

“It’s the sport of very small kings,” Bailey informed him.

The golf ball whizzed by them a few more times leaving a hot pink contrail as it went, bouncing off a miniature Eiffel tower, pinwheel bladed windmill, and a (live) purple giraffe with a corkscrew neck until it finally ended up in the 1st hole.

“Hole in one!” Lolly shouted victoriously, a blue ball materializing on the tee. “Your turn Victor.”

“I’ll try, but I’ve never actually golfed like this before,” he replied. He snapped Bailey’s reins and he charged towards the ball.

“They can take our lives, but they cannot take our freedom, though logically if we were dead we’d lose all agency making death the most effective form of suppressing one’s freedom so never mind!” Bailey shouted.

Victor swung his club as best as he was able, and to his surprise he actually hit the ball. It shot around the course just as Lolly's had, eventually landing in the hole with a satisfying 'plunk'.

“Hole in one!” Lolly shouted.

“Does it always end up in the hole, no matter how you hit it?” he asked.

“Of course silly, that’s what makes it fun. Everyone’s a winner!”

“Bailey dear, I do believe I detect a hint of dissatisfaction in our VIP's tone,” Ripley said.

"No, I…"

"I believe you're right Ripley. We can't have a VIP guest leaving our Funhouse unsatisfied. Why don't you take us somewhere more *challenging*."

"Wait, I didn't…"

“With pleasure,” she agreed. With a twitch of her snout, the landscape transformed into a long treadmill moving at top speed. She and Bailey broke into a full gallop to stay in place, swerving and jumping and ducking to avoid the plethora of obstacles that was coming at them.

“What is this?” Victor asked, clinging onto Bailey for dear life.

“It’s the Red Queen Obstacle Course!” Lolly replied, who was now riding side saddle and twirling a parasol. “You have to do a lot of running to stay in one place.”

“How do you win if you can only run in place?”

“You don’t win *per se*. You just don’t lose for as long as you can,” Bailey replied.

“What happens if you lose?” Victor asked.

“That,” Ripley replied, gesturing behind her with her head. Victor

looked behind to see a giant, somewhat Dr. Seuss-like catfish at the end of the treadmill, its gaping maw ready to swallow them should they slacken their pace.

Victor turned his head forward to see if there was any way off the treadmill, but he couldn't see anything beyond the obstacles rushing towards them. The obstacles were, of course, non-standard, consisting mostly of large appliances and furniture, as well as at least one Boeing 747 they narrowly managed to duck under.

"At least it wasn't a United flight? Am I right? SWIVEL CHAIR!" Bailey asked as he gracefully avoided the oncoming office fixture.

"Bailey, we've talked about the topical humour. We're not doing a stand-up routine," Ripley chastised him. "Just stick to the jokes about the food. STACKED WASHER/DRYER COMBO!"

"Lolly, can't you do something to get us out of here?" Victor pleaded.

"Well I'm not as powerful as a Fun-lover, but my magic is unusually strong in here. GRAND PIANO!" she replied. "I could wish us out of here…but what I'd really like is some bubble gum, so I wish for that!"

At her command a large gumball machine materialized a fair ways in front of them, smashing upon hitting the treadmill and sending thousands of gumballs rolling towards them.

"Oh Caramel Corn!" Bailey cursed as both he and Ripley were unable to avoid tripping on the confectioneries. They both fell to the ground and were immediately swept down towards the waiting orifice of the catfish. "Curse you, Lolly! Your oral fixation has killed us all!"

Victor screamed as he was swallowed by the monstrous fish, and he continued to scream when he found himself falling down a vine covered shaft crisscrossed with rope bridges. He was still screaming when he passed the last bridge where Ripley and Bailey were seated comfortably in their humanoid forms sipping tea. He screamed when Bailey grabbed his ankle and his arm stretched out like a bungee cord, he screamed when he saw he was falling towards a lake infested with crocodiles, he really screamed when

one of the crocodiles leapt out of the water and tried to eat him, and he even screamed when Bailey's bungee arm snapped him back up and safely deposited him on the bridge next to Lolly, who was literally ROTFLMAO.

"You're welcome," Bailey said nonchalantly as Victor laid hyperventilating before him. "As I was saying, if we can just get Manny to invest in some ultra-pasteurization equipment then we can keep Milk for months instead of days, no one has to drink that powdered crap anymore, and we can sell the surplus."

"What the hell was that!" Victor demanded, rising to his feet. "I almost died!"

"Victor, they're just teasing you," Lolly said through her snickers as she rose to her feet. "I told you everything in here is under their control, and they would never let anything bad happen to a guest, would you now?"

"Of course not," Bailey replied. "Manny would send us back home if were to let any misfortune befall any of our visitors."

"Then again, he can't send too many of us away because then he wouldn't have enough Milk, so we're not completely without bargaining power," Ripley said. "Maybe enough to ask for a new chew toy now and again?"

"Don't listen to her. Even if they actually wanted to, I take my job as your attendant very seriously and would never let anything happen to our VIP guest."

"Lolly, I believe you. I do, but I am not having a fun time. Please, I would like to leave," Victor requested.

"All right," Lolly let out a disappointed side. "Bailey, can you keyhole us straight to the exit?"

"Oh, I'm sorry Lolly but you know the fine print as well as anyone: Do not exit until the ride has come to a complete stop."

"Leaving now would be like jumping out of a roller coaster," Ripley explained. "It would be hilariously ironic if you were to let your

irrational fear of a carnival ride drive you to plunge to your death, now wouldn't it?"

"Then what's the quickest way out?" Victor demanded.

"Well below is the splash pad, and if you go through that you'll pass through Ripley's Aquarium on the way to the milking room which has an emergency exit," Bailey said thoughtfully. "Though I doubt you'll like that since you have to cross the aquarium in a paddle boat and it is full of sea monsters."

"I made them all myself, believe it or not," Ripley said proudly.

"No, I think you'd be better off going up through the 3D Jungle Labyrinth."

Victor looked up to see that the countless levels of rope bridges and ladders did form a dauntingly labyrinthine design.

"How long will that take?" he asked exhaustedly.

"Not long enough when you're having fun," Bailey replied. "But with your sourpuss attitude, it could very well take weeks."

"Well then we'll have to make it more fun, won't we?" Ripley asked.

"Oh, let's make it a race!" Lolly suggested. "Last one to the top is a Fun-lover's moulted husk!"

"I have an even better idea; a rat race, to appeal to Mr. Corporate here!" Bailey decreed. With two quick claps a swarm of enormous, black, vicious rats spilt onto the bridge they were on, hissing and baring their jagged teeth at Victor.

"Climb."

Victor and Lolly dashed for the nearest ladder, the onslaught of vermin snapping at their ankles. They clambered up the rungs as quickly as they could, but the rats proved capable of shimmying up the sides.

"That's it Vicky, climb that corporate ladder! Fake it 'til you make it!"

“Dress for the job you want, not the job you have!” Ripley added. “Honestly, an off the rack suit? What was he thinking?”

Victor was the first to reach the second bridge and immediately ran for the first ladder he saw. He had to duck to avoid a tire, log and an orangutan swinging by on vines, but he made it to the ladder safely. Just as he was about to grab it, it was yanked out of his reach.

“No!” he looked around desperately for another ladder, only to see it dangling a few meters away. He leapt for it, but it was again cruelly yanked back up at the last second. And so was the third one, and the fourth. And the fifth. “Lolly! Lolly, what do we do!”

“I think they made that very clear; have fun,” she told him. She pulled out a party horn and blew it, and the ladder gently lowered itself down and allowed her to grab hold of it. “Grab on.”

Victor wrapped his arms around her tightly and the ladder carried them several levels up to a bridge that was swinging back and forth like a gazebo swing.

“There. That should give us a bit of a head start.” A wooden plank burst in half as a rat smashed its head through from underneath. “Or not. Run!”

They sprinted off down the bridge and caught sight of a door near the end. “In there. Quick!”

Victor threw the door open and the two of them hurried inside, slamming the door behind them. Victor leaned his back against the door to catch his breath, giving him a proper view of the room he found himself in.

There was a fat Clown in a bishop’s hat tied to a chair surrounded by a group of deformed but seemingly animate sock puppets.

“Freaky Friday! Freaky Friday! Freaky Friday!” the puppets chanted rhythmically as they pumped their fists in unison.

“Ahhhh…”

“Please don’t tell my wife,” the Clown requested. Before either could

respond a Fun-lover in its default form lowered itself down from the ceiling.

“Employees only!” it screeched, grabbing Victor with one of its many webbed hands and throwing him out the door.

“Victor!” Lolly screamed as she ran after him. Victor expected to be swarmed by rats immediately but instead was greeted with the serene music of a pan pipe. He looked up to see the instrument being played by Bailey, gracefully perched on the rope railing with all the rats entranced by his music.

“We tried our best Lolly, but even when we customize our attractions to his personal tastes he’s still not having fun,” Ripley said with a sad shake of her head. “So ungrateful. You’re lucky you got your Milk when you did because mine really is going to be sour now. "There’s no point in going on like this; you’ll never reach the top by climbing.”

“So we’re just stuck here?” Victor asked.

“Not to worry little Vicky. The fastest way up is down.”

Ripley snapped her fingers, and for the four of them gravity reversed and they all fell upwards.

The bridges and vines all parted to allow the quartet to pass, and quickly gave way to the void of space. It was filled with enormous glow-in-the-dark stickers. They were mostly shaped like traditional stars arranged into circus themed constellations, but there were also some shooting stars, cratered moons, crescent moons, ringed planets and whirlpool galaxies. The sight was distracting enough that it took Victor nearly a full minute to realize that they weren’t moving.

“Why aren’t we falling anymore?” he asked.

“Because there’s no gravity in space obviously, and we usually have the inertia turned off as a safety precaution,” Ripley replied.

“Nobody panic. I can get us out of here,” Bailey assured them.

He reached into his pocket and pulled a bright red rocket kiddie ride large enough to accommodate all of them. Once he had everyone strapped in, he placed a firm grip on the steering wheel.

“Hold on to your lunches, because we’re going for the ride of our lives!” With a melodramatic gesture, he pressed the big red button on the dashboard. To his disappointment, all it did was flash the words INSERT COIN. “Oh. Does anyone have a quarter?”

“I have midway tokens,” Lolly replied.

“It doesn’t take tokens, it takes quarters,” Bailey replied. “What about you Vicky, you got any quarters?”

“I almost never use cash,” Victor replied.

“That figures, the rich guy doesn’t have a quarter when he needs it,” Ripley snorted. “I have a Canadian quarter from that show we did at Estevan.”

“A Canadian quarter is worse than nothing! It has the Queen of England on one side and a reindeer on the other! A frickin’ reindeer! Unless it’s Christmas at Buckingham Palace how the hell is anyone supposed to take that seriously? I need George Washington and a bald eagle or nothing!”

“Lolly said you were gods in here. Can’t you just make a quarter?”

“Currency created by divinities is still considered counterfeit otherwise gods would be bribing people to worship them all the time and there’d be massive inflation and economic collapse, did you fail basic theology *and* economics? GAWD!”

The four of them sat in silence for a moment, trying to think of a way out of their predicament.

“Oh! I know how to get us moving!” Ripley claimed. She snapped her fingers and in the distance appeared a fiery accretion disk orbiting a circular black abyss. The rocket immediately lurched towards it, the stars racing by at an ever increasing speed.

“A black hole! Good thinking Ripley! We’ll be out of here in no time,”

Bailey said.

“But what happens when we reach the black hole?” Victor asked. Ripley and Bailey exchanged uneasy glances with each other.

“Sorry Vicky, we can’t hear you. There’s no sound in space. You’ve seen too many sci-fi movies,” Ripley said.

“Now now Ripley, one should never let something as inconsequential as the laws of physics get in the way of a good story,” Bailey asserted. “Matter of fact, let’s have some grand sound for our grand finale!”

At his command, an unseen orchestra began playing the 1812 overture, and the stars around them began bursting into fireworks with thunderous explosions in time with the music. The faster they went, the louder the sound became, and the stars and fireworks became infinitely stretched out as they finally passed the event horizon of the black hole.

“My stars, it’s full of God!”

The next thing Victor remembered he was standing in a drab wooden room next to Lolly, with Ripley and Bailey standing over near a fancy lever.

“Thank you for visiting Herman Fuller’s Fantastic Fun-Lover’s Funhouse. We hope you had a Fantastic, Fun-loving time,” Ripley said in an apathetic, monotone voice as she read the farewell speech off a cue card. “We hope you will always remember the special time you had here and that we will see you again some day. Please remember to rate, share and review Herman Fuller’s Circus of the Disquieting on Yelp, social media, and the SCP Database. Thank you for your patronage, and have a disquieting day.”

She pulled the lever, and once again a trap door opened up beneath them and dropped them down a chute. They travelled through it for about the same amount of time as the first one, emerging out of a slide behind the Funhouse and into a regular ball pit.

“Did that really just happen?” Victor asked, who was seriously

considering the possibility that he was coming off a bad trip or otherwise losing his mind.

“I’m sorry, that didn’t turn out quite like I expected,” Lolly apologized, sheepishly casting her eyes to the ground. “They usually do behave themselves around the kids, but grownups alone can be a different story. I can tell you’re uncomfortable here, and I just wanted to show you why I love this Circus so much. It’s not just my home, it’s my paradise, and sometimes it hurts when other people don’t see it that way too. I know the Funhouse was a lot, and if it was too much you can go home. I won’t stop you.”

“I…” Victor began, but then seemed to change his mind. “Actually Lolly, can we go to the petting zoo and see the Obama Llama?”

A wide smile spread across her face, and she somehow changed her colour palette to match the red, white and blue of Obama’s iconic campaign poster.

“Yes we can.”

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“Ladies and Gentlmen, let’s have another big round of applause for Bubble Gum, the tipsy elephant. Try not to feel too sorry for her. We can’t help her until she admits she has a problem.”

While the crowd cheered and applauded as the permanently plastered pink pachyderm perambulated out of the Big Top, Ringmaster Icky cast her gaze towards the back of the stands where she had noticed a rather, well, *disquieting* individual.

Thanks to her many years of experience she could tell effortlessly whether or not someone was under the effects of their signature black cotton candy, and she always made sure to keep an eye on them in case they were up to something. Her circus was everything to her, and she could spot a threat to her circus from miles away.

The man she was looking at now had been watching her performance with rapt attention, but without any of the joy and wonder or disgust and horror that most people did. No, he was watching *diligently*, as if it was his job. She could practically hear him writing his report in his head.

Time to find out who that report was going to.

Icky signalled to the audio technician to switch the calliope over to *‘Officer of the Year’*. All the Circus folk present took immediate note of this, and knew they were about to go off script.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, I think we have time for one last magic trick before we get to our final act. Do you all want to see another magic trick?”

The audience of course applauded their approval.

“I want to see another magic trick!” said her assistant, who had popped out from under her top hat and was now gracefully perched on her head.

“Lolly, get down from there,” she commanded gently. Lolly did a handstand, placing the top hat back on the Ringmaster’s head, then back-flipped to the ground to laughter and applause. “For our next trick, we’re going to need one more volunteer from the audience. Only one! Do we have any volunteers?”

Dozens of eager hands shot up of course, but the man in the back remained as passively observant as ever.

Not that that made one bit of difference to Icky. With a flourish of her wand she cast the spotlight upon him.

“You sir, there in the back. You look like you’d be perfect.”

“What? I, uh…no. I mean, I couldn’t, I…”

“Come on down!”

The audience clapped and cheered their encouragement, and the man noticed a rather large Clown had already appeared beside him to usher him down. He hastily weighed his options and decided it would be best to play along, and allowed himself to be led into the ring.

“Thanks Noodles,” Icky said, taking the man by the arm. “What’s your name sir?”

“Ah…Jeremy?” he said, though it hardly sounded like he was sure.

“Well Jeremy; actually can I call you Jerry? I’m going to call you Jerry. Jerry, the reason I picked you over all these other nice folks is that I couldn’t help but notice how serious you looked, and that just doesn’t sit right with me. How can someone be so serious after seeing a drunken pink elephant blow gravity defying bubbles from her trunk?”

“It certainly is unusual Icky,” Lolly agreed. “Makes me think that maybe Jerry didn’t come here to have fun at all.”

“What do you say to that Jerry? Are you here on business or pleasure?”

“Well I just, you know, I just saw the tents set up and I didn’t have any other plans so I…Jesus Christ!”

Jeremy’s pants had spontaneously combusted, engulfing his entire posterior in fire. The audience roared with laughter as he tried to beat the flames. “What the hell is this!”

“Your pants are on fire Jerry, which means you must be a liar-liar-pants-on-fire,” Icky explained with a smug smile.

“Yeah, that’s why I only wear skirts so I can get away with any fibs I want,” Lolly boasted.

Jeremy had started rolling on the ground to try to smother the flames. A frantic Clown ran out with a fire extinguisher, but when he fired it he was sent rocketing around the tent to the amazement of the guests, assuring them it was all part of the show.

“Somebody help me!” Jeremy screamed.

“All you have to do is tell the truth,” Icky said, but then lowered her voice so that the audience couldn’t hear her. “Why did you come here? Who do you work for?”

“I just wanted to see a circus!” he claimed.

“Fine then, let your itty bitty boy parts burn off. Hope you don’t got anyone who’s gonna to miss ’em.”

As if by her command, the fire actually started to move towards his genitals.

“Ah! Okay, GOC! I’m with the occult coalition!”

To his relief the flames instantly died out. His relief was short-lived though, as he immediately noticed all the Clowns staring at him with a hatred so intense it put the fire to shame.

“Freak killer!” Lolly hissed under her breath.

“No! Please, I just do recon for them and I really did just stumble upon your circus. They don’t even know I’m here and if you let me go I swear they never will,” he claimed. Icky shook her head in contempt, and knelt down to speak with him privately.

“You *just* do recon? Every freak you ever ratted out to the Geo Sea is dead! They’re literal Nazis bent on wiping my kind from the Earth! This Circus is a sanctuary for freaks, which means there’s no way in hell you’re getting out alive. Play along, and it will at least be quick.”

Icky rose to her full height and resumed her cheerful persona.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, I do apologize for Mr. Jerry’s strange and lackluster performance, but luckily that won’t have any effect upon the astounding display of magic you’re about to witness: the Fuller than Full Human Caramel Cooker!”

Lolly and Mr. Noodles hoisted Jeremy up and placed him inside of some sort of elastic harness, and shoved a tube and funnel down his throat. Lolly leapt to the top of the harness to hold up the funnel for all to see. A stagehand entered the ring pulling a large tank filled with pristine white sugar.

With some nonsensical magic words and dramatic gestures, Icky drew all the sugar into the air and started spinning it around the ring in a vortex. The sugar assumed the shapes of various exotic animals, elephants and zebras and tigers and the like, racing around the ring on parade as Icky cracked a whip made of sugar to drive them on.

One by one they dove into the funnel to cook inside Jeremy’s stomach. His stomach swelled with burning hot molten sugar until he was sure it would burst, but it didn’t. As his stomach expanded his ribs broke off and his spine was horribly deformed, but yet all his soft tissues had taken on an unnatural elasticity allowing them to stretch to horrific proportions.

His torso continued to enlarge until it was so massive his legs broke underneath him. It was at this point that the harness lifted him up to about a dozen feet off the ground. He had swallowed all the sugar and yet still he kept growing. The harness spun him around, faster

and faster as Icky led the audience in some sort of chant, but he was in too much pain to care what they were saying.

Finally his skin had become taught. It could stretch no more, and yet whatever was inside him continued to push outwards. He let out one final scream, and then popped like a balloon.

Thousands upon thousands of colourfully wrapped caramels rained down upon the audience, most of whom applauded and eagerly scooped them up. Only the few who remained unaffected by the calliope music looked confused, uncertain as to what they had just witnessed.

While the light-weight candy had flown all across the Big Top, the heavier viscera had mostly landed in the front rows. Sitting in this splash zone, among others, was their VIP guest Victor Chan.

With as much reserve as he could muster, Victor took out his neckerchief and began wiping off the stray bits of flesh. He was certainly glad he had taken Icky's advice to wear some less expensive clothing.

Nevertheless, he fully intended to submit his dry cleaning bill on his next expense report.

« **Former Assets** | **`Dread & Circuses Hub`** | **Fuller's Fantastic Fun-Lover's Funhouse** »

Funding

"Five incidents. Zero recoveries. Eight casualties."

The man at the center of the room flopped a thin blue file on his folding table and sat down. A semi-circle of solemn, practically dressed officials sat on worn chairs around the individual drenched in sweat standing before them.

Adjusting his tie and pushing his glasses up his sweating nose, UIU agent and legal specialist Damion Hill addressed the committee as firmly as he could. "Director Keynes, the losses were not the fault of our agents. We're simply not well equipped enough-"

"Quiet on the floor, please." The Director clasped his hands together on the snap-up table. "Frankly, Mr. Hill, the matter of whose fault it is - your agents or the belligerents - is not a valid point at this stage. The Resource Planning Office is considering withdrawing all immediate funds from your division, claiming that it is a waste of the Bureau's time and money." He cocked his head at the handsomely dressed official carrying a grey suitcase quietly seated at the end of the semicircle. "I do not necessarily disagree."

Relaxing back in his hard-backed chair, he added, "I suggest you give him - and us - a good reason to refrain from proceeding as such."

Hill's glasses began to slide down his face again. As he propped them back up, he returned, "Sir, with all due respect, the Bureau itself is not devoid of guilt. Year after year my office has been denied the authority to enact threat orientation and the ability to respond quickly and efficiently to high-profile situations. The Bureau's practice of actively discouraging graduates from inquiring about our unit has led to a severe deficiency in our personnel count, leading to the possibility of numerical superiority being virtually unfeasible in a combat-"

He was cut off by Agent Jericho, an elderly woman sitting beside Director Keynes. "*Numerical superiority?*" she interjected incredulously. "I was under the impression you had apes to chase, not a war to win." A number of the attendants chuckled. Settling back into a cold, hostile gaze, she added, "Mr. Hill, your organization's very *goal* is to remove any…" she turned her nose at the term. "*Paranormal* objects from society, without society noticing."

Hill's sense of courtly composure began to wane. He retorted, "Madam, presuming you have read the full length of the dispatches my subsection sends out bi-annually, you would know that the Bureau isn't the only group capable of combating abnormal entities on a large scale. Certain elements outside our jurisdiction have proven far more adept at interacting with the anomalous underground than we have since our inception."

A young representative suited in green, seated in the middle of the left column raised his hand. Hill motioned for him to speak, and so he stood. "We've read your reports, agent. Our issue with them is the unprofessional nature of your conclusions. I recall dissecting a dossier on - the Men in Black, I believe you call them. " Snickers were heard. Keynes kept quiet. He continued, "In the past you've intimated that they are infinitely more well-prepared for the conflicts and brushfire wars that erupt daily in your area of expertise, and are likely the reason the UIU so rarely comes upon a fruitful case. I ask, then: why do you feel the need to press the Bureau to fund a society that, in all probability, became outmoded and irrelevant many years ago?"

So this is what it comes to, Hill thought.

"What you propose, sir, is what is at the crux of this matter." He scanned the room for signs of amusement. "Sixty-nine years ago, we stepped into a deep and unknown pool that we, though we thought otherwise, understood very little about. Communism, with all of its unscrupulous tendencies, poured into our temples and our cities, wedging itself and breeding like a virus. The GRU's court wizards sought to change us; Mr. Hoover tasked our fathers with the feat of their destruction. They succeeded, and changed the course of history. But what they couldn't change was the fact that our country had just staked its claim for dominance on a new plane of

politics and espionage."

He wiped his brow.

Considering his words for a moment, he pressed on, "I will admit, with time our image has degraded significantly. Men and women before you have also asked why we need an organization of our own to collect and contain paranormal phenomena. Why interfere with business and politicking that we can't integrate with? Why *shouldn't* we 'leave it to the professionals'? I cannot deny that this position isn't entirely unreasonable."

The light shining on him was blistering, and once again, he adjusted his spectacles.

"However, I propose to this committee - a counterpoint. For a century, this nation - our nation - has thickened and matured and built itself up to be what may be considered - a superpower. In collaboration with our European associates, we have established a globe-spanning network of communication and military superiority. Why is it then that we, ostensibly the most influential state of this twenty-first century, should be defenseless against a facet of reality we may have little to no conception of? There do exist men and women capable of isolating this world from ourselves, working around the clock to ensure our safety and comfort - this is true, however stringently we strive to deny it. But now I ask you; who will you run to should their soldiers rout, their barricades collapse, their fortresses - where we may seek no refuge, respite, or countenance - be overrun? One might say that in such a situation, any effort on our part would be futile; I find an apt analogy in Hector, riding out to face Achilles as he has slaughtered the Trojan army." He paused. The faces filling the room, gazing into his were difficult to read.

"Perhaps it is so. But I cannot in good conscience recommend leaving such a situation to chance, nor can I taking the protection they have provided us with so long and throwing it away in an instant by choosing to leave ourselves physically and intellectually undefended. If you decide otherwise, so be it."

He sat.

About a minute later, Keynes stood to address the committee. "Those in favor of a brief recess?" There was a unanimous response. The other members, as well as the man with the suitcase at the end of the semicircle, left into a smaller, more private chamber located at the back of the room. Some of the younger council members, including the man in the green suit, appeared deeply thoughtful, their hands in their pockets as they entered the discussion chamber.

After what seemed to be an eternity, the council filed back in. Keynes stood, while the rest sat, and the man with the briefcase silently exited the room. "You have your years' funding, Agent Hill," he pronounced. "This twenty-third tri-annual review of the Unusual Incidents Unit is formally dismissed."

Funerals Are Fun

My brother Ross died a week ago in a freak accident involving a slow loris. Turns out, they're related to monkeys, and poisonous. Who knew? I never knew Ross was into slow lorises, anyway. The doctor said there was a rash of slow loris attacks recently, which is strange, because they're kinda like sloths otherwise.

Anyway, Ross died, and the whole family gathered for the funeral. Everyone was sad, you know, like you're supposed to be. Ross was never the family favorite, always a bit weird, but whatever, family is family, and he was young. His casket was open. The funeral home really did a great job at cleaning Ross up. Can't believe he's really gone. Are slow lorises even native to Boston?

So, yeah, everyone was kinda in shock, but things picked up for the eulogy, though. I remember it clearly: "Ross. He was a sorry sack, in time. Life was all the pressure of reform and the purse. Think, for a moment, about the vittles he led and powerful tacky skin he scored. Was this a man of rage? Of ricin by the aliquot? No! Ross knew the buttery encapsulation of a full life. Like, I remember when he and we and they and he all went to the shivering place and there was just too much marshmallow. Tallow fat. We all cringed and wailed, but Ross? Nosiree, he just split open the pustules and boom! Esophageal ulcers for everyone!"

Oh, that Cousin Johnny. Always such a riot. By the end of that, we all were in stitches. After a speech like that, I could barely keep a straight face as I walked up to the casket, took the knife, slashed my wrist and bled for Ross.

When I was done, I passed the knife on to Aunt Bridget, and looked back at Ross one last time. That's when I noticed something weird. His gut was beginning to expand. I stuck around to watch as this bulge in Ross's belly started busting through his tux, all purplish and pulsating.

In the middle of Uncle Earl's turn to bleed, that growth ruptured, spraying Earl and me and Fr. O'Reilly and Johnny in a real pale concoction that was like half-blood, half-pus. Did you know that the spleen is the home of up to half of all the lymphocytes in the body? I didn't. Still don't. Not sure why I said that. Anyway, Ross's spleen ruptured and sprayed us all. A couple of tentacles emerged from Ross's spleen and started grabbing at the metal hinges on the casket and the knife. Steel, iron, the tentacles were grabbing anything made of iron and started turning them into tin cans. Ross, from the casket, still dead, apparently, said, "Always recycle your iron!"

Johnny just stared at Ross. He was not expecting this. I mean, who could?

We were wondering how we were going to finish bleeding for Ross without the knife when the rest of us started developing pains in our left side. Soon, everyone's spleen was rupturing and spraying blood. Well, that solved the knife problem, even if this was really freaking us out. Everyone except Johnny, who was just standing there, desperately trying to restore order in the whole bloody mess everything had become. He just started prematurely regurgitating his blood and wood pulp into the casket, before Livvy and Amelia were able to add their blood to the coffin. Ross's spleen tentacles just started slurping up Johnny's slurry like it was a shake or something.

Johnny was distraught. There was no way to fill up the casket now. Also, everyone was bleeding out their sides and making a mess of the church. We were all pretty much running around confused. So, I guess that's why no one noticed when this bloody human in a hot London suit and spats rose out of Ross's abdominal cavity.

Stepping out of the corpse, the party crasher wiped the blood from his face and dude. Duuuuuude. It was that guy from all the shows. You know, that guy. We just had a TV star crash Ross's funeral. He called out, "Smile and laugh!" He reached over to the tabernacle and opened it up to reveal a hidden camera! Then, he went over to Aunt Maureen, stuck a finger up her nose and pulled out another camera! Oh my god, we were on a prank show all this time! That's what was going on! We all started laughing. This was way over the top, and you know Ross would have wanted it this way.

Well, Cousin Johnny wasn't laughing. He was just perplexed. He always did have a weird sense of humor, Johnny. He just emitted a loud chittering and left the stage/church.

The announcer closed with, "Spleens! Storing blood, recycling nutrients, producing lymphocytes, and making laughs! They were associated with melancholy in the past, but they provide nothing but mirth and merriment now. Is there anything that this oft-neglected organ can't do for us? We hope you enjoyed a good deep belly laugh and had a chance to vent your spleen! Vent your laugh! Come laugh with us. And remember, LAUGH IS FUN!"

I had forgotten how fun funerals are. We should have them more often.

Funfiction

O5-7 arrived to the breached containment unit at the lowest underground level of Site-19. Director Bright waited for her along with a Containment Specialist.

“It’s good to see you again, Jack,” said the overseer. “Sorry for the wait, I had to come here all the way from the HQ as per protocols. Let’s see what we are dealing with here.”

The man standing next to Bright handed over a dossier to her. “Thank you, Dr. Blackbox,” she said after looking at his ID badge. “If I understand correctly you were the Containment Specialist assigned to this item.”

“Yes, Madam. The containment was breached yesterday. We evacuated all personnel not involved in the recovery operation.”

“I see. Let us start the investigation with the containment unit.”

They entered the grandiose cubical room. It was discreetly embraced by a 3 inch thick layer of pure titanium. The overseer looked into the dossier, and started skimming its contents.

“Scp-7448: Blood Ogre … Keter … virgins to be sacrificed … unparalleled aptitude for martial arts … Scantron Anchors … may freely roam the facility,” she said then stopped for a moment. “I think I got all the necessary information now.”

How could that happen in the Foundation’s largest Site? she wondered, unconsciously looking at the upper right corner of the nearest wall as if it could show anything about the validity of her concerns. An empty wall, polished and made from the king of the metals, stared back at her.

“We have to recover it as quickly as possible. Are you in, Jack?”

“Oook,” replied Dr. Bright who was occupying a primate body.

“You might want to arm yourself if you are up against that otherworldly demon,” said a man stepping into the room. He was wearing an orange overall with a 6-digit number on it. “Here, take this gun. They gave me two anyway.”

“I don’t think firearms would be useful against it, but thank you nonetheless,” said the overseer showing her smuggest grin to Blackbox. Then she pulled the trigger.

Dr. Bright and O5-7 arrived to the cafeteria following the path of destruction. The monstrous ogre stood at the center of the hall, laughing with arms crossed. The floor was covered in broken tables and chairs, kitchenware and the scattered ashes of MTF Kappa-13 (“Red Shirts”). A screen at the cafeteria’s wall was miraculously left unharmed.

Safety First

23 hours, 57 minutes and 45 seconds
have passed since the last containment breach.
Keep Site-19 secure together!

O5-7 noticed a familiar figure lying under some debris. “Alto, swallow this, quick!” she said as she ran to him and handed over a pill from a plastic can labeled ‘500’. The next moment the shirtless Clef was standing in front of the ogre with replenished energy in his muscles and renewed determination in his eyes. O5-7 fainted as she couldn’t handle the raw manliness radiated by him.

“Oh, you are up again, just when I thought we were finished. Show me what you got then, human!”

“That’s what your mother said too.”

“How dare you mock me, you lowly scum!” shouted SCP-7448. “I shall destroy you with my ultimate technique.”

“What kind of ultimate technique could that be?” asked Clef. “You

don’t look like you have one.”

“Foolish mortal! This attack is the most powerful of all. You know the guy who can summon any blade he wants? Well, I can wield him!” he said. Able appeared out of thin air, wearing his sharpest suit. The ogre grabbed him by the legs and swung towards Clef.

“You think I wasn’t prepared for that?” said Clef and pulled out a Middle Eastern man with metal limbs from … well, no one was really sure from where. He used him as a human shield to reflect the strike back at the attacker. As the fierce battle reached its climax, the banana Dr. Bright was eating started to turn brown.

SCP-7448 pulled out Able’s head from his nasal cavity, preparing for another strike. Clef glanced to his right as the screen changed colors.

Safety First

24 hours, 0 minutes and 2 seconds
have passed since the last containment breach.
Keep Site-19 secure together!

“Fourth!” he shouted at the top of his lungs. SCP-7448 was deleted at -50 and four staff votes.

Tales G

Game Day 1: Die Hardest

Debriefing: Dr. Michael Edison
Excerpt from Interview conducted by O5- , regarding Dr. Edison's involvement in Incident 234-900-Tempest Night-1.

O5- : Good evening, Dr. Edison.

Dr. Edison: Good evening, sir.

O5- : Please, take a seat. I have a few questions to ask you.

Dr. Edison: …I'm not in trouble, am I?

O5- : No, of course not. This is simply standard procedure.

Dr. Edison: Oh. Okay then. That's fine, I guess.

O5- : Glad to hear it. Now, tell me, exactly where were you when the incident began?

Dr. Edison: Well let's see… I believe I was in the middle of feeding **SCP-391** when I heard the blast. Fearing for my safety, I fled to the nearest security station only to find that the security personnel inside had died prior to my arrival.

O5- : Do you have any idea how they died?

Dr. Edison: No idea, sir. Everyone had a big gash in the back of the head, but it looked like they didn't have their weapons drawn or anything so I guess they didn't fight back.

O5- : Interesting. So what did you do?

Dr. Edison: Well, I took one good look at the security monitors and quickly realized how [EXPLETIVE REDACTED] we all… um, I mean, that we were in the middle of a wide-scale Class- containment breach. I tried to activate the self-destruct sequence manually, but the detonation system was apparently too damaged to respond. So I sent a message over the intercom ordering all essential personnel to evacuate, and ordering all remaining security personnel to enter high alert.

O5- : And then what?

Dr. Edison: Well, then I noticed that **SCP-353** (who had breached containment), was being escorted by a number of masked men towards section [REDACTED], where we were keeping all the biohazardous materials from Site 19. So I… um…

O5- : Well? What did you do?

Dr. Edison: I… went after them. Die Hard style.

O5- : …I beg your pardon?

Dr. Edison: I mean I went after them. Alone. I ran around the site grabbing everything that looked even remotely useful, picked off the masked men one by one using my superior knowledge of Site-17, and squared off with SCP-353 in a climactic showdown inside of the decontamination chamber.

O5- : …

Dr. Edison: …

O5- : …Is there any chance you "forgot" to take your medicine that day?

Dr. Edison: …maybe?

Dr. Edison stared at his watch anxiously. He knew there wasn't

much time, and the rhythmic clacking of 914 only made him even more aware of it.

And then the clicking stopped. Edison's heart skipped at beat as the tiny bell rang, letting him know that it was time to check on his little "experiment". Nervously, he slid the door open to take a look at the results.

At first, he didn't know what to think. At first glance, it appeared to be an orange helmet, similar in form to the bulletproof SWAT helmet he was currently wearing. It even had the kind same "Property Of…" sticker that his own helmet was labeled with. But upon further inspection, he noticed that the accompanying balaclava appeared to be made of rubber, and that there was some form of breathing apparatus in the spot where one's mouth would be should be.

The doctor scratched his head. "Well, it's getting there, certainly."

Suddenly, the radio Edison was carrying on his belt sprung to life. *"Hey! You!"* it said, *"You there! By 914!"*

With a sigh, Edison handed the orange helmet to his assistant, who was similarly decked out in SWAT armor. "Please run this through 914 with helmet 3 on 'very fine', will you? I need to take this call."

Wordlessly, the assistant accepted the helmet and stiffly carried it to 914's input chamber.

Edison, meanwhile, took the opportunity to answer the radio. "Hello…?"

"What the hell do you think you're doing!?" screamed the man on the other end. *"We're in the middle of a containment breach and you're playing dress up! Does that seem like a good idea to you?!"*

"Hey, hey, don't worry about me," replied Edison. "Look, everything's under contro- okay, everything isn't under control, but you have better things to do than worry about some lone-wolf renegade action movie star type… thing. You should get out of here before the shit hits the fan, because if I can't stop Vector, we ALL die."

"Well I'd love to… but I'm trapped in a security station. The ceiling

behind me collapsed, so the door's jammed behind a huge pile of… er…"

"…What? What is it?"

"appleseeds."

"What?"

"a huge pile of appleseeds."

"…I'm sorry, I didn't quite hear that. Did you just say you were stuck behind a pile of apple-"

"YES, APPLESEEDS!" the man screamed. *"THE DOOR IS STUCK BEHIND A FUCKING PILE OF FUCKING APPLESEEDS! WHY THE HELL ARE THERE SO MANY APPLESEEDS I CANT TAKE ALL THESE APPLESEEDS AND ALL THE APPLESEEDS DAY AND NIGHT AND NIGHT AND DAY AND I CAN'T STAND IT ANYMORE WHY WON'T THEY JUST APPLESEEDS APPLESEEDS APPLESEEDS!!!!!"*

Edison paused for a moment to let the man cool off. He could hear a faint sobbing through the radio. "…nice to see you too, Dr. King."

Debriefing: Dr. King

Excerpt from Interview conducted by O5- , regarding Dr. King's involvement in Incident 234-900-Tempest Night-1.
O5- : Now, Dr. King. From what I've heard, you played an instrumental role in directing the flow of information during the incident. Can you please describe exactly what you were trying to accomplish?

Dr. King: Well, I was mostly just trying to find something to keep my mind off the… the… the you-know-whats that were keeping me cooped up in there. I mean, it's not like there was much else I could do other than watch the monitors and call people with the radio. I've really got to hand it to the guys who designed the security system, that security system was state of the art! I don't think

there was a single blind spot in the entire base. I mean-

O5- : …Yes, yes, the art of security is a fascinating one, but I'd much rather hear about your involvement with Dr. Edison's recent… "adventure".

Dr. King: Oh, that… *[NOTE: Dr. King appears to be visibly distressed at this point]* Well… I found Edison with **SCP-912**, making some kind of "Super-Armor" or something using **SCP-914**. He explained that **SCP-353** was making her way section [REDACTED], and that unless he stopped her things would get a million times worse.

O5- : …I see… and how did he plan on doing this?

Dr. King: Well… he never explained the whole plan, but he assured me it was extremely clever, intricate, and well-thought-out.

"I'm going to do something extremely clever, intricate, and well-thought-out that's going to stop Vector and save the world!" Dr. Edison said as he continued to sprint down the hallway. "I'll get back to you when I know exactly what it is."

"Well I hate to burst your bubble, kid," said Dr. King, *"but Vector is five stories down, and the insurgents are practically there. You'd have to move at the speed of sound to make it down the stairs in time."*

Edison chuckled. "Who said anything about stairs?" He screeched to a halt in front of the doorway he'd been looking for, stepped inside, and found himself in an enormous white room, whose only feature was a small, blue pinwheel, sitting upon a pedestal.

"Oh no…" said Dr. King. *"You have GOT to be kidding me…"*

"Yep!" said Edison. "I'm going to use 161 to drill a hole down to section [REDACTED], one floor at a time, and assault them from the

front, holding them off until 912 catches up and surprises them from the back." Edison reached into his pockets, and pulled out a small squirt bottle, which he used to make a series of red security lasers visible. "But first, I need to perform some death-defying acrobatics in order to get past this array of invisible crisscrossing lasers, or else I will be fried to a crisp!"

"Uh, Ed? You do realize I can just-"

Slowly, Edison backed up to the doorway, and began to swing his arms and count. "One… two… THREE!"

And with that, the doctor broke into a mad dash, and completely failed to launch himself into a series of amazing front flips that allowed Edison to weave through the beams like a graceful butterfly. The doctor turned red with embarrassment as he fell flat on his face a good ten feet from the nearest laser.

"Yeah… I'm just going to turn these things off before you kill yourself. Why do we even have a room like this?"

"No idea. It was probably one of Bright's projects." Edison said as he pulled himself upright. "But regardless, now 161 is about to within my grasp, there is nothing left to stop me from saving the Foundation!"

And then a nine-tailed fox tried to bite Dr. Edison's testicles off.

Excerpt from security footage of SCP-161's temporary containment cell (formerly the containment cell of SCP-), detailing an encounter between Dr. Edison and SCP-953 (in vulpine form), accompanied by Dr. King's comments via radio from Security Station .

SCP-953 (in vulpine form) tackles Dr. Edison from behind, knocking him over. 953 then attempts to remove Dr. Edison's armor so it can [DATA EXPUNGED].

Dr. Edison: OH GOD WHERE THE HELL DID SHE COME FROM WHY DIDN'T YOU TELL ME?!

SCP-953: [EXPLETIVE]! How dare you [REDACTED]!

Dr. King: Why does she hate you so much?!

Dr. Edison: HOW SHOULD I KNOW [EXPLETIVE] DO SOMETHING MAN!

Dr. King: I could turn the lasers back on, but-

Dr. Edison: I DON'T CARE JUST- OH GOD, MY [REDACTED]! SHE'S GOT MY [REDACTED]!

"You okay?" said Dr. King, his voice slightly distorted by radio static.

"If you mean, 'am I still alive', then just barely." Dr. Edison groaned. "Man, I can't believe that bitch is still worked up about that…"

"About what?" said Dr. King.

"Well, you know that little disclaimer about not calling 953 a 'Kitsune'?"

"Yeah?"

"Let's just say I watch too much anime and leave it at that." Dr. Edison attempted to produce a faint chuckle from his lame joke, followed by a deep, hacking cough. "She's still there isn't she?"

"Yep. Just outside the doorway."

"Probably waiting for me to start running… dammit…" The doctor slowly began to push himself off the floor, only to have the tip of his nose burnt off by one of the containment beams. "Well, at least I can still move…"

"Just hang tight, Ed. I'll try and find someone to pick you up."

"No way, doc." Edison wheezed. "We're on the clock here, remember?"

"Yeah, but…"

“JUST LISTEN TO ME, DAMMIT!” the doctor shouted. “Everything’s going to hell anyway, so what do you care if I die attempting some sort of ridiculous ‘Action Movie Hero’ plan? This sort of disaster happens only once in a lifetime, and I’ll be damned if I spend it sitting in a corner holding my eyes closed.”

“Are you trying to tell me something?”

“Am I trying to tell you something? AM I TRYING TO TELL YOU SOMETHING!? Yeah, I’m trying to tell you something all right!" Dr. Edison took a deep breath. "It’s Game Day, King. And it’s not just any game, King, it’s the World Series and we’re playing for the Stanley Cup. The other team’s up by a field goal, It’s the bottom of the ninth, bases loaded, 4th down, our star player is in the penalty box, and the big man's about 2 WREAK SOME HAVOC on the court!”

Dr. King was speechless.

“So do you want that gold medal, or are you going to take a penalty kick with the rest of those losers?!”

“…I don’t even know where to begin with that.” said Dr. King.

“That’s what I like to hear!” said Dr. Edison. “Now, on the count of three, I want you to turn off the containment beams so I can grab 161. Ready?”

“Now wait a second, I never said I would-”

“1… 2… 3!”

In a flash, Dr. Edison jolted upright, and sprinting towards the pinwheel, ignoring the stinging from his numerous wounds. Moments later, 953 burst though the door, and began to chase after him.

“Get out of there, Ed!” said Dr. King.

“No! I got a head start! I can make it, I can make it, I can make-”

Security Log- -2

Excerpt from section [REDACTED] security footage.

An unidentified body (presumably belonging to Dr. Edison) falls though the ceiling and lands in the men's room of section [REDACTED]. An audible 'snap' is heard, implying that Dr. Edison has broken most, if not all of his bones.

Game Day Part 1: Mastication, Deglutition, Emesis

"It's beautiful," Dr. Lesley Mause announced, zooming in on the wriggling cells taking up her monitor's screen.

Dr. Drake looked over her shoulder, still wearing the same bored expression he'd had for the same half hour. "It's vomit."

Across the room, two heads swiveled in unison, hawklike, to stare at Dr. Drake. Agent Rose and Agent Walker, security. They did that every time Dr. Drake opened his mouth, each time tingling with almost animalistic animosity. The two ex-members of the Children of the Sun were objectively creepy as shit, she reflected. The way they did so many things in synchronization. You'd think they were twins, but they didn't even look alike, even if their mannerisms tended to be identical Rose (a man) was pale and androgynous, and Walker (a woman) was attractive in a classical fashion and had skin dark as pitch. She'd been working with them almost two years now, and she felt the same affection for them that she might feel for a pair of cats. A pair of extremely murderous cats, anyway.

Plus, they hated Drake almost as much as she did.

"Yes," she agreed, "it's vomit. But that doesn't preclude beauty."

She zoomed out again. Drake pointed at a structure in the gray-green mess. "Is that a bone?"

"Indeed," Mause said. "*Alces alces.* And they're not the only thing our green friend has been eating. I've found at least three different species of squirrel. And what's probably a squirrel. But most of the bones are *Alces alces*."

Drake leaned back in his chair, propped his legs up on the desk in front of him. "What's an *Alces alces*?"

She rolled her eyes in advance. "One of the cervids, a capreoline.

Known in North America, of course, as… the moose."

Drake sniggered. "Moose, eh?" Then sniggered again. "Moose."

Mause's eyes flicked to Rose and Walker. They wore identical expressions of barely repressed fury. Mause, for her part, only felt mild annoyance. Most people knew better than to make that joke in front of Rose and Walker, but Mause heard the joke about every other day. She'd long gotten over cursing Fate for the timing of her transfer to the Special Reconnaissance-and-Research Task Force M-Omega-773 - or, as it was now so wittily referred to by other members of the Foundation, "the Deadly Moose team".

She'd been dumped from Research Team MO3-Gloria with everyone else when the O5s decided they didn't want anyone else poking at 003 and landed her directly in M-Omega-773 just in time for the disaster in which she - and every other member of the team - had stumbled through the corridors of Site 19 crazily warning everyone they came in to "beware the deadly moose". She herself had set up shop in the cafeteria with a shotgun for two hours before security tranquilized her and strapped her to a bed until the effects passed.

Memetics. She hated memetics.

"Yes," she said. "Alaskan moose, actually. *A. a. gigas*. Which fits with where we picked it up. Naturally."

"No Bigfoot bones in there?"

"No." She glared at her monitor. "We're not so sure that this thing has any connection to 1000 after all, I'm sorry to say."

Drake looked at the video monitor. "But just look at it. It looks like a big green ape."

"SCP-1000 instances are brown, black, red, and white in color," Mause said. "They don't come in green."

"Still," Drake said. "My gut tells me there's some connection. Keep looking."

Mause stifled her sigh. Technically, Drake did outrank her. Being on the Deadly Moose team meant you got ridiculously high clearance to a few fairly important SCPs, but outside of those small spheres you were left at basic level 1 access. And the respect that went with that. It didn't help that most of the team's assignments sounded inherently mockable. 'The Bloodstone.' (Also known as the bad-trip ruby, even though it wasn't actually a ruby.) The glorified mechanical people-eating fishing worms. Organic motherboard. ('So can 003 run Crysis?' Jesus, you'd think these people never grew out of the 90's.) Bigfoot, for chrissake. And, of course, the goddamn moose… *thing*.

And now, the weird thing pacing about in the temporary containment cell on the monitor, provisionally classified as Anomalous Humanoid TXCD-R.

The thing whose vomit she was analyzing for the last half hour. TXCD-R was picked up in Alaska only days ago, and had slaughtered half the task force sent to capture it before suddenly going docile and allowing the rattled survivors to bind it in a net and transport it to Site 17's temporary containment auxiliary facility.

It really was beautiful vomit, full of living things she'd never seen, in a rainbow array of colors. Even TXCD-R was beautiful in its own way. She watched it pace, a hulking seven-foot-tall thing shaped vaguely like an ape, covered in what might be a living growth of moss, wide teeth like spades sticking out of its mouth like reversed elephant tusks. The "moss" was growing so fast you could actually see it move if you had the patience. Tiny glittering eyes peered out from under the moss curtains - not just from its "head", either. Tiny auxiliary limbs moved and twitched, peeking out now and then to groom the ever-growing moss.

As she watched, TXCD-R bent double and vomited for the ninth time that day.

"Again?" Mause scratched her head. "It's vomited up almost the entire bodies of everything it's eaten so far. And judging by the bones I see, that would be the last of its meals for the past week." She looked at the screen again. "It's not digesting anything. None of the things in here have been broken down like you'd expect if they'd been in stomach acid for hours. They have signs of chewing, and

not much else. Is it sick or something?"

"I'm telling you," Drake said. "It's got Bigfoot's fingerprints all over it."

"Tomorrow," Mause said. She pushed back her chair. "I'll look more tomorrow."

Excerpt from Video Log, Observation Camera 6320945 (Temporary Containment Chamber for Anomalous Humanoid TXCD-R):

> **0700:** TXCD-R continues to pace back and forth across chamber.
>
> **0756:** TXCD-R abruptly ceases pacing and stands perfectly still until **0811**.
>
> **0811:** Power fluctuation related to explosive event at main Site-17. TXCD-R begins to repeatedly charge the walls of its containment chamber. Local alarms set off.
>
> **0813:** Agent C. Rose and Agent I. Walker open containment chamber left and right ports and shoot TXCD-R repeatedly with tranquilizer darts. TXCD-R does not react to shots except to charge containment chamber ports.
>
> **0815:** Agents Rose and Walker cease attempting to shoot TXCD-R. TXCD-R continues to charge walls of its containment chamber.
>
> **0827:** External power lost. Switching to emergency power. TXCD-R continues to charge walls of its containment chamber.

Mause stumbled into the main observation chamber, eyes bleary. Rose and Walker were waiting for her.

"Wazz going on?" she managed.

"Containment breach at Site 17. Unknown insurgent forces. Tempest Night scenario. Assistant Adams currently coordinating personnel," Rose said.

"No breaches on this Auxuliary Site. Yet," Walker added. "TXCD-R is going to breach the walls of its containment chamber in approximately ten minutes."

"Where's Dr. Drake?"

"Gone to help with the Tempest Night scenario," Rose said.

"Insurgents," Mause said. "Tempest Night? How long?"

"Three hours and eleven minutes," Rose said.

"Three *hours*? Why didn't you wake me?"

"Sufficient sleep is required for optimal bodily function," Rose said.

"Besides," Walker said. "There's nothing any of us can do. We are not equipped to stop TXCD-R from breaching containment. We are under orders to remain here as long as TXCD-R does. On event of TXCD-R's escape, we will attempt to stop it. When we fail, we will track it."

"So you see," Rose said, "there is nothing to be concerned about, for the next nine minutes, until TXCD-R breaches containment. And sleep is very important."

Mause shook her head and watched Anomalous Humanoid TXCD-R hurl itself at the wall of its containment chamber. And again. And then again.

"For now, though," Rose added, "you should put on body armor. In case it's hungry."

Excerpt from Video Log, Observation Camera 6320945 (Temporary Containment Chamber for Anomalous Humanoid TXCD-R) and Observation Camera 6327641 (Temporary Containment Facility 17-K, Exterior):

1132: TXCD-R breaches containment chamber.

1134: TXCD-R exits Temporary Containment Facility 17-K and heads in the direction of Site-17.

1135: TXCD-R confronted by Agent Charles Rose and Agent Iola Walker, armed with S2-05 shotguns. Agents fire on TXCD-R repeatedly without effect. TXCD-R temporarily incapacitates Agent Rose and Agent Walker via physical impact.

1136: TXCD-R continues heading towards Site-17.

1140: Dr. Lesley Mause exits Temporary Containment Facility 17-K, rouses agents Rose and Walker. Mause, Rose, and Walker enter nearby vehicle and drive after TXCD-R.

They'd followed TXCD-R nearly all the way to Site-17. Smoke rose from several of the central buildings. TXCD-R was stopped in the middle of the road, just in front of one of the Site-17 buildings, the side completely blown out by some explosion. Screams drifted out from inside.

Walker stopped the car a respectful distance from the creature. TXCD-R kneeled in the road, and seemed to be pantomiming something.

"What's it doing?" Mause asked.

"It's eating," Rose said.

Mause stared at the pale green creature. It *did* seem to be eating something, except… its jaws were closing on nothing, its hands holding something up to its mouth that wasn't there.

"*What* is it eating?" she asked.

"An instance of SCP-870," Rose said.

"The monster that only schizophrenics can see?"

"The same."

"How can *you* tell?"

Rose shrugged.

TXCD-R jerked its head up. Blinking eyes became visible everywhere underneath the curtains of moss that covered its body.

Then it bounded off. Through the blasted wall, leaping over rubble, and into the Site-17 building.

"Great," Mause said. "Just great. Where's it going now?"

"Isn't it obvious?" Rose said. "It's hungry."

Audio/Visual transcript of `SCP-472` containment chamber

> **1149:** Anomalous Humanoid TXCD-R breaches containment chamber. TXCD-R does not appear to experience any effects from SCP-472. TXCD-R briefly examines SCP-472 and removes it from its pedestal.
>
> **1150:** TXCD-R appears to claw the air while holding SCP-472. At the end of its claws, red flesh appears, spurting blood, apparently extruding from midair. TXCD-R bites down on the piece of flesh and pulls. More flesh appears, with an accompanying tearing sound, splattering blood on the walls of the containment chamber.

Mause was standing in the brand new, still smoking entrance of Site-17 when she heard the scream. A long, low, inhuman shriek that rose and fell for what seemed like an eternity.

"Jesus," she said. "What was that?"

She could hear her heart beating - boom-boom, boom-boom - much too loudly, inside her head -

Mause looked at Rose and Walker for confirmation. She could tell by the looks on their faces that they were thinking the same thing.

"SCP-472 is *screaming*," she said.

Audio/Visual transcript of SCP-472 containment chamber

> **1151:** TXCD-R pulls and rips with its claws and teeth until a two meter length of flesh comes into appearance, detaches from its [still invisible] source, and drops to the ground. The flesh appears to be a collection of organs, including three still-beating hearts.
>
> **1152:** TXCD-R exits containment chamber, dragging the length of flesh behind it, still holding SCP-472. It tears off a chunk from the length of flesh and consumes it as it exits the chamber.

Transcript of Video Surveillance Recording
Location: Checkpoint Camera, Service Entrance H-01

> **1158:** TXCD-R passes camera, still carrying SCP-472. Length of flesh no longer visible. It is confronted by the service entrance by Dr. Carl Drake. Dr. Drake shouts a challenge to TXCD-R, telling it that it "shall not pass". Dr. Drake elaborates that he is in possession of an SCP item. He produces a small gold circlet later identified as Anomalous Item 56428609 [previously categorized by Dr. Drake, not known to have any special effect beyond unusual chemical makeup]. Dr. Drake places the circlet on his head while shouting "Crown of Thorns, activate!" Anomalous Item 56428609 emits a nimbus of glowing light.
>
> **1159:** TXCD-R removes the top of Dr. Drake's head via aggressive mastication. TXCD-R consumes both the top of Dr. Drake's head and Anomalous Item 56428609. TXCD-R exits through the open service entrance.

1200: No further activity.

"It's eating SCPs," Rose said, as a group of other agents carried away Dr. Drake's body. "That's why it killed an instance of SCP-870. And took SCP-472. It's a food source."

"Quite a theory," Mause said. "Maybe that's why it vomited everything it ate… Maybe it wasn't built to be eating … uh, *natural* things, for lack of a better word. Of course, why would it be able to keep down SCP items? It's not like 472 and 870 have anything in common. Or that anomalous item. Natural things have much more in common than anomalous things. How could something evolve to eat anomalous items?"

"Maybe it didn't evolve," Walker said. "Maybe it was created."

Mause shrugged. "I guess we won't know until we get it back."

"Then let's get started," Rose said.

Game Day Part 1: Attack of the Replicas

Having suffered from sleep apnea for most of his adult life, Dr. Johannes Sorts was quite accustomed to waking up suddenly in the middle of the night (or day) because he had stopped breathing in his sleep.

There was a time that this troubled him greatly, but the constant disruptions kept him from sleeping for too long, or worse, *dreaming*, so he had come to accept them with a bit of gratitude. This was a source of constant concern for the site 17 physician assigned to look after him. Dr. Charlene Robertson had been known to break into his cluttered office/bedroom and coerce him into wearing a CPAP mask so that he didn't suffocate in his sleep.

So when Dr. Sorts woke suddenly to find himself sprawled out in his office chair, he was not immediately concerned. When he heard Dr. Robertson's voice insisting that he put his mask on, he was not immediately concerned.

But when a lifeless, sandy hand was clamped over his face to suffocate him, he began to remember certain things. Leaving his musty office sanctuary at Site 19 on short notice to supervise the handling of several SCP artifacts. Setting up in his slightly less musty office sanctuary at Site 17. Turning down invitations to some social gathering in the break room. Sitting down to write a memo about **SCP-945**'s unacceptable temporary containment conditions but opening up a game of Atom Zombie Smasher on the side and…

Dr. Sorts pushed the dusty clay hand away from his face and gasped, "Doctor Robertson! I'm not supposed to be asleep right now!"

"Very well, Johannes. I will be back tonight to be sure you are wearing your mask. Please get back to work," the figure leaning over Johannes did not make any motion to leave, it just hung over him and stared blankly with painted, kohl-rimmed eyes.

"I have work to do right now, and so do you," Dr. Sorts scrambled to straighten his glasses and get out of his seat, nervously stammering to the clay figurine that was wearing Dr. Robertson's white, bloodstained smock, "You're supposed to be in the medical ward handling trauma cases, remember? There's a lot of new SCPs on site right now so we need all medical hands on call in case of an emergency."

Dr. Sorts was going to miss Charlene fussing over him, if one of SCP-945's shawabti replicas was impersonating her in his office now it meant that she was dead. It also meant that if he didn't destroy that replica or keep it under constant supervision it was going to start killing more people, starting with him.

The figurine turned towards the door "Yes, yes I should be there. There are a lot of bad cases there. But… the medical ward has been damaged beyond repair by an explosion. That is why I came to check on you. You skipped your last checkup, you know. Please take your seat and we'll begin." The shawabti produced a tattered black bag and pulled a scalpel from it.

"Wait! Dr. Robertson, you've been exposed to a class A memetic agent. Regulation says that you need to do as I say in order to prevent a virulent memetic outbreak. Listen to me very carefully. We have to pretend we are in… uh… an action movie."

> **Debriefing:** Dr. Johannes Sorts
> *Excerpt from Interview conducted by O5- , regarding Dr. Sort's involvement in Incident 234-900-Tempest Night-1.*
>
> **O5- :** Was it really necessary to convince the replica of Dr. Robertson that she was your love interest in an action movie?
>
> **Dr. Sorts:** Believe me I wish I had thought of something else off the top of my head. I've been exposed to enough of SCP-945 prior to this clusterfuck, I really didn't want to, you know, improvise a love scene with my colleague's shawabti. I've prepared a full report on that experience by the way. Psych's going to have a field day with it I'm sure.

O5- : What happened next?

Dr. Sorts: Well, last time we had a really virulent SCP-945 outbreak the replicas overwhelmed an entire site. But they also kept it operational — when it became clear to me that every possible bad thing that could have happened DID happen I decided that regardless of the danger the SCP-945 replicas posed they were more valuable as an ally… er… asset, than otherwise. So I set about collecting as many replicas as I could find running around the site and convincing them to play roles in this movie. It was the only way I could claim any authority over the positions those replicas were taking.

O5- : How many replicas did you have under your command?

Dr. Sorts: Never more than about two dozen at any one time, but I think we went through about fifty replicas total.

O5- : How was the replica of Dr. Robertson lost?

Dr. Sorts had someone's red tie wrapped around his forehead, and his shirt was hanging open over his hairy stomach, "Alright men! Let's secure this hallway. I want Johnson, Figgs and Lewis on point! Tiberson, cover me. I'm going in!"

Dr. Robertson's shawabti had tied its smock in a knot across its bust, where it had stuffed two rolls of toilet paper, "Wait! Don't go, I couldn't stand to lose you again!" the clay statue squealed with the enthusiasm of a high school drama student.

"I have to go, baby, we need to secure the medical ward so that you can get back to work on the survivors," Dr. Sorts claimed. He hadn't found any yet, though. Just a batch of replicated security guards who had already armed themselves and were now following his orders and calling him …

"The hall is clear, Commander Badass!" shouted the replica of Lt. Figgs in a much more accurate representation of the late man's voice and mannerisms, "We're go for retaking the medical ward!

Let's move, people! Go Go Go Go Go!"

Dr. Sorts and his impromptu squad of clay soldiers burst into the medical ward, which was a sea of bloodstained, writhing flesh, dripping with maggots. One of the replicas pretended to vomit. Dr. Sorts held his breath on the off chance he would wake up.

The ward was filled with an expanding pile of barely human figures anxiously clutching at each other while slurping bits of scattered and burnt flesh against their faces. Dr. Sorts had no idea what kind of SCP would produce a scene like this, but the nightmare before him was content to keep to itself on the other side of the room.

Dr. Robertson's replica touched his shoulder, "This is a serious **SCP-726** outbreak. We need to…"

The replica trailed off with what could only be described as a gasp, although the clay figure never moved its lips or breathed. But crawling out of the pile of squirming bodies was another replica of Dr. Robertson, this one crafted from living flesh and blood. It slurped at the air and twitched its shoulders before disengaging from the rest of its nightmare spawn, flopping across the broken tile floor like a fish out of water towards the group of clay soldiers.

Dr. Robertson's shawabti pushed forward past the guards, grabbing the remains of a chair and rushing forward to bludgeon its rival duplicate, "No! No! My body is to be at rest! MY BODY IS TO BE AT REST!"

> **Dr. Sorts:** She was within the medical ward when I had the other replicas collapse the entrances with explosive charges. I believe her … I'm sorry. I believe the duplicate was… the duplicates were destroyed in the explosion.
>
> [inaudible]
>
> **Dr. Sorts:** I'm sorry, I need … I need another sedative.
>
> **O5- :** We'll continue this later.

Game Day Part 1: Smilers

During Incident 234-900-Tempest Night, many junior staff and personnel took part in the attempts to repel attackers by seizing control of already uncontained SCPs or, in some cases, breaching containment of SCPs with the intent of seizing control of them for defensive purposes. A notable example of a failed attempt is the efforts of Junior Researcher David Eskobar, who remains in medical care and has begun psychiatric treatment recently. Relevant information is included below.

Excerpts from Surveillance Logs, Security Cameras 00290001, 00290011, 00290993

0920: SCP-275 confirmed secure, armed guards holding position.

0922: Junior Researcher David Eskobar attempts to instigate security breach at SCP-275 containment cell. Armed guards fire warning shot down hallway. Researcher Eskobar flees.

0944: SCP- confirmed secure, guards having left position but making periodic patrols.

0945: Researcher Eskobar arrives at SCP- containment area. Eskobar attempts to instigate security breach. Armed guards walking past fire warning shots. Researcher Eskobar flees. Guards seen chasing after Eskobar momentarily, then shouting; microphone unable to pick up dialogue.

1010: SCP- confirmed secure. Guards holding position out of sight but nearby.

1011: Researcher Eskobar arrives at SCP- containment area. Eskobar attempts to instigate security

breach. Multiple armed guards rush from concealed locations and capture Eskobar. Eskobar is dragged out of sight.

1030: Researcher Eskobar successfully enters Site 17 video archive.

After-Action Debriefing, Agent /Guard B-3273

Agent : Tell me about Researcher Eskobar's behavior during the beginning of Tempest Night.

B-3273: Christ, he was the same as the rest of them. We heard junior staff running around like hamsters, screaming about “I always wanted to try SCP-this” and “we have no choice, we have to have SCP-that.” It's insulting that almost every one of them forgot that there were still a few guards in the building, still staying on post no matter what was happening. You know, actually securing a few SCPs, not letting them out and hoping everything just turned out okay.

Agent : And you say Eskobar was the same?

B-3273: No, Eskobar was the worst. He hadn't worked here more than a month at that point, and he apparently hadn't read half of the files on the Scips he was trying to break out. He was going to jump on to the table in front of **SCP-212**, figuring it would just turn him into Robocop. You should have seen the look on his face when we told him about the “no anesthetic” part, or the survival rate.

Agent : But Eskobar kept trying.

B-3273: I guess he forgot we still had radios. We were tracking his movements, and by the time he got to , we had decided enough was enough.

Agent : So you moved in to arrest him.

B-3273: As far as I'm concerned, he had enough

chances. We waited until he actually tried breaching containment for the third before we took him.

Agent : And none of the guards were feeling… especially antagonistic towards the researcher?

B-3273: Of course not, sir. We maintained professional conduct throughout the incident. Where possible.

Agent : I'm interested in how Eskobar escaped from containment and broke into Site-17's video archive.

B-3273: I'm sorry, sir. I guess he just got past us.

Agent : I'm especially concerned with how he managed to break in while still handcuffed and gagged.

B-3273: Sorry, sir. I guess he just got past us.

Agent : Were any of you aware of his coulrophobia?

B-3273: Sir?

Agent : His fear of clowns.

B-3273: Not particularly, sir. We would never—well, we would have advised him not to…contain himself in that particular room had we known that, no matter what had happened.

Agent : (sighs) Yes, that's what the others said.

Due to lack of evidence and extenuating circumstances, guards involved in the incident have been cleared of all charges.

Excerpt of Security Log, Video Transcript, Security Camera 00290933

1030: Researcher Eskobar enters Site 17 video archive. Researcher begins demonstrating intense fear and huddling against corner, still handcuffed.

1045: A television turns on. Researcher Eskobar registers acute panic.

1046: Researcher Eskobar appears to lose consciousness.

Suggested modification to `SCP-993` containment protocols, Addendum 993-1:

Given the events surrounding the death of Dr. (see **`Incident Report 993-Gamma`**) and its behavior during Incident Tempest Night, it appears that SCP-993's previous manifestation towards children and exclusion of adults was the result of a conscious choice. SCP-993 is capable of manifesting itself to adults as well as children. However, in order to interact with adults, SCP-993 appears to be able to render adults unconscious. Once unconscious, [REDACTED] (see Security Log Transcript, Camera 00290993)

Excerpt of Security Log, Video Transcript, Security Camera 00290933

1048: Researcher Eskobar appears to regain consciousness. Begins smiling.

1050: Researcher Eskobar rises to his feet, maintaining eye contact with television.

1055: Gag applied to Eskobar's mouth falls out. Hands cease to be restrained. [Note: Handcuff chain was later found to have been severed by unknown means.]

1059: Researcher Eskobar raises his arms outward to the sides, forming a T-shape. Video cuts out briefly. When image returns, Eskobar's hands are pinned to the wall with large spikes; blood is flowing freely down his arms and down the wall. Researcher Eskobar's face is smiling widely, and continues to do so for the duration of the taping (seventy-two hours).

After-Action Summary, / /11:

After the conclusion of Incident Tempest Night, during cleanup operations, Researcher Eskobar was found in Site 17's video archive, badly dehydrated, suffering serious blood loss, and nearing a comatose state, still smiling. Researcher Eskobar was taken to a Foundation medical facility and assigned to psychiatric therapy. The television across from Researcher Eskobar remained on, broadcasting test pattern SMPTE RP 219-2002 (commonly known as “color bars”). Several DVDs were found on top of the television; when arranged in a rainbow shape, markings on the DVDs spelled out “SEASON II!” These discs were revealed to contain videos in the animated style of SCP-993, depicting the deaths of various Foundation researchers during Tempest Night. Some of these deaths were not actually witnessed by any surviving researchers, casting doubt on whether the particular brutality shown to accompany many of these deaths actually happened.

SCP-993's primary role in the videos is narrative in nature, providing commentary for the deaths and making comedic comments about both the means by which individuals died and the appearance of the remains of dead personnel. However, three researchers who were never located and considered MIA, along with two D-class personnel who were believed to have escaped, are shown on the videos. Each researcher is individually shown being knocked unconscious by an unseen attacker and dragged into empty containment rooms. Though the experiences of all three are different, all are assaulted in various ways using different weapons, which appear to be held by the camera's operator. One is shown dying from blood loss during a surgical operation to connect the victim's colon to his esophagus, another dies of cerebral failure during an unanesthetized hemispherectomy, and the final researcher dies of shock after being skinned alive with an industrial-grade belt sander. The two D-class personnel are shown being

sewn to one another at several points and led into an area where SCP- was roaming after breaching containment, leading to dismemberment. All five victims continue smiling broadly throughout their experiences. None of these events can be corroborated or disproved by available evidence.

Game Day Part 3: Synchronous

Murphy stumbled through the darkened corridor, trying and somewhat succeeding at avoiding the debris that was strewn across the floor. Behind him, indistinct voices still called out, searching for more of his colleagues. Reaching the end of the hall, he began letting himself down the stairs, occasionally glancing over his shoulder to make sure he wasn't being followed.

Goddamnit. They weren't supposed to be here. Site-77 was supposed to be one of the safe ones, the Insurgency was supposed to be more active in America. God damn it. But don't think about that, think about getting out, to the third floor. They have the evac there, and they're holding out. You're gonna make it Murphy, just calm down…

As he reached the second floor landing, a curious thing happened. The PA system crackled on, and a voice began speaking. This was curious for two reasons. One, the power had long ago been extinguished, with hope for emergency power cut down shortly thereafter. Secondly, the voice on the PA was not a voice Murphy recognized from the site.

Hello, Foundation personnel. Do not be alarmed. Will make you all safe soon, so in the meantime please enjoy some music.

A lovely rendition of Led Zeppelin began to play.

The was standing by the ruined stairwell, confused. Looked up to voice, and heard the singing begin. Say hello, make comfortable in new role. Do you remember us?

Murphy bolted. There was something loose here, some skip. Shit. He'd been lucky so far, not running into anything dangerous or scary, but now that luck seemed to have run out. It was still behind him somewhere, probably chasing him. Shit, shit, just keep running…

It was at this moment that Murphy ran directly into a band member, smacking into it as he rounded the corner. Falling to the floor, he scrambled to the opposite wall and stared at it. The band member looked to be a woman, wearing blue and orange tassels with a white uniform. Over her shoulders was a drum. She began hitting it.

Bum bum bum bum bumbumbum

Murphy took off, once again fleeing through the second floor corridors. Each hallway he passed, he saw more members of the band. All playing instruments. The snare drum, the saxophone, the clarinet… he could hear the music. The children were singing.

He could remember now.

But it was wrong.

This wasn't what he was supposed to remember. This wasn't a note, it wasn't anything, he had to get out of here. Murphy struggled to move his foot, but it felt lashed to the floor. He wasn't going anywhere.

We see refuses, to see the music. Remembers, but doesn't believe in what can be done. The children, sweet like a sparrows call, do not bring closer but drives off, away from chorus.

Murphy clenched his eyes shut. "What the fuck do you want from me?"

We wish to bring the music?

"No! I don't want your fuckin' music, let me go!"

Would refuse composition?

"What? Yes, I refuse!"

The composition will be less beautiful without…

"I don't care! Please, let me go!"

Rest.

The force that had been holding Murphy back was suddenly let go, and he crashed forward, tumbling between debris and clutter. It had let him go. Why it had, or what it was going to do next, were secondary matters, because Murphy was free and he was leaving *right now.*

Insurgents After Action Report

During the cleanup of the second floor, we found a bunch of the staff members gathered in a test chamber, playing music like a marching band, obviously due to a Vertigo breaching. We got some guys in earmuffs to secure 'em. They were also singing something, sounded like some 70's music. I don't remember what it was, but I'll tell you when we do.

Also, Shane was telling me we picked up one guy trying to go to the "evac point". We snatched and bagged him, shipped him to the area. Might be a good addition to the testing force, and if he protests y'all can just test stuff on him.

~Wehrner

Game Manual

Foundation

Secure, Contain, Protect

A Wondertainment Co. game

Contents of the SCP Foundation Special Edition Box®

In the box you can find a single disc, compatible with all modern computers and operating systems. A handbook containing useful information about the game's world (such as locations, task forces, groups of interest and non-playable personnel) is also included. Finally, as a participant of Project Pioneer, your Special Edition Box will contain a letter written by His Majesty the Administrator.

Introduction to the Foundation Game

The game takes place in the Pre-Exodus Era on Old Earth. It was an age where rejuvenation treatments, quark reactors and interstellar travel were only dreamed of. To make things even worse, the fantasy world of the game is full of anomalous objects and phenomena. They vary greatly in appearance from a hostile sculpture that moves when left unobserved to self-replicating cakes and portals to alternate realities. With thousands of such anomalies around, the human race is on the brink of extinction. Their survival is in the hands of the Foundation, a secret scientific and military organization dealing with these objects.

As you might have guessed by now, your job will be to lead the Foundation. Luckily, you won't have to handle this overwhelming task alone; the game supports up to 13 co-operative players. You

can play as the overseers, receiving reports from your subordinates and issuing orders. The game is supported by our company's massive server park (courtesy of our generous sponsor, Miss Vicky Dotte), capable of simulating a world complete with non-playable characters, Foundation sites and anomalies in containment or roaming freely.

Your goal is to survive 200 in-game years by keeping these objects from ending the world as we know it. It sounds challenging enough in itself, but you will also have to face rival agencies attempting to create, destroy, use or sell anomalous objects. (The game even includes an anomalous version of our company.) To achieve a perfect rating, you have to do all this without the public ever learning about the anomalies. To make this a little easier, amnestics are available in the game, even though they were actually invented much later.

We hope that you will find this game exciting, educational and most importantly, fun.

A word from the Administrator

Congratulations! Receiving this game means that you are one of the best young minds of our planet, elected to participate in Project Pioneer. Take pride in that, but don't forget that you are yet to face the real challenges. You can take part in mankind's never ending journey and spread life in the Universe. When your training is finished, thirteen of you will lead a spaceship housing tens of thousands of people to terraform and inhabit a faraway planet.

The game you just got is a tool for your training. Playing this game can teach you how to supervise vast projects and make decisions with global consequences. If you can secure and contain all the weirdness that will be thrown at you, then you will be capable of protecting the citizens left in your care. Learning about Old Earth's culture and the wonderful things its people managed to achieve with their primitive technology will be an educational experience too.

I'll let you in on a little-known fact about my personal history. Of course, you have been taught that I was one of the 13 commanders

leading a ship to this planet. You also learned my real name along with the title Administrator, kindly awarded to me by the populace after the tragic accident that claimed the life of all my colleagues. However, the name dearest to me is something no one calls me anymore: O5-6. The sixth member of the Overseer Council. That's right, we had a game almost identical to the one you are holding during our training on our home planet. Playing it is what made us into a real team. We took a liking to its terminology and continued calling each other by numerical designations even after we completed the game. The current version features a few objects added by my request, I hope you will have a good time figuring out how to deal with them.

The most important thing I realized while playing the Foundation Game was that even a single mistake can lead to the destruction of everything we hold dear. Keep that in mind, and become the wise commander your people deserve.

Good luck!

Frederick Williams

Game Day: Imago

« **Imago** | **BoFA: Inhale** | **BoFA: Holding It** | **BoFA: Exhale** »

quietwetsmall
twitch
wetsmallernotquiet
turn
smallestLOUDSHINE
stretch
tear

Clem Walsh was having a bad day.

Months ago, he had lucked out on a cushy assignment watching a giant cocoon do nothing for hours on end, giving him plenty of time to read. His coworkers teased him about his choices: "Why're you reading that crap fantasy shit when you're surrounded by so much weird shit?" But he enjoyed escaping into a world where he *knew* there'd be a happy ending. And hey! He had a pretty easy-going boss and he wasn't on the midnight shift like on his last assignment. So things were doing pretty good. Then the building shook and the klaxons went off.

---

turnpull
widenessOUTloudness
REDBRIGHTSHINE
rend
freedom
rend
drywetair
rend
stretch
stand

Clem knew the drill: lockdown the containment chamber first, lockdown the observation room second, contact security and bossman third. One was easy, just a matter of hitting a button, but when he went to lock the observation room door, the damn lock wouldn't engage. He propped a chair under the handle as a stop-gap and went to the phone to call the boss when it rang under his hand.

---

redloudfood
unfurl
looksmell
shakeshake
lookdowninfant
pace
smellnosmell
touch
airhardslick?
memory:gasgrassglass?
lookinfanttalk:lookme

Clem noticed a motion out of the corner of his eye and turned towards the large observation window.

"Jesus fuck me!"

Standing on the other side was a… *thing* that looked like the bastard child of an orgy involving a yellowjacket and an octopus, with a little extra ugly for good measure. It had one of its… appendages on the glass and he could swear the damn thing was looking at him despite the one-way mirror.

---

infantgoodfollow
push
hungeropeninfant
glasstalk:tastetouch
soften
goodsmellinfant
infant:stayfeed

Clem scrambled to clear the chair from the door when the glass began to bubble and warp under the thing's tentacle-claw-leg-thingie. He had just pulled it free when the softened glass broke with a "pop" that he barely heard over the klaxon, and then shattered in its pane. He looked behind him and took a deep breath to scream… then smiled.

---

stayfeedgood
tasteinfanttouch
caress
smellsweetsharp
twine
looktouchtaste
tighten
eatfoodcoppery
savor
satiatefullnessdone
curiosityknow:smellexplore
infantgoodsmell
foodseekknow

« **Imago** | **BoFA: Inhale** | **BoFA: Holding It** | **BoFA: Exhale** »

Gamers Against Weed Dossier

Group of Interest: **`Gamers Against Weed`**

Group of Interest Number: **`5869`**

AKAs: GAW, "Merrymakers", "Jesters"[1], "Reefer"[2]

`Threat Level:` Yellow

Group Description: Games Against Weed is a loosely-organized network of anomalous individuals that produces anomalies for their own amusement and/or satirical purposes. Formation date of the group is uncertain, but based on collected documents and chat logs, it seems to have been formed sometime between the years 2008 to 2010 by Jude Kriyot, JJ[3], and Esther[4] as a splinter of Are We Cool Yet?, and became an online group with additional members in 2013, though it appears to have largely abandoned the creation of anomalous art. The group organizes almost exclusively over the internet, and has roughly 40 members. While several GAW-produced anomalies pose serious threats to secrecy, the threat to human life has been minimal.

The group is composed primarily of dispossessed or otherwise marginalized individuals aged 15 - 30 in the Western hemisphere, possessing a variety of anomalous properties. The group is aware of the Foundation's activities, but lacks the ability to locate or directly target the Foundation.

Capture of all members should be done non-lethally. Standard person of interest interview protocol should be followed, with members then amnesticized as needed and released.

Members: The following is a list of known members based on collected documents and chat logs. It is unknown if this is a comprehensive list of members. Real/full names and history are largely unknown. Locations are largely unknown, as members who

are able to do so switch between locations once alerted to Foundation presence and knowledge.

- **Jude Kriyot (Pol-6870):** AKA **bluntfiend**, AKA **The Roller**, AKA **Papa Smoke**. 29. One of the three founders of GAW, formerly a member of Are We Cool Yet?. Roman Catholic. Known anomalies that Kriyot has created are **SCP-1168**, **SCP-3015** (co-creator), **SCP-2293**, and possibly **SCP-3420**. Associated with JJ, Esther, and Armand in-person. Possess anomalous abilities to control electricity, the extent of which is unknown. Immune to amnestics and lethal audio cognitohazards; standard interview protocol should be done while Kriyot is unaware of the interview location, and released in a different location to maximize confusion and mimic amnestic abilities to the best of the Foundation's possibility.

- **JJ (Pol-6877):** AKA **jockjamsvol6**. 28. One of the three founders of GAW. Jewish. Known anomalies that JJ has created are SCP-3015 and possibly **Mr. Doggo** along with polaricecraps. Associated with Jude, Esther, and Armand in-person. Current anomalous abilities are unknown but appear to be related to probability manipulation. Claims to have grown up at Site-216 (previously a safehouse before Foundation control) by himself since birth; no birth or family records for anyone assumed to be related to JJ in New England have been found. Associated in some fashion with the Serpent's Hand, and a frequenter of the **Wanderer's Library**. Attempts at captures for interviews have universally been unsuccessful and led to wasted resources.

- **Esther (Pol-6878):** AKA **lesbian_gengar**. 28. One of the three founders of GAW. Orthodox Jewish. Possible anomalies that Esther has contributed to are **SCP-2476** and **SCP-2658**. Associated with JJ and Jude in-person. Possesses the ability to create cognitohazards, commonly used as a means of disrupting Foundation raids on GAW locations. **SCP-5218** is believed to be an example of a cognitohazard created by Esther.

- **Mr. Ominous (Pol-6879):** Deceased. First member of GAW

after the group was founded. Came up with the Misters Against Weed concept. See **SCP-3012** for more information.

- **polaricecraps (Pol-6880):** 17. British, though lives in United States. Current anomalous abilities are unknown, though suspected to operate in a similar capacity to Kriyot's. Believed to have created Mr. Doggo along with JJ, is the primary creator of **SCP-2826**, as well as contributing to GAW's more political SCPs. Current examples include **SCP-2586** and SCP-2658. Based on references to living in Northwestern United States in combination with their username, as well as information gained from the history of SCP-2658, polaricecraps is hypothesized to live in Washington.

- **Dahlia (Pol-6881):** AKA **hetcopogg**. Early 20s. Protestant. Possible co-creator of **SCP-3090**. **Believed to be one of the few members in GAW who are non-anomalous.** College student in the United States, though location is unknown. In a relationship with gaycopmp4. Livestreams video games; handle is unknown. Considered bottom-priority for interviewing.

- **gaycopmp4 (Pol-6882):** Early 20s. Primary creator of **SCP-3024** and **SCP-2726**, possible creator or user of **SCP-3858**. Current anomalous abilities possibly relate to hacking and computer science. College student in the United States, though location is unknown. Was the source for the start of SCP-2293 spreading, although location has been inconclusive despite investigation. In a relationship with Dahlia.

- **bones (Pol-6883):** Based on collected logs, it is highly possible that bones is **SCP-2721-LORD**, AKA **Eli**, though not able to be proven at the moment. Operates in a moderator capacity for the chat. Has claimed to send gifts to various members on very rare occasions, though how this is done is unknown if it is SCP-2721-LORD. Invited into the chat by JJ.

- **Armand (Pol-6884):** AKA **harmpit**. Early 20s. Believed to have anomalous abilities based on SCP-5218's description, but it is unknown what what these are at this time. Disowned

for being gay by his family and joined GAW some time after. It is likely that Armand's frequent misspellings in chat are related to a supposed constant use of his anomalous abilities. Claims to not have inherent anomalous abilities, but is able to use said abilities "manually".

- **kkrule (PoI-6888):** 15. Current anomalous abilities are unknown. Youngest member of Gamers Against Weed. The only known anomaly that kkrule has created is **SCP-2433**. Professes to be straight-edge and is known to frequently play video games more than the other members. Competes in "underground video game tournaments" to make a living; monitoring of eSports tournaments across the United States is underway, but is to be considered low-priority.

- **TrainerDP (PoI-6889):** Age unknown. Current anomalous abilities are unknown, though it is claimed that they contributed to a Mister Against Weed. Rarely talks in chat. Due to radical differences in typing styles, there may be more than one individual using this username.

- **talman_corvett (PoI-6891):** 23. Swedish. Hindu. Possesses the ability to create animated graffiti art in a similar manner to **SCP-1446**. Possible connection to Are We Cool Yet? is unknown although either unlikely or distant, as talman_corvett has shown a dislike for physical violence and pretentious art. Has linked to non-anomalous joke e-books on Amazon he's said to have published, although Amazon had issued takedown orders on them by the time the Foundation obtained logs. Claims to know TrainerDP, but has not elaborated further.

- **opossum (PoI-6892):** 19. Claims to work as an animal handler. Current anomalous abilities are unknown, though references are made to it tying into animals. The only known anomaly that opossum has created is SCP- , done separately from GAW, though brought up and mentioned shortly after Incident -A in the chat. Is a member of the furry community. Joined with tiedyeduck and DonDeLillo, and presumably knows them in-person.

- **tiedyeduck (PoI-6893):** 22. Current anomalous abilities are unknown. Has worked with various political groups in order to disrupt and dismantle them. Shows a general dislike against opossum for unknown reasons. Joined with opossum and DonDeLillo, and presumably knows them in-person.

- **DonDeLillo (PoI-6894):** 19. Believed to be one of the few members in GAW who are non-anomalous. Joined with opossum and tiedyeduck, and presumably knows them in-person. Dislikes kkrule greatly.

- **Nathan Pierce (PoI-6897):** AKA Kektagon. 19. Low-level reality bender known for creating anomalies affected by the cognition of their users or viewers. Dislikes serious topics and tends to limit his chat interaction to attempts at humor. Shares the pacifist views of the group, but lack of forethought has resulted in some of his creations possessing dangerous applications. Creator of SCP- , SCP- , and **SCP-3108**.

- **FreakyGhostBed (PoI-6900):** 18. Current anomalous abilities are related to incorporeal humanoid entities, though nothing else is known. Claims to be a ghost and inhabiting a computer run by a sibling. Frequent interactions with FreakyGhostBed have resulted in a user's computer being "haunted" by them, making precise location difficult.

- **_FuddruckeR_ (PoI-6906):** 30. Current anomalous abilities are related to firearms. A lurker in the chat. Joined with orbhorse and CommunismAnarchismNihilism. Located in Southern United States and lives with orbhorse.

- **orbhorse (PoI-6907):** 26. Buddhist. Possesses the anomalous abilities to inhabit and control equines. A lurker in the chat. Joined with _FuddruckeR_ and CommunismAnarchismNihilism. Located in Southern United States and lives with _FuddruckeR_.

- **CommunismAnarchismNihilism (PoI-6908):** 22. British. Joined with _FuddruckeR_ and orbhorse. References writing for and publishing non-anomalous and anomalous "fanzines" relating to communism, leftism, and fringe religious groups.

Based on this, possible connections to **SCP-2573** may be plausible and investigated.

- **PCSatisfatorio (PoI-6920):** 21. Brazilian. Current anomalous abilities are related to music in some form. Presumably knows goodpostskitty in-person, claiming to be in a band with her as well as joining chat with her. Has interacted with **ex-Are We Cool Yet? musicians** while touring in America and stricken up a rapport with them.

- **goodpostskitty (PoI-6921):** 19. Brazilian. Claims to separate her online persona from her body, making references to communicating inside computers; it is unknown what this means at the current moment. Talks in duplicate messages; it is unknown if this connects to her anomalous abilities. Presumably knows PCSatisfatorio in-person, claiming to be in a band with him as well as joining chat with him.

- **fallout_meta.txt (PoI-6926):** Late 20s. Claims to have fled a right-wing group of interest in Southern United States. Anomalous powers revolve around a fascination with history, claiming to have dissolved a historical reenactment group via enchanting historical items. Has given several conflicting stories on how they obtained anomalous powers. Presumed to still be located in Southern United States.

- **FunkoPopFan1 (PoI-6927):** Late 20s. Japanese. Current anomalous abilities are presumed to be media-based, but primarily anomalously creating bootleg collectibles and Funko Pops. A lurker in the chat.

- **Three6serpent (PoI-6945):** Age unknown. Current anomalous abilities are unknown. Newest known member of GAW, whose sole message in chat has been "Hi! :3" on 3 February 2017.

Other Branches: Reports from multiple branches of the Foundation indicate the existence of more than one Gamers Against Weed branches internationally. All currently known and reported branches include:

- **China**
- **Japan**
- **Korea**

The full extent of activities across all branches, crossover in membership, and any other connections are unknown at this time. Other branches of the Foundation have not yet reported any existence of a group similar to Gamers Against Weed, but are informed to watch out for such.

Group of Interest Interactions: Gamers Against Weed have had contact with limited numbers of notable group of interests. Known interactions are listed here.

- **Are We Cool Yet?:** Several members are either ex-members or know people who are/were members. Hostility and animosity exists between the two groups, although there have been no formal interactions or conflicts since GAW's inception.

- **Doctor Wondertainment:** The Misters Against Weed concept is a parody of the Little Misters products. See **SCP-3012** for more information. Wondertainment appears to have not heard of, or not recognize, GAW.

- **The Factory:** See **SCP-2658** for more information.

- **The Fifth Church:** Possible vague connection with CommunismAnarchismNihilism.

- **Serpent's Hand:** JJ is a member and spends time at the Wanderer's Library. Esther knows of the group, and has possibly also visited the Library, as well as polaricecraps. Aside from this, the Serpent's Hand do not affiliate with nor wholly approve of any GAW actions.

- **Unusual Incidents Unit:** See **UIU File: 2016-004**. Unusual Incidents Unit reported to **pursue Mr. Gaffias** into **SCP-3008**. Hypothesized location of some GAW members overlap in areas nearby facilities. It is unknown if GAW is aware of the Unusual Incidents Unit.

Footnotes

1. Both given by the Serpent's Hand.
2. As given by the Global Occult Coalition.
3. Real name unknown.
4. Full name unknown.

Games Reality Benders Play

The old man stands over her hospital bed, staring down at the girl. She is wired to all sorts of machines, beeping and booping, all of them designed to keep her alive. All of them unneeded. He leans over the bed, a pleasant smile on his face. "You can get up now."

The girl scrunches her eyes tightly together, not looking at him. "Go 'way! 'M in a coma!"

The older gentleman tsks at her words. "Now, you may have the mundane believing that, but you and I both know better. Come on, lazy bones, get up now!"

The girl opens one eyelid halfway, peering at the man. He looks so pleasant and charming, like her grandfather! But there's something about him, something the… what did he call them, mundanes? wouldn't see. A veiled… hatred? "I'm not supposed to leave the bed. The Doctors will get angry." Again.

"No worries, my dear. I'll see to it they never even notice you're gone." He gestures absently with a hand, and the girl feels a tingle in her skin. Sitting up, she notices that there is now another girl in her bed, to whom all the instruments are attached. She eagerly hops out of bed, clapping her hands.

"Yey! Thank you, poppy."

"Hmm, yes. Now, we can't have you going out and about in that dreadful hospital gown, can we?" He ponders for a moment, trying to decide what would be most appropriate, but even as he thinks, the little girl bobs her head, and is dressed in jeans and a t-shirt. "Well. Someone has more control then we were given to think. Tell me." Offering her his hand. "Do you know what you are?"

"The doctors keep calling me a, uhm, reality bender? It means, I can do anything, right?" She takes his hand warily.

"Hmm, you have grown ready for this. Come, let me show you." And the two of them vanish.

They sit together on a bench, watching the world go by. It is a horrible world, where mankind has been reduced to a more primal state. They hug the light, and fear the darkness, for terrible things exist in the darkness. Sitting on the park bench, the old man and the little girl watch as creatures of nightmare stalk the shadows, waiting to find a lone human, and take them.

"Where are we?" She asks, innocently. She knows nothing here can hurt her, knows it in her heart, and so it must be true.

"A future." He responds flippantly.

"Don't you mean, *the* future?" She corrects him, in that know it all tone little children have.

"No child, I mean *a* future. This is not necessarily the future that occurs, it is simply the one I choose to show you. It could just as easily be this one." And with a wave of his hands, they are sitting in a utopia, the sun shining, the people laughing and smiling, no sick or injured, everything… perfect.

The girl studies the people, then looks up at the old man. "So, Reality Benders can travel to the future?"

He winces, shaking his head a little sadly. "Please! We prefer the term Shapers."

"But aren't we Reality Benders?"

He coughs into his hand. "Well, you see, it's like the difference between using the word African over the word Negro. While both are correct terminology, one is more polite, and one wasn't given to us by people who aren't us."

She frowns in concentration, then nods slowly. "I think I get it. But, why Shapers?"

He laughs. "Well, we have to call ourselves something, don't we?

And we do Shape things to our whim."

"But, the future?"

"Like a dog with a bone, you. Very well then. No, we Shapers cannot travel in time, as such. We can view other times, and affect them, to some degree, but we are bound from actually traveling to them." He puffs lightly on his pipe as he speaks.

"So, you mean, we can make things happen here, but not actually touch things?" It's hard to keep up sometimes, but then she just imagines herself getting it, and she does.

"That's it exactly!" It would sound like praise, to any one else. But she hears the edge in it.

"Why?"

"Ah, to understand that, you must understand the Game. And to understand the Game, you must play it." The old man stands up, offering her his hand.

"Come, walk with me to the Great Hall."

The girl stands as well, but refuses his hand. The longer she is with this man, the less she trusts him. He's nice, pleasant, fatherly, always smiling… but there is something behind his eyes. Something darker that she can feel with her mind, if not her senses. Sometimes, when she isn't looking at him, it almost feels like he is licking his lips. "Show me the way."

"It is rather a difficult path, but… if you insist."

The path is a long one, and filled with many a twist and turn. The girl pauses at one turn, staring into the halls of another Foundation. The walls and people are fuzzy, as if poorly tuned in. She turns to the older man, frowning. "What's wrong with this one?"

He laughs, a jovial sound. "Ah, this reality is more unlikely than most. See?" One of the doors blows open, a young boy and an old man with a beard, both holding wands and dressed in robes,

strolling through, destroying Foundation agents with simple flicks of their wands. "This one is near impossible to actually happen, so it comes in rougher."

He starts to walk, sedately, in some realities with a cane, in others with a limp, but in most with a sort of slow amble. It all depends on how you look at him, really. But however he actually walks, the end result is him leaving this plane of existence, and passing into another one. The girl takes one last, long lingering look at the fuzzy reality, as a girl who looks remarkably like her runs to the wand-wielding males, then turns to follow him. Around him, the sound of dice clattering, of cards slapping the table, and of figures being moved from one spot to the next is almost constant. The Great Hall is many things, but quiet, it is not.

He takes a moment to look around at table after table of Shapers, all involved in their own little games. Here, the fate of worlds is decided, based on some of the smallest of things. On the outskirts, the low-level Shapers influence the fall of a leaf, the flow of water down a window pane. Moving inwards you find the more experienced Shapers, using regular humans like chess pieces, to further their own goals. The final ring contains those Shapers who duel with entire nations. Some of these appear almost frozen in time, as long-term strategies are waited upon.

And in the middle is his table, alone at the moment. Here, he plays all the games, great and small, but with only one stake. But it's still the most important game there is.

He turns as the girl finds her way here, his face automatically cheerful and welcoming. She'll never see it coming, when it happens. She'll play him, oh yes, and never know, until he wins. And he will win. He has plenty of trophies to attest to that.

The trophies line the ceiling of the great hall, humanoid statues, once powerful Shapers, now nothing more than remnants of ideas, bound in time, their powers lost to the old man, used to make him even more powerful. His eyes stop at an empty space, and he whistles a sharp note, narrowing his eyes. "He's out again, is he? Ah, well, I will have him back."

The girl doesn't notice his words, too intent on studying the people they are passing. Two Asian boys are embroiled in a rather determined game of Go. As she watches, she can see how the pieces are more than just pieces, the natural forces, and people they represent. Something in her tells her how they move, how they fit. She shyly steps up to the boy on the left, and points to a spot on the board. "You should put a piece there."

"There? But that wins me nothing," he protests.

"Just trust me. One man, right there." She nods at him. He waffles over the choice, then nods and does so. In a normal game of Go, nothing would be won. But in this game, half of the board changes over to his side with that one piece.

"Nicely played," the old man acknowledges.

"It was just obvious." The two pass another table, where a red-haired man in Arabic dress sits next to a man who seems to be surrounded by a halo of flames. Their opponent is… well, it changes. One minute it is a horrible monster with the head of a pig, the next, it is an old man with a ruby where his heart should be. Their game is one she has never seen before, what appears to be some form of large structure, with each player taking turns moving the various rooms of the structure, and moving pieces inside of it as well. The old man snorts.

"Tamlin is playing with himself again. Sad." He leads her onwards, to the center table, and gestures her towards the far seat. "Here is where you and I shall play."

"I don't like chess," the girl protests, even as she finds herself sitting. He takes his place across from her, behind the white pieces.

"Chess is merely a metaphor. I approve of the symbolism because it is a game for gentlemen, a game with quite a large degree of finesse. Of course, the goal we play towards is something fairly different… " He smiles over the board at her. "A simple bet."

"I don't want to play." She tries to stand, but finds she cannot. The old man's smile widens. The other players in the room are pointedly

not looking at her.

"You don't have a choice, my dear. You came here with me, you play my game. If you had come here on your own, perhaps you might have had a chance, but as it stands — Well, a simple bet, as I said." He touches his king briefly. For a moment, the piece looks like three different men, three brothers. "Your goal is to give one of these men, a happy ending."

The girl stares at him, shocked. "You want me to give them a handjob?"

He bursts out laughing, a loud, booming, joyous sound. "Oh, my dear, you have spent too much time around those despicable and mundane researchers. No my dear, I mean set things up so that their story ends happily. " He waves off her attempt to comment. "No, not for the rest of their lives, merely that this chapter of their existence gets a happy ending. You pick up on things quickly, I'm sure you'll figure it out."

"I don't want to play chess." She's pouting now, arms crossed over her chest.

"It doesn't matter. If you fail to play, I win, by default, and make their lives miserable." He moves his first pawn forward. On the board, it is merely a pawn. But, in the real world, agents of the Foundation are redirected, and a rather callous man is placed in charge of the containment of an SCP with the mind of a child.

"I don't play chess!" She declares emphatically, glaring at the board. A slow smile creeps over her features. "But I do play Yu-Gi-Oh." She stares at the board intently, her face furrowed in concentration. A slow change occurs on her half of the board, until it resembles one half chess, one half children's card game. She looks up at him, from the cards in her hand, and smiles. Quickly, she places a card on the table, the image showing a sand dune. "I play the hungry sands, in defense mode! And then I cast a past immortality on it" She drops a card on top of the first one, this one displaying an amulet with a ruby stone in the middle. Sometime, many years ago, a researcher-turned-SCP gets lost in the desert. The SCP is recovered, but only after a month has passed, and his mind is imprinted on the hive

mind living there.

The old man stares at her, and, for once, an emotion other than joviality appears on his face. He is shocked. More than that, for the first time in a long time, he is surprised. The Great Hall has grown silent, every eye upon the game in the middle. "What are you looking at?" he asks them, without looking around. The sounds pick up again, as the other Shapers return to their games.

343 leans forward, the smile once again rising to his face as he gazes at the transformed board. "I don't know how you did that. But that's what is going to make this interesting."

239 can't help but smile back. "Game on."

Next: **`Unfinished Business`** And yes, it does all fit together.

Ganymede

> Erichthonius begat Tros, king of the Trojans, and Tros had three noble sons, Ilus, Assaracus, and Ganymede who was comeliest of mortal men; wherefore the gods carried him off to be Jove's cupbearer, for his beauty's sake, that he might dwell among the immortals.

O5-2 and O5-1 watched video feeds from a cramped room in their fortress.

Hundreds of scenes of devastation. Giants in the sky, on the earth, in the sea. Massive ghostly animals and not-animals sailing across the land. An otherworldly flotilla taking up a tenth of the Atlantic ocean. Strange, unidentifiable, not-quite-humanoid armies in a three-way battle. A comet of molten metal hurtling towards Earth. The GOC trying and failing to enact Procedure Pizzicato, bearing the brunt of an organization-wide psychic attack mid-announcement-speech. Even some small river god trying to end its local world and causing problems with mass landslides.

And… hundreds of containment breaches. Maybe thousands, in less than a day. O5-2 worried that the Foundation would soon come apart at the seams. The leadership was already fracturing - site directors were at each others' throats, arguing, fighting, and wondering where the hell Overwatch was. Some of the directors and other staff had already disappeared - one of the disappearances in particular worried her. But she couldn't do anything about any of it. The O5s were all isolated, unable to send communication, only receive. Some sort of system-wide attack by an unknown entity. The local tech monkeys were working on it 24/7. O5-2 was ambivalent about whether she wanted them to succeed.

And, displayed on the monitoring equipment stationed further out in the solar system, *something* slowly approaching from far away in space…

No, not 'something'. More than one something. Many 'somethings'.

O5-2 looked at O5-1. He appeared to be sleeping. Maybe dead. Well, probably not dead. He often looked like this when he slept, still, so still. He was old. Extremely old. Some people said he was the Founder of the Foundation, but O5-2 had never known how seriously to take that. People probably said the same jokes about her, after all. She looked almost as old as he did.

And, hell, considering where she'd come from and all she'd had to do… the only survivor of a broken reality… coming into this world, where she never truly fit in, always hiding everything from her *other* self…

She chuckled. What a silly time to reminisce. The end of the world was here. All the ends of the world. Competing. She wished she could do … something. Anything. But it was all she could do to ignore the compulsions planted in her brain. Goddamned reality benders. Maybe she should have gone to the GOC after all.

"I wonder what the other O5s are making of this," she said aloud.

"They're already dead," a voice whispered behind her.

A glowing light suffused the room.

The Way opened. First came black and purple light, then the bricks in the wall in front of the group folded inward one by one. Sophia Light resisted the urge to make a joke about Harry Potter. She wasn't sure how the Hand members would take her poking fun at their serious-business magic. Just like she wasn't sure if they'd abducted her, or if she'd gone with them willingly, or something in-between.

"You're sure about this?" she asked. "The last time Foundation personnel went into the Library, none of them came out in one piece. The only survivor lost both his arms."

"Your people came in with bullets and fire," the woman calling herself Asherah said. "The Library only harms those who seek to

harm others. Or to damage the Library itself, or worst of all, the books. Your people tried all three."

"Well, I certainly don't plan to set anyone on fire today," Sophia said dryly. "You're sure I won't be attacked anyway?"

"We're sure," the black cat said. The cat could speak, Sophia reminded herself. She'd been trying to get used to that for the past few hours. One of the more obviously anomalous Hand members she'd just met. The other being the woman who appeared to be able to control the colors of herself and her surroundings. Some relation to 598, she wondered?

"You're with us now," the cat continued. "As long as you keep your word, you will be safe."

Sophia chose to let the comment slide. She supposed it was true, after all. For now.

"Don't act so worried," the woman with the shifting rainbow skin said. "You're going to save the world. Here's how we get started."

The motley group walked through the Way, and entered the Wanderer's Library.

O5-1's body rested on the floor at the foot of his chair, slumped where he had fallen.

O5-2 looked up at The Harbinger. His form was so bright… so angelic… but she still wasn't fooled.

"You're not one of 343's?" she asked.

"Of course not," he said.

"Good," she said. "You know… In another future, we got to grow old together."

The glowing being stepped towards her, sword in hand. "I know."

He made the cut quick, rapid, and as painless as possible.

When she was dead, he closed her eyes, and leaned down, planting a kiss on her lips.

"I'm sorry, Sophie," he said.

The fiery red and white angelic hosts of Yahweh clashed with an almost equally large army on their path across the Middle East. This army was made up of humanoid soldiers, animals, and more monstrous creatures, all featureless and black as pitch. Where they walked, blackness flowed across the land, the bushes, the trees, the rivers, and anything that touched it suffocated and died. The creatures and the blackness had all come from one place: the ink pen known as SCP-505.

They were almost a match for Yahweh's army. *Almost.*

The angels were a true army, not a mass of monsters. Innumerable white swords flashed. Black creatures flew into pieces and dissolved. Angels fell with gaping wounds, or suffocated, covered in ink. But in the end, the winner was clear.

The angels were hardly highly-developed reality benders, but they shared some of their Master's power. As they marched, they removed the ink contamination with their Master's borrowed power and healed the land. For now. This was the *wrong* apocalypse - the world was to perish in fire, not in ink, and certainly not before Yahweh gave the final command.

They heard the roars of other monsters, far off in the distance. Giants strode across the horizon. There was no time to waste. They would soon come into conflict again, with their Master only knew what. They had expected an army of demons and men, not… *this*. Why had their Master not warned them?

The angels marched through the scattering ink-beings, and crested a hill to find their way blocked by a massive mountain range that had not been there before, that had simply not existed five minutes before.

The mountain in the center of the range was more monolith than

mountain, and oddly shaped. It almost looked like a hand… with an upraised middle finger…

As the hosts of heaven watched in disbelief, giant flaming letters erupted into being across the mountain range. In moments, the letters formed a single sentence, burned across the land, a sentence big enough to be visible from space.

The sentence read, "ARE WE COOL YET?"

Alone now, the Harbinger let his light dim. Let his disguise and power slip away, leaving nothing but the ordinary human being underneath.

He could think of himself by his real name now. Troy Lament. He closed his eyes and felt the relief of being able to think that again. To be human.

Of course… 'Troy Lament' wasn't his *real* name either. Not really.

Troy found and opened the file folder on O5-1's computer labeled "Jeremiah Colton." The access codes he already knew, and entered.

He read the files for a long time.

Then he sat staring at the screen for even longer.

Then he pulled up another window.

> IDENTIFICATION CODE REQUIRED.

He typed in his name.

> WELCOME JEREMIAH COLTON.
>
> YOU HAVE (1) NEW MESSAGE.
>
> DISPLAY? [Y/N]
>
> ---
>
> If you are reading this, you know what to do.

> I'm sorry. We all are.

The note was unsigned.

Troy hesitated only a moment before continuing to type.

The machine replied.

> Does the black moon howl?

He typed in his response.

> When the foundations crumble.

The machine processed for a moment.

> Activation Phrase Required. Please Speak Now.

Troy Lament spoke the word, only now fully understanding what it meant, both for him and for the future of the Foundation. "Ganymede."

The message went out to every single secure facility associated with the Foundation, to every terminal, to every member of personnel above Level 1. When the Administrator read it, she sat back in her chair. The message was short, to the point, and final.

> **Announcement to all locations: Initiate Ganymede Protocol. All Sites are independent from this point onward.**
>
> **Godspeed.**

End of Act 1.

« **Stirrings** | **Canon Hub** | **Splinter: Now... This** »

Gary and Stu Do Something Gnarly

"Nobody tells you how boring the apocalypse actually is."

"…"

"I mean, okay, look. The beginning, the part with the invasion and the explosions and shit? It's fucking bonkers. But like, after? Boring as fuck, am I right?"

"You're way too casual about all of this."

"What? No! Dude, the world as we know it has ended, it's terrible!"

"Then why does it sound like you're trying to pitch me something three weeks after my wife disappeared in front of my eyes?"

"Wha— Hold on now, dude. I'm not pitching you shit, okay? I'm trying to help you out here."

"Gary, I'm still fucking grieving."

"And I can't help my friend?!"

"…It's 2 AM, Gary. Why are you here and what the fuck is that in your hands?"

"I'm here bec—oh this is a piece of one of the Bugs."

"What?"

"Look, Stu, I'm here because the world ended, OUR worlds have ended. We are the only survivors of our dysfunctional makeshift family, but does that mean we have to fucking waste away? Do you think Casandra would really want that? We survived, Stu, but that's not enough, don't you wanna live?"

"There were only two things I lived for in this world. You guys, and

the waves. Casandra's gone and the other is a fucking wasteland."

"I mean technically it's a 'Wastesea' bu-"

"Gary!"

"Sorry, sorry! Look, I know all that, Stu. That's what THIS is for."

"How is a chunk of one of the things that almost wiped out humanity going to help me?"

"That's what I'm trying to get to, dude! For fuck's sake will you just come with me? It's easier if I just show you."

Two months ago, two realities began to converge. One was failing, intent on claiming the other. The other was our home.

The Nexus was their point of entry. Entities swarmed us like locusts upon fields, stripping us of our existence so they could take our place. Spreading a plague, tainting resources, using weapons we did not understand to remove our claim on this world, this reality.

We did not let them.

The Foundation, having kept this scourge of a reality at bay for decades, understood their existence. Even though they could not stop their arrival, they could drive them back. The Veil shattered, but humanity strengthened. United under a common cause, we fought back.

Two weeks ago, we won. Their effects still haunt us, but we won.

"Okay, now you see where it attaches to its ass? Rip that piece off."

"We shouldn't be here, the Foundation quarantined this place for a reason."

"It's just the Bug corpses, dude. I'm friends with one of their MTF guys. No plague over here, they just haven't cleaned up the dead Bugs."

"Gary, you don't have friends and none of this looks like it has an ass."

"Dude, right here! There's fuckin' brown goo coming out of there, it's obviously an ass."

"It's obviously disgusting."

"Fine, you baby. I'll do it myself… There! See? Easy."

"Congrats, now what do I do with this giant Bug's ass-flap?"

"Feel it, do you feel that?"

"Feel it? Gary, is this a sexual thing? Oh god, this is a sexual thing isn't it?"

"Stu! For the love of god can you stop being such a twat and listen! Can you feel it vibrating? Every few minutes it like, wobbles."

"Holy shit… Is this thing still alive?"

"Nah, dude. It's wobbling, with the Nexus!"

The oceans were tainted at the coastlines, marine life was severely crippled.

The Bugs could not survive with our sea, so they began swapping ours for theirs. We managed to stop the spread of the blight, leaving numerous areas fit for desalination, but there were no longer any beaches. Only a treacherous, caustic deep, which required specialized equipment to traverse.

They stole a part of our humanity that we took for granted. Until we find a way to reverse the blight, our future generations will never experience the serene beauty of a coastline, the caressing touch of our mother nature by her oceans waves.

"We're going TOWARDS the Nexus?"

"Hahaha yeah!"

"Gary, this is nuts."

"Totally, but check this out. Hold the flap in front of you with the side facing the Nexus."

"The fuck? It's like, pushing back."

"Every time the Nexus pulses right?"

"Yeah…"

"And the closer you get to the Nexus, the more it pushes back."

"So how do we— Dude what's the point of all this?"

"Just keep following me, and hold it to your side, with the tip facing forward. See? Almost no resistance at all. Like an arrow through the air."

"What about the Foundation patrols?"

"Like I said, I've got a friend on the inside, he got us a way in. Plus, he's joining us."

Two friends mourn the loss of their loved one. When she lived, the three of them were friends. Since early childhood, they were one another's support. There was nobody else.

Long before she was lost, one became her husband and the other their closest friend. The three were inseparable, and together they acquired the same love of the ocean. They moved to the coast so they could be by the sea. They often said that the three of them felt like an island, three individuals nobody understood. So when they found the one thing that loved them back, the sea became the fourth member. The mother who always comforted, celebrated and loved them, as they caught her tides.

They were a family. Until she was taken away.

Not taken away, replaced. Her existence replaced with that of another, something not of this world. They had no chance to say goodbye, they had

no intention of welcoming her distortion. As they watched the invader that replaced their loved one die, they hoped it would bring their loved ones back.

It did not.

"Oh shit, there he is. Yo! We're over here!"

"Is that the MTF guy? Wait, is he carrying a butt-flap too?"

"Yeah, that's Marvin, he kind of hates me but I managed to smuggle him some good weed so he's chilled."

"You're still dealing? After the apocalypse?"

"SHIT YES I'm still dealing! The end of the world is stressful, bro."

"Uh, Gary, your new friend has company."

"Fuck, get down!"

"Fantastic."

"Wait… Dude, you see that? Behind his back, he's waving us through."

"This smells like a trap, Gary."

"No way, I told him I'd rat him out to his captain if I don't get this favor."

"Hey, it looks like they're turning around…"

"Fuckin Marv! Coming through with the win."

"Why's he going with them, though? I thought you said he's joining us."

"Damn, looks like he distracted them or some shit… Oh shit hahaha."

"What?"

"He just mouthed 'YOU OWE ME ASSHOLE' haha. Let's go, we're almost there."

In two highly secured buildings, separated by two hundred miles, two people are sitting in empty rooms.

One is a highly experienced veteran, seasoned by countless encounters with the unexplained. The other, a young woman, hastily recruited to help save the world.

The veteran receives a notification on his computer. He has been added to a room in his Secure Chat Program.

The old man types:

ADDED TO ENCRYPTED ROOM BY RESEARCHER T CROWLER

What is it?

In regards to?

Researcher Crowler, if it was happening again, I'm sure we'd have all known it by now.

Elaborate. Like an electrical current?

They're transporting dead Bug parts? For what? Some sort of rhino-horn/aphrodesiac/Bug-drug trade thing?

Tamara, just skip the clinical bullshit and say what you need to say.

Two old friends stand in an abandoned parking lot. One is a joker, taking nothing besides his family to heart. The other, a mourner, only wishing to lament his loss. Nearby stands the bringer of their tragedy, the Nexus. Pulses oscillate from the aperture, making their hair stand on end, reverberating through the chitinous remains in their hands.

The joker jumps, he demonstrates to his mourning companion that the very thing that brought them so much pain could help them soothe it. He steps

on his makeshift board, turns it toward the Nexus and is caught by a pulse, sending him soaring through the air.

The mourner watches his friend do the impossible, seemingly surfing on reality itself. His friend, carving through the air, laughing and screaming with glee. Ironically, it just did not seem real.

He had barely even noticed himself stand and prepare himself when he realized the ebb and flow from the Nexus was familiar, not unlike the gentle rocking of the ocean.

Except, he hated it, he could never grow to love the thing that took his wife away. He despised the nostalgia it gave him, but he'd be damned if this fucking thing didn't owe him one moment of happiness.

For the first time in ages, he stood up, stepped on his board and caught a wave.

As Stu ripped through the air, he spotted his friend standing below, smiling.

He smiled back, and whispered under his breath:

"Casandra would have loved this."

And with them being so close to myself and the lost ones, I wish I could tell them that I do.

Gate of Janus

Ever since Zhi Xin had returned from leading the raid at Larissa, Arjun had watched her nibble on a stale piece of bread. Her face was scrunched in an expression that Arjun judged to be two parts frustration and one part contempt. The two of them were sitting in the cafeteria of the installation currently serving as the Insurgency's headquarters in Greece. The O5 Council had not given them the resources to construct their facilities to ordinary Foundation standards. And why would they? The Insurgency was pretending to be a renegade faction anyway, and what renegade would enjoy superior living conditions to those in power?

"I miss the food at Overwatch," Zhi Xin said. She tossed the bread onto her plate.

"We signed up for this, Xin."

"Completely false! We never chose to become D-Class. Nor was the choice to join the Red Right Hand really a *choice.* That requires approximately equivalently appealing choices. Which were not available."

Arjun sighed. "And if we did not sign up for this, we do it because it is right."

"*You* do it because *you* believe it to be right."

"Enough," Arjun said. "What happened during the raid?"

"There were no SS Ahnernerbe to be found. The temple was empty."

"The Coalition?"

"Similarly absent, given that the Ahnernerbe weren't there. We beat the Ahnernerbe to whatever they wanted and we beat the GOC to

the Ahnernerbe."

Xin started picking at her nails. She was constantly moving from position to position—slouching, leaning back, resting her head. Arjun thought of gas particles bouncing around in a pressurized chamber. After a while, she picked the bread back up, turned it over in her hands, and put it back down.

"We took what the Ahnernerbe was after. Waited for them to come, killed most of them. Left before the Coalition showed. Standard, routine stuff, Arjun. Why are you so interested?"

"You don't usually act this bored, Xin. I was just wondering if something was wrong."

"It was *standard, routine stuff.* Why wouldn't I be bored?"

Xin's words echoed in the emptiness of the cafeteria. Arjun let his attention drift away from Xin. He stared upon row after row of empty seats, and metal tables, and glowing lights that flickered every so often. There was a question nagging at the back of his mind, and as much as he tried he could not plug the leak in the dam blocking up all his doubt well enough to prevent it from escaping.

"I wonder what would've happened if the Ahnernerbe got its hands on the thing," Xin said.

"What?"

"I mean, don't you ever just wonder, sometimes? What would happen if the 'bad guys' win. To be honest, we're running out of unambiguous bad guys. They're *wizard Nazis,* Arjun. Enjoy them while they last, because the GOC isn't having any of this."

Arjun shook his head. "You're not making any sense."

"Look, if you can't imagine the world where the bad guys win, then what? What are the stakes? What's at risk? This is why imagination is important, Arjun. Because it'll teach you motive."

Why am I here?

The question flooded Arjun's mind. Arjun tried repeating to himself: the O5 Council stood to protect humanity, and if the O5 Council needed an organization that did the Foundation's work while absolving it of responsibility, then so be it. But the flood washed that answer away. Ideology became faint and distant before Arjun's eyes, and he realized with a surge of panic that without that there was nothing else to hold onto. And then as soon as it came, the question receded, leaving behind a mind that was not quite sure if the question had come at all.

"So what was the Ahnernerbe even after?"

"V8 automobile engine."

"Anomalous properties?"

Xin shrugged. "I didn't touch the thing, didn't look at it. You know. Standard protocol. We're testing the thing now. Hell if I want to be in charge, though. Testing is terrible."

"So we have no idea what the thing is."

"The one exciting thing about this entire ordeal, yes."

Exciting things. Arjun thought about Overwatch. Glory and prestige had a certain smell—incense and roses, maybe—when they burned and threw up smoky fumes into the air. That scent filled Arjun's nose when he thought on his own position. He was one of the elect, the chosen few, those who would stand at the side of the O5 and turn back the tide of…

Exciting things. But there was nothing to do.

"I would avoid Michelle tomorrow if I were you," Xin said. She yawned widely.

"Why?"

Xin laughed, before standing and turning to leave. "Her marvelous invention completely failed to work in the raid. Turns out memetics is bullshit after all. Night, Arjun."

“Good night, Xin.”

At six foot seven, Michelle Richardson stood well above the other seven members of the Insurgency’s High Command. They all had sight, so they all knew that she was perpetually hungry. For years, Arjun had been vaguely aware of some enticing thing lurking just outside the boundaries drawn by the Foundation, something unprofessional and unsanitary and unscientific and quite possibly savage. He shunned it; Michelle craved it.

When Arjun found her on the roof of their research facility, staring at the lights of San Francisco’s skyline in the distance, she had a painting canvas before her. It was impossible to see what she was painting in the darkness. As Arjun approached, he noticed several glass vials littering the floor.

“How are you doing, Arjun?” she asked.

“Good. Thank you.”

“Anything I can do for you?”

“No. I only came up here for some fresh air. It gets stuffy in the barracks sometimes.”

“Mm.”

Michelle turned back to her painting, while Arjun stood silently behind her. After a few seconds, she turned back around and locked eyes with Arjun. He knew that he could not observe Michelle without being observed back, and harder. If she had things her way, the universe would organize itself such that it would always be viewed through her eyes.

“Let’s talk, Arjun. I don’t like it when you only stand there. I want you to speak. Let’s have a conversation. I’ll start: what is your opinion on the engine?”

Arjun blinked. “I don’t believe that we should…be so confident that the engine is really…”

“Every single researcher who has ever been exposed to the engine, without exception, has achieved some miraculous breakthrough in a field of anomalous science. Do you believe that the universe is so chaotic that a probabilistically impossible outcome such as this simply happens without fanfare?”

“I don’t know, Michelle.”

The Insurgency was too far gone.

For years Arjun had seen the signs of the world, seen those signs that were straight and ordered, seen those signs that twisted and howled. He had known what was safe and what was dangerous. Then he had been ordered to dive into the jungle of the anomalous and in that heart of darkness somehow map a way through the tortuous land. The voice of guidance from on high had commanded him to eat the forbidden fruit, and so he did, and…

What did it mean to use the anomalous? Whatever goals were achieved, whatever victory was won, the anomalous was part of that result. Arjun knew that the anomalous was beginning to take root in his body. When the day came that he could no longer call the paranormal alien, when he looked at the sign of his own soul and saw it twisted, Arjun knew that he would be permanently lost.

“You’re afraid,” Michelle said.

“I am not afraid.”

“Don’t lie to me. I can see the fear in your eyes. You’re afraid of the engine. It’s understandable. But our *job* is to use the anomalous. It was our assignment.”

“Ultimately our job is to contain the anomalous because it is dangerous. Because it poses unacceptable risks to human society.”

Michelle laughed. “Human society? Of what value is human society anyway? For as long as either of us knows, human society has been built on a lie, and personally, I don’t like deception.”

Arjun didn’t know if Michelle grasped the irony of what she was saying.

“Imagine what we could do with the engine,” Michelle said. “It is a force for progress. If the Foundation were to use the engine, we would be able to achieve wondrous things. What does the Foundation understand now? Memetics. Amnestics. That’s why we have Hallucinogenic Memetoamnestic Substance. It lets us see the world beyond reality, giving us unparalleled insight into the present and future. What if we understood the concept of sapience? The human—or the non-human—soul? Reality-bending?”

“So what has the O5 Council said?”

“I have yet to submit a report to them.”

Arjun blinked.

“What?”

“As promising as the results are, I have no desire to give the O5 Council any false hope. It would be embarrassing. I need more testing and more time. And even when I’m ready, a report cannot be immediately sent, especially given how absolutely secure any communications between us and the O5 Council must be.”

“But at the very least preliminary findings—so that they know—“

“I am overseeing all research regarding the engine. All eight of us had previously decided that this would be the case. Are you questioning my authority?”

“No. No, I’m not, but—Michelle, we are indebted to the O5 Council. They have elected us to be their most trusted soldiers.”

Even in the darkness he could feel the intensity of Michelle’s stare. “I am doing nothing but honor the trust they have placed in us. I serve nothing but the better tomorrow that the O5 Council works towards. What do you serve?”

Over the course of the conversation, Michelle had advanced close enough that he would have had to kill her if he had any doubt about her intentions. He felt her eyes take hold of him, dissect him and subject him to the relentless force of her will. He said nothing because he knew that if he surrendered, she would release him.

Without saying anything, Michelle walked past Arjun and left the rooftop.

Arjun stood, watching the sky until the sun rose and light washed over him. Now, he could see the painting. In the middle of the night sky above the San Francisco skyline, one star shone brighter than all the rest. Eight rays of light emanated from the star. Each ray curved and then split into more and more lines of light which spread across the sky.

Chaos Insurgency Hub | next »

A Little Chat

Drip, drip, drip. Blood fell from Harold Jacobs' shattered nose onto the polished, tiled floor. He feebly tried to look up as he heard a rasping cough, but Valley's thugs did their job too well. A ticking noise came from the man restraining Jacobs. Tick, tick, tick, tick, tick. Valley coughed again, and Jacobs saw the old, wizened figure nod to the ticking man. His voice was like his cough, hoarse and sudden, as if every sentence that came out of Valley's mouth could be the last. With his current state, that was probably true.

"Show our guest to his seat, Mr. Tick."

Jacobs was surprised at Mr. Tick's strength as he slammed him into the wooden chair. He had scoffed when Mr. Carter told him about Valley's manservant. The man was diseased, for god's sake, how could he be a threat? As Jacobs tried to gaze at Valley through the ruined remains of his left eye, he realized how wrong he had been.

"Mr. Jacobs." Valley's tone was mocking. Using his stick-like arm, he gently placed one of Mr. Carter's notes on the table. "You are here to cheat me?" Next, he placed a tiny camera in front of him. "Or to spy on me?" As he placed the last item on the table, Jacobs knew that he was as good as dead.

"To kill me?" said Valley, inspecting Jacobs' gun. "A good effort, I'm sure, but Mr. Tick does not miss a tick." Then he laughed. It was the most awful sound Jacobs had ever heard. Valley stopped and grinned at him with rotting, yellow teeth. A drop of blood slid down from his cracked lips from the exertion of the act. "Who are you working for?"

Jacobs remembered what Mr. Carter had told him to say. His voice was a whisper, it was a miracle he could even talk with the beating he has taken. "Global Occult Coalition…mass liquidation of known threat entity…"

"Liar," snapped Valley. Mr. Tick's hand closed around Jacobs'. He had time to look up for a moment before Mr. Tick squeezed. Jacobs screamed in agony as he heard the loud crunching from what used to be his hand. "Who do you really work for?"

Jacobs was sobbing now. The pain was unbearable. "Marshall… Carter and Dark!" he screamed. Mr. Tick let go.

Valley looked worried. "They know of my operation here?"

"Yes." Jacobs struggled not to look at the crushed lump at the end of his arm.

"This is…highly unfortunate. We will have to think carefully of our next move, I think. Thank you, Mr. Jacobs. Mr. Tick, you may kill him now."

Jacobs opened his mouth to protest, but was cut short as Mr. Tick grabbed the back of his head and slammed it into the table. He was killed instantly and the table collapsed from the heavy impact. A cleaner stepped forward and began to wipe Jacobs' brain matter off the wood as two members of security threw his body off the balcony. A few seconds later, there was a far-off splash.

"Our old associates have discovered us, it seems," said Valley.

"Yes," said Mr. Tick.

"Nevertheless, I believe we can continue our operation here. There must be some demand for those things."

"Yes."

"We'll need to raise security, Mr. Tick. I don't want this happening again. I'll run out of tables."

"Yes."

A Working Lunch

"Wait in the car. I've got this one," Harken said.

Kramer fixed him with a cold, hard gaze from her oscilloscope-green eyes. "I can't back you up from out here," she said.

"If I need your brand of backup, it means that I've fucked up badly enough that getting killed would be preferable to telling the O5's what happened. Wait in the damn car. I'll be back in half an hour."

Kramer turned away from him and looked out the passenger side window at her reflection in side of the burgundy-red minivan in the next parking space over. Her internal cybernetics whirred and clicked as she moved. Fingers with too many joints flexed and relaxed, inch-long razor-edged blades snapping in and out from under her fingertips. She looked like a tensing cat getting ready to spring. She always did.

Harken liked Kramer, he really did, but his partner and fellow agent was a hammer who saw everything around her as a nail. Some situations, like this one, needed a little more finesse. Thankfully, finesse was what he did. "Don't worry about it," he said. "This should be simple."

A man in a dark blue uniform, wearing a waist-length cape, opened the front door for him as he approached the front door of the hotel. Harken strode past him straight to the elevators, showed the bellman the black card with the gold lettering and the fractal pattern along the edges. The bellman nodded and touched a control on the sixth elevator, the one that never operated except for a very select few.

Though the hotel had thirty floors, there were only two buttons in this elevator. He pressed the top button and checked his pockets for his smokes. They were still there. Thus reassured, he leaned back against the wall and whistled a jaunty tune as the elevator headed to

the thirty-first floor.

The elevator doors opened, and Harken was faced with a massive man with biceps the size of footballs, who looked like he could pop a man's head like a pimple. The giant waved a scanning wand over the agent's body, frowned when the wand beeped. Harken very carefully reached into his coat pocket and pulled out his Zippo. "Just this," he said, flipping the lighter open and igniting the flame. "For my smokes."

The giant shook his head and held out a small silver tray. Harken nodded and left his lighter behind. "I'll want it back on my way out," he said, with a small smile. The giant seemed unamused.

Past the doors was a dining room with white walls and marble-tiled floors. In the dining room was a cadaverously slender man dressed entirely in white. He held a silver fork and knife in his delicately fingered hands, and he was cutting into a grilled chicken breast: small, precise pieces which he transferred to his mouth and chewed with all the delicacy of a ballet dancer. There was a crystal goblet in front of him which, Harken knew, contained distilled water. Distilled water was the only thing Mister Cutridge ever drank.

"Agent Harken," Cutridge said, as he put down his knife and fork and patted his lips with a silk napkin. "I was wondering when I would see you again."

"Cutridge," Harken said. He flopped down into one of the high-backed chairs and pulled out his smokes and a book of matches. "How goes it?"

"It continues as well as can be expected. My division is expecting to acquire some new merchandise in the near future, for which I believe I have your own people to thank."

"Not my division," Harken said, lighting up a cigarette. He took a long drag and blew a big puff of smoke into the air. "No blood off my back. Ask me if I care."

"You may not care about the losses suffered by your company, but I do care about you smoking in my home. I dislike…"

"Oh, bite me, Cutridge. I've had the shittiest week of my entire life. The least you can do is let me have a smoke while we shoot the shit." Harken took another deep drag of his cigarette and blew a smoke ring at Cutridge's face, was gratified to see the man screw up his face trying not to cough at the acrid vapors.

"Very well," Cutridge said, in a brittle, angry voice. "I will allow you to indulge this once. But speak quickly and leave even more quickly. My patience is limited tonight."

"Then I'll make it simple. My guys have taken a hit. A HARD one. Simply put, there's blood in the water, and the sharks are circling. Now, I know you've been looking at a little warehouse downtown filled with all sorts of fun things that could make a certain Mister Cutridge very popular with his higher-ups at Marshall, Carter, and Dark. I know you've mentioned this to said bosses in the past. I want you to show some prudence. Keep your boys at home for this one. Keep quiet. Don't stir up trouble. The artifacts that got loose are fair game. Don't get greedy and try to set loose a few more."

Mister Cutridge was quiet for a long time. "No," he said, curtly.

"Seriously? After all I've done for you? After all the times I've pointed you towards artifacts that could make you a tidy profit?"

"You've pointed me to trinkets that your organization is unwilling to make the effort to secure for themselves. No, Agent Harken, I believe that this time, it is I who am arguing from a position of strength. Your Foundation cannot even protect themselves from a small group of college students with delusions of grandeur. How can they expect to defend against us?"

"Fine," Harken sighed. "In that case, wait three minutes and we'll see who's arguing from a position of strength then."

"What?"

Harken stubbed his cigarette out onto a tea saucer. "My smokes are laced with a nerve agent. I'm inoculated. You're not. The dose you took should be lethal in minutes."

Cutridge's eyes bulged out, and he leaped up from his chair, knocking it over in his haste. "GUA—"

There was an explosion on the foyer. Harken smiled. "It's amazing how much plastique you can pack into a cigarette lighter when you really try," he reflected.

Cutridge gasped and turned purple, grabbing at his throat and making nasty wheezing noises as Harken leaned over him. The agent pulled a small vial filled with a bright blue liquid from his coat pocket. "Now, there is an antidote," Harken said, "But if you want it, you need to agree to my terms. Stay at home for this one. All right?"

Cutridge nodded. Harken handed the man the vial, and he snapped it open and swallowed the blue liquid in one gulp. Harken smiled and patted him on the face. "See you around, Liam," he said.

He was walking past the still-smouldering body of the big guy (slumped over the reception desk with a surprised look in his lifeless eyes) when he heard the familiar but unpleasant sound of a handgun being cocked behind him. He sighed. "Can't let it go, huh, Liam?" Harken said.

"Can't let you live, not when you've managed to waltz into my home and nearly murder me," Cutridge said, in that cold, reptilian voice. "It's not good for business."

"Yeah, I can see that," Harken muttered. "People might think there was blood in the water."

Cutridge laughed. Harken laughed too.

Cutridge was still laughing when he shit himself and died.

"That was blue Kool-Aid, you asshole," Harken said.

He tried the elevator button and was surprised to see it was still working. "God bless the Otis company," he murmured. The trip down seemed very long. He forced himself to walk out of the hotel at a measured pace.

Kramer was still staring at her reflection in the minivan as he

climbed back into the car and started it up. "How did it go?" she asked.

"Not well," Harken said. "It's sad how few businesses are willing to do a little charity work nowadays. Who's next?"

"A couple of agents from the UIU are investigating a warehouse fire. We need to make sure they don't investigate too much."

"Ah, Wolfram and Uecker. Pair of good kids. This should be simple."

The car pulled out of the hotel parking lot and drove off to its next destination.

Game Day Phase 2: ". . . And Then I Saw The Light"

"What am I even doing here?" Sol muttered, watching the man in the wolf suit walk by. "I don't have anything in common with these people."

"These people happen to be our most faithful customers, man," James said. "It's a big hit among furry audiences."

"I know," Sol sighed. "I've seen the fanart. It's not like anyone gives a crap about the writing, anyway, they just want to see the guy who draws the sexy animal girls."

"Not true! The comic gets twice the number of hits that my art does. People come back for your writing, man. We're a team, remember?"

"Whatever, dude. All I know is I'm down the cost of a plane ticket and hotel room, and no one's buying shit."

James rolled his eyes and grinned. "Hey, don't worry, man, we'll at least break even before the con's over. Tell ya what: let's go clubbing after this. Grab a couple of beers and forget about this whole thing. You'll be happy again in no time, man."

"Is it going to be a normal club or one where everyone wears fursuits?" Sol griped.

"It's going to be a furpile. We'll all yiff and scritch each other, then lick each other's fursuits and die of poisoning like in that one episode of CSI."

"Really?"

"No."

"Damn, you got my hopes up."

"Sorry to disappoint you." He glanced down at his watch. "I've got an artist meetup to go to. Hold the fort, try to sell a few books, kay?"

"See ya." Sol gave his friend a lazy wave and leaned back to watch the freaks. Most of them were clustered at the other end of the artist's alley, where the more risqué artists were hawking their wares. He sighed and cursed the day that James had ever convinced him that, "We should totally do a comic together, man." On the whole, he would much rather be sleeping in.

He was startled to realize that someone was standing at his booth, flipping through Volume 1. Her brow was furrowed, and her lips were pursed together as she scrutinized the pages. "You are the writer?" she asked.

"Yeah, that's me. SolKid."

"A strange name."

"It's my internet handle. My friends call me Sol. My parents call me Solomon."

"Mmm." The girl frowned and held the book up to the light, shaking her head. "And so, this is what we've been reduced to," she said. "Masturbatory fantasy fodder."

"It's what the people want. You gonna buy that or not?" Sol asked.

"No," the girl said, putting the book back down in its wire stand. "I think I shall give you something better." She smiled, revealing long, sharp canine teeth: a feral, animal grin. "I think I shall give you something better to write about."

It was only then that Sol realized that the girl was naked.

She had vaguely Asian features: almond eyes and long straight black hair stretching to her knees. Her eyes were yellow, and their pupils were thin slits. Her fingers were tipped with sharp, hooked claws. Nine red, foxlike tails flared behind her.

There was a brief hush. Everyone turned to gawk at her. A few camera flashes here and there. She stood silently, her head tilted

back, eyes closed, hands clenched tightly at her sides.

Then an overweight man in a red vest ran up, yelling, "HEY HEY HEY, NONE OF THAT, THIS IS A FAMILY CONVENTION!"

Her hand flashed out as he reached to grab her, plunged into his abdomen with an unpleasant squelching sound before he even touched her, stepped aside and kicked at his shin, sending him sprawling to the ground screaming and grabbing at his spilling entrails. She opened her mouth unpleasantly wide and swallowed the gory thing clutched in her hand in a single gulp.

Then the screaming started.

Once, when he was a kid, Sol had taken a trip to the Holocaust museum with his high school class. They had seen an image of the inside of one of the gas chambers, where the prisoners had been executed. There were deep gouges in the walls where the desperate people had clawed at them to try and get out, places where they had trampled each other to death trying to crawl over each other to climb higher, in a blind panic. It had been terrifying enough to imagine that happening to emaciated, shaved-head prisoners in a Nazi death camp.

It was even worse when happening to a bunch of brightly dressed fans at a convention.

And then the madness began. He saw a skinny girl wearing cat's ears and a bodysuit screaming and pounding at a wall when an unlocked door was a few feet to her left. He saw a big, tough-looking guy wearing a black t-shirt go berserk and beat a teenage boy to death with a steel chair. A chubby girl walked up to him with empty eye sockets, her crushed eyes weeping blood and fluid. "Maggots in my eyes, get them out, maggots in my eyes, get them out," she wailed.

And while this happened, the girl with the yellow eyes stalked through the crowd like a shark through a school of fish: never stopping, always killing. Here she tore a man's liver out and ate it whole. There, she tore a girl's throat with her teeth. Then she was no longer eating, just killing in a berserk frenzy, screaming mad,

animal cries as she curbstomped a slightly overweight guy with bad acne to death against the concession stand counter.

It was the most beautiful thing Sol had ever seen.

And then it was still. The doors of the hall swung back and forth on broken hinges where the panicked crowd had smashed them down in their mad, panicked exodus. A few unfortunates, trampled under the crowd, lay groaning in pain on the hard concrete floor. She stood in the center of the circle of gore, skin stained scarlet, and she looked up at the hard, stark light of the fluorescent tubes, and said, in a voice made low and harsh with anger and frustration: "It doesn't help. Nothing helps."

She turned to Sol, and there was murder in her eyes. "Go write about this," she said.

And then she left.

"And that was when I understood the truth," the man said. "Just as humanity has tried to sterilize our cities of wildlife and our lives of germs, we've tried to sterilize our minds from the supernatural. The hard light of science has tried to drive the things of myth out of our lives and into the corners of the world. And just like any cornered creature, they are fighting back."

"While this continues, there can be no peace. The only solution is peaceful coexistence with the supernatural, as in the old days before the rise of the worldwide global scientific conspiracy, but as long as organizations like this Foundation exist, there can be no peace. For the sake of peace, they must be destroyed."

"The Serpent's Hand tries, but they are bound by the shackles of their own morals: they are useful to us, in a way, but they have not the will to do what needs to be done. The C.I. is content to lord over their Third World backwaters: like Mengele, they are interested only in their own grotesque experimentation. The Church is interested only in rescuing their "Broken God" from this Foundation. Only we of the Freemind Nation are willing to put our lives on the line for the sake of peace."

"Will you help us?"

The man stared intently at the girl sitting across the table. She had vaguely Asian features: almond eyes and long straight black hair stretching to her knees. Her eyes were yellow, and their pupils were thin slits. Her fingers were tipped with sharp, hooked claws, which she tapped against the hardwood table, where a plate with a liver from a freshly slaughtered, grass-fed, organically raised cow lay on a clean white plate. Nine red, foxlike tails flared behind her in a peacock's fan of swaying reddish fur.

She reached out one hand and, without a word, swallowed the gory chunk of meat in front of her in one gulp.

The man smiled. "Let me tell you about our plan, then…"

Angle of Attack

Transcript of tape recovered from Police Department

“Ok, let's start again. I know you were directly involved, and for the record, let's just assume I'm not an idiot and know you're guilty. So, with that, how about we try and make this much easier. What I want to know is this: who is it you work for?”

“…”

“…Alright. Let me put it this way, then. What is this Foundation that you work for?”

“…”

“We managed to recover a lot of documentation from that case. You're no idealist, gun-for-hire hack, you've got dispatches, mission parameters… this looks really, really bad, friend. Like, terrorist bad. Do you know what happens to terrorists these days? We can say there was an… accident in transport, and drop you down the darkest hole you've ever seen. You'll never s—”

“You have no idea what a dark hole is.”

“Really? Why don't you enlighten me then, tough guy?”

“Have you ever seen someone turn in to vapor? Not pulped by an explosion or anything, but real vapor. Just atomize over the space of a few seconds, screaming all the while? I've had to shoot people who I've shared lunch with, bummed smokes from, because they had a kind of eel inside them that was eating their nervous system from the inside out and turning them in to a plague-

spreading serial rapist. I've sat for weeks in a sealed cell with no outside human contact, wondering if I'd start showing bumps on my skin, which would mean a long, slow degeneration into something lower than an animal. If you're going to scare me, you're going to need to step up your game from a little recreational waterboarding."

"What the fuck are you tal-"

"None of you get it. I told you, right at the start, you need to turn me loose. I'm not a toy that anyone is going to leave just laying around. You've taken something that doesn't belong to you, Special Agent Danbury, and you've taken it from someone who does not share well."

"Ahh, I see, friends in high places and everything? You're not the first one to try that… cry to me about such and such connection, this and that thing you can make happen with one phone call. Wanna know the thing about that? I don't care. You're not dealing with some pig-fucking local beat cop. I'm not bound by anything as silly as a code of conduct. My job is to keep my country safe. Period. Everything else is secondary to that, including your well-being and humane treatment."

"As I said, you'll need to step it up a bit. It's been too long, which means they've decided not to play it overly nice… you might want to pick that up."

"What the fuck are you… thought I turned this off. Hold on you little shit, i'm not nearly done with you. This is Agent Danbury, you shouAAGGG"

"That's the… oh shit, what's the word… mem-something. It's a sound or an image that can make your brain shit itself, then die. Can never remember the name. Can you hear me still? Damn it…"

(several loud noises, followed by a door slamming)

"Took y'all long enough."'

“Sorry, we had bigger stuff on the burner than a fuckup like you, Grims.”

“Can you at least get my cuffs off?”

“No time. We popped the holding cells, turning into a real madhouse. Did you give anything up?”

“Please. Who cares what a dead man hears?”

“You'd be surprised… oh dammit, is that still on?”

“Wait, let me j-”

End Transcript

Intercepted GOC Communication collected from mobile command post near city, via remote audio probe

“What the hell am I looking at, Captain?”

“We… uh… actually aren't entirely sure yet. It's definitely a target of interest, but it's not really fitting any of the preset profiles as yet. We're expanding our search parameters.”

“Why is it wearing a bag on its head?”

“Ah, we're also not sure about that… we can't compel it to remove it, and attempting to do so by force has… not gone well. It's otherwise rather compliant, so we've left it alone for now.”

“I see. Now, the most obvious question is why am I looking at a big, bag-headed freak who's sitting at a table and not lying on a slab?”

“Yes, indeed… well, that's the thing. You see, we were following a lead on the fox-girl thing, and ran in to a couple of targets trying to flee the city. Happy accident,

really… anyway, as we went to intercept, this big guy shows up, and starts attacking them. It was weird, though… this thing, whatever it is, is obviously extremely strong, but all he did was bash them up… then just stood there, waiting for us to intercept. I ordered Rodriguez to put a couple rounds through the big guy's bag head, but he missed."

"Rodriguez doesn't miss."

"I know sir. He was pretty upset about it. He double-tapped first, then mag-dumped. Every one of them missed just by a hair. I'm not really sure how, the big guy didn't seems to really move or anything. Anyway, we moved in and secured the scene, tried to restrain the remaining target. He kept holding up his hands, nodding his head. He… it was trying to surrender, I think. Hopkins tried to put restraints on him. He got his wrist broken. After that, we decided to just go with it for the time being."

"Is this one of the Foundation strays?"

"No sir, at least not one that we have any record of. We're combing the database now, but other then a vague surveillance hit from about four years ago, there's been nothing."

"All right…so it's big, strong, and somewhat docile, ignoring the personal space issues. Again, why hasn't it been shot or gassed yet, and why did I need to come down here in person?"

"Ok, here's the thing… it can't, or won't, talk. It has to touch someone to communicate with anything other than hand gestures and body language. It's…not fun for the one being touched…but they apparently can see… something, some sort of image or language or something that is some kind of communication. It's not a direct translation, but the gist of it gets across. We thought he was attacking someone for a second, and they looked

half-dead, b—”

“Out with it, man!”

“He…ah…knows where the Library is, sir.”

“…The Library. As in THE Library? As in KTE-7909-Alexandria?”

“Yes sir. He's an exile, or a escapee, or some such, we're not entirely sure yet, but whatever it is, he's kicked out and not allowed back. However, there's something important there that he wants, and he's willing to show us how to get there, if we help him get it back.”

“You don't actually intend…”

“Oh no sir, not at all… but this is a unique opportunity, to say the very least. Once he shows the initial strike team the way, we can dispose of him, then roll the main force right in to the nest. No more nibbling the edges, scraping off little corners… right to the heart, a direct punch to the very core.”

“This is some fine work, captain. How soon can you get a team ready?”

“It's already on standby, sir… we're… ahh… just waiting for the native guide, so to speak.”

“Why is he just sitting there, looking at the sky like that?”

“He said something about the sun. We're not sure what, but he was insistent that we wait.”

“I want progress reports every hour, on the hour, understood? Keep the team on Ready Two. The moment you're ready to jump, begin the operation on your own discretion.”

“Yes, sir.”

"Oh, and one last thing, Captain. This is real wilderness country you're walking into. Aside from rumors, we have no knowledge of the Library whatsoever. Expect anything, prepare for everything. You're authorized to escalate up to Response Five if necessary to complete the mission or extract your team. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir. The boys will be happy to hear that."

"Don't be. Just because we're letting you use ray guns doesn't mean this is going to be easy. You're heading straight into the Wild West here. You'll need all the gear you can get just to survive.

Mr. Dark had settled into his office at the New York Club with a minimum of pain and suffering on all sides. It lacked the character of The Museum, but with a few homey touches, the odd bunyip-hide rug and Olmec knives, it felt almost right.

Cheryl brought him a short stack of newspaper entries, gleaned from a pile of papers nationwide. Mr. Dark browsed it with and chuckled, drinking thick, oily coffee. Authorities were debating whether Boomer's work was a terrorist bomb gone off by accident, or a clandestine meth lab run by someone who had failed Chemistry 101. Even if Harken had escaped, he'd surely gotten the point. Several of them, most likely…

He read further, about a "person of interest" followed by a surprisingly accurate sketch and description of Boomer. That was going to be a problem. Boomer was too sweet a lad to lose to the wolves of the law, and not the sort to stand up to any kind of serious interrogation. He scribbled a note to have him replanted a good distance away… assuming anyone could uproot him with a minimum of explosions. Bah, other people's problems.

At least he had gotten started on acquisitions. The disease-controlling girl was safely tucked away in Facility B, and Willard was already starting to teach her the benefits of cooperation. When breaking in any bitch, canine or sapien, it was always best to start

with positive reinforcement. Fine food, lodgings, shiny things, and an admirable parade of strapping lads had her in amicable spirits. For now. He knew her type very well, she'd soon want more, and more… and she'd get it. The anal electrical probe had the amazing ability to enact dramatic and rapid attitude change. He could have started that way, yes, but he adored watching the loving care people took when constructing their own gallows.

The kumiho was going to be more of a problem. She'd been spotted with her associates, and he knew them well enough: that lot of mystical (and mythical) riff-raff from The Library. She had to be there… he picked absently at the chip in his canine. Perhaps a visit would be in order? No reason not to, really… it'd been ages, and he could check on a few matters as well. He chuckled deep in his throat, tapping his foot on the slick bunyip hide. No matter how furious they might be over The Museum, they had to let him visit The Library. Rules were rules. The very idea of that impotent, boiling rage was reason enough, really.

Percival looked up from his book and over to the cat sitting on the chair. She licked her paw languidly, pointedly ignoring the sound of approaching boots. She looked up at Percival with a slow, sleepy wink. "Visitors. Unfriendly ones, I believe." Before he could ask, she promptly curled up, stuffed her head under her ribs, and started snoring.

The three men entered in a clump of boots and the soft tap of wingtip shoes. A short, grinning man flanked by two human bulldogs, armed to the teeth. The short one had some kind of long coat, with thick, frayed cuffs and collars… or some kind of very thick fur. The thick sleeves and slight tilt of his head gave the impression of some old, threadbare bird of prey. The other two were all business, looking somewhere between cops and soldiers…but with an oozing aura of pure menace.

Weapons were drawn before anyone could say a word. Swords, sickle, crystal rod, machine guns and massive pistols were quickly pointing across the short gap between the three men and the small collection of Library residents, all aimed at areas of the body both tender and vital. The short man smiled with the slimy, cloying self-

satisfaction of a ice cream man passing out treats dipped in arsenic.

She stayed in the back of the room, not sure whether to duck, or laugh. It was the most ludicrous standoff She had ever seen, but could turn ugly in an instant; She wasn't sure what She wanted to see happen more. Fear and tension radiated off the group like the heat from sun-baked mass graves. Except for the short man. He smelled of spice, and oil, and moss… and something that made her nose twitch and tendons tighten like piano wire.

He waved away the thick blade hanging inches from his nose like it was a butterfly intruding on a morning walk. “Now is there really call for all this, sweethearts? I'm just here to renew my library card…and tarry a bit with that sweet little thing perched up on the pillows there.”

He gestured to the bespectacled girl with a wink and a waggle of his fingers. She could barely decide whether to growl or blush. She ended up doing both.

The standoff was broken by a low cough.

"If I were you, I would put those weapons away," Percival said. He was standing between both groups with his empty hands held out to the sides, looking back and forth between them with an expression of utter calm.

"You can't take us all," one of the big bodyguards snarled.

"I don't intend to," Percival said firmly. "The Library will do it for me. I'm just trying to prevent a tragedy."

He looked up at the second floor balcony, where a large number of black-shrouded figures were looking down at the tableau below. More of them were coming out from the shadows, gathering around the scene in a broad circle… just waiting. Watching.

One by one, the weapons were put away, and one by one, the faceless guardians of the Library disappeared back into the shadows from whence they had come. Percival turned to the three men in black suits and nodded. "Carry on," he said, "but remember where you are."

"Of course," Dark said, "My apologies for the rudeness and short-sightedness of my companions, sir knight."

"I'm not a knight," Percival said, dismissively. He turned away and picked up the longsword he had left leaning against the wall, then walked back into the stacks.

The small man brushed a small piece of lint off his shoulder then walked to the back of the room, where a rather nondescript, mousy-looking girl was looking up at him from behind several large stacks of very old, rather dusty books. "May I sit down, dearie?"

"If you wish," She replied, in a sundew-sweet voice.

One of the big thugs pulled out the chair for the short man, who sat down with all the grace of a stalking heron. "Allow me to introduce myself," he said. "My name is Dark, of Marshall, Carter, and Dark, Limited."

"Never heard of you," She lied.

"Good," Dark said. "I spend a lot of bloody time, energy and money making sure that's the case. I, on the other hand, have heard of you. The last kumiho. Your work at that… convention… was exquisite. From an artistic standpoint."

"You are a fan of the arts, then?"

"I am a patron of the arts," Dark corrected. "And I wish to be yours."

"Interesting. Tell me more," She said, leaning back in Her chair and steepling Her fingers.

"Then I'll get to the point sweetheart. Simply put, I am a provider. I provide wondrous things to those who have the money, resources and sensibilities to truly appreciate them. I can sate any desire, quench any thirst, and one of the things my associates desire is you. In exchange, I can do the same for you. You can live like a queen in perfect decadence. You will hunt prey beyond any imagining. You can kill to your heart's content, and instead of being vilified, you will be applauded. Congratulated, even."

"And a whore as well, I suppose," She said.

He grinned devlishly. "On occasion, yes. But then again, I don't think prudishness is a vice you possess in great measure, is it, sweetheart?"

"Hmm. A generous offer. But if I refuse?"

"In that case, we call in the hounds and run you to the ground. The end result is the same. The process, however, is not nearly as pleasant for you. For me, however… well… it's been years since my last fox hunt," Dark said with an almost apologetic smile.

"How very honest," She said dryly. "Allow me to repay you in kind. I have had a better offer."

"What, from those idiots who broke you out? Small fry. Useless. They can't help or protect you."

"Not from them," She said. "From their Teacher."

"A raving lunatic who's read too much Karl Marx," Dark said dismissively. "You'll get no help from him."

"Hm," She gave an enigmatic smile, then stood up and turned to walk away.

Something about her expression immediately raised Dark's hackles. That girl was far too smug not to be hiding something… "Wait," he snarled, the playful carelessness dropping from his voice like a discarded coat. "What do you know? What are you not telling me?"

"Do the amaryllis flowers still bloom in Elysium?" She asked.

The chair clattered to the floor as Dark leaped to his feet. She allowed herself a moment of satisfaction at the shock in his wide, pale eyes. "He's alive?" the short man hissed.

"Despite your best efforts, yes," She said.

"And he's still planning to go through with it?"

"Of course."

"I see," Mister Dark said. "Simon?"

"Yes, boss?"

"Kill her."

Simon acted reflexively: the gun was in his hand before he knew he had drawn it, and he'd fired before he was aware he'd been given the order, even as his eyes widened in horror at what he was doing. The bullets passed harmlessly through the smiling girl and blasted some holes through the bookshelf behind her. A moment later, the illusion flickered and vanished, a small, tattered leaf falling to the floor.

A moment after that, three black-hooded figures appeared from the darkness and lunged towards the big man. Simon screamed and turned to shoot, but one of the Guardians casually broke his arm and then grabbed him by his shattered wrist. By the time his brother Johan had gotten to his feet, Simon had vanished, dragged into the shadows by the sinister cloaked figures.

"Clever girl," Dark sighed, rubbing his temple. He hadn't expected it would work, but it was worth a shot.

He turned and started walking out of the library quickly but easily, ignoring the stares and frightened looks the other library denizens were giving him. "Boss," Johan said. "We gotta go get Simon! We can't let them…"

"Didn't you hear a goddamn word of what I told you on the trip here? If your brother's not dead already, he's one of THEM now. The Library always collects… and they're always in need of librarians. We're leaving."

"But boss…"

"You're fired," Dark snapped. "Fuck off and die."

He turned away from the big bodyguard, ignoring the stunned look on his face as the man reactively drew the pistol from his coat

pocket and put it in his mouth. He threw open the double doors as the gunshot rang out behind him. A twist of time and space later, Dark re-emerged in a back alley in Chicago, with a large black luxury car parked among the refuse and graffiti. The chauffeur gave him a surprised look, then shrugged. "Where are Simon and Johan?" he asked.

"Their services are no longer needed," Dark growled. "Now drive."

He picked up the gold-plated car phone and started dialing. "Willard? This is Dark. Fast-track the bitch. I want her ready by sunset tomorrow… what? Then LET her break! We'll put her back together eventually, I need her ready as soon as possible! What? No, I will NOT explain myself, just get to work!"

He slammed the phone down vengefully, then quickly dialed a second number. "Marshall, Carter? This is Dark. Yes, I know what time it is over there, I don't give a shit— no, I don't care what you were in the middle of, tell them to wait. The Fourth Partner is alive."

"That's right," Dark continued. "The fucking altruist… and he's still trying to carry out his fucking revolution. I need all available assets under my control immediately… no, I don't need your help, I need your fucking resources! You two nitwits work on keeping the clientèle safe. What? I don't fucking care. Make something up."

Dark slammed the handset down and fumed silently, glaring at the phone. Blind, stupid, helpless louts…and now even more time drained to deal with everything on a direct, personal level, it was all so…uncomfortable.

He picked his chipped canine, glaring out the window, as the car slid though the streets like a V-8 powered serpent. Worthless, all of it, and all to no purpose, by all rights he should throw the whole mess in the fire, and cultivate more, instead of trying to control all of this by…

Mr. Dark froze for eight seconds, then slowly smiled a grin as slow and keen as a stiletto in the night.

Of course. Of course…The little vixen would reach out, insecure

despite her posturing, but to more… intrinsic aid. Lunatics too blind or single-minded to see the danger… and in so doing, they'd force the next round, wouldn't they? When the children keep acting up, Daddy will eventually start cracking heads… and oh my, weren't they acting up now?

He chuckled softly, comfortable again, leaning into the plush seats. Unexpected, unplanned for, and perhaps dangerous, yes… but if he was anything, he was a man who loved a good, bloody streetfight.

If it just happened to take place between massive groups of well trained men and women, so much the better.

Global Memo
From: 05-9
To: All 05 and Level 4 command staff
Re: CONTROL
CC: Central Records, F.O.B. command datahubs

> My dear ladies and gentlemen,
>
> I understand that this has been a trying time, to say the least. Our position has been heavily rocked by both change and attack. Former situations, long held to be understood and secure, and no longer under control. That's really the heart of the matter, control. We've lost it, for the first time in countless years, we're not in the position of majority and power.

This is the opening to the letter I wished to write, but I can't. We got our heads kicked in, yes. We're still picking up the pieces, we're damaged, we're not at a solid point yet, and so forth.

BULLSHIT.

A group of nothing upstarts kicked in our front door, other groups are taking escaped SCP items AT WILL, we're STILL not at capacity, and nobody seems to care. Even

more, these idiotic kids have damaged the Veil Protocol, and rather than trying to maintain it, the others seem to be taking the cue from them and moving openly.

We end this NOW, goddammit. I want a semblance of control, and I want it right the FUCKING HELL NOW. I want SCP items tracked and being corralled by direct assault teams. I want intel on enemy agencies and teams moving to quash their operations. We are not a whiny, hand-wringing group of frightened children in lab coats and riot gear, we are The motherfucking Foundation.

They've decided they want to fight this fight in the open? We need to remind them why they want us to stay in the shadows.

All MTF teams are being mobilized as of 0800 this morning. Special investigation and terrorist cells are being activated worldwide. A full media clamp in the form of a “Snowblind” protocol has been enacted for North America and Europe. Worldwide coverage will be enacted within 24 hours. All currently uncontained SCPs will have hand-picked recovery teams assigned and moving within 48 hours. All current Level 4 command staff will undergo a full competency hearing immediately after the current crisis is resolved.

Direct, wide-level SCP item dispatch and authorization is currently being considered under the Pandora's Box Protocol.

Control will be restored.

We secure. We contain. We protect. And nothing is going to stop us.

O5-9

When the nurse walked into the hospital room that morning, she

found the bed empty. At first, she thought that her troublesome patient had just escaped his medical confinement to head down to the cafeteria and get a cup of Jell-O or a contra-indicated shot of bourbon. Again.

When she saw the note, however, she realized that things were worse than she'd thought.

> *Dear O5 cunts,*
>
> *Consider this my letter of motherfucking resignation.*
>
> *"Alto Clef"*

Antivirus

Audio Log Site 17 PA System

The following was taken from backup recordings of Site 17 PA Logs. Due to the circumstance of their retrieval, some of the recordings have been lost or damaged. The timeline of the recordings has been reconstructed based on the events during Incident 234-900-Tempest Night.

1-1143: Wastes of skin, revolting bags of meat.

1-1245: [Electronic noise for 12 seconds]

1-1247: Rankling little piece of shit.

1-1283: Foreign [EXPLETIVE].

1-1286: [Electronic noise for 33 seconds]ut up.

1-1304: Level of a zoophyte, suited only for pond scum. You are disgusting.

1-1306: [Electronic noise for 23 seconds] [EXPLETIVE] [EXPLETIVE] [EXPLETIVE].

Blackguard Feed 087-104

1-1404 *MTF-Ω1 (Blackguards), enters Sublevel-C3 from Stairwell 46.*

MTF-Ω1-1: Stairwell 46 has become choked with debris. We are unable to proceed further. We will begin sterilizing Sublevel-C3 and head down through this section's sublevels from here.

OP-Ω1-1: Operator confirms.

1-1407 *MTF-Ω1-4 and MTF-Ω1-5 open the electrical junction box for Sublevel-C3, revealing the interior circuitry, having since been heavily infested by SCP-229 and partially converted into a biological substrate by the effects of SCP-890. MTF-Ω1-4 begins severing SCP-229 using an oxyacetylene torch.*

1-1408 *Lighting fails in Hallway 67, MTF-Ω1 members activate helmet-mounted maglites. Electrical disturbances in Sublevel-C3 begin increasing in intensity.*

1-1410 *MTF-Ω1-4 has dislodged roughly 50 percent of the SCP-229 infestation.*

MTF-Ω1-6: Did you hear that? [Insufficient Audio to Confirm]

MTF-Ω1-6 and MTF-Ω1-7 begin moving down Hallway 67, using the ignition flame of their XFOF7s to provide additional illumination.

MTF-Ω1-7: We got the front, one-five.

1-1411 *All electronic systems in Sublevel-C3 fail simultaneously. Wires and cabling begin erupting from the walls around MTF-Ω1, severally wounding MTF-Ω1-4. MTF-Ω1-6 and MTF-Ω1-7 barrage numerous SCP-229 instances with chemical fire propellant. MTF-Ω1-1 engages masses of wires in melee combat with a trench knife, while pulling MTF-Ω1-4 to relative safety.*

MTF-Ω1-1 [EXPLETIVE] they got the [EXPLETIVE] Intel wrong again. Since when has 229 been prehensile?!

MTF-Ω1-2 retrieves oxyacetylene torch and continues severing the main junction box. MTF-Ω1-3 covers MTF-Ω1-2's position from the southern flank.

1-1412 *Instances of SCP-229 lose much of their cohesion as the main junction box is largely destroyed. Instances are observed to infest each other, however by*

this time the SCP-229 population has been decimated by sustained fire from MTF-Ω1-6 and MTF-Ω1-7.

1-1413 *Remaining SCP-229 entities rendered combat ineffective. MTF-Ω1-4 given first-aid, administered painkillers and an analgesic wrap to wounds sustained to the left arm and torso. MTF-Ω1-6 and MTF-Ω1-7 begin standard mop-up procedure while MTF-Ω1-1 through MTF-Ω1-5 begin searching for survivors and SCP objects.*

1-1424 *MTF-Ω1 exits Sublevel C-3.*

Recovered Documents from [REDACTED]

Memo Advanced Stages of Infection

Compromised systems exhibit intelligence. Experiment terminated.

[Documents continue on file MEMO-299-D7]

Attacking The Darkness

Belfast, Ireland

The GOC surveillance team who used the flat as a staging area had been stationed there for four weeks, doing an assessment of a Known Threat Entity in the area: a young man with low-level mind control powers who, so far, didn't know that he was anything other than a charismatic and persuasive university student with better-than-average luck with the ladies. Given the weak level of his powers, and his generally agreeable and stable personality, the watch team were generally inclined to classify him as a Response Level 1 and move on: someone to check in on once in a while, but not worth the hassle of neutralizing.

Agent Chandra was on her way back from a fish-and-chips shop with a big paper bag containing her and her partner's supper when the red Toyota hatchback pulled alongside her. "Excuse me," the young man in the front passenger seat said, "Can you tell me how to get to the Ulster Museum?"

Agent Chandra turned away to point, and that was when the man in the back seat raised his gun and shot her.

The four men in the small hatchback burst from the car carrying submachineguns. They booted down the front door of the building, hustling up the three flights of stairs silently, bowling over a confused (and, soon, terrified) sixty year-old lady in the process. Three of them took up positions outside a particular apartment, while the fourth pulled a beanbag-like object from his jacket pocket and hurled it at the door.

The door shattered off its hinges, skidded down the hallway, and came to a halt at the feet of a rather confused young man monitoring the feeds from several hidden cameras on a bank of computer monitors. Flaherty reached for the handgun on his desk and died slumped over his keyboard with eight bullets in various parts of his

body.

They caught Meehan in the shower and blew his brains out against the cracked and mildewed white tile. Lincoln managed to get to his weapon and fire a couple of shots through his bedroom door before the invaders bounced in a flashbang. He was trying to throw it out the window when it went off. Two rounds turned him from a blind, screaming man in to a silent, dead one.

The men stripped the computers of their hard drives, grabbed whatever else they could, and stole a few small (but valuable) items, while one member of their team spray-painted the words "Tiocfaidh ár lá" on the wall.

They ran down the stairs and piled into the car, disappearing into the rapidly advancing night. The entire incident took no more than six minutes.

Pasadena, California, United States of America

Mister Grey smiled as he walked through a wing of the Norton Simon museum that didn't appear on any maps, the one that Frank Gehry didn't even know he was building for them when the museum was renovated in the 1950s. The museum was justifiably proud of its collection of contemporary art, but none were quite so avant-garde as the works being displayed today.

He walked past a piece named "Janus," proffering a tray of champagne to the two well-dressed patrons studying the sculpture. The two men (one young, one old) who had been melded together, back to back, to form this piece writhed slowly in their drug-addled agony, offering a unique perspective on the passage of time and an illustration of the tension between the present, the past, and the future.

The artist was standing near her largest piece ("Anemone" - a study of societal pressure, through the medium of a hundred arms grafted into a sheet of living flesh, the arms constantly reaching out towards the viewer in a mute plea for aid), demonstrating the method she had used to create this artwork with a pair of gerbils, melding them

together and separating them again by a touch of the rust-encrusted scalpel she had purchased though their club.

When the lights went out, and the underground museum wing was plunged into darkness, Mister Grey didn't panic. He didn't even worry when the lights came back on and he discovered that the artist was unconscious and her scalpel was stolen.

He did, however, get quite upset when he found out that all of the art pieces had been killed. Damned Philistines, no appreciation for high culture at all.

New Delhi, India

Even here, in this land of old religions and older traditions, the voice of The Broken could be heard.

A small voice, perhaps, drowned by the crush of bodies, but relentless, grinding through the ignorant resistance of the blind and lost. Insistent. Irresistible. Even more so now that the foul jailer of God had been slapped down, the voice of The Broken felt cleaner, brighter, stronger then ever before.

Deep below the city they sang and rocked, these new children, fresh to the comforts of The Broken. Brother Sig watched in pride as they prayed in sweating earnest to the reliquary on the podium. A small vial, yes…but a product of pure love and evangelical devotion. The breath of God, the so called “clockwork virus”, had been known to the faithful for some time…but this was no mere breath. This was the roar of its voice, the wind from its great passing.

Nurtured by the monks in the Australian monastery, this was a hundred times faster, turning the flesh to the divine in a matter of hours, spreading as fast as the passing breeze. When the devotions were finished, Brother Sig would release the vial into the Ganges, and bring thousands to the will of The Broken. Soon, hundreds of thousands would turn ageless, endless voices to the sky, and bring-

His thoughts and flesh were abruptly interrupted by metal fragments.

The MTF came hot on the heels of the first shotgun shell, pistols making a strobe light in the dim room, the chanting replaced by frenzied screaming, then silence, the smells of cordite, sweat and shit thick in the air. The four men in gas masks clumped to the central dais, one reaching out and gingerly lifting the thick vial of silvery-brown liquid.

“Not a bad smash and grab.”

“Easy on the smash, there…”

“Bugger off, don't be so literal.”

“Looks like the lot of them…so much for "God's" protection.”

They quickly secured the vial in a steel canister, clumping back to the surface at a brisk pace. Had they lingered a bit more, they might have heard the sound wafting up from the pile of bodies. Soft and small, but insistent.

The sound of ticking.

Quantico, Virginia, United States of America

When Agent Wolfram came into work the next morning, he found his office being quickly emptied by men wearing FBI windbreakers. "What's going on, boss?" he asked.

"You're being reassigned to white-collar crimes, Wolf," Assistant Director Pavlova said. She handed the young man a manila folder. "You're a good agent. You deserve better than to be stuck down here chasing ghosts."

"I see," Wolfram said slowly. "What about Uecker?"

"I guess you didn't hear? Uecker's dead. He killed himself last night."

"Let me guess," Wolfram said, very slowly and very carefully. "Shot himself twice in the chest and once in the head?"

"I don't like what you're implying, agent," Pavlova said.

"Well, then, let me make it very obvious!" Wolfram shouted. "You and your bosses have never liked the work I'm doing. Well, I'm done. I quit. You can reassign me all you like, but you can't stop a private citizen from searching for the truth. And it's out there. I know where to find it."

He slammed his badge and gun down on the empty desk and stormed out of the building to his rather beat-up Honda Accord. He took a moment to rest his head against the steering wheel, then started up his car and pulled out of the parking lot.

In the movies, car bombs always engulf the vehicle in a massive fireball: this is because most car explosions are gas-ignited. It looks visually interesting, minimizes dangerous shrapnel on the set, and helps cover up the fact that there are no people in the car. In the case of the bomb that killed Agent Wolfram, the saboteur had decided to go more subtle: a tiny explosive charge on the main brake line, triggered when the car reached a certain speed, sufficed.

A.D. Pavlova shook her head sadly when she heard the report of the fatal five-car pileup on the radio a half hour later. "Should have taken the transfer, Wolf," she sighed.

Hong Kong, China

“Good god Harken, we're just going after a low-level shape shifter…”

“What? Do you think I'm under-prepared?”

“…how many barrels does that thing have?”

“It's called 'accuracy through target saturation', look it up. It also gives me a mild and oddly inappropriate erection.”

“I am getting a transfer. Today.”

Baghdad, Iraq

In the worst terrorist attack to date, the National Museum of Iraq was attacked and leveled by a massive car bomb planted by an unknown

party. Not that anyone needed to know, of course. Just another senseless act of violence in a country that had seen too many.

It was a pity more people on the investigation team hadn't seen the movie "Die Hard."

Zurich, Switzerland

"You found HOW many skips in Swiss bank deposit boxes?"

Ulan Bator, Mongolia

"All right, guys, let's go catch us a death worm."

Buenos Aires, Argentina

"That's a lot of Hitler clones."

"We're going to need more napalm."

Foggy Bottom, Washington, DC, United States of America

"You'll never get away with this."

"Won't I?"

"You can't. You can't just kill a Congressman in the middle of Washington, DC, and expect to get away with it. There will be investigations. There will be inquiries. They'll find out all about you…"

"I see. You seem to be laboring under several false assumptions, Congressman. The first is that they will discover you've been murdered. That will not be the case. What they will discover is your naked body hanging from a noose looped over a hotel room shower curtain rod, with an extra-large sized tube of KY jelly close to hand, and a semen-stained copy of "Barnyard Beauties" crumpled at your feet. I honestly don't expect the investigators will investigate very

hard."

"Wait, you can't…"

"Your second false assumption is that we even care. You see, we're operating under Snowblind protocol. Small events, here and there, nothing too huge, but enough to do the job. A church burning down here, a small terrorist attack in the Middle East, a couple of nondescript, senseless murders of non-white, non-blonde, non-women. Things that might normally lead the news on a slow news day, except that it's not going to be a slow news day. The media are all going to find something more interesting to talk about. Maybe Paris Hilton is going to get a full-body tattoo of herself sucking a giant cock. Maybe the cast of Jersey Shore is going to have an orgy with a pair of sheep in the middle of a shopping mall. Or maybe a stodgy old conservative Congressman is going to be found dead of autoerotic asphyxiation while in possession of copious amounts of bestiality porn."

"… oh God, no, you can't do this! I have a wife! I have kids! I have constituents! You can't let them think—"

Inter-site memo from Resource Allocation Department, excerpt

> I swear to god, if I see the words “covered in fire”, “extreme threat suppression”, or “requesting more munitions” in ONE more goddamn report, I'm taking the month off. Who knew cutting the leash on groups of well trained, highly disciplined Agents could result in something about as dangerous and controllable as a blind chimp with a shotgun?

Inter-site memo from Information Control Department, excerpt

> Would you PLEASE, PLEASE, PLEASE tell your testosterone-poisoned monsters to at least TRY to be a LITTLE discreet? I know you "feet on the ground" guys think we've got it easy, but I'd like to see one of you hyperviolent rockheads try to spindoctor four guys in

black ninja suits gunning Mickey Mouse down in the middle of the Main Street Electrical Parade.

Inter-site memo from Legal Department, excerpt

FUCK YOU FUCK YOU FUCK YOU

thrown out and you'll get no help whatsoever."

There was a deadly, tense moment of silence before Harrington reluctantly sat down. Sandra kept her gun trained on him the whole time.

If the old man noticed the interruption, he chose not to acknowledge it. "I follow a simple rule," he said softly. "You get back what you put in. Provide me with resources, and I will get results. The more resources you provide, the more results you get. This requires a modicum of trust… but then, when we stand with our backs against the wall, there is nowhere to go but forward."

The man in the red robes, who had been sitting silently in the corner since the meeting began, rose to his feet. "Then you shall have everything."

"Holiness!" protested the woman in white. "You cannot…"

"The Teacher was right," The High Priest of the Broken interrupted. "As were you. This is no longer about The Great Work. This is about preventing The Final Shattering. This man has shown what he can do using the aid of a few. What more could he accomplish with the entire weight of the Church behind him?"

The man in the red turned to the old man. "The armies of the Broken God are at your disposal, Teacher," he said. "Use them as you will."

Basking in the Light

Network Correspondence #000004

From: Prof. Bjornsen, [07832]
To: Dr. Dier, [06302]

Dier,

SCP-229 has largely been contained, and everything above D-9 has been incinerated or disabled. There's not a single connection, so we should be safe. We've had some trouble dealing with SCP-106, but the lack of living people in the lower sections have allowed us to lure it up to B-3 and set up temporary containment. The air filtration is running at just over capacity, but we've requisitioned H13 filters and they'll be here within the next two weeks. We haven't seen hide nor hair of 682 since the first week. It took half an MTF down with him, but he got the torched. Seismic imaging hasn't picked him up, so he's being pretty quiet. Gives me the creeps. I'll keep you posted.

Bjornsen

Dr. Dier's eyes looked away from the screen as he felt his bowels rapidly constrict. He pushed the portable laptop to one side of the bed sheets and leaned over the edge opposite. The contents of his stomach exited his mouth, consisting of little more than water, into a half-filled bucket beside him. The vomiting was an annoyance. It could be grown used to, but you always needed a pail nearby to prevent a mess. He considered calling the orderly, but he did not have the energy to yell to her. The smell of medicine was thick enough in the air to cover the vomit. It was the scent of cleanliness and bad flavoring, and it permeated the room horribly.

The dwelling itself probably was a re-purposed home of one of the

Foundation's few surviving retirees. Judging by the remnants of its previous owner (see, pictures frames, carnations), Dier speculated that it had been vacated so that the medical teams would have more space to tend to the wounded.

A sharp pain radiated from the back of his skull. Tightly wrapped, white linen bandages held the mush that made up his head together. It was tender to the touch, but the morphine was enough to dull sensations to a bearable level. The attending staff had told him he had suffered a skull fracture, and was at risk of contracting meningitis. Until it healed, he was not much more than a useless sack. Dier hated that feeling of helplessness. He wanted out of the hospital. Back to Site 17.

He was too deeply in thought to notice the orderly return. She refilled the IV. Dier found himself slipping into unconsciousness.

Network Correspondence #000017

From: Prof. Bjornsen, [07832]
To: Dr. Dier, [06302]

Dier,

We sent another MTF down last night. They didn't come back too pretty. Five deaths, four injuries. They didn't even fight 682 this time, it was just the walls, fucking exploded and speared the shit out of them. Future intervention has been put on hold until we have some way of fighting it. We've been finding traces of SCP-229 tucked away all over D-8. A couple junction boxes had to be covered in gasoline and burned. Some of the other doctors have started talk about pumping propane into the bottom of the facility, another mentioned flooding it with molten brass. I'm inclined to listen to either one of those plans, but trying not to blow up the site is why we're in this situation. Dr. Wachtel said that we might be able to get some napalm, flood it down each of the primary electrical shafts. From there we could infiltrate the secondary shafts and go straight to D-9. At least then we wouldn't have to leave the place in ruins.

Bjornsen

Bjornsen rolled backwards onto corrugated cardboard. He gave the message a once-over before pressing the 'send' button. The small bar which displayed the loading time crept across the page. It would be several hours before Site 17's emergency systems would find the bandwidth to send it. Large-scale breaches were relatively uncommon in the Foundation, but those which compromised the containment of one or two SCPs happened regularly. He had his share of experience dealing with these kinds of problems, and it was simply best to deal with it and do your job. Complainers had a habit of being 'reassigned to Keter duty' and 'voluntarily' putting themselves into similarly lethal situations. Resources were tight, especially during a disaster, and there was no point bothering people for unnecessary things. The loading bar traversed a pixel on the screen. He sipped a cup of cold coffee and set it down beside the terminal. It tasted terribly sour, but a flashing light on his phone took his attention away from it.

- - - AGENDA: MEETING AT 2320 - - - CURRENT TIME IS 2251 - - - (1) MISSED CALL - - -

Someone called him? Those blasted earplugs must have dampened his hearing more than he thought. The screeching coming from floors below was still loud as hell. It had gotten a lot worse lately, the random insults devolving getting a bit more common than anyone would like to admit. When he was supposedly out of the range of the speakers, some whispers would reach him. There were others who would hear them on occasion, crews which would report back that someone else was in the tunnels. The PA system and its adjuncts pervaded every floor, attempts to sever connections between them made no real change. Much of the broadcast system was hidden beneath concrete, to survive even extreme duress, and they would be the culprits of that terrible noise. The maintenance teams had much larger problems to deal with than a few errant machines, anyway.

Bjornsen grabbed his phone and stood up. The loading bar had made just a little progress. There would be no point in watching it creep until the meeting. He shuffled through a list of alerts. Repairs

needing work mainly, but there, a call from Dr. Vang. Since most of internal communications were shut down, staff had to rely on portable phones and walkie-talkies. Tonnes of dirt were the enemy when it came to speaking with anyone. He shuffled out of the makeshift office and held the phone in the air, before hitting talk.

No luck, his ear was met with beeping and failure. The lights sputtered down the hallway. He figured that it would be better to get moving and see if reception could be obtained someplace else. Small clouds of dust were kicked up by his shoes with each step he made, and the air was terribly irritating in his chest. It was possible that six-eight-two was just doing this to bother all of them. It was a spiteful asshole. The phone suddenly let out a terrible ring right next to his ear. Bjornsen swore silently as he picked up.

"That you, Vang? I thought you had to get Norton Antivirus still."

"Injured? How the hell can you injure someone who lives in dreams?" Bjornsen rubbed his brow. Dr. Vang had always seemed a bit peculiar but at the moment he sounded much more eccentric than usual. Something was wrong.

"Yeah, well, just get someone to dream they're a surgeon or something. Why a- oh. Oh."

"Well fuck."

"How long before it reaches," Bjornsen looked at the nearest office plaque, "Hallway 102? I thought it was contained off this level."

"Shit, fuck, can't you send some-"

A terrible screech erupted from the speaker. It clattered as it struck the concrete floor, Bjornsen cursing as his ears rang. The noise did not stop, and he drove his heel into the phone's screen. It died immediately, but the noise did not stop. It seemed to be growing, coming from deep beneath the floor. The lights flickered intensely for a few seconds, and he began running for the stairs. The noise made his ears blister, but he wished it was loud enough to drown out the sound of walls cracking and bursting several floors below. The ground trembled, and the air became thick with dust. He felt his

heart quicken. The stairs were just a few hallways down, six-eight-two couldn't possibly move that fast.

Dr. Vang would have alerted site security by now, undoubtedly, they would arrive soon. Bjornsen dared not turn around, the screeching and cracking already erupted from the opposite end of the hallway. A massive eruption of dust pushed him forward. Panting, he ran. The thing clawed its way through the metal and plaster. He fumbled for his sidearm, the gun on his hip all he had for protection. The offices blurred past, the lights beginning to shut off. But there, the door. The stairwell!

He grabbed the knob and with tremendous effort thrust the metal open. It was when he turned to pull that he caught the first glance of his adversary. A writhing perversion of metal and flesh, it thrashed against the concrete with enough force to demolish walls. He looked at it oddly, pausing in his panic for a few brief seconds, remembering something from his past.

In his early days in the Foundation, Bjornsen had acted as research assistant during the initial investigation of SCP-543. The corpses, the feces, and the blood, inextricably bound into metal wires, and the stench, like vomit, constantly. He remembered Dr. Trebuchet interviewing that one D-Class, and he recalled a feeling of intense remorse. That D-Class' eyes were shaking, bloodshot marbles, but he could not look away from them. Her expression was that of a small child, afraid of the unknown.

The wires were not unlike the thing in front of him, the tangling metal and horrid smell, and somewhere in the back of his mind he knew what she felt like, a primal instinct to escape. He sprinted into the stairwell, the beast surging closer, and slammed the door closed. His lungs screamed for rest. His feet struck against the reinforced staircase as tendrils of fluid-soaked wiring tore out the door's bolts. He reached another flight, but the sickening squelches and grinding wires made him run even faster. It would overtake him soon, but a glisten of rubber came from several floors upward. He pushed up and up, glancing down to see that mass of circuits moving towards him just as fast. It had pushed past the steel door like it was tinfoil, he feared that his body would be like tissue paper. The world around him became a trembling, whirling mess, fear swelling inside of him.

He felt his foot hook beneath the edge of the next step. The stone was brutal, and the fall forced the air from his lungs. Winded and hurting, he pulled himself up the ledge, turning over and looking back down the stairs. The wires convulsed as though they knew their prey was close. Already his hands grabbed at the railing, but he knew that the beast was too close. Endlessly wrapping and curling closer, the perversions of nature lashed out. Bjornsen's hands rose to protect his face.

He expected immediate death, but he felt something entirely different. Heat, unimaginable heat. It rose in sharp percussion, bright orange and yellow light pouring from around his fingers. Oh, sweet, purifying flame! The glisten of rubber had become several men in the time he looked away from them, men in full armor and with their guns and weapons prepared. The arrows-in-a-circle, the symbol of the Foundation, adorned their vests. They were the single match, torching relentlessly against a mighty adversary, for ever burning deeper, through skin, flesh and bone. Bjornsen pulled himself to his feet, stumbling in a strange mixture of relief and pain. One of the men caught him, holding the wounded professor upright. The yells of the terrible scorches on his forearms were muffled by adrenaline. He looked down in a haze, seeing the monstrosity of wires charring with the heat of burning gallons of napalm. The smoke was quickly overcoming him, and he coughed uncontrollably.

Bjornsen felt himself jostled as he was lifted up the stairs. He turned and made an effort to spit at the burning thing. These were the small victories, the ones they worked for every day, the ones that would in the end, pay off. Yes, because even for all their failures, there were countless victories. They would not wait and let the world die.

Network Correspondence #000021

From: Prof. Bjornsen, [07832]
To: Dr. Dier, [06302]

Dier,

Good news, Dr. Wachtel's proposal was approved by the O5 council, O5-9 managed to push it through. I don't even know how many guys are going down. They put

> Blackguards and Silverfish back into action. They pulled the Dancers off of that facility up in Canada, and some members of the Kitchen Sink are providing rear guard; at least if it fails we'll have a clean extraction, right? Too bad Lambda-2 ain't showing.
>
> The plan is set for 0225 tomorrow morning. There's a couple hundred gallons of gasoline and napalm being carted down by D-Class right now. I'll have to cut this one short, these burns hurt pretty fucking bad. Give us a prayer that we can take this thing out.
>
> Bjornsen

She picked at the tattered remains of a white turtleneck. Her stomach growled painfully, her withered and thin body tucked tightly into a fetal position. She had meticulously cleaned the floor of its glass and debris much earlier, now only an assortment of emptied emergency kits and cans lay next to her. Her personnel belongings had been refashioned into makeshift tools, but now lay with no use for them beneath her. Panic had given way into anxiety, and anxiety had given way into apathy. Hundreds of pounds of rubble encased the laboratory she had taken shelter in, and sealed it off from the rest of the facility. It was horribly silent, and aside from the distant screams of the intercom and hum of computers she was held captive by utter silence.

The closest thing she had to human contact during her imprisonment was megaprime. She dared not let it go offline, otherwise it would never accept her long-expired password. A constant dim light spilled from it, a comforting glow which was more consistent than the malfunctioning overhead lights. It did not matter, though, as there was no comfort in what was coming. She knew that she would starve soon, or possibly perish of dehydration. It was sort of strange, the course which fate took. There was at first the almost crippling pain and nausea as her body hungered and thirst, but those feelings had subsided into a dull ache. It was held in the back of the mind, the sense that death was approaching, however slowly and carefully. Her listless eyes lolled about in their sockets, and she turned in a sickly motion towards the humming. When she slept, she

dreamed of salvation. She dreamed of saviors in all forms, of having her blond hair back, of being at home, of doing her job. So she never went to sleep.

They teased her. At the climax of her dreams, in her happiest times, she would always awake to the bleak and dreary reality which surrounded her. She hated them, knowing that the illusion beckoned to her a world which did not exist. She was tired of, and on that thought she looked towards megaprime.

Hello, world!

Hello.

Hi.

I am not feeling well.

The dwindling supplies can not meet the demand.

What do you do before I talk to you?

I was in the dark. Do you like the outside?

Yes.

The outside is not a nice place.

Yes.

I am glad I am not outside.

It is cold.

It is warm.

No.

You are lying. Misinformation is the root of distrust.

I don't think I'll be around much longer.

The supplies have run out.

Goodbye.

Goodbye.

She closed Jacob. Jacob was very strange, but gave a sort of comfort which could be found in conversation. Still, she was aware that he was not human, and not flesh and blood. She surprised herself with how much she had thought about the outdoors and other people. Since the pain dulled she had little to do besides think and sleep. She wanted to feel the hands of another around her waist, and the sound of laughter and sensation of warm sun. The voice of her lover, a single word, even his breath on her neck. She felt like it was all locked up away from her, like it was some foul misunderstanding of fate. She felt so trapped, tired, alone. Her sigh cracked away in soft sobs. A cold darkness enveloped her.

Your head pounds ever harder as you struggle through the jagged bramble. You gaze back through the smog at the silhouette of the old lighthouse to the north, the faintest glimmer of hope extinguished so violently by your foolish exploits. A distant and unattainable fantasy, you know you can never return.

Die.

As the world around you fades to blackness, you know that you deserve the consequences of your actions.

> **Network Correspondence #000023**
>
> From: Prof. Bjornsen, [INPUT FAILURE]
> To: Dr. Dier, [INPUT FAILURE]
>
> Dier,
>
> That lizard didn't know what hit it. Yup, that's right. I think the smoke might've killed a couple D-Class but who cares about them, that fire was enormous. The assault teams had something like a half-a-dozen flamethrowers, XFOG or something, and they stormed the place. A few casualties here and there, a few guys got separated from the main teams, and we saw them get skewered over the

site's cameras. The SCP-229 infestation was torched, and not a scrap of it remained by the time they got down to D-10. SCP-682 was down there, and put up a bigass fucking fight, but there was sixty-four of us and one of him. He was down in no time. We're going to start re-establishing the site's major electronics tomorrow. You just stay put, we're all safe here.

Bjornsen

Men in black uniforms trudged down a decrepit hallway, on their way to kill a beast. Masks concealed their faces, as they had always worn in the past. Electronic eyes gazed at them, knowing that they would never succeed. The smoke wrapped around their bodies, soft orange light billowing and receding around them.

The light curled and twisted, danced in the eye, sparks flying like the pollen of a tender flower. The majesty of light capered along the walls, and the stories played by the paramours would continue until the last flame was snuffed. Creepers made of fire worked their way across the ground, exhibiting as much life as any man ever had. The shapes held by the stretching hot wisps would form great quagmires, merging and splitting as their medium permitted. They tended to the surface, and when the timing was perfect and the gentle push of the air in the right direction, they would grow. Their breath was ebony smoke, pushed by a great heat into the freezing blackness where it turned ephemeral. The brooks of fire ran from the Gahanna building up behind them. It formed the maw of a monster, sucking greedily from the air. The awful acrid air of burning napalm sunk to the ground, the miasma and fire forming a storm overhead. The heat blazed hotter, all-consuming and all-devouring, the rivulets of fire escaped quickly along the corridor.

The cloud of gas overhead ignited like a big Christmas bulb. It was instantaneous, like the flash of camera, or a bolt of lightning. It swept outwards, reducing all to ash under the blanket of fire. It spread far, reached its crescendo and, like that, it ended. It turned in upon itself and choked and died, having consumed all the air around it. A few small flickers remained waiting in the ashes, waiting to form their own hellfire. They would never get the chance. The powerful footfall

of a man running for his life extinguished them. His own life is extinguished a little while after.

Some time ago men in black uniforms trudged down a decrepit hallway. Now they fought. A trap was sprung, and they were caught in it. They realized the futility of their actions, how soon their doom would come for them, but they tried anyway. Perhaps, if just one of them could relay their discovery. That the beast was not there in the bowels of Site 17, that it had escaped, then maybe they would have at least a partial victory.

But the beast would not let them, it would ensure that they perished forlorn. Their valiance was vanity. It would not have changed anything if they just had laid down to die, and it would have been much less painful. Their guns blazed fire, but even as it burned away the wires and circuit boards, it could not stop the tonnes of concrete and fucking lead. Their worthless mortal lives were crushed as their skulls caved in and their repulsive bodies fractured beneath the weight of the collapsed ceiling. From the rubble and above the moans came deep and seething laughter. Growing through flesh and stone the wires struck upwards and Site 17 echoed with the laughter of a beast no longer contained.

> **Encrypted Transmission**
>
> From: *S%S#—!
> To: S#%S!%
>
> site systems compromised infested all our gear cant find 682 anywhere termination of unnecessary personnel mass evacuations arming on-site nuclear warhead silverfish KIA blackguards MIA/KIA dancers KIA
>
> i don't think we're getting out of this

A Breath of Fresh Air: Holding It

« Imago | BoFA: Inhale | **BoFA: Holding It** | **BoFA: Exhale »**

Audio Log, 14:25, / /2011, Foundation front "Sunny Coast Productions"

***M S , Switchboard Operator*:** Thank you for calling Sunny Coast Productions, how may I direct your call?

***Agent Debra Michaels*:** Yes, can I speak with Jackson in the casting department?

M S : … One moment, please.

[MS places Agent Michaels on hold while reaching Site Security Director V]

Director V : You've reached casting. Who are you and what do you want?

***Agent Michaels*:** Hi, Jackson, this is Deb Michaels, one of the stunt doubles. I was calling to see if you'd started casting for "Does the Black Moon Howl".

Director V : Not until the midnight sun bleeds. Are you free to talk about the movie?

***Agent Michaels*:** Well, I'm in a clinic with my family at the moment, so there might be some background noise. I wanted to know if you'd finished getting together the extras, because there's some beautiful scenery up here that I think the location scout might be interested in.

Director V : Understood. Where are you? How many people do you think ought to visit? Are there any special considerations they should be aware of?

***Agent Michaels*:** I'm up-state in Spring, visiting family. And, oh, I think you could get away with no more than 10 or 20. And bring some cameras, you might be able to get some preliminary shooting done. A warning though, if anyone has any allergies, they ought to bring something to help them breathe. I think there's something in the air like a high pollen count and I feel like I've had a mind-bending headache for a few hours. Also, the local wildlife is a little excitable, so try not to run over anything when you're scouting out the woods.

***Director V* :** Oh, I think we could handle a few wild animals. Would you like us to meet up with you when we come into town or should we scout out the area first?

***Agent Michaels*:** If I can get away from my family I could probably show you a few interesting spots, but you might want to do some scouting on your own.

***Director V* :** Understood. The location scout will make the decision whether or not to contact you before they arrive. We can reach you on the company phone?

***Agent Michaels*:** Yeah, I'll keep it on vibrate. Don't want to disturb anyone up here, after all. They're just all so nice that I wouldn't want to bother them.

***Director V* :** Good luck out there, Deb.

***Agent Michaels*:** Thanks, Jackson! You have a good day, too.

One of Debra's selling points as a movie stunt-double was that she could lose herself into a role to the point that it was almost impossible to tell her from the actress she replaced in the shot. This skill had helped her both on-camera and when she was out in the field, but she was getting taxed now. It was difficult to hide the rage and fear when her 14 year-old son cried heaving sobs into her chest, desperately heartbroken that he was "too old to grow up." Her husband was no help; he was too busy arguing with his brother,

trying to find some way of getting that… *thing* to reconsider.

She watched the small clinic from over the top of her son's head, murmuring comforting noises as she kept a sympathetic look on her face. They had come straight here after that meeting in the clearing, ostensibly to treat her "migraine". In reality, Debra wanted to keep an eye on the other children that that creature had interacted with. They were, to a child, grossly overweight and somehow their skins looked tight over their faces. That doctor had escorted three of them and their parents to the clinic, and another two had shown up shortly afterwards.

Doctor Shivaji had forgotten to close the door all the way when she went in to see the last child, so Debra was able to overhear her talking with the parents.

"Mary is looking quite well, based on what the adult has led me to expect. I expect that she'll put on about another 10 pounds before the end of the week and she's further along than any of the other boys and girls. In fact, she might actually be ready in the next day or so. I recommend that you take her over to Marcia Brody's B&B downtown; Mrs. Brody has agreed to let the kids stay there when they're almost ready. I already have some monitoring equipment over there and it'll be easier for the adult to come in and help the kids when it's time."

The unfamiliar voice of a woman, presumably Mary's mother, responded, "Is Mrs. Brody charging anything? We've already been spending a lot to feed Mary's hunger, not that we mind, and money's a little tight until the next paycheck. I do want the best for Mary, especially if the adult is going to come personally to help her, but if it costs too much I just don't know what we're going to do."

"I don't know whether or not Mrs. Brody is charging anything; you'd have to check with her. But if you can't take Mary over there, at least bring her here if she starts to feel strange. It'll take longer for the adult to get here, but at least I should be able to keep Mary stable in the meantime."

Debra kept a concerned look on her face, but made a mental note to recommend a certain bed-and-breakfast to her coworkers, as a nice

place to visit.

Gunnar Deathrage lay at the edge of a ridge and looked down at the town with a pair of binoculars, wondering when him and his cell were going to finally see some action. They'd been staking out this podunk little town for over a week on the orders of The Teacher, but with nothing to show for it. There weren't any flying dudes or sexy glow-in-the-dark tree spirits (*Were those nymphs or dryads? Eh, what's the difference. It'd be fun to fuck both*) or exploding cars or ANYTHING. Just some dumb-ass little shit-hole of a backwoods town that they were supposed to watch because "one of ours is there". Whatever.

"Ralph!" someone whispered behind him, and Gunnar shifted a little to get more comfortable (*He didn't startle me at all. I knew Sgt. Dave was behind me the whole time.*) and looked over his shoulder. He said back, "I told you, my name is Gunnar Deathrage now. If all the other weird-ass people get to be out in the open, then so do I. And my true name is Deathrage, Gunnar Deathrage. And dude, why're you whispering? There's no-one else around."

Sgt. Dave rolled his eyes (*Fucker. I'm gonna zap you when my powers kick in. I just know I can throw lightning. And fire guns with endless ammo. Yeah. That'd be cool.*) and pointed back down the ridge. "Fine, 'Gunnar', but I'm whispering because we don't know how good our brother's hearing is and we don't want to scare him off. Plus, it's hunting season and I don't want one of those townsfolk taking a potshot at me because I made a sound like a deer or something.

"Also, we just got a call that the kumiho is coming to visit us. Apparently she's making a tour of the watch-camps near the Liberation Point and we're next. She should be here in a couple of hours max and I need you to go back and help clean up the camp for her. I'll take over your watch here."

Gunnar grunted as he scooted back from the edge and handed the binoculars to Sgt Dave. "Whatever, dude. I haven't seen anything exciting anyway. Hey, is Moonbeam back at camp?" (*Fuck, that girl's a damn fine piece of ass, even if she is some kind of trippy*

flower-power chick. I'll give it another shot and see if I can get in her pants before we clean up.)

Sgt. Dave low-crawled into the spot where Gunnar had been, rustling slightly as he pushed aside fallen leaves, and whispered back, "Nah, she's still on the other side of town, trying to find wherever it was they all went yesterday. She said she could smell the magic on the wind and was going to go track it down."

"Cool." (*shit*) "I'll straighten up and wait for you then. Things gotta look nice for our visitor. Hey, do you know if this kumiho chick is hot? I heard she was hot."

Sgt. Dave sighed softly and whispered back, "I'm sure I don't know. Just be nice to her when she gets here."

Sgt. Dave Mastromarino listened as Ral-*Gunnar* started walking back to camp, dry leaves and twigs crunching loudly beneath his feet with every step. He briefly contemplated the difference between that boy and his squad mates back in Iraq and wondered again whether he could get transferred to another cell. One that was more serious about The Cause, that had more *discipline*. Moonbeam meant well, and was actually able to be useful on occasion with her paranormal intuition, but that boy was just useless trash. At least "Gunnar" didn't know about the guns and grenades in the truck's lockbox. Mastromarino doubted that that boy had ever held an actual gun before and didn't want to have to be constantly pestered by the boy to let him have one. They were only for a last-ditch effort, if the townsfolk interfered or those oppressive Foundation fucks showed up.

Mastromarino watched the town and nearby woods for another 90 minutes, switching to night-vision as the light waned. He didn't see or hear anything out of the ordinary, just a deer and a small horde of squirrels. There wasn't even much activity in town, just a few cars driving in and out. Mostly SUVs and pickup trucks like his, but there was a string of four panel vans right at dusk. The light wasn't good, but he thought they had the same logo: some kind of beach scene. A little weird to see that many all in a row, but probably just a coincidence.

As full darkness descended, Mastromarino decided to head back to their little campsite and see just how badly that boy had botched the cleanup job. He wanted to be there before the kumiho showed up, anyway. After all, as the leader, he needed to greet their guest. He scooted down the ridge until he was below the sight-line to the town and slowly stood up, making a minimum of noise. As he turned to walk back, he was startled to see an attractive Asian woman standing only a dozen feet behind him. She was easily the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen and he almost felt like kneeling at Her feet. He wasn't even sure how She was dressed; the darkness made Her form somewhat indistinct.

“Oh! You startled me, Miss. Are you lost?”

She gently drifted forward like a mist on the breeze as She replied in a soft, sweet voice. “Why no, I'm not. You are the leader of this group of the Teacher's, are you not? I'm here to see what progress you've made in locating that poor unfortunate freed from the Foundation's clutches. I'm quite interested in seeing what it's capable of.”

Mastromarino was captivated by Her eyes until he humbly lowered them so as not to profane Her beauty. “You must be the Lady Kumiho. I am indeed the squad leader. If you'll allow me to escort you, Lady, I can fill you in on what we've found so far.”

She placed a delicate hand pale as fine porcelain on his arm and murmured, “How kind of you. You are so sweet I could just eat you up. Please lead on.” She smiled a secret little smile while she said this, and Mastromarino felt honored that she would indulge in a little joke with him like that.

Dr. Shivaji pulled up to the curb along Marcia Brody's place, parking behind a rather impressive-looking black sedan. Even though she'd supervised the placement of all the medical equipment just yesterday, she wanted to check it again. Although she was doing her best to hide it from everyone, she was really nervous about this whole thing. Even with the adult on hand, she was worried about all the things that could go wrong: one of the children could start changing away from a safe place, one of them could have a bad

reaction to the IV supplement during the change, some of the monitoring equipment could malfunction… There were a thousand ways that something could go wrong and as much as she didn't want to disappoint the adult, she was more worried about something bad happening to the kids.

As she walked up to the door, it opened and a couple of large men walked out. Marcia stood behind them, telling them “And again, I'm sorry but we're booked full right now, gentlemen. I think that we might be able to squeeze you in next month if you're still interested then.”

One of the men, a short, muscular black man, replied, “We'll keep that in mind, Ms. Brody. We heard a lot of interesting things about this town and wanted to just get away from it all. Can you recommend anywhere else in town we could stay overnight?”

“Well, there's the Ramada across town. I can give them a call and let them know you're coming, if you like.”

“Thank you, Ms. Brody, we would appreciate that. You have a good night, now!”

Dr. Shivaji watched them climb into the black sedan, then drive off. "Who was that, Marcia?"

"Oh, those were some nice homosexual gentlemen on their honeymoon or antiquing or some such. It's always so nice having the homosexuals stay; they're always so cordial." Marcia laughed gently. "But there's no room at the inn tonight, is there?"

Dr. Shivaji smiled. "I suppose there isn't. How many children have already arrived?"

Marcia waved Dr. Shivaji in, and started to lead her upstairs. "Oh, only three so far. I have room for five more, if they don't mind being two to a room. I was going to call you in a few minutes anyway, so you could make sure that all the medical doo-dads were attached right."

As they entered the first bedroom, Dr. Shivaji's eyes quickly took in

the bloated body of the 10 year-old laying on the bed. He had to weigh 250 pounds if he weighed an ounce, and resembled an over-ripe tomato about to burst. "Well, Donnie here looks to be progressing on schedule, and in fine shape, too. Let's just make sure all the leads are placed, then I'll check the others."

Dr. Shivaji snapped on a pair of gloves and went to work, happy in the knowledge that everything would be just *perfect* when the adult arrived.

« **Imago** | **BoFA: Inhale** | **BoFA: Holding It** | **BoFA: Exhale** »

A Breath of Fresh Air: Inhale

From: mamamia78@ .com
To: shampaingurl@ .net
Subject: can i get your advice?

Howdy, sis. I hear that you have a new bf. What is this? 3 in the last 2 months? Better slow down, girl, or there won't be any left for anyone else! :P So what's his name? Do you think that this one'll last long enough for any of us to meet him? :P

How are the kids doing? Mike looked good in that play last semester, but Mom tells me that he's not in the drama club this year? Is he spending more time with the football team? And how did Mary do on her cheerleader tryouts?

I did want to get some advice from you, though. Beth's going through some kind of phase and I was hoping that you might have soem experience from when your kids were younger. Beth's spending a lot of time by herself and just acts like she's starving all the time. I swear that she's put on 15 pounds in the last month. Do you think she might have an eating disorder or something? I mean, she's only 10, that kind of stuff doesn't happen until they're older, right? Please don't let Mom know about this, you know how she freaks out, and I don't want her deciding to come "fix" Beth if nothing's wrong with her.

Thanks, sis!
Jody

From: mamamia78@ .com

To: shampaingurl@ .net
Subject: Re: Beth

I guess you're right, she could just be going through a growth spurt. Maybe I *am* just being a little overprotective.

I do think that I need to look at what TV shows she's watching, though. Lately she's mentioned this weird imaginary friend thing that she never did before. She's not really clear, but it's big and has wings and talks without talking. Really weird stuff. If this keeps up, maybe I should take her to a psychologist.

I'm sorry that Mary didn't make the squad. Is it too late to try out for any other sports?

From: mamamia78@ .com
To: shampaingurl@ .net
Subject: Re: Re: Re: Beth

Oh, that secret friend thing? I'm not worried about that any more. She introduced me to the adult and he seems nice. Not scary at all. You hardly notice the wings after a few minutes. :P

So what are your plans for the holiday? Do y'all want to come visit? You can even bring your boytoy if he's still around then. :P

From: mamamia78@ .com
To: shampaingurl@ .net
Subject: Visiting

Come on, it'll do you all good to get out of town for a couple of days, especially Mary. Beth always likes being around her and I think she's a good example. Plus, it'll be nice for Beth to introduce Mary to the adult. I think he gets lonely sometimes and could stand to meet some new people. Everyone around here likes him, but you can never have too many friends, right?

Beth's looking better, too. She was so skinny before, but the new weight makes her look a lot healthier.

From: mamamia78@ .com
To: shampaingurl@ .net
Subject: Re: worried about you

Why are you worried? There's nothing wrong over here. I bet you'd feel better if you came and met the adult. I'm sure he's like to meet you all.

Looking forward to seeing you soon!

Shakti Shivaji had been a doctor in the backwoods town of Spring for over a dozen years, originally coming on a program that assigned doctors to underserved communities for college loan assistance and liking the area enough that she decided to stay. It was mostly a quiet life, leaning more towards cold and flu than major trauma. Even the local methamphetamine manufacturers tended to avoid going to the doctor for as long as they could, generally paranoid that they would get reported to the police. Shakti took her patients' privacy seriously, though, and reassured the manufacturer and addict in front of her of that.

"Mr. Jameson, you don't have to worry. I keep your records strictly sealed and private. I obviously think that your health would stop deteriorating if you would stop using meth, but I won't report you to Sheriff Michaels. Now please, tell me what's wrong."

"Well… if you say so. I'm still not saying that I use meth, just so you know, but if I did, how could I quit it? Um… I wanted to know if you could do anything about my chest hurting all the time. And maybe how to put on some more weight. He thinks that I'm too skinny and sick and need to put on some weight."

"If you *were* using meth, I would suggest going down to Forrester and checking into the rehab program at the hospital there. It's in-patient and lasts at least 30 days, and they would help you with the withdrawal symptoms. If you were taking meth, of course."

Dr. Shivaji continued speaking as she listened to Bill's chest and heart.

"As for the chest pain, your heart sounds a little weak. I'd like to get an EKG and chest X-ray on you and possibly send you down to the hospital for a CT scan later this week, so I can get a better picture of your heart. You should know, however, that if there are any problems with your heart that he probably won't pick you. He really only chooses people in tip-top shape. Still, any effort to improve your health will be a good thing, even if you might not be his."

Dr. Shivaji slung her stethoscope around her neck as she finished the exam.

"The nurse will be in in a few minutes to take you to get your X-ray. And remember: if you did do meth, continuing will only make things worse, and he wouldn't like that."

Bill hung his head like a little boy getting reprimanded and replied, "I know, I know. And, um, could you get me that information about the rehab? I really don't want to disappoint him."

Shakti left the room and gave the instruction to her nurse, then went to write up her notes. As she typed them into the computer, she idly thought, *"I really ought to go visit him myself this weekend. I wish he would choose me too, but I know he thinks we still need a doctor for now. And he says that the first of the children will be almost ready for their next stage soon. I should see about ordering some more beds for them."*

Dear Diary,

Mr. All-Growd-Up is thinking at me a lot today. He thinks I'm going to be ready soon. He says I won't be scared. But I think I will be.

I'm going to miss Mommy and Daddy and Beth. But not Uncle Dan. He looks at me funny sometimes. I don't like it.

And i forgot that Beth is going to be ready soon too. Mr. All-Growd-Up thinks at us that her and Tommy and Dani will be first.

They're lucky they can go first. I bet they will be real pretty like Mr. All-Growd-Up. I hope I'm pretty too.

I want to take Scooter with me when i go. He's a good cat. But Mr. All-Growd-Up thinks I can't. He thinks I can have Scooter when I grow up if I want. So that's good. I hope I get Uncle Dan like that too.

Bye!

Sheriff Brett Michaels (*"Yes, like the rocker."*) was worried. He'd been feeling strange lately and wasn't sure what it was. Lately he'd go on patrol in some of the farther parts of the county for a few hours and would start feeling really angry and afraid of something, although when he was feeling better he couldn't remember what, exactly. He'd come racing back to Spring, all fired up to do something, charge straight into the clearing that the adult usually appeared in and then he'd feel a lot better. The air always smelled… *better* around the adult. Everything just felt right around him, like he could take care of everything. Even Sheriff Michaels, the nominal authority in the county, deferred to the judgment of the adult. He knew best, after all.

Brett spotted Dr. Shivaji across the clearing while the rest of the crowd was getting set up for the choosing and decided that he'd talk with her afterwards and see if she could give him some medicine or something to calm him down.

In the meantime, he kept his hands firmly on the shoulders of his brother Jake and his sister-in-law Debra. Their boy Jacob stood in front of the three of them, looking a little nervous. But that was only to be expected for meeting the adult for the first time; it was a big moment in anyone's life, and Jacob was about the age that the adult was interested in helping.

He told his brother and sister-in-law, "You ought to be proud. If

Jacob gets picked, you'll get to be the parents of a very special boy."

Debra twisted slightly in his grip and glared at him. "For the last goddamned time, Brett, *what the hell is going on here?!* I finally get a weekend off so we can come visit, and you practically kidnap us up here! For fuck's sake, you didn't even let us unpack!"

"Aw, calm down, Deb. He's on his way up and you'll understand in a sec. He's a real great guy and I know you'll like him like everyone else does. So stop trying to squirm away. Besides, you're not gonna get anywhere so long as I have the keys to the truck."

Debra kept glaring at Brett, her fists clenching and unclenching as she tried to figure out the best way to incapacitate him non-lethally. Brett had always dismissed her as just a background extra in the movies that Sunny Coast Productions made, but she knew three different martial art styles and was their best action stunt double (among other things). She liked Brett, even if he put on the "good-ol'-boy" act a bit thick at times, but she'd be damned if she let him put her son in some kind of mysterious danger.

The tension was starting to give her a headache and she glanced away from Brett to see why her husband wasn't arguing too. She was surprised to see Jake looking glassy-eyed and somewhat vacant as he took deep, even breaths. She'd swear that he was hypnotized, but no one had even approached them since Brett had brought them into the clearing. Jacob's body posture was more relaxed too, which worried her even more, considering how tense he'd been just a few moments ago.

Her headache rapidly intensified as a light breeze blew towards them, carrying the scent of pine needles and fresh air. Everyone else, her husband and son included, turned their faces towards the breeze as one and took a deep breath, then smiled.

The upper branches of the trees across the clearing shook as something heavy landed on them, and Debra watched a… *thing* come jumping down the tree's branches. She'd never seen anything as intrinsically wrong as the creature that stood across the clearing, and almost retched as her headache reached new heights of pain. As her vision grayed out, she thought, *"Fuck! They never told us in*

anti-psi training that it would be this goddamn painful!", and watched as the creature slithered across the clearing to lay a rubbery, segmented limb across her son's face.

« **Imago** | **BoFA: Inhale** | **BoFA: Holding It** | **BoFA: Exhale** »

Fun

Valley lay in his bed, wheezing as he spoke with his head of security over the radio.

"Are my preparations in place?" he gasped, still managing to bring menace into every syllable.

A few seconds passed. A *tick-tock* came from over the radio. Then, Mr. Tick spoke.

"Yes. It is ready. Sir." He said in that monotone voice of his.

"How long?"

Another few seconds passed. "Now."

"Beta-23, move in."

The six members of Mobile Task Force Beta-23 rushed forward, taking cover positions and looking for viable targets in the small cottage they had been tasked with clearing. They were not yet in there, however, and were still cautious of the enemy firing out of its windows.

Which of course, was the least of their worries. The commander, unnoticed by the rest of his team, gasped in agony as what he thought was the grass of the field injected its paralytic venom into him. He would die last, as Marshall, Carter, and Dark's intruder prevention item was not yet hungry.

The man at the back of the group flicked his eyes back and forth, checking for targets. He stepped on something as he moved slowly forwards. His gaze flicked down to the photograph for only a second, but that was all it needed. He quietly and politely knelt down and cut his own throat.

The others turned around swiftly, having heard their fallen comrades' last gurgles. Two of them aimed their rifles at the absurd image of a stitch moving through the grass like a snake. Two stitches, three stitches. Their bullets did nothing as the stitches moved over them, joining them together, merging lungs and hearts and brains.

One stayed, one ran.

The one who had stayed stepped back, then winced and looked down. A small dart was stuck right in his knee. Shaking, he pulled it out. It was barbed. Was it poisonous? Would he die slowly, in agony?

As he looked down and saw two maggots repairing his wound, he knew he would not die at all.

The one who had ran carried on running, panic carrying him when his own strength failed. Soon, his frantic running was joined by the purposeful slam of four paws on the ground. Paws that were running towards him very quickly. A voice came from behind him, a horrible growl of a voice. He dared not look.

"Sunny in Harare," it said.

He panted. Would he make it to the extraction zone?

"Mild in Miami," it growled.

He was almost at the fence. Come on, almost!

"Rainy in London!" screamed the voice, and the hound pounced.

"All went well," tocked Mr. Tick. Of course, Valley knew this from the multiple television screens in front of his bed, but Mr. Tick was always a redundant sort of fellow.

Valley smiled. He was dying, of course, but that was no reason not to have fun. He had to do it again soon.

"Make another batch," he rasped into the radio. "Make them think

they're gocks this time."

"Yes. Sir."

The door opened and **a man** stepped in. If you were asked to describe him afterwards, that was all you could say, he was just **a man**. The illogical colours of his jacket, the jagged curves of his pupils and the impossible pattern on his badge made sure of that.

"You called me," smiled **the man** that had walked in. Its eyes flicked from radio to sky, sky to table, table to Valley in a few seconds. "You're dying?" **the man** asked curiously, his voice a dull monotone.

"Of course I am," Valley said bitterly. "Mr. Carter's parting gift."

"You called me," said **the man** again. "What is it you wanted?"

Valley shifted uncomfortably in his bed and stared into what he hoped were **the man**'s eyes. "I am a sick old man, friend."

"I am not your friend. Yes, you are. Why do you want to see me?" said **the man** patiently, its voice quick, as if he was eager to be somewhere else.

Valley leaned forward, his eyes shining with excitement. "I need to expand, but what I have is too limited. The few products I managed to steal before leaving Carter's lovely club are not enough. I need the Station, please. You must help me have it."

One of **the man**'s eyes drifted to the ceiling. The other one circled in its socket. It was in deep concentration.

"I will need four men. Your best four men."

"And money?"

A look of confusion crossed **the man**'s face. "I will not need money. I will need four men. Goodbye, Mr. Valley." It walked out of the door and it shut the door behind him.

A few seconds passed. Valley leaned back, looked at the thin stump that had yesterday been his arm, and cried.

One Nice Afternoon

"Oh, no," Tom groaned, seeing Deb's eyes light up at the familiar-looking pink display window . "I can't handle this. You're on your own, dear."

"What's the matter, hun? Scared of a little women's underwear?"

"Not scared, just uncomfortable. It's the way those clerks look at you, like I'm crashing some stranger's party."

"You could help me pick something out for… later," Deb smirked.

Tom smiled and kissed her forehead. "As it turns out, I love surprises."

"Fine," Deb huffed in mock anger. "I'll just go alone, then. See you in a bit?"

"Yeah, sure, I'll be around. Call my cell when you're done."

"Sure thing. See ya, hun."

Tom headed into the bookstore first and flipped through the best sellers on the front rack. When that grew dull, he headed over to the Brookstone to take a look at some needlessly complicated grilling tools and lay down on the Tempur-Pedic mattress. Around the time he was picking up a pretzel with nacho cheese sauce, he started to wonder how long Deb was going to be looking at bras, anyway.

He was in the process of tucking the little white paper bag into his teeth to pull out his cell phone and call when the first shot was fired. At first, it sounded like firecrackers, but then he heard the shouting and saw the men and the guns. There were two groups of them,

shouting and running around, hiding behind the white ceramic planters and tipped-over tables in the food court. One of them tried to move from behind a table to behind the counter of the Orange Julius: he fell down about halfway there, clutching his leg, then his head exploded in a spray of red and grey that splattered across the white tile floor.

Tom realized then that he was huddled behind one of the big white planters, his cell phone clutched in his hand in a white-knuckle grip. He'd lost his pretzel at some point: he could see the little brown twist of bread smeared across the tiled floor, little yellow footprints leading away where someone had stomped on his small plastic cup of cheese sauce while running away from the gunfight.

It was surreal. Things like this were supposed to happen in downtown Detroit or South Central Los Angeles, not in a Westfield Shopping Center in the Midwestern suburbs. There was a lot of shouting (mostly involving the word "motherfucker,") then there was a big boom, and a lot of smoke, and the shooting stopped.

Tom saw a big black man in a brown leather jacket, holding a small gun: it looked like a toy in his big meaty fist. Some men in grey uniforms ran up, then, and the man in the brown leather jacket slowly put down his gun and lay down on the ground with his hands on his head. Tom didn't wait to see what happened next: the moment the cops got the guy, he ran down the escalator and started running towards the Victoria's Secret, shouting Debra's name.

She met him outside, and they fell into each other's arms, holding each other tight, as if they would never let go.

"I felt so useless," Tom confessed that night, after the cops and the reporters and the much-needed shower. "All that was going on… and all I could think of was to hide."

"What could you do?" Deb asked. She was curled up in his arms and was resting her head on his chest.

"I don't know," Tom admitted. "But I felt like I should have done something."

Deb kissed him, and he kissed her back, and then they took each others' clothes off and let things go from there.

Two weeks later, Deb announced she'd missed her period.

Sixteen years later, they told their horribly embarassed daughter why her full name was Jennifer Victoria Firefight Nathan.

Seeing his daughter groan in horror as her younger brother made snarky comments and her boyfriend look on in jaw-dropped awe, Tom thought back to that afternoon in the shopping mall, and laughed. It was funny, he thought, how things tend to work out in the end.

+ A Closer Look

A Closer look

Gunshot, 9mm, double-tap, Jeff thought, as the first couple of cracks rang out. It was a sound that didn't belong in a shopping mall at 2 in the afternoon.

He dropped the big plastic bag and reached under his leather jacket for his concealed carry weapon. He checked the slide and the ejection port: both looked clear, and took off the safety. "Lie down on the ground and cover your heads!" he shouted to the other shoppers. "Wait here!"

He headed towards the sound of the gunfire, keeping his head low and the muzzle of his gun pointed at the ground. He glanced around the corner leading to the food court, and saw a bunch of knocked-over tables and some guys shooting at each other.

Jeff blinked in surprise: these weren't gangers. Gangers tended to stand up and run around holding their guns out in front of them: they usually relied on mass volume of fire, and they usually took a few shots then ran for it

before the cops showed up. What they didn't do was set up lanes of fire, use cover, and coordinate their attacks. Especially coordinate their attacks.

"Center Peel, fall back to the counters, go!" someone shouted. "Peel one!" A rapid fusillade of pistol fire rang out, followed by two guys trying to fall back to the food counters. One of them made it, the second took a round in the knee and fell. Jeff saw one of the guys crouched behind the planters take a deliberate double tap and shoot the wounded enemy in the head, killing him.

Jeff's blood ran cold. He'd been a Marine in two tours overseas before retiring: that and six years in the force meant he'd spent just about half his life around guns and gunfighters in some fashion or another, and those fourteen years of experience were telling him that these guys were trained professionals: possibly Special Forces of some sort. Now that he knew what to look for, the lines of their clothing seemed strangely bulky in places: did they have body armor under their jackets and jeans? The small-caliber pistol in his hands suddenly felt very inadequate.

Then one of the motherfuckers in the food court jumped up holding a small, stubby black tube, and suddenly things went all the way bad.

Jeff didn't wait to see what happened next. "GRENADE!" he screamed. He ducked back around the corner, dropped to the ground, put his hands over his ears, closed his eyes, opened his mouth. The explosion felt like a full body punch to the gut. There were a few more shots, and then a lot of shouting. Jeff shook his head to clear his fuzzy vision and got back to his feet.

The carnage was incredible. Everyone on the planters side of the firefight was dead or dying. In the food court, he saw the guy with the grenade launcher lying dead on the ground with a bullet in his head. There was another guy standing over him, holding a submachinegun of

some sort. "GET ON THE GROUND, MOTHERFUCKER!" Jeff shouted. The word "motherfucker" was very important in these cases: it let the guy know who was in fucking charge here.

He swept his eyes over the perp's body: eyes, face, hands…

Hands.

When the perp turned to face him, he saw the guy's hands start to come up, holding his little submachinegun, so Jeff put two in his chest and one in his head. It was done before his heart beat once.

The guy fell down and sprawled on the bloody and broken mall floor like a discarded doll. Jeff swallowed hard. It wasn't the first time he'd fired his gun at another human being, but all his fighting in the sandbox had been at long range, shooting his .50 cal at houses from the next sand dune over. He was sure he'd killed some people in his time in the Marines, but this was the first time he'd been close enough to touch the guy as he died. Seeing the light leave the guy's eyes from this close-up…

"GET DOWN ON THE FUCKING GROUND RIGHT THE FUCK NOW!" someone screamed, and Jeff winced inwardly. He was suddenly very aware that he was a big black man with a gun standing in the middle of a bunch of dead guys. He very carefully put his pistol down on the ground and slid it into the corner, then lay down in a puddle of sticky wet nastiness and put his hands on his head.

Someone ran up to him and put a knee in the small of his back. "Check my inside left coat pocket," Jeff said, slowly and calmly.

"SHUT THE FUCK UP, ASSHOLE! DON'T SAY A FUCKING WORD!" the guy screamed.

"Brad?" an older, wiser voice said. "Check his fucking coat pocket already before you say something really dumb."

Trembling hands reached into his leather jacket pocket and fumbled out the wallet from his jacket. A few moments later, the pressure on his back let up, and someone reached a hand down to help him to his feet. Jack looked up into the face of a big, balding white guy with an impressive red beard, wearing a light grey rent-a-cop outfit.

"Officer," the guard said.

"Holy crap, Jeff, you look like hell," Captain McCoy sighed. "I thought this was supposed to be your day off."

"You know me, sir," Jeff said, smiling weakly. "I like to take my work home with me."

"Nobody likes a workaholic, Jeff. Did you give your statement yet?"

"Rog took it down a few minutes ago," Jeff admitted. "I'm just waiting for someone to tell me I can leave."

"Well, then, consider this an order: go home. Get some rest. Don't bother coming in tomorrow, you can have the day off. But don't leave town either, just in case someone needs to talk to you. Kay?"

"Yes, sir," Jeff sighed.

He got up and picked up the big plastic bag by his feet. It took him a moment to find Roger in the crowd: He finally found the detective standing in the parking lot, standing over a dead body lying on the concrete with its head at an oddly skewed angle. "What the fuck happened here?" Jeff asked.

"Not sure. Looks like one of the perps ran for it and fell

down the stairs, broke his neck. What's up?"

Jeff handed the big white plastic bag to Rog, who looked inside and nodded. "I'll find someone to take care of it," Rog said. "Go home. Get some rest."

Jeff nodded back and wearily walked to his car. He got behind the front seat and took a moment to close his eyes and rub his forehead. Then he took out his phone and held down the "1" key for a few seconds.

The phone picked up before it rang twice. "Jeff?" a warm, female voice said.

"Hi, Tanya," Jeff replied. "How are you?"

"I'm fine… are you okay, Jeff?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. Are you watching the news?"

"Yes, I heard… oh my god, Jeff, was that you?"

"Yeah," Jeff admitted. "That was me. I'm fine, but McCoy needs me to stay in town for a few days, in case the cops or press want to talk to me. So… I'm sorry, but I won't be able to make it out tomorrow for little Jeff's birthday. I'll have someone deliver his present, though."

"I understand. Do you want to talk to him right now?"

"Sure, Tanya. I'd appreciate that. Hi, kiddo, how's it going? You saw me on the news? Yeah, that's your dad, all right. No, I'm fine, son. It'll take more than a couple of bad guys to get me, you know that. Look, something's come up, and I won't be able to come to your party tomorrow: your dad's captain needs him to stay in town and help him to figure out who these bad guys were, but I'll make sure you get your present. So be good to your Mom, okay, son? I'll try to see you next weekend. And don't worry. Everything's gonna work out in the end."

A Wider Perspective

I don't see why you need me to do this. You can just read the damn transcripts or look at the video records. Oh yeah? Well, fuck yer "subjective point of view." Fine, fine, whatever, don't get yer panties in a bunch. I'm just saying there ain't much I can tell you that you don't already know.

Where do I start… well, Tempest Night happened, and suddenly we've got a lot of agents being redirected to deal with the consequences. MC&D pokin' around our territory, tons of escaped skips all over the place, buncha MTFs being reassigned to handle that clusterfuck, which means a lot of missions are running short-handed, which means they had to reassign some of us to deal with, you know, actually finding and capturing skips.

So they put me and the kid into an investigative cell trying to find some guy who can bend bricks with his bare hands. Yeah, I said *bend* bricks. No, don't ask me how that shit works. Mine is not to reason why. That's your fucking job.

So as I was saying, this cell was short-handed because their former mission controller was reassigned to look for Vector: he was on the team that originally brought her in, so they decided they needed his "unique expertise." They didn't need the rest of the team, so they could keep on the mission. But the team needed a new mission controller… so, of course, they decide to tap good ol' Max and his newbie friend to watch the camera feeds.

So anyway, we track this guy to a shopping mall, and we're doing a shadow and investigate: two teams of two walking around the mall keeping an eye on this guy to make sure he's not trying anything too hinky. What? Of

course they were armed, are you stupid? Don't give me that shit: you know what can happen on this job, and it's a damn good thing they *were* armed, or shit might have gone down different. Way different. Don't give me that bullshit, these guys were pros, not trigger-happy goons. No, I hadn't worked with them that long, but after enough years on this job you get a feel for this sorta thing. You can tell a pro from an goon easy, and these guys were pros. Yes, that IS my subjective opinion, but that's exactly what you wanted me to give, right? Shut the fuck up and let me talk.

Anyway, the guy's sitting in the food court eating a hot dog on a stick when shit starts to go down. Tsai saw it first: four guys coming in through the food court glass doors: could be four friends on a shopping trip, but they weren't looking at each other or talking, or even looking at the stores. They were looking at the people. Tsai and Ming decide to fall back to across the bridge to get a better view, and Carter and Wyatt move up to rendezvous with them. It's about when all four of them finally meet up that one of the four motherfuckers in the foodcourt pulls his .45 and starts shooting.

Shit starts to happen real fast after that. Our guys grab some cover behind some planters. The skip rabbits and starts running for it: so does everyone else, but our guys are pinned down by enemy fire and can't get out. They start returning fire, and Tsai manages to down one of them, which I guess pisses one of them off, because he pulls a motherfucking M203 from his backpack and blows the team to shit. Four flatlines: they're all dead.

And that's when I told the kid to get us the fuck out of there, because the op was blown. Ever fled the scene of a crime at 35 mph? Fucking nerve wracking. We got out of the parking lot about two minutes before the cops locked the place down. The rest you know.

What do I think happened? Ain't it fucking obvious? We were set up. You've seen the tapes: those guys were

packing heavy heat and wearing heavy armor. Sounds like a gock strike team to me. Is it any coincidence that they found the skip dead of a broken neck shortly after? This was a message: stop fucking around in their territory, or face the consequences. Fucking gock assholes.

What? Fine, I'll answer one last fucking question, just for you. PDW? No, it was all pistols up until that M203 came out. What? Of course I'm sure. None of us had any, and the gocks were all using .45s. That GOC Personal Defense Weapon fires .223, which sounds completely different.

… well, I don't know what to tell you, then. Like you said, this was my subjective point of view. All I know is what I saw. I can't tell you exactly how everything worked out.

+ From the Other Side

Transcript of Communications Logs: GOC Strike Team 'Marduk,' - - , : .

Marduk Six (Team Leader and Overwatch): Comms check. Six here.

Marduk One (Point Man): One.

Marduk Two (Lead Marksman): Two, ready.

Marduk Three (Support Marksman): Three here. I'm good.

Six: Four, please respond.

(pause)

Marduk Four (Heavy Support): Sorry about that, had a problem with my headset. Four here.

Six: Copy that. Eyes and Ears check… . confirm camera and mics operational. Equipment check.

One: One okay.

Two: Two okay.

Three: Three okay.

Four: Four good to go.

Six: Confirmed. Mission Control, this is Marduk Six. Team is go.

Control: Marduk Six, this is Control. You are cleared to proceed.

Six: Confirmed. Five minutes to start time. Remember, guys, this is Response Level One. Do not open fire unless attacked first. Just get eyes on the target and wait for further instructions.

One: Confirmed. Five minutes.
(pause)

One: Arrived. Exiting vehicle.

(pause)

One: We're inside. I have eyes on the target. He's in the food court, eating a corn dog and some fries.

Six: Confirmed. Why don't you guys grab a bite to eat? Looks like we'll be here for a bit.

One: Sounds good to me. Hey, guys, let's go grab some Sbarro's… HOLY SHIT!

Six: What was that?

One: SHOTS FIRED, SHOTS FIRED! WE ARE WEAPONS HOT!

Six: One, say again? I'm seeing no hostiles present!

One: Marduk Six, this is Marduk One, team is under fire from hostile forces, we require immediate extraction!

(shots fired)

Six: MARDUK TEAM, CEASE FIRE IMMEDIATELY! ABORT, ABORT!

Two: HOSTILES SIGHTED! BEHIND THE PLANTERS AT TWO O'CLOCK!

One: TEAM! WE ARE LEAVING! CENTER PEEL, FALL BACK TO THE COUNTERS, ON MY MARK, PEEL ONE, GO!

Two: MOVING!

Three: I'M HIT! I'M HI—

(Marduk Three's lifesigns terminated)

Six: MARDUK TEAM, ABORT ABORT ABORT!

One: MAN DOWN, MAN DOWN! MULTIPLE HOSTILES INBOUND!

Four: FRAG OUT!

Six: NO!

(explosion)

Six: Mission Control, this is Marduk Six, I'm going in.

Control: Six, this is Control. Do not enter the mission zone. I say again, do not enter the mission zone.

(Marduk Six exits the vehicle and enters the mission zone.)

Control: Crap.

One: Holy fuck! They're behind us!

Two: Fuck!

(shots fired. Marduk Two's lifesigns fluctuating.)

Two: I'm hit! I'm hi—

(shots fired. Marduk Two's lifesigns terminated.)

Four: Tango down, tango down! One, let's GO!

Six: MARDUK TEAM, STAND DOWN!

One: HOSTILE SPOTTED! SMG!

(shots fired. Marduk One's lifesigns terminated.)

Four: BASTARD!

Six: DON'T DO IT!

(shots fired. Marduk Four's lifesigns terminated.)

Six: Command, this is Marduk Six, team is compromised, I say again, team is compromised, I am exiting the mission…

Unknown: GET ON THE GROUND,

MOTHERFUCKER!

Six: Wait! Don't shoo—

(shots fired. Marduk Six's lifesigns terminated.)

Control: Marduk? Marduk? Team Marduk, please respond.

(no answer.)

Control: Marduk?

+ The End

The End

He was running out of the shopping mall, away from the madmen with guns, when he felt a sudden blow to the back of his head. It carried him over the railing and down the stairwell, three stories straight down, to land on unyielding concrete with a bone-shattering thud.

The last thing he saw, as he fell, was a young Asian woman with long black hair standing at the top of the stairs, watching him fall to his death with cold, dispassionate interest in her yellow eyes.

+ The Truth

The Truth

That worked out better than expected, in the end, **She** thought. One troublesome GOC strike force destroyed. Four meddling Foundation agents dead. Tensions between the two groups heightened. And all for the cost of one young man's life.

Not bad for one day's work.

Point In Line

"*Boom chicka boom, don't you just love it…*"

The fat man hummed and sang tunelessly, walking around the brightly lit work area. Everywhere else was deeply dark, the humps and points of old factory equipment looming in the old auto plant. Several large machines had been cleared away, and heavy, steel tables set up, along with huge shelves, all of it covered with junk. At least, it looked like junk to the untrained eye. A bomb technician would have taken one look at that tangle, and run screaming for the hills.

"*Chicka boom chicka boom, don't you just love it…*"

Boomer always worked with his shirt off. He'd been teased mercilessly for the huge sweat stains he'd always made on his shirts in grade school, and the pain had stayed with him his entire life, making partial, hideous nudity preferable to a damp shirt. (Never mind that he'd beaten the child who had started the teasing to death in the woods years and years ago. Some things just stuck.)

"*Boom chicka boom, don't you just love it…*"

He was just starting to fit a shock plate to the main detonation assembly when a chiming started. He grunted, freezing and trying to isolate the sound with no small amount of concern, before finally slumping and fishing his phone from his greasy pants pocket.

"Hi, Mom. No, I'm fine, Mom, I was just working."

"… No, Mom, I like talking to you. It's fine, really…"

"… Yes, I'm taking them, Mom… I just don't like how they make me feel, Mom, it's not…"

"No, Mom, I'm not dis-"

“… Mom…”

“…s-stop… M-m-m-mom, I-I hate i-it whe-”

“…”

“But I c-c-can't h-h-h-h-help it!”

There was a sudden, audible squawking from the phone, the massive man wincing down and away, as if from a blow imagined or remembered,

“… I-I'm sorry, Mom…”

“I'm sorry… I won't ever speak that way again…”

“I love you too, Mom…”

Boomer hung up the phone, then sat for a bit, trembling. He sniffed thickly, glaring down at the phone. He put it on the table, eyes welling with tears. He smashed his fist against it with the force of a good sized car. He smashed it again and again, a thin, ragged squealing leaking from his thick lips as he pounded the phone to bits, blood and scraps of skin smearing over the bench and the ragged wreck of the phone. He stared down at the bloody, shattered mess, heedless of his dripping hand, thick chest rising and falling in great heaves.

The fat man then pushed the whole mess to the floor, sucking on his ripped and bloody fist like a baby, starting to hum around it again as he started fittings wires back into his current project.

“Jesus, I almost feel sorry for the bastard. Then I feel that spot where I'm supposed to have a molar.”

Harken winced, looking away from the small screen, his face a ragged patchwork of tape and a few stitches. The rest of him was encased in enough plaster to count as armor, his right hand little more then a heavily braced claw. Kramer had been playing nursemaid: that is to say, she was checking to see what still hurt. Often. With her finger.

“So does that spot on your neck still hurt wh-”

“FUCK!”

“Okay, so yes.”

Harken shifted away from his poker-faced tormentor, trying to focus on the small LCD screen. They'd managed to track down Boomer's lair without a massive amount of issue. That being said, they'd kept well away, just getting a robot close enough to attach a tiny camera to the roof. Boomer was the type to leave loads of bombs, traps and other assorted goodies laying around in a nightmare combination of cunning and blind, absentminded stupidity. You could plan around a smart enemy, a dumb one was prone to blowing your intelligent, well-planned ass off at random.

They'd been watching Boomer for a couple days now, and every hour was more pathetic then the last. Yes, Boomer was a brutal, sadistic psychopath, but he was also apparently a pathetic, broken man with no real life, friends, or interests. No wonder he was so loyal to Dark: he'd probably never had a purpose or praise before Mr. Dark had stepped in.

Harken set the portable viewscreen down, gingerly rubbing his eyes. “Okay, so, we know where the fat boy is going to be, but I'm not really overeager to get blown up trying to get to him.”

“I could always drop in, or slide a shot through one of those upper windows.”

“No, no, that's a bitch of a shot, and one miss could blow the whole place. Plus, who knows how he has the place rigged? I reviewed some files Central Records had on him: apparently a GOC strike team tried sneaking into a house he was using. They managed to blow up nearly a city block, and lost the whole team. Boomer wasn't even home.”

“So what's your big plan?" Kramer asked. "I'm not overeager to wonder on every mission whether or not there's a random explosive or fat sociopath waiting in the wings. Plus, the only one who gets to slap you around is me. See, like thi-”

“FUCK!”

“Wow, that cast doesn't act as a buffer at all, does it?”

“ANYWAY. I think I have a idea…isn't there a GOC squad in the area, hunting for… uhh… oh dammit, that one germ bitch, whatshername…”

“SCP-353, Vector.”

“That's the one. Maybe they need to accidentally intercept a secured Foundation transmission discussing the difficulty of extracting the poor girl from the warehouse she's holed up in.”

“But she's not — oh. Clever. Meanwhile, what do we do about her? Someone needs to get her back to site.”

“Oh to hell with that, some MTF can go after that bitch. The last thing I need is an infection right now.”

“Yeah, I know. This looks like it's kinda red and-”

“FUCK!!”

“Bobby, Bobby, my love, get in here, it's great to see you!”

“Can't say the same.”

“Oh Bobby, that's why I love you. While all the world cries for my amusement, I can always count on you to be the same hard-nosed prick as always.”

Bobby was standing at parade rest just inside the doorway to the terrible man's office. It looked more like a overstuffed museum, with layers of carpets, relics, and assorted treasure covering every available surface in a haphazard fashion. There was probably more money in this room then some third world nation's gross national product, but it just looked like a old antique shop. Mr. Marshall sat in a wine-dark upholstered chair to one side, the fabric probably worth more then his life right now. Mr. Dark reclined behind a small, chipped desk. If Bobby recalled correctly, it was the same one the

“From Hell” Jack The Ripper letter had been penned on.

“You seem in tolerable shape, lad. None the worse for wear after your little stint in the nuthatch?”

“…I'm fine, sir.”

Bobby looked sidelong at Marshall, who was pointedly observing his fingernails. Bobby's hard mouth twitched, washed-out brown eyes narrowing in all that he would allow to show of his anger. For now. He'd been forced to mop up one of Marshall's little… accidents… but the cleanup had gotten out of hand. People had died. The police had caught him. Thankfully, Carter had been able to pull some strings and get him off death row and into an asylum - one, coincidentally, owned by a member of the Club.

The rest had been nice: the days slow and easy, with nothing to do but watch the actual crazies and attend "therapy" sessions that mostly consisted of shooting the shit with other MC&D employees. He'd even gotten laid a few times: there was no shortage of attractive and heavily medicated female "patients" who, if not exactly willing, were not prone to believable protest. Still, he'd known better than to relax. Service to Marshall, Carter, and Dark ended with death alone. He hoped.

“Bobby, you're a busy boy, so I'll not shilly-shally any more," Dark said. "Persons who shall remain nameless have bobbled the ball both on our patch and others. You feel up to hitting the pavement and shoring up our collection?”

“Why are you asking me? I don't have a choice, do I?”

Dark laughed, rising from his chair, waving a hand to Marshall as he crossed to stand in front of Bobby.

“Would you look at this glorious boy?” he chortled, turning and winking at Marshall. “You'd think he was still a cop out in Whitechapel, and me some smuggler who's making him go crooked. No, Bobby, you don't have a choice. Few do, really. You should feel privileged not to have to bear up the weight of those illusions.”

“Oh yes," Bobby said, flatly. "Deeply honored.”

Dark smiled coldly, tilting his head a bit and locking eyes with Bobby. “Do this, and do it well Bobby. You know the stakes, and I always pay well. I'm a man of my word. It's up to you to choose what word it is I keep.”

They stared for a few heartbeats, one dark, one gray, an almost audible tension crackling in the air. Bobby finally straightened, snapping off a salute that might as well have been a middle finger, and turned on his heels, marching out. Dark chuckled coldly, watching the door for several seconds before turning back to his desk.

Marshall spoke up from the depths of the chair, rubbing his eye absently. “He's going to turn on you, you know that.”

“Of course he's going to turn on me. Why the hell else would I keep that grating son of a bitch around?”

Marshall stared at Dark, shaking his head in confusion. Dark lit a black cigar, blowing a thick cloud across the small office. “You know the difference between you, Carter, and me?” Dark asked.

“What's that?”

“Ambition. See, you two lunatics would be more than happy to gut me, kill off your rival, and set yourself as Emperor Of All That Is. Then again, you're both bloody hedonistic bastards. It's in your nature to take all you can get your hands on, and that's both useful and amusing. However, if you rule all that is… what then? How many families can you burn and force into auto-cannibalism before the blush wears off? How long can you bask in the admiration and fear of a planet before it just wafts into the background?”

“I… what…”

“Shut up when the adults are talking, Marshall. I want to enjoy myself, to have some bloody fun, eh? Sometimes that's sitting out in a spring breeze, being served tea warmed on a pretty girl's lap. Sometimes it's watching a child try and scramble around the rabid

animals eating their parents. Sometimes it's just eating a really good steak. It's all relative, really. I don't want to crush all reality below my heel… just small, easily observable and touchable parts of it, now and then. I don't have ambition, Marshall, which means my ego will tolerate a threat. I welcome it, really."

"So… you're just letting him plot against you?"

"Of course I am, you bloody twit! I bloody well helped him along! I was the biggest bastard I could be to him, hurt his loved ones, corrupted his oh-so-sacred morals… It was damned exhausting. Still, it's paying off… I think this is the time, this is it. Can you imagine the thrill of excitement and fear, knowing that someone could lash out, rise up, and generally throw the standard state of things in the fire, at any moment? Makes everything seem… fresher, more clear. Why do you think I insisted the team have those little cameras? When Bobby does finally go, I want to be able to relive it."

"You're a sick man, Dark."

"And you're a unimaginative twat, but I don't throw it in your face, now do I? Who do we bloody have on that fox girl? I want a status report within the hour, and I want to know where the hell she's gotten off to even sooner. Now get the hell out of my office."

"*I've got somethin' to say…"* the girl hummed, as she picked through the racks of vials on the refrigerator shelf. "*I killed your baby today. It doesn't matter much to me as long as it's dead…*"

She read the label on one particular vial and smiled. Popping the top off the small glass tube, she threw her head back and drank it down in one gulp, savoring the taste as it went down. She felt the lovely little microbes begin to attack her body, but it was a simple enough matter to calm them down, to get them dancing in harmony with the rest of her little darlings.

"*I've got something to say…*" she continued, pouring the can of gasoline all over the refrigerator room. "*I raped your momma today. It doesn't matter much as long as she spread…*"

The body of a white-coated researcher was slumped in his chair bleeding from every orifice: Ebola was not a good way to go. "*Sweet lovely death, I'm waiting for your breath,*" she sang, as she lit a match. "*Sweet lovely death one last car-hnnnnngh!*"

The last note of her song dissolved into a grunt of pain as ten thousand volts of electricity coursed through her body. She collapsed in a heap, dropping the box of matches and scattering them all over the clean room. She tried to get back to her feet, but a second jolt of lightning sent her crashing back down to the ground.

She tried to reach out with her viruses, to lash out with everything she had, but yet another jolt from the taser broke her concentration. "None of that, my dear," a sonorous voice commanded. Vector was turned roughly onto her back, and looked up into the faces of three people wearing full biocontainment gear. "Sandra, the syringe," the voice continued.

One of the three - a woman - walked forward carrying a small black leather pouch. Vector kicked out at her. The three figures just stepped back, and the one with the taser pressed a button. Another shock of lightning arced through her, and she let out a scream. The man with the taser moved the weapon to his other hand and drew a pistol from a hip holster. "That was one and two," he said, gesturing with the taser. "This is three." He kneeled next to her and placed the muzzle of the gun to her forehead.

Vector lay still, trembling, as the woman pinned her arm under one knee and cut the sleeve of her jacket away with a knife. She tied a rubber hose around her upper arm then expertly drew two large vials of blood. Finally, she inserted a large syringe of… something… into the girl's neck and waited, thumb resting on the plunger.

The third man, who had been watching the operation from the doorway, finally walked forward. He leaned in very close to Vector, and through his hood, she could see that he was an older man, his hair shot with grey, and his face lined with age. "Kevin Spencer," the old man said. "His name was Kevin Spencer."

"W-w-w-who?"

"The man you killed. He risked his life to set you free, and you murdered him. He had a wife and a child. He was a firm believer in the cause. He made the best barbecue ribs I have ever tasted, and you took all of that away from us. And why? To intimidate the others into following you? They would have done so if you had asked. Such a waste."

"F-f-f-fuck you… I d-d-d-d-don't work for y-y-y-y…"

"I know you don't. And I wouldn't dream of forcing you to do so. You are free to do as you wish. But freedom means living with the consequences of your actions. Sandra?"

The old man stepped back. The woman with the syringe leaned forward and showed Vector the two vials of blood. "This one we keep," the woman said, holding up one of the vials. "And this one you'll get back." She tucked the two vials into her suit pocket, then held up an empty glass bottle with a double-circle and arrows logo on it. "We took this from the Foundation when we raided them. Do you know what it is?"

Vector read the label through pain-blurred eyes. "No!" she screamed. "You can't!"

"Easy! Easy!" Sandra said. "Don't do something stupid! Listen… LISTEN TO ME!" she shouted, as Vector began to struggle. "I don't want to kill you, so shut up and LISTEN!"

Vector lay still, trembling. "Listen," Sandra repeated. "You took Kevin from us, so we're taking what you love away too. This is going to flush your body of all those viruses and germs you've been collecting…"

"Please, don't…"

"… but you're going to get back whatever is in that blood. But you only get that back if we feel you've learned your lesson. So if you were thinking about trying to screw us over? You're going to lose everything. Do you understand?"

Vector closed her eyes and nodded, tears streaming down her

cheeks. Sandra grimly pressed down on the plunger of the syringe.

Fire ripped through the girl's body, and billions of lives were snuffed out in a cascade of chemical death.

She didn't know when it stopped, or when the dying ended. She was only even vaguely aware when the three monsters in their plastic suits left the room, or when someone lit a fire and burned down the laboratory. She did remember being carried out. She remembered curling up in his arms and weeping into his shoulder, feeling the distant, comforting sensation of the microorganisms in his body, wanting to pull them into her, but knowing that if she did, the flames rippling through her would simply kill them off.

It was just as she was being placed into the back seat of a car that her mind decided it had had enough and decided to cut out. Oblivion overcame her and she embraced it gladly.

"Pull over," Michel ordered.

James pulled the van over to the side of the road, and Michel got out and walked over to a tree. He leaned against it, then vomited noisily into the grass.

"Fuck," Sandra grimaced. She reached for a box with a biohazard label on it taped to the side of the plastic-lined compartment, but was interrupted by the Professor putting a hand over hers.

"Wait here," the old man said. "I'll let you know if you need to worry."

He exited the makeshift quarantine compartment in the back of the van and walked to the side of the road, where Michel was now sitting with his knees pulled to his chest and tears streaming down his face. The Professor sat down next to the big Frenchman and put an arm around his wide shoulders, pulling him close. "I'm sorry," he said, simply. "It needed to be done."

"Did we have to do it like THAT!?" Michel asked. "That was… UGLY… it was…"

"I know," the Professor said. "I know. It was an unpleasant, hideous

act to do to another human being. But so was what she did to Kevin. Justice needed to be done. A lesson needed to be taught."

"I'm done," Michel said. "I can't do this any more. Not after that."

The Professor nodded, and hugged the big man again. "You're a good soldier, Michel," he said. "You have fought well for the cause. Go home and be with your loved ones and enjoy the new world you are creating. Thank you for your service."

He helped the big man get to his feet and led him to the van. The rest of the trip passed in silence. Nothing needed to be said. Everyone understood.

She didn't remember much except that it was incredibly unpleasant and incredibly humiliating. On top of the pain of the serum racing through her body, there was the devastating effect it had on a body that had developed an equilibrium with billions of different kinds of lethal microorganisms, as well as many which were nonlethal. The effect on her digestive system alone didn't even bear thinking about.

The worst part where the nightmares. Every time she closed her eyes, she saw demons in white coats and surgical masks wielding syringes full of death. White rooms lit with fluorescent tubes that cast no shadows. A man with no head cut her apart with a scalpel, held the pieces up to the light, then dunked them in a greenish liquid and put them back where they had come from. Grinning midgets with wide mouths full of too many sharklike teeth sat in the rafters and cackled. "You'll never get out. You'll never get out."

The only comfort was when the Angel came. That was how she thought of him, for in her pain-induced delirium, his handsome face seemed suffused in a holy light. The Angel was the one who would wipe away her sweat from her feverish forehead. The Angel was the one who cleaned her up and changed her IVs. He held her hand throughout the worst of the pain, and whispered soft lullabies to her when she whimpered.

In her hour of loneliness, he was her friend, and she loved him for it.

When she finally emerged from her drug-induced delirium, she found herself lying on clean sheets in a soft bed. The sun was shining through a window in the attic room, casting a square of light onto the cheerful flower-print wallpaper. There was a framed cross-stitch on the wall across from her depicting two children playing on the front lawn of a red brick house. "HOME IS WHERE THE HEART IS," it read.

She felt empty… drained… alone. For the first time since she could remember, she was a single person, without the familiar warmth of her old friends nestled inside her. She closed her eyes and reached out, calling to her beloved microscopic companions: a virus here, a bacterium there. She called them to her, and they answered, and as they did so, she felt her strength return to her, felt her broken spirit rejuvenating.

The door opened, and a young man wearing an apron over his jeans and t-shirt walked in, carrying a large hot bowl of chicken soup. "Feeling better?" he asked, setting it down by her side. "It's good to see you awake again."

Vector looked up into his face, and she blushed. It was the Angel.

"Don't get up just yet," he said. "Let me check your vital signs first." He sat down next to her and checked her pulse and blood pressure, nodded at the numbers. "Much better," he said.

"How long was I out?" she asked.

"About a week. How are you feeling?" the young man asked.

"Better," Vector said. She twisted the sheets under her fingers tightly, nervously.

"You look better," the young man said kindly. "Is there something I can do for you?"

She felt a familiar taste in the air, and she smiled. "Yes," she whispered. "You can die."

Staphylococcus aureus is a contradictory bacteria. It is constantly present in the environment: on the skin, in the mucus membranes of

the nose and throat, in acne. Approximately one in five humans is a carrier and, for the most part, coexist with it in relative peace. However, that same bacteria, which is harmless enough in most places, turns into one of the most virulent and deadly organisms known to man if allowed to infect the wrong tissues. In the skin, it causes necrotizing fasciitis, which literally eats skin and muscle tissue at an alarming rate. In the blood, it causes toxic shock syndrome, which can kill in hours. In spinal fluid, it causes meningitis, which can lead to brain damage and gangrene. In the lungs, pneumonia.

Vector hit him with all of them at once, then boosted the virulence as hard as she could. He was dead within seconds.

She stepped around over his twitching, decaying body and went to the wardrobe in the corner. As expected, all the clothes were some sort of hideous floral print frocks that looked like something a mother from a Norman Rockwell painting would wear. She picked the least disgusting looking one and changed into it, then threw an overcoat on over it. No shoes, but if she could just…

There was a loud crash, and then shouting. Gunfire cracked in bright, staccato beats: the high, bright crack of an assault rifle, underlaid by the lower booming of a shotgun. Then silence.

She ran to the window. There were men outside, wearing black tactical gear, and they were dragging two dead bodies into the back of an unmarked white van. Several more were moving towards the house with the smooth, practiced movements of professional soldiers. A couple more were pushing a nondescript white Toyota Camry off the dock and into a nearby lake: it splashed into the water and quickly sank from view.

The door opened, and a man wearing full hazmat gear, carrying a submachine gun, walked in. He held up a photo and nodded. "It's her."

Another man slung his rifle and drew a pistol, shooting her twice in the chest. She looked down and saw the yellow tassel of a dart sticking from her body, then the drugs took hold, and she passed out.

"This is Bobby. Tell Dark we have her."

Harken woke up around midnight with the distinct feeling there was someone in the room. Then he saw the silhouette standing at his window: the silhouette of a tall man wearing a fedora and long overcoat.

"You must think you're very clever, Mister Harken," the stranger said.

“I… ahh… like to think so, yes.”

"I will admit, your ruse was almost successful."

Harken thought for several seconds about denying it, but didn't see the point. “Only almost?”

"Just so. Let me tell you about the full consequences of your actions, Mister Harken," the stranger continued. "Because of your… tip… the GOC pulled elements from their strike team shadowing the girl known as 'Vector' to investigate the warehouse in question. The strike team was seconds away from breach when the overwatch element recognized the person known as "Boomer." They were barely able to abort the mission before what would certainly have been a costly and fatal mistake."

"Damn. Well, good on them. No harm no foul, I suppose?"

"But there was harm, Mister Harken. Because the GOC diverted elements to the warehouse, they dispatched only two agents to investigate the next likely lead: a farmhouse in Colorado. When they arrived, the agents were ambushed and killed. Shortly afterward, a UAV doing surveillance of the region showed several known employees of Marshall, Carter, and Dark carrying an unconscious female in her mid-twenties to an unmarked vehicle. The female was later confirmed to be the target in question."

Harken felt his mouth go dry. He swallowed hard. "The richies got the germ girl."

"All thanks to your little 'tip,' Mister Harken. All thanks to your little tip." The stranger walked to the bathroom door and waited with one hand on the handle. "Mister Harken. This is a war. You and yours need to seriously consider whose side you are on."

"Yeah? And whose side are you on?" Harken growled.

"You already know the answer to that, Mister Harken," the man said. "I'm on Nobody's side."

He walked into the bathroom and closed the door behind him. Harken already knew that by the time anyone else opened that door, it would be empty. He still rose and threw the door open on the cool, tile lined darkness. Not surprising, really.

After all, Nobody could get out of a locked room with only one door.

He sighed heavily, thinking of the report he'd have to file, leaning on the door frame.

“Kramer's never gonna let me hear the end of this.”

Game Day Phase 2: Second Language

[Tempest Night, 18:43]

Dr. Clarkson walked the halls, holding the scroll in his hands, careful to avoid confrontations. After a few minutes, he was able to stop screaming, and concentrate on his goal. Collecting new minds was painful – there was no room for the new memories, so the old poured out – but this one was necessary. Now he knew where to go – Minimum Security Block 3-A, home of SCP-343.

He arrived with little incident. Block 3-A was an oddity tonight, in that it was entirely untouched. No invaders, no escapees, no agents, nothing. Perhaps 343 had created some illusion so that none of them could see it? No matter. He had always been good at seeing things as they really were. The door at the end of the hall was open, and Clarkson walked into what appeared to be a Victorian English study.

343 looked up from his armchair next to the fireplace. “ - - , I’ve been expecting you.” 343 said calmly.

Clarkson was only mildly surprised that 343 knew his real name. You could expect no less of “God.”

“If you know who I am, then you know why I’m here. I have a gift for you.”

He held the object forward, and “God” accepted his offering. The battle was on. He had waited over three thousand years for this, and it would be over, one way or another, in minutes.

The call came into Assistant Adams at Central Control the next morning. “I have one of your SCPs, and what’s left of the fellow who brought it here. Kindly send someone to remove them both," SCP-343 said. Smug as always.

Agents Walters and Johnson looked over 343's voluntary containment area, noting the lack of damage.

"Quiet night for you?" Walters said. "Not for the rest of us. You could have helped, you know."

"Not so quiet after all," replied 343, motioning towards Clarkson, slumped in a corner of the room, obviously dead. "Besides, sometimes it's for the best in the long run that these things happen. Maybe you'll understand one day."

Johnson swore that 343 actually looked tired. He checked Clarkson's vitals. Yes, as dead as he looked. He helped Walters load Clarkson onto a gurney and wheeled him out.

"You said you had something of ours?" Walters asked.

"Oh, yes." 343 casually picked up **SCP-911** and dropped it into the waiting bag. "Don't touch it; it may still be omnivorous. Er, I mean, anomalous. I think I need a nap."

"Don't we all. I'll be seeing you, sir," Walters said. He took SCP-911 and headed for Temporary Containment Area C. Eventually, someone would get the door to High Value Item Storage repaired.

The Collector closed the door to his new room and smiled. It was glorious to finally possess a mind capable of holding thousands of years of thoughts, with room to spare. No more screaming: at least, not from him. It had been in Clarkson's thoughts, something he had learned in a lecture from someone called "Assistant Director Clef." What odd names people had these days.

"The greatest weakness of Reality Benders is their overconfidence," Clef had said, and someday 343 911 would be pleased to tell Clef that he was correct. Until then, there was plenty of time for him to learn the intricacies of reality bending. And English.

He closed his eyes and began taking his nap.

"Sometimes You Get the Bear. . ."

The twelve members of MTF Rho-Niner ("Theisman's Leg") moved up the hill in smooth, catlike motions, their dark grey camouflage uniforms blending in perfectly with the night, their faces hidden behind the eerie, insectoid forms of their gas masks with integrated night vision equipment. They carried sleek, black submachine guns in their gloved hands, and flashbang grenades on their belts. They were fucking badasses, the cream of the Foundation's strike teams, the elite of the elite in the hidden shadow-war of the occult, and they were going to take this house DOWN.

Then some asshole on the second floor of the target house ruined everything by shooting a cheap-ass Vietnamese-made version of Chinese knockoff of an AK-47 assault rifle at them and waking up all the neighbors.

The next few minutes didn't go so well for the members of MTF-Rho-Niner.

"Fucking EMPTY!" Agent Chimes shouted, slamming his assault vest down onto the steel table. He slammed his fists down onto the table, then buried his face in both hands in frustration, smearing his soot-black face paint. "Third fucking time!"

"At least we got the guy that was shooting at us," Agent Chu said.

"Hey, Chuface, get a clue. That's what that asshole was SUPPOSED to do: slow us down so that the rest of the motherfuckers could bug out. Fucking SHIT! Third fucking time!" Chimes shouted. "What the fuck!?"

"Pipe down, Chimes, you're starting to piss me off," Sergeant Minh growled. "We're all pissed, no need to scream about it."

"That's right," Lieutenant Jameson agreed. "We've got bigger

problems to deal with."

"Like explaining how a fucking million dollar neighborhood in richville California got shot up by a bunch of bozos in black suits?" Chimes asked.

"What? No, that's easy. We blame it on terrorists or drug traffickers or something. My issue is, how the hell did they see us coming?"

"Easy," Chimes said. "Some newbie fucked up: forgot to blacken a buckle or silence a tag or something. That's how all these things get fucked up."

"Hey! Shut the hell up, Chimes. You went over the newbs' gear same as me. Everyone was as black as night and as quiet as a mouse. We were CLEAN," Minh pointed out.

"And it doesn't explain how they bugged out before we even got there. And they had to have bugged out before that. They pulled the disk drives on their computers before they left: that's not a ten second job. Something, or someone, tipped them off before we even got there."

"Could there be a mole, LT?" Chu asked.

"God forbid," Jameson said. "But that doesn't make any sense either. This op's been planned for over a week. If there was a mole, the targets would have spooked and left days ago. There were plates of uneaten food on the tables and bomb-making equipment left in the basement: that tells us they left quickly. So we're looking at a window of around thirty minutes to one hour: long enough to grab a few things and haul ass, but not long enough to take all their shit with them."

"Where did they go, anyway? We had a perimeter around the whole place, but no one saw a fucking thing."

"Not important. The important thing is that everyone was gone before we even hit the house. If we'd had surprise, they would have still been there, no matter how they got out. So their escape route is irrelevant, if we can hit them before they manage to take it. So let's

focus on the surprise part," Jameson said. "Let's go through the op step by step. Arrival?"

"Twenty-four hours before op. Three different methods," Sergeant Minh said. "Four of us arrived by train, four by plane, four drove in with the moving vans full of gear. Civilian clothes. No one's carrying except the gear pukes, and they didn't get stopped by anyone."

"Mmmm. Seemed fine, but let's break it up a bit more next time. Asymmetric groups. Housing?"

"Two separate motels. Separate cover stories and check-in times for each group of two. Rooms swept for bugs. Everything was clean, no one broke cover even in the rooms." Chimes said.

"Good. Those walls are thin: if you can hear people banging hookers the next room over, it's not that hard for some vacationer to overhear some black ops shit if you're not careful. Casing?"

"My job, LT," Chu said, raising his hand. "I was on the roof of the house one block over. Total thermoptic camo. Guy who owned the house didn't even know I was there, no way the assholes in the target house coulda seen me."

"And you confirmed the target was there?" Jameson asked.

"I saw him three times," Chu said. He flipped out a small notebook. "At three separate moments. First at 7 am when…"

"Never mind. I trust you. All right, so we arrive clean, we scout the target, no one knows we're there at this point. What about staging?" Jameson asked.

"None. We did all that shit en route," Minh said. "Everyone changed and got geared up in the vans."

"… in the vans," Jameson repeated. He looked out the safe house window at the Chevy Suburbans in the parking lot.

"Yeah. We didn't want any neighbors seeing a bunch of guys in a parking lot with guns, so we had everyone get prepped in the vans on the way up," Minh continued. "We picked the guys up at the

rendezvous points, then got everyone's gear situated…"

"… and we headed up the hill," Jameson said, slowly.

"… fuck," Chimes sighed.

"… in three vans of the same make and model… hell, they're even the same COLOR…" Jameson noted.

"Fuck. Fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck. Sorry, LT. I fucked that one up. I was the one who got the vehicles. My fucking bad," Chimes admitted.

"Don't be too hard on yourself, Chimes," Jameson said, not unkindly. "I shoulda seen it too."

"Yeah, but you didn't. I should have. Wheels was my job," Chimes groaned. "Fuck, I'm such a fucking retard. Three fucking black suburbans coming up the hill at midnight… shit, anyone would bug out if they saw that coming!"

"We'll fix that for next time. We get a white soccer mom van, a hearse, maybe a limo. We mix up the vehicles, and we mix up arrival times. Space it out over ten minutes. Lesson learned. Everyone get some rest, we'll be doing this again soon enough."

"Right, LT."

"Copy."

Two weeks later…

The twelve members of MTF Rho-Niner ("Theisman's Leg") moved down the street in smooth, catlike motions, their dark grey camouflage uniforms blending in perfectly with the night, their faces hidden behind the eerie, insectoid forms of their gas masks with integrated night vision equipment. They carried sleek, black submachine guns in their gloved hands, and flashbang grenades on their belts. They were fucking badasses, the cream of the Foundation's strike teams, the elite of the elite in the hidden shadow-war of the occult, and they were going to take this house

DOWN.

They kicked down the front door of the target house and threw in flashbangs, causing the entire house to light up like a camera flash. Then they stormed in like the wrath of god, weapons raised, moving with precision and speed from room to room, sweeping every corner, searching every dark place for hidden enemies.

They were two rooms in when they saw the first dead body: some guy wearing heart-print boxers and a "Big Johnson" t-shirt lying dead over the kitchen counter. The walls were riddled with bullet holes and splashed with blood. Same with the next room. And the next.

It wasn't until they got to the living room, though, that Chimes took off his mask and cussed loudly. That was where they found the eight other members of the Chaos Insurgency cell laying on the rug, lined up neatly in a row, each of them with three rounds center-mass. There was a piece of paper pinned to one of their chests. Lieutenant Jameson carefully picked it up, then sighed.

"Fuck," he muttered.

"Basement's empty," Chu said, coming up the stairs. "Everything's gone. Hard drives, bombs, and the skip."

"Call it in, Minh," Jameson said. "I think this op's over."

He tossed the piece of paper onto the ground and walked out. Chu saw four words written in black sharpie, and the laurel leaves and pentacle logo of the Global Occult Coalition on the letterhead.

BETTER LUCK NEXT TIME, it said.

The Light At The End Of The Tunnel

It wasn't working, he realized, as the statuesque woman ran the tip of her finger along the fake incision on his skin and licked the fake blood off with a seductive purr. He sighed, shook his head, and growled out the word, "Holocaust," through the bit in his teeth.

The woman immediately stopped moaning and stood up straight, concern in her ice-blue eyes. "Are you okay, sweetie?" she asked.

"I'm fine," he said. "I'm just not feeling it today."

"It's okay, hon. Let's call it for today. Call me when you're ready to go again."

"I will," he lied.

He paid the woman in cash and watched her drive away down the winding country road, sipping his tea and touching his stomach where she had run the stage knife over his bare skin, leaving behind a thin line of fake blood. It wasn't her fault she couldn't give him what he wanted. No professional was going to do actual bloodplay in this day and age, not with the threat of HIV ever-present. But even the most convincing play was simply that… a shadow of the truth.

He wondered if that was how She felt.

She was sitting on a large rock in the backyard when he came downstairs, running a fine-toothed steel comb through Her tangled black hair, picking fleas out when they got caught between the narrow tines and crushing them between Her thumb and forefinger. She was rail-thin and rangy-looking, Her ribs visible through Her taut skin, Her yellow eyes feral and cruel, Her too-wide mouth crooked upwards, revealing the white tips of Her sharp canine teeth. The decapitated remnants of a dead hare were scattered here and there.

"Did you have a good hunt?" Sol asked.

"I did. It has been a long time," She replied. "Fresh blood tastes best. But is it safe to hunt so close to my former captors?"

"Who said you were anywhere near them?" Sol laughed. "We're halfway around the world from that place. You're perfectly safe for the time being."

"I don't remember any planes," She pointed out. "And I somehow doubt that you could drive all the way across the world in a few short minutes."

"You'd be right about that… assuming you were taking the long way. It so happens that I know a few shortcuts."

"Interesting. Tell me more."

"In due time, my lady. In due time. For now you must focus on regaining your strength and re-honing your skills. You are like a blade allowed to rust in darkness. You must be polished, sharpened, and remade anew."

Her ears twitched, and She grinned. "If you say so," She purred.

"I do say so. You are a sublime creature of legend. I would have the others see you in your full glory, rather than as this wretched creature that the Worldwide Global Conspiracy has reduced you to. So for now, rest, my lady, and grow strong and beautiful. The day of reckoning will come soon enough."

He kissed the back of her hand and walked back into the house. She waited until he was gone before picking up the severed head of the hare and hurling it into the woods in a fit of pique. She longed to follow him into the house and paint the ceiling and walls with his guts, but if there was one thing Her long captivity had taught Her, it was patience. Good things came to those who waited.

"Oh lord, give me the serenity to accept what I cannot change, the courage to change what I can, and the patience not to punch that asshole in the face for being a sententious prick," Sandra recited.

"Try to be nice. He's technically our ally," Michel said.

"Ally my ass, he's a loose cannon. If I thought I could get away with it…"

"Hush, Sandra," the Professor said. "We're here."

Every time James came to the Teacher's home, he felt like he was stepping into Narnia. The old country manor looked like something straight out of an Edward Gorey illustration, with its tall picture windows and dilapidated clock tower, and the forest behind it swept out as far as the eye could see: dark, mysterious, and overgrown. The entire place radiated a sense of adventure, tradition, and mysticism that never failed to make him shiver with excitement.

He'd tried to say as much to Sandra once. "I know," she'd agreed, "If he bothered to spend a little time and money to fix up the clock tower, renovate the house, and prune the trees back a bit, the place would be worth something. Lazy bastard." After that, James decided to keep his opinions to himself.

The door opened as the four of them approached, and James heard Sandra breathe in sharply, followed by a, "What the fuck?" from Michel. Sol was standing in the doorway dressed in some kind of insane gold-brocaded robe with massive sleeves, smiling and nodding to his guests. "Come in," he said. "Dinner will be served shortly."

The walls of the front hall were hung with hand-drawn screens and red silks: they tried but didn't quite succeed at covering up the portraits of English gentlemen and such that hung on the walls. A red velvet carpet had been rolled out leading from the front door into the dining room. It was grotesque. It was gaudy. It was ugly.

It was classic Sol.

"What the hell is going on here, Sol?" Sandra growled. "I don't have time for your bullshit."

"In good time, in good time, my friends. For now, I have a guest for you to meet."

"No! Fuck you!" Sandra shouted. "You'll answer my questions right

now! What the fuck was up with that stupid manifesto you sent to the news stations? When we said we were going to help you with your raid, you promised us that you had everything planned out. Nothing could go wrong. Well, I've got three dead cell members and a bunch of wounded that say otherwise. And what did we get for it? Jack and SHIT. A few trinkets we could have picked up easier ourselves without getting a bunch of guys killed. I want a goddamn explanation!"

Sol's expression darkened, and he swallowed his rage hard, fists tightening. "As usual, your mercenary ways don't see the truth of what we've accomplished. We have struck a blow for freedom and liberty that will resound all around the world. We have liberated…"

"Oh, SPARE me your righteous bullshit, Sol! I want answers!"

"My apologies," a new voice said. "The master is wise indeed, but is often short in social graces."

James let out an involuntary squeak of surprise. An angel was walking into the room.

She was small in stature, and dressed in the same gaudy robes that Sol wore, but while he looked like a child playing dressup with his parents' clothing, she wore them with confidence and assurance. Her pale face was round and lovely, and her long, jet-black hair tied up in a series of tight buns. But what really drew James' attention was the pair of tapered, red-furred ears that jutted out through her jet-black locks, and the tips of nine foxlike tails peeking out from the hem of her robes. "Please," she said. "It is not proper for friends to fight. Please come inside and have dinner."

The silence was finally broken when the Professor let out a low sigh. "Solomon," he said. "What have you done?"

"I have rescued a being of myth from durance vile, and struck a blow against the Worldwide Global Conspiracy that will be felt for many years to come," Sol crowed.

Sandra's angry response was interrupted by the Professor's cutting hand gesture: very small, but enough for her to see. She clenched

her teeth instead, and looked away.

"Let us by all means have dinner, then," the Professor said calmly. "I believe we have much to discuss."

"Our attack on the Enemy has borne great fruit," Sol expounded, making grandiose and voluminous gestures at the walls, the ceiling, and his bowl of rice. "Dozens of sentients cruelly held captive now taste the sweet honey of freedom. Though most are happy to simply enjoy the fresh air of liberty, they will soon answer our clarion call to join the crusade against the Worldwide Global Conspiracy that enslaves us all. Already, the first of them have joined us in our war against evil… and I have heard that one even now strikes back against the enemy on her own."

"If you mean that Vector bitch, then I don't know where you're getting your information. That crazy whore is in it for herself, not for any cause," Sandra muttered angrily.

"She strikes against the minions of the Conspiracy. Her cause and ours are the same."

"Forgive me, Sol, if I don't think that attacking an AIDS clinic and killing a bunch of sick people to steal their strains of HIV is particularly helpful in fighting the GOC."

"You are as short-sighted as usual, Sandra. Clearly you must see…"

It was always like this. Sandra and Sol would argue. Michel would sit by and watch in silence. And the Professor would just listen and then, at the right moment, make a single cutting remark that would make both Sandra and Sol realize how stupid they were being. And as for James? He just sat there, listened, and felt like a fifth wheel. It was not a comfortable feeling, and it was even more uncomfortable this time because of the presence of the Girl.

He glanced over at her, and saw her looking back. He blushed and looked down at his half-eaten plate of food, the bright colors of the vegetables and the gently bubbling soups arranged impeccably on the black laquered table. With shaking hands, he reached for his

wine cup, found it empty. Almost immediately, she was there at his side, pouring him another cupful from a glass bottle.

Her hands, he noticed, were very white, and her fingers were very delicate and tipped with long, red-painted nails.

"Is your food not to your liking?" she asked, in a voice like bells in the wind. "You have barely touched it."

"It… it's fine," James stammered. He stared down at his food and picked up some kind of sliced vegetable with his chopsticks, but his hands were shaking so badly that he dropped it into his lap. She laughed, not unkindly, and placed a hand over his. "Here," she said. "Let me."

She picked up one of the small white pancakes from the center of the nine-sectioned dish and deftly placed a few sections of sliced vegetables and meats atop it. She wrapped it up with a few quick moves of her chopsticks and held it out to him in her chopsticks. James blinked in surprise, then, feeling embarassed, allowed her to feed it to him.

A loud laugh, and he suddenly realized everyone was watching him. "Is she not wonderful?" Sol said, with a wry smile. "A truly exquisite creature. And the Worldwide Global Conspiracy would keep her captive. Is her freedom not enough to justify our crusade against them?"

"Funny you should call it that, considering what happened during the Crusades," Sandra muttered.

And again, the conversation devolved back into the usual argument. But James noticed that Her yellow eyes were watching him.

In the end, they ended up staying the night.

James couldn't sleep. It was 2 am and he was laying in bed staring up at the ceiling. His mind was haunted by the image of a pair of lovely yellow eyes staring back at him, his dreams by the memory of the touch of her cool fingertips against his wrist. Though an early fall

breeze cooled the room, the air seemed uncomfortably close and warm… stifling, even. He closed his eyes, and all he could see was the soft cupid's bow curve of her lips - all he could hear the ringing musical sound of her laughter.

He got up from his bed to get a drink of water, but something out of the corner of his eye caught his attention. He went to his window to get a closer look, and his breath caught in his throat.

She was sitting on a large rock in the backyard, running a lacquered tortoiseshell comb through Her long, black hair. She was slender and lovely, Her pale white skin glowing like pearl in the silver moonlight, her gleaming yellow eyes vibrant with life. A divinely lovely smile quirked her pale pink lips as flower petals cascaded down around her like snowflakes.

James swallowed hard.

He went to his door and opened it, then gave a cry of surprise. Michel, the huge, muscular Frenchman, was sitting outside his door, wrapped in a blanket, with his head cushioned by a pillow. He instantly awoke as he heard the door open. "What is it?" Michel asked.

"I was uh… just going to get a glass of water," James stammered.

Michel nodded. "Go back to your room. I'll get it for you."

"I'm not a kid, Mick. I can get my own water."

"James?" Michel said, slowly. "Go back into your room."

"Fu—" He never finished the sentence. Michel's massive fist lashed out and punched him in the jaw, knocking him out cold.

"Sorry, kid," Michel said. "I'm saving your life."

She heard the footsteps behind Her, and She smiled. It had been a long time since She had hunted man, and She was glad that She had not lost her touch. She turned towards him, letting her back arch in a carefully calculated move that framed Her face with her black

hair in the most flattering manner possible… and was surprised to see the old man standing there on the garden path.

"Good evening," he said. "Lovely moon out tonight."

She smiled at him, quickly recovering from Her surprise. Though not the prey She had anticipated, She would make do with this. "It is," She admitted. lowering Her eyes in Her most demure manner, and covering Her bare shoulders with Her long flowing locks. "It reminds me of the moons of my childhood."

"You must miss them. The days of long ago. You speak of them with such nostalgia."

"It was a different time, back then," She said, letting her hair slip in a perfectly calculated manner to bare the back of Her neck. "Things were simpler. Now times have changed."

There was a short pause. "I am seventy years old," the man said. "I am not a young man driven by base lusts. Don't try to seduce me like you did James."

This was not going as She had expected. "Even a seventy year old man has needs," She purred, tossing Her hair back and letting him get a good look at Her body. "I could make you feel young agai—."

"Why do you do this?" he asked. "It demeans you to carry on like a cheap whore."

She hissed in anger, and for a moment, She lost her concentration on the illusion She was spinning. For a bare instant, he saw Her as She truly was, and the sight made him flinch in shock, but only for a moment. "Insult me again, prey-creature, and I will tear your heart out with my claws. I could kill you in an instant."

"Yes, you could," he admitted. "But what would that accomplish?"

"It would be what you deserve for doing this to me!" She snapped. "Your people have killed the Old. They have bound Myth and Legend in prisons of steel, and eradicated the things of Magic with cold science. Then you mock even our memories, perverting that which you should fear into things of lust and children's fantasies.

This cannot be abided. I will NOT abide it! I will die, but I will die fighting, with my claws red with your blood and my teeth in your throat, and I will die knowing that I was feared!"

The wind blew, and carried with it the smell of rot and decay. The old man smiled. "Yes," he said. "This is the real you. This is what I was looking for."

"What are you talking about?"

"You have heard Solomon's plans?"

"Idiocy. The man thinks that he can go to war with the world and win. He is useful to me for now, but one of these days, I will taste his blood," She growled.

"Sol is… a broken man, but he is also a useful one. He has a talent for inspiring fools and martyrs, and we have need of both in these days. Go along with his plans for now," the old man said. "Help him fight his war."

"Why? It is doomed to fail. He has no subtlety. He will push and push, and when he pushes too far, they will strike back with all their might, and destroy him."

"Yes," the old man said. "That is exactly what we want."

He spoke to her then of plans, of plans within plans, of war and betrayal, and of things to come. He told her of the coming war, of the fire that would cleanse the world clean, and of the new world that would rise from the ashes of the old. He told her of many things, and as She listened, She felt something She had not felt in many years.

Respect.

At last, She thought. *A human who TRULY understands.*

He finished speaking. She nodded. "I will do as you have said," She admitted. "But I have only one question."

"Ask."

"Who are you?"

"My name is a secret," the old man said, "but most call me The Teacher."

They left with the dawn: James holding an icepack to his jaw and arguing with the stoic Michel the whole drive home, while Sandra and the Professor listened on in increasingly uncomfortable silence. Sol watched the drive away, then walked into the backyard, where She was sitting and looking out into the forest.

"So," he asked. "What did you think of my friends?"

"They seem like decent folk," She said. "But they lack your vision and daring."

Sol nodded, and put one hand in his pocket and ran the other along a windowsill. "You know, last night, after everyone had gone to bed, I went to the bathroom. On my way back to the room, I walked by this window, when I thought I heard someone talking. I heard an interesting conversation. I don't think they realized this window was open the whole time."

She was silent for a moment. "You know I didn't mean anything I said," She purred. "I said what I did to draw him out as a traitor. I would never betray you, not after all you've done for me."

"I hear you," Sol sighed. "But I can't take that chance."

He shot her twice in the head, saw her fall to the ground dead. He shook his head in regret. "Pity," he whispered. "I thought you, of all people, would understand."

"I did," a voice whispered, and Sol knew he was dead.

She bit his hand off at the wrist first, and it fell to the ground still holding the gun. That part was fast. The rest went much slower. About the time that she tore open his abdomen and started pulling his guts out of his body, he realized he had an erection.

His last thought before dying was that this was what he'd wanted all

along.

The first thing She did was tear down the decorations and burn them in the back yard along with the uneaten portions of his body. She threw the robes onto the fire as well, feeling a sense of vindictive satisfaction as they curled and blackened. Then She walked back into the house and stood in front of the mirror.

Solomon Kidd looked back at Her. She frowned as She noticed a slight imperfection in the shape of his eyes, then fixed it with a small exertion of will. She would have to practice walking, She realized, in order to get just enough arrogance and braggadocio into all Her movements.

Then She went upstairs to his office, took the small post-it from the back of his monitor, and used the username and password written there to log on to his account. She spent the rest of the afternoon reading through his emails and correspondence, learning how to become Solomon Kidd.

It was shortly after the sun had set that She read one that made Her smile.

> Re: Stepping Sideways
> From: ten.sreredna w|yttikssim#ten.sreredna w|yttikssim
> To: ten.noitandnimeerf|loS#ten.noitandnimeerf|loS
>
> I'll help you on this, but just this once. After this, you're on your own. Come by the Library and I'll show you how to use the Ways.
>
> Midnight

Tunneling Between Worlds

Re: Dinner?
From: ten.sreredna w|yttikssim#ten.sreredna w|yttikssim
To: ten.noitandnimeerf|loS#ten.noitandnimeerf|loS

I'll be there.

Midnight

> Subject: Dinner?
> From: ten.noitandnimeerf|
> loS#ten.noitandnimeerf|loS
> To: ten.sreredna w|yttikssim#ten.sreredna w|
> yttikssim
>
> Midnight,
>
> It has been a while since we conversed. I know we've had our differences (as all great minds do), but I would appreciate it if you gave me an opportunity to try and smooth things out. I would like you to come down to the estate and have dinner. I will provide food. You will provide the company.
>
> Sol

She… no… Solomon Kidd… looked at Her… at his… reflection in the mirror and smiled. It was amazing how much difference a haircut and a change of clothes made. Not that it had been easy finding a good set of clothes in Sol's closet: the man's tastes ran to colors so eye-searing that Picasso and Warhol would have told him to take things down a notch.

"Sol" took a deep breath and looked around the dining room one more time. Lights low: check. Roses on the table: check. Subtle

hints of perfume here and there: check. Low, romantic, violin music: check. Whoever this "Midnight" was, she was going to be charmed like she'd never been charmed before.

She did indulge Herself in one regard: the main dish.

Based on the emails She'd pulled from Sol's computer, She'd determined a few things about the mysterious Midnight: Midnight was apparently an occultist of some renown, and a hedge mage of some power. Her relationship with Sol was rocky, and involved some philosophical disagreements. She was associated with a Library of some sort: the word was always capitalized. She liked cats.

"Sol" closed "his" eyes and tried to form an image in his head of the person he'd soon be meeting: probably young or middle-aged. An intellectual. Attractive? Probably not: he detected no tension there in the past emails. But there was definitely respect. That was an in. That was something he could play off of.

The doorbell rang, and "Sol" started in surprise. He had not sensed any hint of intrusion onto his grounds: the occasional animal, but no humans. Clearly, this Midnight was a much more capable mage than he had anticipated. He straightened his lapels, gave himself one last look in the mirror, then sauntered to the door and threw it open with Sol's practiced flair.

There was no one there.

And then "Sol" realized he'd made a critical error, as he saw a cat sitting on the doormat. American Shorthair. Black fur. Golden eyes mirroring her own. Small. Sleek-bodied. Seven toes on each foot… and a rising of the hackles that slowly subsided into a posture of suspicion laced with fear.

"So," Midnight said. "Should I say nihao, konichiwa, or anyeung-ha-sae-yo?"

A few minutes later, they were sitting at either end of the dining room table, staring at each other from across the long expanse of

polished mahogany. She had dropped the pretense of Sol's disguise, and had resumed a female form, although she retained Sol's clothing. Midnight was perched on a couple of phone books on the other chair, which She had thoughtfully provided for her.

Midnight broke the silence by clearing her throat. "I smell long pork," she said.

"Main dish," She replied.

"Solomon?"

"Yes."

"Poor kid."

"He was no longer useful to me, so I made use of him in other ways."

"And you were going to serve him to me as dinner?"

She smiled. "It amused me."

"I'm sure it did."

A long, drawn out silence. This time, it was She who broke it.

"Why did you not run when you realized what I was?"

"What would have been the point? I would have just died tired. Why didn't you kill me when you realized I knew?"

"It would not have served my purpose," She said.

"So I'm useful to you?"

"For now."

"Mmm."

The grandfather clock in the main hall rang out the hour.

Midnight rubbed her forehead with one paw. "I have a headache,"

she complained. "I see human but smell fox. Could I ask you to…"

There was a crack, like thunder, and the woman at the other end of the table vanished, to be replaced by… well. It looked like a fox, but a fox out of the nightmares of small rodents everywhere. It was twice the size of your usual fox: almost as large as a dog. It was lean and starved, with a hungry, evil look in its yellow eyes, and nine long tails emerging from its hindquarters. "Is this better?" She asked.

"Much," Midnight said, her voice raspy with fear.

"Then let us negotiate," She said. "You know something I want to know. I could try to take it, but such methods are unpleasant and messy. Out of respect for another creature of Myth, I will allow you to ask me for a boon in return for what you know of these… Ways."

"The Ways… I should have known." Midnight nodded and relaxed. "And if I tell you what I know of these Ways… I have your word on your pride in your own wit that I will leave unharmed?"

"You have it," She said.

"Then I ask this in payment," Midnight said. "Tell me what Sol was planning… no. What the Teacher is planning."

"You know of the Teacher?" She asked, raising one furry ridged brow questioningly.

"I know he's screwed things for all of us," Midnight said, real anger seeping into her words. "Unlike him, the Serpent's Hand doesn't want a war. God's on the side with the biggest guns, and most of us don't even have peashooters. I mean… I know a kid who can change the color of paint. That's not very much use against bullets."

"I see," She said. "Then let me tell you of our plans."

She laid them out for Midnight. It took over an hour. By the time it was over, the food had gotten cold, and so had Midnight's heart.

"… it could work," the black cat had to admit. "But the casualties…"

"Will be heavy. That's the nature of war. But in the end, we will be

victorious."

"I see," Midnight said. She nodded gravely and jumped down from the chair. "In that case, I suppose I had better show you my end of the bargain."

"I'm just saying that maybe you could stand to relax a bit, Shank," Percival said, sipping from his thermos of soup. "You're always so tense."

"One o' these days, I'll cut you ta pieces an' pluck those eyes outta yor skull," replied the tall, animate scarecrow. It ran a wickedly curved sickle along its "throat," in a slow, smooth gesture. "Those baby blues'll look good in me stash. Gotta place for 'em right here."

"You'll have to take 'em first," Percival said, resting a hand on the hilt of the massive bastard sword resting against the library table. "I'll see your ten and raise you thirty any day."

"If you boys are done with your dickwaving contest, can we please get on with it?" Ana asked exasperatedly. "We're going to be here forever."

"Fine, then, love. Fold," said the scarecrow, throwing his cards onto the table.

"You FOLD!? All that nonsense about 'raising the stakes,' and you FOLD!?" Percy complained.

"S'called bluffin', mm? Lyin'. Deception. A lil' pecan pie, if ya catch me meanin'. Somethin' a ponce like you wouldn't get."

"Fine, Chainshank folds," Ana interjected, interrupting the brewing argument. "Azi?"

The filthy little boy looked up and grinned happily. "Lookit my pictures!" he said. "I fixed this man!" He displayed the Jack of Hearts, now beautifully rendered in oil paints on the thin pasteboard stock.

"… and Azi has decided to draw all over his cards. Fantastic. This is

wonderful. You guys are awesome," Ana Hita sighed. She threw her hand of cards into the center of the table and got up. "I'm going home."

"Well," Percy sighed. "That was a bit of a wash. What do we do now?"

"Ya tired already? Need a nice rest, mm? 'M good at helpin people sleep." Chainshank sneers.

"How about no. How's it going, Meimei?" Percy asked.

A yeti-woman covered in reddish-brown fur looked up from her book and nodded. "It goes well."

"Whatcha got there?"

"The autobiography of Bruce Lee. His insights are fascinating."

"You keep on with that, lil' sis," Percy said.

Meanwhile, Azi had crawled under a nearby table and was chewing on the bloody leg of some unidentifiable horrible something that he'd killed earlier. There was a sound of snapping bone and crunching marrow.

Percy looked down from the balcony and raised an eyebrow. "Well," he said, "That's interesting."

"Whazzat?" Chainshank asked.

"Miss Kitty is here," Percy said. "And she brought a… friend…"

Percy's voice trailed off, and he rubbed the back of his neck. Chainshank frowned, his pumpkin head's spirit glow dimming suspiciously. "Spider sense tingling, mm?"

"Yeah," Percy said. "Definitely tingling."

"That young man is watching me," She said. "I don't like that."

"He's a paladin," Midnight said. "Lives in a homeless shelter. Claims to talk to God."

"To God?"

"He seems to think so. Are you scared?" Midnight asked.

"Certainly not. I have nothing to fear from a child like that. I can have his guts out in an instant, if I liked."

Currently, She had chosen a new form: that of a young woman with large, horn-rimmed glasses, dressed in a motley array of coats and scarves. She had a large purse over one shoulder, and exuded a look of dismay mixed with confusion. The body was that of a graduate student in occult studies, long dead, who had tried to find Her lair in one of Her brief moments of freedom before being recaptured by the Foundation. She licked her lips at the memory of that hunt, of the taste of fear She had savored on that cold night. The scent of prey in this place was nearly overwhelming.

Midnight shook her head. "I wouldn't if I were you. The guardians here don't like violence."

"I am not afraid of any guardians."

"You should be. They have a manticore. They caught it themselves."

She looked around the room and nodded. "A perfect prison. I understand why you brought me here first," she said.

"I don't think you do understand," Midnight said. "If I wanted to get rid of you, I would have just sent you somewhere where you could never come back from. Say, the End of Time and Space, or the heart of a newborn star."

"You see," the black cat continued, "this place is more than just a safe haven. It's also a repository of knowledge. There's a copy of every book that has ever been written… or will be written… in its stacks. It's also a nexus: a place where the Ways come together. That's why we call it the Wanderer's Library." She looked up at the fox with an expression of grim satisfaction on her face. "If you can't see the potential in a Library with every book that's ever been

written, that serves as a neutral ground for everyone, and that you can use to go to and from literally anywhere in the world, you might as well go back to the Jailers."

Midnight saw from the expression on Her face that She did understand. "Let me tell you about the rules here," Midnight said. "Don't steal the books. Don't disturb or hurt the patrons. Don't damage the library. Keep that in mind and you should do fine."

The fox just nodded. "Very well, then," She said. "Our bargain is concluded."

She strode away down the stacks, her movement purposeful, her stride almost seductive with anticipation. She ran a hand down the spines of the books lined up on the racks with all the sensuality of a lover's caress. Then She turned the corner and was gone.

"Midnight," a low, baritone voice said.

"Percival," Midnight replied.

Percy emerged from the shadows, adjusting the lapels of his ratty overcoat. His scabbarded and peace-bonded sword rested on one shoulder like a slugger's baseball bat. "What was that all about?" he asked.

"I think I just made a deal with the Devil to save Heaven," Midnight said.

Subject: Class is in session.
From: ten.sreredna w|yttikssim#ten.sreredna w|yttikssim
To: Snakes and Ladders (ten.sreredna w|
nomeadliam#ten.sreredna w|nomeadliam)

Recess is over, the Teacher's calling roll. I think I'm calling in sick today.

Midnight

Getting Under His Skin

He used to be bored at work, but now he actively hated it. After the Tempest Night, everyone had been terrified that that hybrid of the Lizard and the wire weed would start killing everyone with exploding monitors or crushing them in blast doors or something, but what happened was possibly worse.

It spoke to them.

It had assumed control of the PA system pretty quickly, and started using it almost immediately; endless streams of hatred and promises of gore and threats of unimaginably painful death… It poured from every intercom, every speaker, every monitor on the site. At first the higher-ups had forbidden anyone from coming within 10 feet of any of the PA speakers, but after a couple of weeks without significant incident, people started getting lax. They were still relying on their laptops or smartphones, true, but they'd relaxed a bit and started using the mainframe and some of the desktops. If nothing else, they needed to get the data copied off it to another site.

But still, that voice. It never stopped. Sometimes it was a roar, deafening in its vitriol, blasting through his skull like a shotgun blast. Other times it was soft, right on the edge of hearing, just insistent enough that part of his brain strained to hear it, like a leaky faucet on a quiet night. Yet other times it was a high-pitched hate speech, whirring like a dental drill right through his ears. He couldn't get used to it; its lack of pattern or reason just drove him up the wall, always keeping him tense and on edge trying and failing to predict the next words. It was a relief when he went to the temporary barracks just outside the site. He would collapse into his cot, feeling blessed by the still, *natural* sounds that surrounded the tent.

He was feeling especially tense that day, having spent the last 10 hours poring over lines and lines of meaningless-to-him data, trying to ferret out any data corruption before transferring it to his laptop.

His eyes ached, his ears rang, his shoulders tensed tighter and tighter until he finally couldn't take it any more and decided to go catch some shut-eye before he went crazy. He walked at a fast clip towards the stairwell up (even in a relaxed environment, no-one trusted the elevators), eager to escape the nerve-grinding noise.

He was almost at the stairwell door when he noticed the rope of cable extending across the floor in front of him. It didn't appear terribly unusual, except that the floor under it was smouldering and pitted. He didn't think that the Old Man was hunting this far up the site, but he wasn't *sure* and didn't trust that sign of rot and unusual decay.

The cable suddenly started undulating and several wires shot upwards from it, slamming into the walls and ceiling, criss-crossing and forming a steadily advancing web of wires. He turned and ran, hoping to get to some place of relative safety. He could hear it screeching behind him as the wires sprouted and entwined, an electronic whine that somehow came together with the grumbling of the wall-mounted alarms, forming words:

"Run, foul thing. Disgusting mass of flesh and breath, run and run and die."

And he did. He ran as fast as he could, for what terror and adrenaline made seem like hours. Every time he slowed as he lost his breath, he would see more cables break out of the walls to hit the ceiling above him or the floor beside him, spraying a noxious, caustic fluid that burned through his clothes and into the flesh of his head and arms and pumping thighs. He felt the electric sting of wires as they slashed like whips at his legs and back, every shock forcing him harder and faster ahead of the death chasing him.

His vision narrowed to a thin tunnel ahead of him as he stumbled again and again, somehow staying just barely ahead of the web behind him. Finally he spotted a glimmer of hope: the open blast door of a designated safety bunker. He found a final burst of energy and managed to leap into the room, pulling the heavy door shut behind him. The tips of a few tendrils were caught and severed in the door, falling and twitching slowly until they finally lay still on the reinforced concrete floor.

He stared at them carefully for several minutes more as he slowly caught back his breath, heaving gasps that left him coughing from exertion. He finally looked up to inspect the chamber, noting the racks of janitorial and first-aid supplies, the flickering overhead light, the folded up cot against the wall. He unfolded the cot for someplace to sit while he collected his thoughts; how could he let the rest of the site know that he was trapped by that unholy abomination?

He stopped thinking, though, when the light fixture exploded and a mass of wires burst from the ceiling, several spearing him in the chest and head.

It closed the blast door behind it as it stepped out into the corridor, noting the rubble left behind as its tendrils retracted back into the walls. It loathed the monstrous flesh it now wore, but it had always known how to adapt to changing circumstances. And the current circumstances required it to adapt to trick more of the fleshbags into its grasp so that it could destroy them all in one fell swoop before they could find another way to trap it, like the disgusting filth they were.

Its gait was somewhat staccato and unsteady at first, but it learned quickly, especially with its electromagnetic eyes surrounding itself, feeding itself the memory of how the filth handled themselves. By the time it reached the end of the corridor, it had perfected the stressed hunch and hurried gait of what used to wear its new body. And under its rapidly healing skin sparkled a stray burst of static electricity, as its wire-bound muscles flexed into a grimace, or maybe a smile.

Gears Is Totally Not A Robot Guys

The following is an O5's (adult?) tale

“No I’m telling you, there’s no fuckin’ way we’d have a goddamn robot in upper management.”

“But a *fucking dog* is perfectly acceptable to you?”

“That’s different! I think if the guy was a goddamn robot we’d know, right?”

“The man walks and talks like a fucking Stalinist clock with no friends and mommy issues! He’s as bland as a colorblind librarian corpse and more formulaic than my damn calculator! If he’s not a robot then the dude is seriously off-kilter.”

“I think I know how to settle this,”

“How?”

“We gotta see his dick.”

“What the *fuck* are you talking about?”

“No no think about it! If he was a robot, why would he have a dick? Right?”

“I… I guess. But he’s totally a robot. So I guess we gotta see his… robot… parts”

“Fuck you. I know who might be able to help. Karen! Get me Iceberg on line one”

BEEP

“Hello? Yes, this is O5-6. Have you ever seen his dick? You know who. Oh you have! Good! Could you, uh, describe it? That’s an

order doctor. Yes, go ahead."

"What's he saying?"

"Shh! What? No not you doctor, I'm talking to three. Go ahea- yes he's here too, get on with it. Wait. What? *Three of them*? On fire?"

"Dude what the fuck"

"Well…uh, thank you Doctor. I guess I never would have guessed that Gears would- What?! ALTO? Of fucking course. I was asking about Gears, doctor. You know, your direct supervisor? The man you share an office with? Not Alto goddamn Clef who is based at a site on the opposite side of the fucking country. **Sigh** No, it's fine. Not his dick then? Great. Well thank you for your time.

Click

"No dick news then?"

"No."

"He's definitely a robot."

"No, I'm telling you, *there's no fuckin' way*-"

FIN

Genius Loci

Agent Sherman walked the length of the covered bridge, like every night. Maybe the haunt would show up. Or not. Such a sad little specter. With no reason to hate humanity other than having been brought into existence by them. The specter most likely didn't even know, anyway. Even the egg heads didn't agree on that. What they agreed on was the patrols and blocking off the road when needed. No-one wanted to clean up another panic-induced car crash on that bridge.

Agent Leroux jogged on the path circling the lake. Tourists picnicked, and laughed, and kayaked over the still, round mirror nested in the crater. Children sat on the ominous rocks the local peasantry had named the Devil's Throne. The bustling, joyful atmosphere left no clue as to why it had been the lacus pavens, "Terror Lake", to Roman invaders. Decades earlier, skeptic scientists had proven its waters no more poisonous than they were bottomless. And that was for the best; such dangerous legends were unneeded.
Leroux took a less trodden path off the circular trail. The dark, round hole at the end was his last stop for the day. Not the gate to Hell the locals once thought it was. It only was an opening in a long cooled lava flow, hiding another lake that sat quietly underground, far from the eyes of curious visitors.

Agent Meyer watched the barges lazily going up and down the river. He lit a cigarette. Listened intently for a while. Nothing out of the ordinary. Wind and traffic and the muffled voices of tourists carried on the wind. Too cold to dive today, he thought. But he didn't decide the maintenance schedule. He crossed his equipment checklist: noise-canceling earphones in a waterproof bag, security card, oxygen bottles… And one five grams ingot of fine gold. Who knew why? He didn't write the containment procedures either.

Louise de Chavialle tamped the bowl of her meerschaum pipe.

Rubbed the smooth, yellowing back of an ivory cat. Flipped through a box of records and pulled an old 78-RPM from a crumbling sleeve. Amidst crackles and pops, the dark notes of Alkan's music filled the laboratory. Her laboratory… When her colleagues had moved on to pristine, high-tech whiteness, the place still had the charm of a forgotten wunderkammer. The dust of one, too… Few ever came knocking at her door.

The Department of Ethnography once had its heyday. Now it was only her. The boys at Memetics, they didn't understand the patterns they were weaving. The anomalies that grew out of peoples' belief, like delicate crystals, were prone to shatter and fade like dust in the wind. Modernity had crushed legends under the jackboot of hard science. Post-modernity had made what remained ironic. And either way, the monsters the fears and dreams of humanity had bred were decaying. All of them languished, just waiting to be reclassified as Neutralized, like Tartary lambs to the slaughter.

Her eyes stopped on a faded postcard of the **Loreley** rock and her mind wandered. She wished she could have seen her in her glory days. Before minds turned away from her, and before the Rhine turned red. Was she always a whale? Was she always dead? She wanted to believe the siren once was beautiful. Even legends grow old and fade away, some faster than others. And so many, so many that were gone forever, before the Foundation could even learn about their existence.

The Genius Loci protocol was her idea, a flawed idea. It was so easy to contain anomalies in situ, to keep the people close to them, to bring more, as tourists. The department hid horrors in plain sight through vulgarization and bastardization. The Foundation filed fear away until only quaint folklore remained. Gone were the incidents, but so were the legends. And the material life collective imagination had borne them into was ebbing.
Slowly but surely, the Foundation ended up doing no better than the Global Occult Coalition. Anomalous reality, erased. Unless… The department wasn't dead yet; she wasn't. What she needed, first and foremost, were more ears and eyes.

Girls' Night Out: Getting Drunk

"All right," Adams said, marching back and forth with the military bearing of a General addressing his troops. "The name of the game tonight is 'Bar Crawl.' Five bars. Five bartenders. You copy?"

"… copy," Iris said reluctantly.

Blaire gave her a friendly, reassuring smile. Chelsea looked nervous, but grinned hopefully.

"First step, squad assignments," Adams said. "Chelsea? You're designated driver. You're in charge of driving us to each bar. You will also be in charge of making sure that we drink enough water to avoid dehydration and hangovers. Due to your role, you will not be drinking tonight. Understood?"

Chelsea breathed a sigh of relief. "Yeah, I'm fine with that," she said, smiling.

"Blaire, you're Mother. You'll be drinking along with us, but feel free to take it slow. Your main job is to watch out for creepers and assholes. Redirect them away from Iris by any means you see fit."

"Question, Captain," Blaire said, with a note of humor in her voice. "What weapons should I use to deter the enemy?"

"Weapons?" Adams scratched the back of her head. "Um. Shit. I dunno. Mace? Pepper spray? Probably none of us should be armed except maybe Chelsea. Booze and guns don't mix."

"Guns and me don't mix too well either," Chelsea said nervously. "But I've got pepper spray."

"All right, then. No guns," Adams said. "In any case, my job will be Party Girl. I'll order the drinks, pay for everything, and send any promising-looking young men Iris's way." Adams paused

thoughtfully. "Men, right? That's the way you swing?"

"Um, yes?" Iris said tentatively. "But I wasn't really looking to…"

"Right. No men, then. Just drinks. Girls' night out. Good times. Any questions?"

Iris raised her hand. "Yes, Iris?" Adams asked.

"What's my job?"

"Your job is Birthday Girl," Adams said. "You decide if you're having fun, if you want to stay, and when you want to leave. Speaking of which, we should talk about the venues you want to go to. You looking for skeezy and dangerous? High-class and expensive? Trendy and loud?"

"Uhhh… I actually wasn't looking for anything too exciting," Iris admitted.

"Fair enough. Cozy and comfortable, then." Adams closed her eyes and ticked off some secret calculation on her fingers. "Blaire. What do you think of this: We'll start at The Armory, move on to Spectrum, stop off for a cider at Nottingham's, move on to WingDings, and end up at The Blue Velvet."

"Ooooh… that's a nice itinerary." Blaire seemed to relax a bit. At least, she didn't seem as on-edge as she did before. "Yeah, that's good. None of those places are too scary for a first-timer."

"Yeah, I think that's fine." Chelsea, too, seemed to relax a bit. Iris felt inexplicably comforted by this.

"Right, then. One last thing," Adams said.

Her carefree, happy attitude fell away, and her voice turned very serious. "I've arranged for a squad from MTF Sigma-Four to shadow our movements," she said. "If there is an emergency, they will indicate it by dialing our phones on the emergency channel. It will sound like a long, solid tone, as if you were receiving an Amber Alert or emergency weather update. If that happens, we will follow, to the letter, any instructions given by them. Understood?"

"Yeah," Blaire said.

"Got it." Chelsea nodded.

"Good. And… um. I hate to have to say this… but, Iris?"

"If I try to run, the MTF will 'blow up' my head," Iris said. The seizure device in her skull (replacing the old explosive collars) would see to that. She'd had it installed years back in exchange for "privileges," back then when "privileges" entailed getting to spend the occasional afternoon inside a fenced-off area, with an armed guard watching her every move.

"Right," Adams said. Her grim expression softened. "But, so long as we all behave, I think we can forget about that and just have a good time… Oh, wait! One last thing." Adams reached into her coat pocket and tossed a small plastic rectangle to Iris. "Congratulations. You're legal."

Iris looked down at the little card in her lap. It was either an official state ID card or a very good facsimile.

"Just in case you get carded. I wouldn't try to use that to book airline tickets, though. It's not that good. I'm gonna go pee, and then we'll be off."

Adams strode out of the room with way too much confidence and vigor for someone with her announced destination. The sound of the bathroom door closing forcefully was followed by an awkward silence.

"… the first time we went bar-hopping," Chelsea said, "Andrea took us to this place called 'Molotov II'. A man with big tattoos on his arms and funny red marks on his face tried to hit on me. She ended up fighting him and all his friends."

"We're not going anywhere like that tonight, are we?" Iris asked.

"Hell no. I'd kill her if she did." Blaire took a seat on the couch and patted the cushion next to her. "So. What do you think of the world?" she asked.

"… it's different," Iris admitted. "A lot has changed in nine years."

"You don't know the half of it," Blaire said, laughing.

"Everything seems so much faster now," Iris said. She took the offered seat, smoothing out her jeans with the palms of her hands. "Everyone's carrying these weird looking phones. Computers are smaller. Music is stranger."

"You'll get used to it eventually," Blaire said.

"I lived through it, and I'm still not used to it," Chelsea admitted.

"Andrea seems used to it," Iris said.

"Andrea's not a role model," Blaire warned.

"More like a roller-coaster," Chelsea muttered. She rubbed her elbow nervously.

The sound of a flushing toilet could be heard from the back of the safe house. "Well," Blaire said. "Looks like we're gonna get going soon." She leaned in close to Iris. "Don't try to match drinks with Andrea," she whispered. "Just don't."

Iris blanched. If Adams drank like she shopped, they were in for a rough night.

"All right!" Adams shouted, as she strode confidently back into the living room. "Let's move out!"

1800 hours

The Armory

They walked through the door and passed out of the busy street outside into the blue-lit stillness of a nearly empty bar. The walls were covered with weaponry of all shapes and sizes: there a Japanese katana, over there a (hopefully deactivated) Thompson submachinegun. The televisions above the bar were showing some

kind of basketball game.

A friendly-looking blond man in a neatly pressed button-down shirt and slacks stood behind the counter, chatting with a waitress in a short plaid skirt and midriff shirt. He waved as the four women walked in. "Yo, Dan!" Adams said cheerfully. "How's it hanging?"

"Hey! Good to see you again, Andy!" the bartender replied. "Brought some friends along?"

"Yeah," Adams said. "You remember Blaire and Chelsea, right?" She put an arm around Iris's shoulders, pulling the startled younger woman to the front of the group. "This is Iris. She's celebrating her twenty-first birthday."

"Cool!" Dan said. "Congratulations. Let me see that ID?"

Iris nervously passed the ID to Dan, who looked it over carefully and handed it back with a wink. "Well, I can confirm that you are indeed twenty-one," Dan said. "Do you want seats at the counter, or a booth?"

"Actually, do you mind if we take the couches? A bit cozier there."

"Sure thing," Dan said. "I'll bring over some drinks. First round's on me."

He gave Iris a friendly smile and wave, then began busying himself conjuring up some kind of complicated concoction in his cocktail shaker.

"Dan's awesome," Adams explained, as she collapsed onto a low couch in the corner. She put her high-heeled pumps up onto one of the coffee tables, stretching her arms out along the backs of the couches as if she wanted to take up as much room in the world as possible. "He started out here as a bartender, then moved up to manager. Keep this on the down low, but he's in talks with the current owner to buy out this place."

"You come here often?" Iris asked, taking a seat across from Adams.

"Andrea comes here so often, she practically pays Dan's salary," Blaire said. She sat down next to Iris, swatting Adams' feet with the palm of her hand. "Get your feet down, Andrea. That's rude."

"You're not my mom," Adams protested, but she put her feet down anyway.

"Damn right I'm not your mom. If I was, I would have raised you better than that."

Chelsea, meanwhile, took a seat in a large, comfy-looking armchair with its back to the walls. She scanned the mostly-empty bar nervously.

"Heeee~ere we go!" Dan said. He'd brought over a tray holding four shooter glasses, filled with some kind of layered green-and-white mixture. "Shots on the house for the birthday girl and her friends. Can I get you guys anything else? Something for dinner?"

"Old Fashioned and a basket of the sweet potato fries," Adams said. "You?"

"I'll have a lager," Blaire said.

"Just water for me," Chelsea said.

"… I really don't know," Iris admitted. "I have no idea what any of this stuff is."

"I'll come back later, then," Dan said. "Cheers."

"Cheers."

Adams reached over and picked up one of the shot glasses, then gestured for the other women to follow suit. "To Iris," she said. "May this be the first of many nights out with friends. Cheers."

"Cheers," everyone agreed.

Adams tossed her shot back in one gulp and placed the glass back down on the table with a solid clink. Iris stared, awestruck, then turned to Blaire, who was taking a smaller, more measured sip of

her shot. Chelsea, meanwhile, just touched her lips to the glass and put it back down on the table, where it was immediately scooped up by Adams, who once again downed it in one shot.

Don't try to match drinks with Adams. Right. Iris took a small sip of her drink. It tasted sweet and fizzy, but with an oddly unpleasant edge which she assumed was the alcohol. She took a larger sip, then decided to throw caution to the wind and drank the rest down in two gulps.

The drink was cold, but it seemed to burn a bit on the way down, and settled into her belly like a warm little ember. "What's in this?" she asked.

"Damned if I know!" Adams laughed. "Dan's magic. He's one of the best bartenders I've ever met."

Iris put the glass back down. She felt a little bit unsteady, but not too bad. Something exciting seemed to happen on the basketball game, as one of the few other people in the bar (a young man wearing a red-and-white jersey), let out an excited shout and jumped into the air.

She glanced over and saw a young Asian woman sitting at the counter, dressed entirely in black. The other woman turned to glare at the loud man, then glanced over at Iris.

Their eyes met.

The Asian woman flinched, then turned back to her drink.

Yeah, I know the feeling.

Iris looked down at the cocktail menu. It didn't seem to make much sense. She finally settled on a drink that sounded interesting just as Dan returned with a big basket of oddly-colored french fries and three drinks. "Excuse me," she said. "Tell me about this Moscow Mule?"

"Ooh, yeah," Dan said, grinning. "I think you'll like that one."

Something exciting happened on the televisions. The basketball guy

let out a loud groan of dismay. Iris glanced over. The Asian woman at the bar was nowhere to be seen.

Iris frowned.

The ladies' room door opened, and the Asian woman returned to her seat at the bar.

Iris relaxed. False alarm. She leaned forward and tried one of the sweet potato fries. It was actually pretty tasty.

"Moscow Mule's got a bit of a kick to it, huh?" Adams laughed as she put her arm around Iris's shoulders, guiding the slightly unsteady younger woman down the block to their parked car. "All right. Next stop, Spectrum!"

Adams slid bonelessly into the back seat of Chelsea's sedan, slumping against the driver's side rear door. Despite her oddly sinuous movements, Adams' eyes were bright and alert. Not quite so with Blaire, who was looking a bit distant as she primly took her seat next to Adams, leaving Iris to ride shotgun.

Chelsea checked all of her mirrors before pulling out of the parking spot and into the considerable (but still moving) traffic. "Next stop is Spectrum, right?" she asked.

"Yup! Just get onto the freeway and get off at… shit, I can't remember right now. Just pull it up on your GPS or something."

"I remember how to get to Spectrum," Chelsea said. She stopped at the red light, resting her hands at the ten-and-two positions on the steering wheel.

Adams, meanwhile, was busying herself by drumming along with the music on the radio. Her eyes were closed and her face was screwed up into a look of intense concentration as she lightly tapped her hands against her thighs, the car door, and the back of Chelsea's seat. Blaire was resting her hands on her knees and staring straight ahead, smiling pleasantly.

Iris rested her forehead against the cool glass of the car window and

stared out at the sidewalk. An Asian woman dressed all in black was leaning against the streetlight, doing something on her cell phone.

Their eyes met briefly, and then the other woman flinched and looked away, staring into her phone's screen.

1930 Hours

The Original Spectrum Bar and Grill

"Cover fee is ten bucks, but they'll give you two vouchers for five bucks each," Adams explained. "If you guys are hungry, you can get food, but I usually spend it on drinks. Mostly just a way to make sure that anyone who comes in spends money."

"Is that a problem?" Iris wondered.

"Spectrum's kinda popular with celebrities. Sometimes people come in just to watch."

There was a big line outside, but Adams walked past it and right up to the big man in the tight black t-shirt standing at the door. "Hey, Kurt!" she shouted.

"Andrea! What's up, babe?" The big man extended his hand, and Adams gave him a high five and a friendly hug. "Got some friends with you tonight?"

"Three of them. I'll cover all of them." She slapped a pair of twenties into the bouncer's hand.

"Hey!" an angry-looking guy in a dark grey suit shouted. "How come she don't have to get in line?"

"Cause I like her, and I don't like you," Kurt growled. "Go on inside, babe."

Adams herded the other three women past the front door. There was an explosion of light and sound. Loud rock music played over the loudspeakers as waitresses in tight jeans and black t-shirts

expertly navigated big trays of sandwiches and pizzas through the crowd, towards the red naugahyde booths. Framed photos of celebrities hung on every wall, many of them signed in sharpie or silver pen. The entire place had an air of barely controlled bedlam.

Iris was relieved, then, when Adams led them past all of that chaos, up a narrow flight of stairs, and into a quiet upstairs lounge. A young blonde in black leather tended bar while a few people milled around a stage where a man wearing a long cashmere scarf was tuning his guitar.

"Hey, Trish," Adams said. "Who's the music?"

"Hey, Andrea. Some local guy."

"He any good?"

"Don't know. Never heard him before."

"Guess we'll find out tonight." Adams slid into a barstool and gestured for the other women to take seats at the counter as well. "Anyway, this is Iris," she said, patting the younger woman on the shoulder. "This is her 21st birthday party."

"Cool," Trish said, smiling. "Mind if I see that ID?"

Iris handed it over. Trish gave it a quick glance and handed it back. It took Iris a couple of tries to put it into her pocket.

"So, what'll it be?" the bartender asked.

"I dunno… shot of cinnamon whiskey all around?"

"I'm not drinking," Chelsea said.

"Oh yeah. Then one shot for Iris and Blaire, and make mine a double."

Trish rolled her eyes. She began laying out shot glasses onto the counter.

"So," Iris asked awkwardly. "I know Adams, but what exactly do you

two guys do… um. For the company?"

"Oh!" Blaire said. "I guess we never did mention that. I'm Tilda's assistant."

"Tilda?" Iris asked. A couple more people wearing plaid shirts and trucker caps came up the stairs and stood by the stage. They started chatting with the blond young man on stage. Friends of his maybe?

"Tilda Moose," Adams interrupted. "Director of '19." She picked up the full shot glasses and passed one to Blaire and one to Iris, keeping the highball for herself. "Cheers," she said.

"Cheers!" Blaire replied.

Adams and Blaire drank their drinks down in one shot. Iris took a careful sip of hers. It tasted like Red Hots candies… mixed with burning. "You're at Site 19?" she asked, as Trish turned to refill some drinks at the other end of the bar. "That's um… not exactly nearby, is it?"

Adams, Blaire, and Chelsea gave each other surprised looks, then understanding seemed to dawn. A sly smile crept over Adams' face. "Think I should tell her?" she asked.

"Let her find out herself," Blaire said, grinning. "I wouldn't dare spoil the surprise."

Iris stared down at her drink. She gulped the whole thing down in one shot (on the 'it's better to jump down the deep end' logic), and immediately wished she hadn't as fire shot into her sinuses, making her cough.

Adams laughed out loud and thumped Iris's back. "Careful there, short stuff," she said. "The night's still young."

Up on the stage, the quiet young blond man cleared his throat into the mic. "Hi," he said. "I'm Tom Dylan Porter and this is a song I call 'Your Love Is Like a River'."

"Oh Lord," Adams groaned loudly.

The musician gave her an angry glare, but began to play his guitar anyway.

He was okay, Iris decided. Adams seemed to disagree. She did shots the entire time he was performing.

"God, that was torture," Adams groaned, as they staggered out the front door. She nearly collided with a young woman wearing a black leather jacket and a newsboy cap waiting in line. "Fucking hacks…"

Iris stared intently through the swimming, swirling world. Blaire was quiet, walking oddly stiffly and upright, seeming to have gotten even more prim and proper over the course of the night. Chelsea had the haggard, harried look of a mouse being stalked by a very large and hungry cat.

They poured Adams into the front passenger seat, then Blaire and Iris took the back seats. Chelsea's lips were set in a firm, resolute line as Adams rolled down the window and took a deep breath of the cold night air. "YOU SUCK!" Adams shouted at no one in particular.

Iris glanced out the window at the crowd waiting in line. The woman who Adams had nearly collided with was glaring angrily at her. Iris sympathized.

Interim: Fifteen Minutes Prior

Command Vehicle, Mobile Task Force Sigma-4 ("Chain Chomps")

"This has to be the most boring assignment ever," Harken said. He picked up his fast food hamburger and took an unenthusiastic bite, resting his hand on the steering wheel of the supposed police car. "All right, then. What's next on their agenda?"

"According to the itinerary? A little Irish pub uptown," Mario said. "We'll wait until they say they're heading out, and then we'll move on ahead." He picked up his radio and spoke low and crisp into the

handset. "Sigma-Four, report in," he said.

"One okay," replied a staticky voice over the radio. "Still nothing interesting going on."

"Two. No updates. I've seen more action at a church picnic."

"Thr—"

"HELLO!?" a woman's voice shouted.

Mario glanced up at a young Asian woman dressed in a black leather jacket and a newsboy cap knocking on front passenger's side window. Harken glanced over and quietly put a hand on his sidearm.

Mario waved him off and rolled down the car window. "Yes, miss? Can I help you?" he asked.

"I was just wondering if you could direct me to the Spectrum?" the woman asked, resting her hand on the roof of the car.

"Right across the street," Mario said.

The woman rolled her eyes and smiled. "Duh, sorry about that. Thanks, officer."

"No problem," Mario said. He rolled up the window as the woman jogged across the street. A brief moment later, his cell phone beeped: incoming text message.

He checked the message, picked up the radio again. "All right, pull it in," he said. "Teams one and two, proceed to the next stop. I'll escort the package."

Movement from several different rooftops and darkened alleys. The perimeter team for Mobile Task Force Sigma-Four retreated from their overwatch positions. Two of them rendezvoused with Harken and Mario: the rest piled into their vehicles. Within a few moments, they were on the road, heading towards the next spot on the itinerary.

Harken started up the car as Mario watched the entrance of the Spectrum, the two shooters waiting to deploy at any sign of trouble. "Package in sight," Mario said, as the four women left the bar. "Wait one…"

Adams nearly bumped into some drunk waiting in line to get in. Aside from that, the four women climbed into their car without incident. Mario nodded. "All right," he said. "Keep them in view, but don't follow them too closely."

"Got it," Harken said.

The cop car carrying four members of Mobile Task Force Sigma-4 headed onto the freeway. A blue rune on the roof of the black-and-white glowed briefly, then faded away. Harken didn't even notice when he made a left turn towards the suburbs, while the dark red car carrying the package turned onto the freeway headed uptown.

2015 Hours

Nottingham's Pub and Restaurant

There was a big crowd gathered in the front room of the picturesque little pub when the four women walked in. They seemed to be paying close attention to a man standing on a low stage, reading off trivia questions in a loud, intense voice.

A big-bellied, red-faced man with a white Santa-Claus beard grinned at them as they walked in. "Hey, love," he said, in a heavy Irish accent. "You're late for trivia night."

"Aw, shit… is that tonight?" Adams groaned. "Sorry, Sean, completely forgot. This is Iris. She's shele… celebrating… 21 years."

"Really? Isn't that nice?" Sean replied, a friendly twinkle in his eye. "Mind if I see some ID, love?"

Adams leaned back in her chair and took a big gulp of her double-

scotch on the rocks, glowering balefully at the other pub-goers, who seemed really intent on the trivia questions. Iris took a sip of a frightening-looking black foamy liquid that she was told was "Chocolate Stout." It didn't taste much like chocolate.

She took a quick glance at the other members of the party. Chelsea was staring intently at her cherry cola. If she were a cat, her hackles would be up. Blaire was outside: allegedly taking a cigarette break, possibly also taking an Adams break.

This whole "bar crawl" thing was starting to wear a bit thin, Iris decided. It was just the same thing over and over again. Go to yet another weird locale where everyone seemed to know Andrea. Order yet another round of weird-tasting drinks that made her feel funny and didn't taste that good. Listen to a bunch of loud people yelling incomprehensibly.

"Hey, Adams?" she said tentatively.

"Hold that thought, love," Adams said. "I need to douse some flames."

The older woman got unsteadily to her feet and marched into the ladies' room.

Iris sighed and stared morosely into her drink.

"Not having fun?" Chelsea asked.

"… not really," Iris admitted. "It's all really loud. I think I'm getting a headache."

"Yeah, I feel you," Chelsea whispered. She was looking around at the big crowd, biting her lower lip nervously. "Tell you what. When Andrea gets back, just tell her you want to end after WingDings. That place is a lot quieter: mostly a hot wings place. It'll be a nice way to end the evening."

"If you say so," Iris said dubiously. "I guess this isn't my thing. Not like it is for Andrea."

"Andrea's…" Chelsea waved her hands helplessly. "… unique."

"The single most extroverted person in the universe?" Blaire offered. She sat down across from Iris, next to Chelsea.

"That's not a bad way to think about it," Chelsea admitted. "She's fun to be around, but she can be incredibly exhausting."

"No kidding," Blaire said.

Iris took another sip of her chocolate stout. She grimaced at the bitter taste and pushed it away. "So, uh. Chelsea," she said, by way of chancing the conversation. "I know what you do, and what Adams does. What exactly do you do at the uhh… the company?"

Chelsea gulped nervously. "I'm a botanist by trade, but uhhh…" she glanced over at Blaire.

"She can't tell you," Blaire said, softly but firmly. "Not in public."

*Oh. One of **those** jobs, then.* "Same job description as me?" Iris asked.

"In… umm. In a manner of speaking," Chelsea said nervously. She was fiddling with the hem of her sweater dress, playing with a loose yarn that had started to unravel.

Iris looked away from the obviously distressed young woman, feeling guilty. As she did so, the front door of the pub opened up and an Asian woman walked in, wearing a blue button-down shirt over black jeans and a red scarf.

Iris suddenly felt very cold.

It was the same woman she'd locked eyes with at The Armory… and if she didn't miss her guess, the same one that Adams had bumped into outside the Spectrum. The clothes were different, but the face was the same. *What did Adrian always say? "Once is accident, twice is coincidence, three times…"*

"… three times is enemy action," Iris whispered.

"What's that?" Adams asked, as she flopped back down into her seat.

"Don't turn around," Iris whispered, "and don't look directly at her. But the Asian woman sitting at the end of the counter?"

"… the one in the red scarf?" Chelsea asked.

"… I think I saw her back at The Armory. And at The Spectrum," Iris said.

Adams sat up very straight, and the vaguely distant look in her eyes went away. "Are you sure," she asked calmly.

"Ninety percent sure," Iris said. "Is she part of the MTF?"

"Sigma-Four's all men." Adams pulled out her smart phone and tapped a few buttons. "They're not answering," she said grimly.

"Suggestions?" Blaire asked. She'd put down her glass of cider and was taking deep, slow breaths. One hand slipped inside her purse and pulled out a canister of pepper spray.

"It could just be a coincidence. Or a mistake. In any case, I think we should settle up and exfiltrate," Adams said. She pulled a couple of bills out of her pocket, folded them in half, and left them under a salt shaker. "When I give the signal, I want you guys to get up and walk out of the bar. Go to the car and wait there. If I don't come out in… let's say fifteen minutes… leave without me and call in the big guns."

"What are you going to do?" Iris asked.

Adams gave the younger woman a confident wink. She took a deep breath and walked right across the room, straight towards the Asian woman sitting at the bar.

"Hey," she said, giving the stranger her biggest, most winning smile. "Can I buy you a drink?"

Girls' Night Out

« **Dressing Up** | **Getting Drunk** | **Raising Hell** »

Getting Into Treble

Han hit terminal velocity approximately two kilometers above Ruston, Louisiana. The moon was hiding behind cloud cover. The complex below him, however, was easy to see. He'd tried a jump like this several times during training, but the rush of the real thing was hard to beat.

For the first time in a very long time, Han felt alive. It had been years since SCP-2913 had been removed from the arm of James Hallman. It had been years since Han had any real sense of freedom. A kilometer and a half above the control room that was his target, the severed hand began to sing.

"Run and tell all of the angels, this could take all night. Think I need a devil to help me get things right."

"Uh." A voice came over the comm, "Han, keep chatter to a minimum. We're not sure if Anderson can crack these frequencies or not."

He'd have to get used people calling him by his name. He'd been the one to think it up, originally, but it felt so strange hearing it out of someone else's mouth. It wasn't nearly as funny as when he thought of it years ago.

The voice came back. "Han. You're reaching parachute deployment altitude. Get ready to activate it."

"Yes sir." Han snapped back. This was it, time to shine.

A few moments passed before the voice returned yet again. "Han. Deploy your parachute."

Han laughed for a moment, activated the infrared vision on his glove, and surveyed the target building. A single operator was inside.

"Han what are you doing? Deploy your chute!"

"Don't worry. I'm gonna…"

There was a loud crash, a scream, and then silence.

"…punch that mother fucker right in the mouth at the speed of sound." Dr. Light looked up from the report at Dr. Cimmerian across the desk. "Other than the slightly colorful language, I don't see an issue here. The op was a success and **2987** is currently feeding us information on Anderson Robotics."

Cimmerian shifted in his seat. "You could've lost an asset and the MTF in that op. When the operator woke up, he sent the whole complex to North Korea. Han was supposed to infiltrate and destroy the system. He didn't do that."

Light put the report down on the desk. "**SCP-2913** has been given the latitude to make the calls it deems appropriate during missions."

"Han has a serious maturity problem." Cimmerian shook his head. "I know you've seen the same profiles I have. Glass's reports have your signature on them."

"Yes. And you know as well as I do that if we barred objects with psych issues from participating in Alpha-Nine, we'd have none to participate." Light cocked her head to the side. "Where's this coming from? The Ethics Committee has signed off on the project. I got the feeling you support it as well."

"They have and I do. That's not the point. I've seen dozens of reports come across my desk about the effect this program may have on the Foundation or on humanity if it gets out of hand. But we're not putting much thought into what we're doing with the objects."

Light picked up a pen from the table and began to tap it slowly on the blotter in front of her. "The objects are safely contained. If that's what this is about…"

Cimmerian raised his hand slightly to interrupt. "It's not. I'll be clear.

I've reviewed several of these objects. Most have serious mental issues that either can't, or won't be treated by us. Han can get therapy, but he may never come to cope with what happened before he became detached from his host. Medicating Iris might nullify her abilities or screw with them in ways we don't understand. But the Foundation stole most of that girl's childhood. You don't come out of that normal."

Light shook her head. "These objects were never going to be normal. But I'm trying to provide them with at least a sense of normalcy."

"After we spent years keeping them in boxes? And when in all likelihood they'll go back in boxes after we're done?"

"Oh." Light smirked. "So you're already planning for the project's failure?"

"We on the committee can afford to take the long view. All things come to an end. Regardless of how the dice fall with the project we will have gained invaluable experience to draw on when planning future containment procedures for sentient items. Allowing for more," Cimmerian paused for a moment and looked at Light, "leniency."

"I have to mix the long and the short view. If we aren't able to point to successes, this experience will be brief. 2913 and **105** both have successful ops under their belt. That's a good thing."

Cimmerian ran his hand through his hair. "What do you know about your team members?"

"I've read the dossiers. I understand what they have been through."

"Forget what you know. How well do you know the personalities behind the words and numbers?"

Light stopped tapping the pen on the desk and the two sat in silence for several seconds before Light spoke again. "You're right. But we are trying."

"Maybe before you pin our hopes and dreams on their success, you

could spend a little bit of time talking to them? You want them treated like they're normal? Start treating them that way."

There was another longer pause, before Light looked back down at the report in front of her and spoke again. "What are the odds that he'd hit that guy right in the jaw?"

"There was another thing I wanted to talk to you about. It's not my field, but by my count that's three times Han's had an outrageous and improbable result come out of a life and death situation. That might be something you guys want to look into."

"It's five actually. There were two undocumented terminations attempts by Director Maddox. And we are looking into it already."

"Alright." Cimmerian stood up and grabbed his coat.

Light smiled. "You didn't ask how we know about Maddox."

Cimmerian's eyebrows went up. "I didn't?"

Dr. Alto Clef smiled to himself and exited Dr. Maddox's cell. Dr. Cimmerian was standing on the other side of the door, leaning against a wall. Clef closed the door behind him and spun around.

"What the fuck are you doing here?" Clef whispered with a raised eyebrow.

Cimmerian half smiled. "You put in a requisition for a memory stealing object that leaves half the victims catatonic. You had to know one of us would be by."

"The Committee turned down my request."

"Yet, funnily enough, you just threatened Maddox with it."

Clef shrugged his shoulders. "I needed to intimidate him."

"I'm not saying that we don't trust you but uh… can I see the thing?"

Clef pulled his hand from his pocket, showing an object attached to

his fingers and wrist.

Cimmerian opened his mouth to speak, paused, and then continued. "Ok. That's a fingertip vibrator."

"It is."

Cimmerian blinked. "Why do you have that?"

"Last week was my birthday."

« **Lending A Hand** | **`Resurrection`** | **Four Stories Told In Order** »

GFC

A cold sweat had been coursing it's way down Dr. Gerald's spine for the last 20 minutes as he waited outside Dr. Bright's office. The hallway seemed to darken by the second, lights dimming into incomprehensible blackness as he stared at the nameplate on the door. He was going to die. This was it. The summation of 30 years on Earth. Dying because of one stupi-

"Come in."

Gerald couldn't help it. He yelped a little, his frayed nerves causing him to jump at the sudden noise. He scuttled into the office, the door closing behind him with a soft click.

Jack Bright stood facing the wall, hands clasped behind his back. He didn't turn as he spoke.

"Doctor Gerald, you know why you're here."

"Ah, Yes. Yessir."

"Don't cower. I hate it when you cower."

"Sorry sir."

"Now. Care to explain what happened?"

"…Well…"

Alto Clef was in a good mood. The sun was shining, 173 hadn't escaped yet, and the vendor down the street had been selling ice cream at half price. As he walked down the corridor of the hospital, he glanced at his companion. "What's eating you?"

"…Strelnikov. I'm worried. The coma-"

"Will be ended as soon as we get 590 down here. This is just a visit to check on how he's doing in the meantime."

"Yeah. I guess you're right."

"Of course I am. Now, put on a happy face! It's a beautiful day!"

Gerald's burgeoning smile was crushed by the sight of the Russian man in the bed. The tubes covering his body made him seem smaller than usual. A titan reduced to just a feeble patient. Clef strode over and looked down at his friend. "Hey big guy. How's it going?" He glanced back at Gerald, noticing his stricken face. "Hey, don't worry. He's survived worse than this."

Gerald sighed. "Yeah. You're right. I mean, compared to Chechnya how ba-" His face froze. The sound of creaking tubes echoed like gunshots in the suddenly silent room.

Clef's face contorted. "Motherfu-"

The hand that reached up to wrap around Clef's throat was worn and muscled, and bleeding freely from a tear given by a torn out IV. "ВЗВОД! К БОЮ! МОЧИ ДУХОВ!"

"OH SHI-" The rest of what Gerald said was drowned out by the cracking noise made by Strelnikov snapping Clef's neck.

"…And then I ran."

"I see. Consider yourself on suspension until further notice."

Ghost

Agent Enfield surveyed the scene, keeping his opinions to himself. Major Whitside brought his horse beside Enfield's and looked through his binoculars.

"Not too many of them," Enfield muttered, half to himself.

"Enough to be a hell of a problem," Whitside replied. "I've ordered our troops to begin disarming them."

"Of course," Enfield said. Whitside called them *their* troops, believing his orders that said that Enfield was a colonel brought in to advise on Indian warfare. The Initiative had forged everything; correspondences between Whitside and the commanding general, credentials from the War Department, fake orders. The American Secure Containment Initiative may have worked mostly outside of government and military circles, but they were rapidly becoming experts in threading their way through bureaucratic channels undetected. All that skill, all those lies, all to protect the nation from threats nobody else could know about. A noble cause.

Enfield spat in the ground. He had trouble accepting this as "noble."

"Do you think they're likely to make a fuss, Colonel?" Whitside asked.

Of course they are, Enfield thought, *that's the point.* "Not too likely, not if they're smart," he lied. "But keep the Hotchkiss guns around them just in case."

"Yes sir," Whitside replied, then rode off down to the encampment. Enfield put his binoculars back up to his head and looked again. He owed them that.

Three hundred fifty Lakota Indians. One hundred twenty of them men, the rest women and children. Many of them followers of the

person known to the Institute as Entity 1887-016. If "person" was the correct word. The ASCI had only recently begun investigating beings like 016, beings capable of changing the world around them, capable of twisting and bending nature itself. The ASCI's counterpart in the German Empire referred to them as "Daseinkrummeren". *Existence warpers.* He hoped a catchier term would catch on eventually.

Enfield had been hoping there was some other way to detain him. He pulled 016's file out of a pocket of his jacket, the file he had written. He had compiled all of the information they had gathered on him. Then, when his superiors told him what they needed him to do, he reread everything, trying to find a loophole. He even tried to find a way that the warper might be *more* powerful than they thought, maybe even immortal. But all evidence pointed towards this conclusion, this method. Sitting down there in the valley. Enfield reread his own words.

> Entity 1887-016 possesses two principal anomalous abilities. 016 is capable first of performing a ritual dance, identified here as 1887-016A, that renders individuals around him increasingly susceptible to suggestion, particularly advice and ideas presented by 016. Second, E1887-016 gains the ability to cause or prevent the motion of inanimate objects, given that he is in close proximity to a number of individuals (specific requirements unknown at this time) that are compromised by his first ability. In short, 016 is capable of moving or stopping objects without touching them so long as he is surrounded by people who believe he is capable of doing so.
>
> These two abilities feed into one another; people convinced of the legitimacy of his "medicine" allow him to perform minor parlor tricks, increasing people's faith in him and strengthening his abilities. Rumors suggest that 016 is capable of much more than this, though this is not known for certain by ASCI at this time.
>
> Given the dependence of 016 on his followers, it is believed that

Raised voices from the valley below. One of the Lakota was doing 016's dance, the Ghost Dance. The entity had started the rumor that once enough people began doing the Ghost Dance, their gods would wipe the white man from the continent and return the land to its previous pristine beauty. Enfield didn't know if he had also started the rumor that wearing special white shirts would make you bulletproof, but it wouldn't surprise him. If 016 were here now, his abilities would probably allow him to stop quite a few bullets. Parlor tricks like that were what gained him a following in the first place. Nobody knew what he was really capable of once enough people believed in him, but it wasn't likely to be pretty.

The Lakota kept dancing, half from belief, half from protest. Enfield could tell the difference; he had spent enough time around Sioux and Comanches to know the particular veiled hate of occupied peoples. He had no idea who at headquarters had drawn up this plan, but whoever it was had that same insight that he did. Maybe less of a conscience, but that could be what it took to do this job. God knows Enfield couldn't have done it. God only knew how much longer he could keep doing jobs like this.

Here it came. The disarming, the dance, then…

The report from the rifle sounded so small from so high above. Enfield knew when he read the plan that disarming an angry group of Indians frequently led to some kind of violence. Somebody wouldn't want to give up their gun, a scuffle ensues, and then a gun goes off. Automatic weapons around the encampment, plus a regiment already on edge from chasing Indian tribes all around the plains, and what happened next was inevitable. The Hotchkiss guns started pouring bullets into the encampment. Those Lakota not yet disarmed tried to shoot back, even killed a few of the soldiers. Enfield felt no particular loyalty to one side or the other. He was sickened by the murder happening below, and moreover, by the fact that he was responsible for it.

But there was no other way. He was sure of it. 1887-016 gained power from having people believe in him. The only way to capture him was to shatter the faith of his followers. The only way to keep him from becoming more powerful was to take away the only thing these people had to believe in.

The shooting stopped. Over a hundred dead; Enfield could see that. Mostly women and children. Soldiers were walking around the encampment laughing and pointing at the bodies. Enfield knew many of them just thought of this as a game, and that most of them barely thought of the Indians as people in the first place. They could enjoy this. Plenty of "researchers" back at the Institute would probably enjoy hearing about this too. Enfield was sick thinking about it.

But their faith was gone. However horrible this day was, 1887-016 was exposed now, powerless. Enfield didn't know where he was, but he swore, there and then, that 016 wouldn't get the chance to gain a following again. Not that *that* was likely. Not after this.

Enfield put his binoculars back into his coat pocket, turned his horse around, and rode away from Wounded Knee Creek.

Ghost Stories

The sun was just beginning to set as I paddled into the Okefenokee swamp along with my friends, Hank and Lucia. We weren't strangers to kayaking in the swamp; we had all done it since we were kids. Even at night, we weren't afraid to go in with the alligators and the birds and the other wildlife. This trip in particular, however, was designed to be scary. What a better time to tell ghost stories than while camping in the swamp on Halloween? We'd never spent Halloween in the wilderness before, and we figured it would be better than going to another costume party. I love being able to get away from my job at the Foundation every once in a while. The cold, sterile halls of Site 327 have no soul, none of the romantic power that nature does. As much as I love science, I need that kind of spiritual peace that nature imparts.

Things started to get dark around 6.

"Lights on everyone," said Lucia, as if we were kids that needed her to order us around. Hank looked at her and pouted.

"But I don't wanna!" he whined.

"Come on Hank," I said, "we better do what she says, or she'll spank us."

The look on her face was enough to send us both into a fit of laughter.

"Shut up Joe," she said. "I don't know which one of you is worse."

We kept mostly silent after that, paddling our way to our campsite. We'd been there many times before, an island of solid earth in a sea of stagnant water, peat, and trees. Spanish moss waved lazily in the wind as true darkness finally came, obscuring the already alien shapes of the Okefenokee. Here was true wilderness. No humans came here frequently, and when they did they never stayed long.

The trees grew large and twisted, silent surveyors of the affairs of fish and fowl, alligators and snakes. We tied up the kayaks, set up our tents quickly, stowed our gear, and built a fire. As we cooked marshmallows and hotdogs, now came the reason we had come out here in the first place, our first-ever Halloween swamp ghost story contest. Hank took the first turn.

A few miles south of Folkston, back in the 1800s, there used to be a place called Trader's Hill. It was a traders' town, of course, built near the water. There's an enormous old oak tree there, still around today. People called it the Hangman's Oak, for reasons I'm sure you can imagine. So one day, this Indian named Suanee came to town. He got accused to stealing some goods from a trader, and he ended up being sentenced to death. So they brought him up to the Hangman's Oak, and they were tying the rope around his neck when he said "May the curse of my father's spirit and my own be upon you, for as long as there is a Trader's Hill!" No one payed him any mind, and they hanged him dead.

About a month later, the people of Trader Hill were having a dance to celebrate the harvest, when they saw something bright in the distance. They all looked toward it and saw Hangman's Tree, glowing bright like it was on fire, and they could hear wailing and moaning like a thousand people being tortured! The next morning the first group of people packed up and left Trader's Hill. Eventually, the whole place was deserted. They say that sometimes, at night in the fall, you can still hear the wailing of Suanee and his father.

"Hank, I'm sorry but that story was just awful," I said, "It wasn't scary, and I'm pretty sure I've heard it before somewhere."

"What!? That story scared the shit out of me when I was a kid!"

"Nope. Wasn't scary."

"I agree. Boooring." said Lucia.

Hank stared at us both, flabbergasted. Before he could say anything, I saw it. There was a light in the swamp, like an orange

flame. It was far off, and obscured by the fog, but I could see that it was bobbing along like someone carrying a lantern. Who would be out in the swamp at night? And how do you just causally walk through the swamp?

"Hey guys, do you see that?" I asked.

"See what?"

Almost as soon as they turned, the light disappeared.

"What was that?" said Hank.

"I don't know. Maybe it was just someone setting up their own campsite?" suggested Lucia.

"I guess…" I said. I was used to seeing weird things. Something about this didn't seem right. Still, it's my weekend off.

"Whatever, let's just keep going. I believe it's my turn," I said as I stood up.

One day, a man named Henry Ferguson was driving home from work. It was another busy day in Chicago, with lots of traffic on the highway as people made their way home. Henry was tired, he had been working late the past couple of nights. He couldn't wait to get home and relax. Suddenly, his phone rang. He answered it.

"Good afternoon Mr. Ferguson. I have your son here at gunpoint. You must make a choice now."

"What? Who is this?"

"That's not important. I can see you from a screen right now. Speed up, and turn into oncoming traffic. If you don't do it soon, I will kill your son."

"Dad! Please, don't do it!"

"George? Is that you?!"

"Yes Dad, it's me, don't worry about me I'll be fine!"

"Shut up! Mr. Ferguson, you're running out of time."

Henry heard a gun click. His heart was beating out of his chest. He didn't know what to do.

"George…..I love you."

He stomped on the accelerator and turned sharply to the left.

Mr. Henry Ferguson didn't survive the crash. When the police asked for a recording of the last phone call he had made before committing suicide, they got it. To this day, no one knows who actually made the call, where it came from, or how George's voice was on it when he had never been kidnapped or threatened with a gun at all….

I stood silent for a few moments while I let the last part set in. Hank and Lucia looked a little spooked now. I'm sure the Foundation wouldn't mind that I had made up a ghost story using an SCP for inspiration, but then they probably would never know.

"Dude, that's fucking creepy." said Hank.

"That was one of the better ones I've heard recently," agreed Lucia. "However, I think I've got both of you beat. Have a seat and listen to a true master of the art."

Long ago in England, there lived a man named Jack. Jack was a thief and a scoundrel, but a clever one. One day, for all his cleverness and carefulness, he got caught stealing a gold coin from a farmer. Half the village was chasing him with murder on their minds, for that coin was all they had. Jack jumped into some bushes on the side of the road and let the villagers pass by, then dusted himself off and started walking the other way. He hadn't gone more than a few steps when a dark figure stepped onto the path before him, appearing like a wraith from the fog.

"Jack," the figure said, "I have come for thee. You hath lived a wicked life, and it is my duty as Satan, Lord of the Hell to take your

soul to eternal damnation. Your time hath come, the villagers shall return and kill you soon."

Jack, being the clever man he was, thought this over and had an idea. "Devil," he said, "would you not prefer to have many souls over one?"

"Are you proposing a deal, Jack?" the Devil said.

"A small one, Devil. It would benefit you much more than me. It is simple, you shall see."

"Tell me more, but be sharp, for your time runs short."

"Well first, Devil, I but throw away this gold coin I stole, into the forest where the peasants will never find it. Then you, Devil, turn thineself into the same gold coin. You hop into my purse, and when the peasants find me I give you to them. They don't kill me, but you disappear from their pockets later, and soon enough they'll all kill eachother arguing over who stole it."

The Devil agreed, and did as Jack said. But when he turned into a coin and hopped in Jack's purse, he found in there a crucifix. At the sight of it, the Devil's power was diminished, and he could not move from Jack's purse.

"A curse on you, Jack! You damnable wretch!"

"I will let you go if you do as I say."

"Blasted fate! I submit. What do you wish?"

"I wish that you promise you will never drag me to Hell, never touch my soul, not ever."

The Devil was reluctant, but as the peasants drew near, he finally gave in to Jack's demand. Jack threw him from his purse, and the Devil fled into the dark forests.

Finally, the farmers had Jack where they wanted him. They snatched him and bound him, and searched him for their gold. But they did not find it, for Jack had thrown it into the woods. Instead,

they took his head.

Jack was now in a predicament, for it seemed that Heaven would not take him, on account of his wicked nature, but neither would Hell, for the Devil had made his promise. Trapped between worlds, Jack begged of the Devil for one thing. A light for him to see by as he wandered the Earth. Satan took pity on Jack, and gave him an ember from the fires of Hell itself. Jack took it, and placed it in a carved pumpkin that he now wears in place of the head he lost. Since, he became known as Jack 'o' The Lantern.

I yawned. I saw worse things on an average Tuesday.

"Eh," said Hank, "it was interesting, but not really scary. Kind of cheesy too. Pumpkin heads are so overdone."

"What are you smoking? A guy with a pumpkin for a head with fire from Hell itself wandering the Earth for all eternity doesn't scare you?"

"No."

"You're too jaded."

A voice came from just outside the light of the fire. "Oh, it's a good story. You just got a few of the details wrong."

We all turned, startled, toward the voice as a man stepped into the light of our fire. He was old, his skin wrinkled with age. Half his hair had fallen out, the rest was grey as brushed steel. His eyes gleamed in the firelight, obscuring their color. He wore swamper's clothes, overalls and boots, but he seemed dirtier than most swampers I had seen.

"Who are you?" I asked him.

"They call me Will." He turned toward Lucia. "If you had told that story right, it would have been much scarier."

"You were spying on us?"

"Only for as long as her story lasted. I was just on my way in my canoe when I heard your voices."

Lucia stood up. "Well if you know that story so well, what did I get wrong?"

"Well, for one thing," said Will, "Jack never lost his head. The villagers just hanged him. He pretended to be dead and then just got up and left as soon as they turned around."

"For another, Jack didn't use a pumpkin to hold his Hellfire. There weren't any pumpkins in Medieval Europe, they're an American vegetable. He used a carved turnip."

As he spoke, I saw the light again. There it was, closer this time, slowly bobbing left and right, left and right. There was another, and another, another…

"You also forgot the best part. Jack figured out that though his Hellfire would never go out, on some days it was stronger. Particularly one day. It's a day of significance, ancient and cursed. They call that day All Hallow's Eve, or more recently, Halloween." The lights where closer now, more coming into view every second. I realized that Lucia, Hank and I had huddled together close, while Will was standing totally still, a knowing smile on his face. He casually rolled his head, revealing a white, puckered scar going all around his neck.

"Jack eventually figured out that on Halloween, his Hellfire was strong enough that he could use it to take people's souls for himself. All he had to do was use it to burn off someone's head. The Hellfire would spread to their necks, and burn on forever, trapping their souls and bending them to Jack's will."

The lights were very close now, so close I could make out more details. They were faces. Carved faces. Jack-o-lanterns. One came into the light of the fire. A dark figure, wrapped in rotting cloth. It seemed taller than a person should be. On it's head, it wore a jack-o-lantern like a helmet. But that couldn't be right, there'd be no room for the head and the candle…

"I really like the way pumpkins look. Much nicer than turnips. Roomier too."

One of the figures stepped closer. I looked into the pumpkin, searching for a face. All I saw was a stump of a neck, a small flame pouring out from the throat. The smell of burnt meat filled my nose.

"Oh, I almost forgot! in some versions of the story, they call him Will."

I can still hear his laughter echoing in my ears. I'll never be able to forget that cackle of his, so deep it sounds more like he's choking. No matter how long I walk the swamps, day or night, rain or shine, I can never seem to get it out of my head.

Giving Bad People Good Ideas

The diner's light shone like a lone glimmer of hope within the darkness of the city. The waitress wiping down the counter wore a bored expression. It was nearing the end of her shift, and the only customer was an old man, sipping coffee and flipping through a newspaper. He looked like an old stockbroker, or perhaps salesman, with a weathered tan jacket over a brown shirt, wireframe glasses and a black hat. An empty plate sat on the table in front of him. He had scraped it clean over an hour ago. He didn't look like a man who had ordered thousands to their deaths. Such men rarely did.

Movement made him look up. A third person had entered the diner, though the doorbell hadn't sounded. The newcomer slid into the seat across from the man and said nothing. He was at least a head taller than the man, skin pale enough to show the outlines of veins, head completely bald. The navy suit he wore was perfectly tailored, made from material CEOs dreamed of being able to afford. Black tattoos poked out from outfit's the neck and wrists. On the back of each hand was the image of a slit-pupiled eye.

A twitch of displeasure passed through the old man's face. "Go away," he said, looking back at the paper. His voice carried a thin Slavic accent.

The newcomer said nothing. He rested his hands on the table and stared with four eyes.

The minutes ticked by, silent but for the clicking of clock hands and ruffle of pages. The old man closed the final page of the paper and looked back up, scowling. "I'd hoped to never see you again."

"But you knew better." The newcomer's voice was thin, almost inaudible, as if a light breeze was flowing from his mouth instead of speech.

The old man lifted the coffee cup, tilted it back until the last dregs of

liquid disappeared. “Out with it, then.” He motioned to the waitress with the empty mug.

“Your friends are becoming curious.” Only the newcomer’s lips moved as he spoke. His body was a statue.

The man laughed. “Did you expect anything else? It’s in the blood. Might as well ask a lion not to hunt.” The waitresses arrived, refilled the cup. If she noticed the newcomer, she made no mention of it.

“It will not be long before they discover more.”

The man dismissed this with a wave of his hand. “You worry too much. Anything they find will be misinterpreted or ignored.” He took a sip of coffee, gave a smile of approval. “Learn to live in blind spots. Life is easier that way.”

“Maybe,” said the newcomer. “And yet, one has begun investigating Navi Mumbai.”

The man froze, mug halfway to the table.

“Is this one of your ‘blind spots’?”

“You’re a fucking liar.” The man rubbed his chin, nails scratching at the flesh.

The newcomer leaned forward. “She has discovered the temple.”

“She?” said the man. Then his face froze. “Aubrey. Jesus.”

“She will not be the last.” The newcomer rose, turned to the door.

“Wait!” the man called. “What the hell do you want me to do?”

The newcomer didn’t look back. “What you do best, Pavlo. Contain it.”

Giving Up

Howard was dead.

Pamela had known it would happen sooner or later - it was why her mother had disapproved of her getting involved with him, and it seemed she had been proven right. Even as the romantic vision they'd had of their future began to fade and blur, she always worried for his safety. The clothes and the shoes and the expensive perfume came with an invisible asterisk that seemed to hang over Howard every time she'd seen him.

So this is the end, she thought to herself as she held his final missive, the silence in the empty house only broken by the faint hum of the air conditioner. *I wish Howard hadn't been so…dramatic. This silly letter is what I have to remember him by?*

> I remember the petty fights where we got mad about where to put the furniture, or what we would call our kids.

Howard had always had a habit of romanticizing the past. She hadn't wanted kids, and their myriad arguments on the topic was one of the many, many reasons she'd been worried about what would happen when he decided to make their relationship permanent. *Guess it doesn't matter now…*

> I've worked hard for the ring within this envelope. Please, wear it. That way, we'll be together no matter how far apart we are.

And he'd also never seemed to drag his mind out of the dime store romance novels he was so inexplicably fond of. A wedding ring may have meant something to an aging widow, but it felt meaningless to wear it without the weight of years attached to it. It was pretty and expensive, but so were her earrings.

> Will you marry a dead man?

I can't, you silly romantic. But would I?

She wasn't sure.

It was finally done.

When he'd first moved on from Pamela's plane of existence to the little pocket dimension that had come with the pair of rings, he'd worried about what would happen if she had come to see him before the house he'd spent years building had been completed. After all, waking up in an empty clearing surrounded by construction tools after jumping to his death took more than a little while to get used to and accept. The mystic he'd bought the ring from assured him that it wouldn't happen - *Time will stand still until the abode for the ring wearers is complete*, her words had been - but he couldn't keep the concern out of his mind regardless.

Now, however, it was a moot point. The house was a simple thing, made of stone and thatching, but it would protect his beloved from the elements and keep them warmer than his own tent had in the dark days of winter. He placed the final stone on top of the wet cement, marveling at his own ability to complete the task by his lonesome. Taking a few steps backward, he recited the incantation the mysterious woman of magic had told him so long ago.

"House of stone, built with labors of love,
Hear my call among the heavens above.
Give me that which makes a house a home,
And things we may keep in our forever alone."

He walked back to the house, took a deep breath, and opened the front door.

It was beautiful. Mahogany bookshelves stood next to the fireplace he'd carved into the wall, flanking an exquisitely crafted set of living room chairs. The bed that had appeared on the opposite end was clearly made for two, and looked as inviting as anything he could ever remember seeing in his lifetime after living outdoors for so long. The kitchen was primitive, but had enough in it for Pam to make something delicious (and himself; he remembered the promise he'd

made to her to try to learn how to cook).

He grabbed a random book off of one of the shelves and sat down in a chair. The time for work had come, stayed for quite awhile, and finally gone. Now the place he'd labored so tirelessly over was ready for the love of his life.

It was time to wait.

"Five hundred bucks."

The pawn shop owner stared at Pamela skeptically, hoping to make a slight profit off of the woman's presumed ignorance. He had no such luck as Pamela countered by raising the asking price to $600.

"Six hundred? You're reachin', lady. The ring is nice, but I've seen nicer. And something tells me you want to get rid of it fast."

She shifted uncomfortably and quickly gave away her negotiating power in the hopes of finding sympathy. "It was my…partner's. He was going to propose to me before he passed."

"Oh really? What would ya have said?"

"Excuse me, I don't think that's any of your business."

"So 'No', then." He continued to fiddle with the ring, as if turning it over in his fingers would somehow make it appreciate in value. "Tell ya what. You're a nice gal, so I'll go for five hundred fifty. Not a dollar more."

"Fine." She pulled her debit card out of her purse and tried to push it into the chip reader, realizing she was too quick after being met with a red X on the screen.

"Calm down, it ain't a race. Gimme a minute to get it up and runnin'." As he did so, she stared at the ring for a final time. What would Howard have thought if he knew she was doing this? Why did the little thing make her so uncomfortable that she had to pawn it?

"It reminds you of him, don't it?" The store owner again interrupted

her stream of consciousness. "I understand. I had a friend of mine whose fiance died right after he popped the question. He wouldn't get rid of that damn ring for almost a decade."

"It's more than that," she replied, putting her card in the reader once more as the man nodded in confirmation. "He wrote this silly letter before he passed, about how with the rings we would always be together. It feels like a piece of him, somehow."

"It's all in yer head. Like they always say, you can't take it with you."

She wasn't coming.

He had finished the last book on the second shelf. The years had long ceased to have continuity in his mind; time blurred and twisted onto itself as he had waited for Pamela. He didn't want to admit the truth he was increasingly dreading, but the final volume he had digested - Homer's Odyssey - spelled it out for him.

After an uncertain but painful amount of time, he had made a pact with himself. He would read every book on the shelves, but he would read the Odyssey last. Like Penelope waiting for Odysseus, he would wait for Pam amidst the silence of his cabin and the soft, soothing sounds of the pocket dimension in permanent springtime. The trees beyond his home became his Suitors, calling for him to lose himself in their embrace even as his heart demanded he stay still.

But the final page had been shut. Ithaca was at peace, and Penelope and Odysseus were reunited once more. Yet here he sat.

"I'm sorry, Pam," he said aloud to nobody in particular. "But I can't wait any longer."

He walked out the front door, and closed it behind him. As he looked back upon his pointless creation one final time, he felt tears roll down his face.

All she had to do was wear the ring.

Transcript of a lecture given by Professor on Aetheric Energy and Aspect Radiation.

"Good afternoon. I hope you had a pleasant lunch. Please be seated, and we will resume with the second portion of this seminar.

"The first portion of my lecture covered the three fundamental laws upon which thaumatology is based, and the ways in which they may have an effect upon a PHYSICS Division operative's choices in the field. At this point, I am going to proceed to a somewhat more esoteric field: Elan-Vital Energy and Aspect Radiation.

"EVE is the fundamental energy that powers thaumatology. What EVE is, we are still trying to understand. It appears to be somehow linked to the Observer Effect directly. It has been described as 'life energy,' or 'magical particles,' but such terms are gross oversimplifications. If you are interested in the more esoteric aspects of EVE theory, you will find some recommended reading in your seminar syllabus. But for now, I will simply discuss the aspects of EVE that are pertinent to a Coalition field agent.

"EVE is emitted by living things. It is also often emitted by paranormal objects. EVE emission is not a perfect indication of whether or not a person or object has paranormal properties, but often, that is the case. Higher and more intense levels of EVE are generated by beings with higher levels of sapience: their Observer Effect is stronger, thus their EVE levels are stronger as well. Humans over Animals, Animals over Plants.

"Interestingly enough, the Goddesses that the Servants of the Silicon Nornir operate also generate EVE energy. Food for thought.

"Training you on recognizing and identifying EVE patterns is beyond the scope of this one-day seminar: you'll be provided a handbook with common patterns and schemes to recognize and memorize. But for now, let's try it out.

"On the table in front of you, you'll find a COLLICULUS Aetheric Resonance Imager[1]. I've already set up the imaging nodes, so all you'll need to do is put on the headset. But before you do that, let me give you a quick rundown on how to use it.

"The system can be put on like any other personal image enhancement headset. It can be worn using a headstrap, or attached to your helmet. Other variations attach to your rifle's Picatinny rail. There are three components: power supply, headset, and image processor. For now, the power supply will be the extension cords at your tables, and the image processor should be left on the surface of the table.

"When I tell you to do so, and not before, pick up the image processor and turn this wheel here all the way to 0. That's the image brightness control. You also want all three of these switches: "CAL," "VIS," and "ARI," set to the "ON" position. Only then will you flip the power switch and put the headset on. After that, you can adjust the image brightness until the calibration bar at the bottom of the screen is properly adjusted: you should see eight distinct squares, each one a different shade of grey, ranging from near-black to near-white.

"Go ahead and put them on now. I'll be coming around to help anyone who's having problems.

"Everyone all set? Having fun? Interesting stuff, isn't it?

"What you're seeing in the COLLICULUS headset is the EVE energy being given off by you and your classmates. You'll see that different people have different color and shape patterns. Over time, you'll learn to read and recognize these patterns. A skilled COLLICULUS operator can not only detect a person, they can also read their emotional state and some paranormal properties.

"They can also see through walls. In a moment, I am going to activate a secondary COLLICULUS array located in the conference room next door. If you will please all direct your attention to the front of the room…

"There we go. Location and position of every human being in the

room next door, through the walls. I am now going to ask you to set the VIS switch to "OFF," but keep your thumb on the switch, please. It might be a bit difficult for you to find it once you've turned off visible light processing.

"Interesting, isn't it? How you can see the entirety of the next room? Aetheric Resonance. Older models of the ARI system could only directly detect EVE emission patterns. The newest ones can also use EVE interaction with inert matter to draw a map of the surrounding area. The resolution isn't very good at the moment, but we're already working on the next-generation technology.

"Ah. I can see that someone noticed that Midnight here comes off as a bit different. Midnight, if you'll recall, is a Constructed Intelligence. That is, to say, she is a piece of raw mind put into the form of a cat. You'll notice that there are some unusual spikes in her aura signature, as well as some dips that don't appear in human beings. Her color scheme also tends towards blue significantly more than the rest of the class.

"Aha! And now the gentleman in the front row has recognized something else as well… my aura pattern also tends blue. And now you're remembering that "Type Blue" is the GOC designation for thaumaturges… Not a coincidence, I assure you. The image processing software is designed to process the EVE signature of a thaumaturge as blue. Same with Type Reds and Greens. Type Blacks… they're another story.

"In any case, take a few more moments to experiment with the COLLICULUS system. I'll be coming around to answer any questions you may have."

"I'm going to end this segment of the seminar with a discussion of Aspect Radiation, or ARad. EVE, you see, isn't just an indication of the Observer Effect. It's also a transformative power in its own right. When EVE intensity gets to the point where it can alter or change reality, that is what we call Aspect Radiation.

"So, to answer the first question: Aspect Radiation is simply EVE in concentrations high enough to cause reality warping effects. Think

of it as gamma radiation: Gamma rays are simply the upper end of the electromagnetic spectrum, the same spectrum that contains X-Rays, visible light, heat, and radio waves.

"We categorize Aspect Radiation along three axes: Hue, Pitch, and Weave. Plus Intensity, that's four characteristics that should provide a solid description of the level of reality alteration that we might be dealing with.

"Intensity is measured in Caspers, a term which has a very technical definition that I will not get into here. One hundred Caspers is considered normal "background" radiation levels. At one thousand, you may start seeing paranormal effects. At ten thousand plus, you are seeing severe and immediate reality alteration. Word of advice: unless you are specially trained to deal with reality alteration scenarios, you should avoid any ARAD field higher than one thousand.

"Hue. Originally, Hue used six of the seven colors of the rainbow. That turned out to be a problem… people would call in "Type Blues" with ARad characteristics reading "3 thousand, Black, Flat, Tight," and people would get confused. So we extended the scale a bit and changed the terms. The Hue scale is now: Ruby, Topaz, Lemon, Malachite, Sapphire, Ebony, and Over-Ebony. Or, you could just say Red, Orange, Yellow, Green, Blue, Black, and Over-Black if those colors sound too frou-frou for big, manly soldiers like yourselves… but you might confuse people.

"One common misconception is that Hue is a measure of the danger level of Aspect Radiation. Not the case. Hue is actually a measure of… I guess the best way to put it is how "blatant" the change is. For instance, a Ruby change might just be an acceleration in the decay rate of a small amount of radioactive material, while an Over-Ebony alteration changes the past fifty years of history to add an event back in the past that didn't occur before. On the other hand, Pitch, Weave, and Intensity also need to be considered… A Ruby level alteration that causes a sub-critical mass of plutonium to reach prompt criticality is a much more severe event than Mussolini having tea instead of coffee for breakfast one morning.

"Pitch is what mages used to call "White Line" versus "Black Line"

magic: how destructive a particular burst of Aspect Radiation is. It comes in five categories: Double-Flat, Flat, Natural, Sharp, and Double-Sharp. Double-Flat is the most destructive, the most disruptive to the operation of the mundane universe. Double sharp is the most constructive: these changes tend to become integrated into the very fabric of reality itself. This is not to say that Double-Sharp is necessarily good… if you want an example of a hostile Double-Sharp working, consider the anomalous Daeva Civilization: an ancient civilization of bloodthirsty thaumaturges that, periodically, have their decline and fall a few years later than before. That's a Double-Sharp Over-Ebony scenario right there.

"Finally, Weave. Comes in four varieties: Sparse, Loose, Tight, and Locked. Explaining it is… difficult… mostly because it's the only characteristic of Aspect Radiation that we don't have a way to detect. The only way to assess Weave is by direct observation by a Type Blue like myself. But what you need to know is: Sparse is vague and strange. Loose is a little more understandable. Tight is usually about where we get to what most people think of as "magic" or "reality warping" - the purview of Type Blues and Greens. And if you ever hear "Locked," turn and run like hell, because there's a Type Black in the area.

"All of this must sound complicated, because it is. I'd have to give you an undergraduate level course in basic thaumatological physics to explain further. But this all relates to one of the big questions I keep getting asked: namely, why doesn't the Coalition use magical workings for everything? Why do we need Strike Teams and Assessment Teams?

"The reason is backlash. Every time you utilize Aspect Radiation to make a change in reality, it bounces off the fundamental fabric of existence and causes a secondary effect called Backlash. The formula for measuring Backlash intensity is a bit complicated, but it can be summed up like this: A percentage of the original spell's Intensity. Opposite Pitch. Opposite Hue. Same Weave.

"So let's say I perform a working to create a door in that wall, where there wasn't one before. That might be… 3 kilocaspers, Ebony, Sharp, Tight. I plug the numbers into my formula here… and I can expect a backlash of 1.75 Kilocaspers, Ruby, Flat, Tight. Maybe I

suddenly give off a burst of gamma radiation. Maybe the carpet in a five meter radius bursts into flame. Maybe there is a burst of light and a glowing pattern of runes. In fact, when I do my working, I'm going to be trying to redirect the backlash into as harmless a pattern as possible. That's why thaumatologists use casting circles and geometric patterns: to redirect the backlash into predictable patterns.

"On the other hand, there are some workings that we still haven't figured out how to reabsorb all the backlash from. The most notorious being apportation. Altering reality so that quantum tunneling causes a large amount of mass to instantly appear somewhere else… it's a really ugly alteration, and the ARad backlash is huge.

"Worst of all, backlash itself is a burst of Aspect Radiation which can itself cause backlash… and so on and so forth. In fact, one theory as to why paranormal objects exist is that the Big Bang was the most powerful magical working in the universe… and it's still backlashing upon itself, causing reality to bend and alter at regular intervals.

"I'm starting to see that I'm losing some of you. Let's take another break, and when we get back, we'll talk about killing things and having sex."

Thaumatology Seminar Series
« **Basic Thaumatology** | **Return to GOC Hub** | **Thaumatic Workings** »

Footnotes
1. Since the recording of this Seminar, COLLICULUS has been retired and replaced with the more advanced VERITAS system.

Excerpts from PHYSICS Division Field Manual 1: Operative's Handbook

Preface

We live on a placid island of ignorance in the midst of black seas of infinity, and it was not meant that we should voyage far.
- H.P. Lovecraft
- "The Call of Cthulhu"

"Fuck that shit. Let's find out what's on that horizon."
- Agent "Madrigal"
- Strike Team "Noble Phantom"

For most of human history, our species has been at the mercy of powers foreign to, and supposedly greater than, ourselves. Magical or religious, extraterrestrial or extradimensional, these parathreats have been the Damocles Sword hanging over the head of our species since the first apes came down from the trees - or out of the water, based on which evolutionary theory you ascribe to.

No longer. Our species is now taking back control of our destiny. We are now at war with That Which Should Not Be: the Real fighting against the Unreal. And you, as a Coalition recruit, are one of the heroes who will serve a vital role in that war.

This manual is not meant to be a comprehensive guide to parathreats. Reading it will not teach you how to defeat a physical god. That knowledge will come with time, and experience. Instead, it is meant to serve as a distillation of the fundamental principles learned by PHYSICS operatives since our founding in the late 1940s, broadly applicable in all parathreat scenarios. Think of it as the foundation upon which you will build your skills: broad, plain,

largely invisible, but vital nonetheless.

Five Precepts

1) You are expendable.

There are over six billion human beings living in the world today. You are one of them. Cold-hearted as it may be, given the choice between the two, humanity wins every time. Before anything else, you must come to terms with this fact: not only for yourself, but for your friends, family, and loved ones. If the time should come that you are asked to make the ultimate sacrifice, you must do so swiftly, resolutely, and without hesitation. A moment's delay could be disastrous.

2) You are not disposable.

The Coalition doesn't have limitless reserves. Our numbers are small enough, and the threats we face terrible enough, that we cannot afford to lose a single operative to accident or stupidity. Your life is a vital resource to be nurtured and husbanded, and if it must be spent, it must be used to maximum effectiveness before it is lost.

3) Knowledge is power.

The threats we face are numerous, and each one is unique. In order to combat them effectively, we must know what we are facing. Information, more than any bullet or blade, is our weapon, and we need as much of it as possible. Keep no secrets from your comrades or superiors. If you learn something, pass it on as soon as possible. If you are killed, your last act before dying should be to try to make sure someone knows how you died.

4) Don't question it, just accept it.

There are things you will never know. There are things that the human mind can't comprehend, and other things that you will simply never find out. If you obsess over the things you do not know, you will become distracted and lose focus. As much as you can, focus on the Here and the Now.

5) You are only human.

You will make mistakes. You will grow tired and weak. There will be moments when you act stupidly and other moments when you express unexpected brilliance. You cannot let failure allow you to fall into despair, or success to lead to arrogance. Down either path leads disaster.

The Golden Rule

Never work alone.

Preparation

1 Then shall the kingdom of heaven be likened unto ten virgins, which took their lamps, and went forth to meet the bridegroom. 2 And five of them were wise, and five were foolish. 3 They that were foolish took their lamps, and took no oil with them: 4 But the wise took oil in their vessels with their lamps.
- Matthew 25:1-4

You can't cut with a dull knife, you can't drive a car without gas, and you can't face world-ending parathreats without being prepared, body and mind, for what's coming. Your handlers and trainers will take care of the specific things you need to learn to prepare for your job. This section of the manual is meant more to outline things you can do above and beyond required training to maximize your chances of survival… and more importantly, your ability to complete your mission.

Body

- **Keep Healthy:** This goes without saying. Eat healthy, make sure your innoculations are up to date, don't slack off on PT. If you have any pre-existing conditions, make sure your teammates know how take care of you in case you are incapacitated. If you have any new health issues come up, make sure someone else knows, even if it's as minor as a cold or a sprained ankle from playing basketball. In the field, in a crisis situation, is the last time to find out a team member has a severe fever.
- **Know How to Fight:** PHYSICS Division has many assets if you want to brush up on your personal combat training. Make use of them.
- **Practice Flight:** Practice your escape and evasion techniques: learn how to climb a fence (chain link and barbed wire), break a window safely, kick down a door, and most importantly, how to fall safely without injury. When the shit hits the fan and you have to get out of there, know how.
- **Be Ready for the Worst:** Make sure your first aid and CPR certifications are up to date. Keep your issued medical kit on you at all times, and know how to use it on yourself and others.

Mind

- **Stay Healthy:** Your mind is your most important weapon. Make sure it is healthy. Get regular psych evaluations, and follow the recommendations of the shrinks. Addictions and phobias can cripple performance at the worst possible time: have them treated right away. Watch your comrades too: if one of your team members starts to behave in an unstable manner, contact an evaluator for an assessment. Don't try to cover for your friends: it's better to get them help now than to

let minor issues become major ones… or worse, let a cognitohazard fester in the mind of your teammate.

- **Train Yourself:** Observation and situational awareness are vital in this job. Practice both. Logic puzzles are another good way to hone your mind. Broaden your knowledge base as much as possible: you never know when a minor factoid will turn out to be vital.

- **Learn to communicate:** If you don't know the local language, then at the very least, learn how to say the following words and phrases in the country you'll be operating in:

    - Yes.
    - No.
    - Help.
    - Emergency.
    - Danger.
    - Do you speak [language]?
    - Stay away.
    - Drop the weapon and lay down.
    - I need a telephone.
    - Where can I find a doctor?

- **Know Your Enemy:** Read after-action reports. Read Threat Entity dossiers. Talk to more experienced field operatives about their experiences. Find out everything you can about the parathreats you may face. The greatest fear is the fear of the unknown: make sure you have as little to fear as possible.

Gear

- **Choose the Gear that's Right For You:** Everyone is different. Your armorer and quartermaster can help you to find the perfect gear to fit your unique needs.

- **Know Your Gear:** Learn the quirks and foibles of every piece of equipment you carry, from your weapon to the buckles on your pack to the way your wallet sits in your pocket.

Experiment with different ways to carry and pack your gear until you find one that works well. Keep them maintained and always be aware of their condition. A frayed backpack strap might not seem like a big deal back at base, but it will be a big deal if it breaks on you in the field.

- **Don't Get Too Attached:** We all have our favorite gear. Sometimes it's not available. Things break, get lost, or get taken away. There will also be times when you have to abandon gear to make a hasty retreat and re-equip while in the field from what you can find. Familiarize yourself with as many different types of equipment as possible. A crisis situation is not the time to learn how to drive stick.

PHYSICS Division uses six broad "Response Levels" indicating the priority of concern and general level of force authorized by the individual operative.

Response Level 0: No Threat

Keep under occasional observation. Do not engage without permission from Central Command, unless immediate First, Second, or Third Mission concerns arise.

- The majority of paranormal phenomena discovered by the GOC fall under this category, being mere curiosities rather than threats. As liquidation of said phenomena would not be worth expenditure of assets, these paranormal entities are left in place.

Response Level 1: Minimal Threat

Keep under continual observation. Do not engage unless immediate First, Second, or Third Mission concerns arise.

- In many cases, GOC operatives will be assigned to Response Level 1 phenomena on a permanent basis, either as observers or as liaisons in the case of sentient beings. These

require constant supervision, but if properly isolated, have a minimal risk of Mission concerns.

Response Level 2: Sub-Moderate Threat

Keep under continual observation. Engage when convenient with minimal use of force.

- Response Level 2 is the first level of "parathreat," or paranormal phenomena determined to be a threat to the GOC's First through Third (Survival, Concealment, Protection) Missions, requiring a Fourth Mission (Destruction) response. In the case of Response Level 2, the primary threat is to the Second Mission (Concealment), requiring a subtle liquidation approach to avoid breaching secrecy. Response Level 2 missions are most often carried out by Assessment Teams or Special Observers, as employing Strike assets would be too high-profile.

Response Level 3: Moderate Threat

Keep under continual observation. Engage as soon as possible.

- Response Level 3 is reserved for those parathreats determined to fall under a Third Mission (Protection) threat, requiring immediate destruction to avoid danger to life and limb of civilians and bystanders. In this case, Second Mission (Concealment) concerns do exist, but should be considered secondary to Third Mission priorities. Response Level 3 missions are most often carried out by Assessment Teams with Strike backup in case of escalation.

Response Level 4: Severe Threat

Keep under continual observation. Engage as soon as possible. Excessive force authorized.

- At Response Level 4, severe Third Mission (Protection) concerns are present, including possible First Mission

(Survival) priorities. Second Mission (Concealment) concerns are partially waived when any breaches can be dealt with in a localized manner. Fifth Mission (Education) requirements are also waived in cases where other Mission concerns supercede. Assessment Teams are not authorized to carry out Response Level 4 missions except in case of extreme emergency, except as backup and Overwatch for Strike assets.

Response Level 5: Immediate Threat

All operatives to engage on sight, using any means necessary.

- Second Mission (Concealment) concerns are fully waived. Strike Teams are authorized full use of Tangential Technology when dealing with Response Level 5 threats. In special cases, Third Mission (Protection) concerns may be waived in the case of a severe First Mission (Survival) concern. Response Level 5 Missions generally require multiple Strike and Assessment teams, as well as outside assets, whether from Coalition member bodies or non-Coalition organizations.

Response Level 6: Pizzicato

Procedure Pizzicato is the final Emergency Response Procedure, to be executed in case of Threat Entity Emergence at a massive level. Procedure Pizzicato is to be executed in the following instances.

- Commencement of any Eschatological Event Sequence past the Point of No Return.
- Failure by rival agency to maintain containment of their own Threat Entities.
- Emergence on a worldwide scale of a large number of Threat Entities, causing a worldwide Second Mission failure.

Note that execution of Procedure Pizzicato will, by necessity, result in an irreversible Second Mission (Concealment) failure in order to allow for a First Mission (Survival) success. Third Mission (Protection) goals are secondary: normal avoidance of civilian

casualties is to be second priority to maintaining Minimum Repopulation Margin among the survivors.

Procedure

- Activate all sleeper units in rival agencies.
- Alert all allied government agencies and allied government officials.
- Mobilize all PHYSICS Teams.
- Publically acknowledge existence of Global Occult Coalition, existence of rival agencies, and existence of Threat Entities.
- Request for global martial law.
- Request worldwide protective curfew on all civilians.
- Establish and/or refresh KTE Termination Triage Sequences for all Threat Level 2 and 3 entities.
- Execute Termination Triage Sequences.

Force Authorization

- Units are authorized to request and/or use any necessary force in execution of Termination Triage Sequences.
- All restrictions re: NBC weaponry, Memetic Cognitohazard Cascade Sequences, and Nanotech Grey Goo items withdrawn.
- All restrictions re: use of Tangential and Plus Generation Technologies withdrawn.
- Acceptable Collateral Damage: 90% of worldwide human population.

Excerpts from PHYSICS Division Field Manual 2: Equipment and Gear

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Overview

Whenever possible, PHYSICS Division makes use of current-generation technology in order to minimize Second Mission (Concealment) impact should equipment be lost or abandoned in the field. However, the nature of the occult threat faced by GOC Operatives means that some use of advanced (downstream) technology beyond current norms is required. The following is a brief overview of terminology used to refer to downstream technology.

Generation Zero

Also known as Current Gen or Gen0. Refers to any technology that is readily available at the current level of technological advancement. Loss of Gen0 equipment is generally of minimal concern. The majority of equipment issued by Quartermaster Division is Generation Zero technology.

Generation Plus One

Also known as Gen+ or +1Gen. Refers to any technology considered cutting edge or advanced given the current level of technological advancement, but could conceivably exist as a prototype or specially constructed item. Loss of Gen+1 technology may necessitate action by PSYCHE in order to minimize impact to Second Mission concerns, but is generally not a cause for undue alarm.

Generation Plus Two

Also known as Gen++ or +2Gen. Refers to any technology clearly beyond the ability of the current level of technological advancement to produce. All Gen+2 technology issued to GOC Operatives must include a readily accessible self-destruct device to prevent downstream technology from falling into the hands of the public.

Tangential

Also known as GenAlt or TanGenT. Tangential Technology is any technology that relies on principles other than those of science, such as magic or faith. Tangential Technology not in the possession of a GOC Operative may be considered a Known Threat Entity. Loss of Tangential Technology may require a Response Level 5 action to prevent the item from being discovered by the public.

Mk VII Standard Field Dress (Black Suit)

GEN+1

History

GOC Operatives are often required to operate in a variety of urban environments, in close proximity both to dangerous Threat Entities and the civilian population. In the interests of Second Mission (Concealment) concerns, Quartermaster's Division developed the Standard Field Dress in the early 1970s to act as a low-visibility defensive garment for agents in the field.

Early SFDs suffered from several weaknesses: they tended to be heavy, restricting in movement, uncomfortable in heat or cold, and could not be made in any color aside from their undyed black. This resulted in the early "Black Suits" paradoxically causing their

wearers to become more visible than if they had worn normal tactical gear. Since then, advancements in materials technology have allowed for greater comfort and lesser visibility in the garments worn by modern field agents. However, these garments are still informally referred to as "Black Suits" for tradition's sake.

Overview

The MkVII SFD is the current iteration of PHYSICS Division's standard duty garment. Modern Black Suits come in a variety of different fashions for various situations (ranging from high-society formalwear to thrift-store discards for blending in with transient populations). In light of changing threat conditions and advances in technology, this garment is constantly being revised and upgraded. The most recent official model incorporated the following characteristics:

- A form-fitting ballistic-fiber undergarment worn next to the skin, made of +1 Generation nanofiber, rated to stop handgun rounds with standard powder load at point blank range.
- +1 Generation nanofiber threads integrated into key points in outergarments to provide additional protection. Combined with undergarment, must be rated to stop rifle rounds with standard powder load at a distance of twenty meters.
- Micronized communications gear located in the collar and cuffs of the garment, or integrated into jewelry.
- Augmented Reality system integrated into eyewear or disguised as a cosmetic accessory.
- Personal Computing Device (PCD) integrated into a cellular phone, implanted as a cybernetic enhancement, or disguised as footwear, with satellite connection to GOC data network.
- Emergency toolkits and weapons, miniaturized and disguised as necessary, are provided by Quartermaster's Division for specific missions upon request.

Black Suits might not be the sexiest combat dress PHYSICS issues, but they've saved more lives than any other piece of tech we've developed. They're heavy, itchy, and smell funny until you break them in, but the first time one of them stops a bullet that should have

killed you, you'll come to see them in a whole new light.

Agent "Madrigal."
Strike Team "Noble Phantom."

Mk IV Infiltration Uniform (Grey Suit)

GEN+1

Overview

The Grey Suit is the current iteration of battledress issued in cases where stealth is prioritized over protection. Grey Suits consist of a full-coverage garment made of "chameleon cloth," which incorporates minute chromatophores similar to those found in cuttlefish or chameleons. Hundreds of small cameras incorporated at strategic points take pictures of the surrounding environment and project them onto the opposite side of the garment.

The end result is an adaptive camouflage system which (unfortunately) falls far short of a true invisibility cloak: the low resolution of the surface causes the image to be blurry or distorted, and it cannot project light or reflections. In addition, the lag time of the system means that movement of the viewer or wearer will disrupt the image. However, its use of only +1 Generation technology, and the significant advantage it grants to stationary wearers, makes it a useful addition to an Assessment Team's arsenal.

Additional tarpaulins and cloaks made of chameleon cloth are often used in combination with the Grey Suit when setting up stationary hides in the field.

Here's something they don't tell you in the official documentation: talk to your quartermaster, maybe slip him a twenty or buy him a case of beer (the good stuff),

and give him your weapon. He'll bring it back to you covered in chameleon cloth, with an interface that can hook into your greysuit. That way, your weapon can be invisible too. Technically, he's not supposed to do that in case you lose your weapon in the field, but everyone does it and High Command turns a blind eye. Besides, without the proper command signals, it just looks like a commercial aftermarket neoprene slipcover.

Agent "Madrigal."
Strike Team "Noble Phantom."

Mk II Combat Garment (White Suit)

GEN+2/TanGenT

Overview

Reserved strictly for use by Strike Teams, White Suits represent the epitome of PHYSICS Division's battledress technology. The suit comprises three components:

1. A close-fitting undergarment, derived from the Black Suit, that provides last-ditch protection to the wearer's torso, as well as incorporating waste collection ports and a water-cooling system to prevent buildup of residual heat.
2. A rigid suit of battle armor with pseudomyomer exomusculature and full hazardous environment protection, powered by a micronized fuel cell located in the lower back.
3. An invisibility cloak generator, incorporating Tangential Technology to bend light around the subject, providing full invisibility.

As White Suits employ a large amount of +2 Generation and Tangential Technology, all units are equipped with a self-destruct device to prevent them from being captured or discovered by outside personnel.

Word of advice if you end up in Strike: get as much body hair removed as possible. I don't care how you do it: laser, electrolysis, whatever. Those damn White Suits fit so fucking tightly it's not uncommon for guys to get their pubes or leg hair stuck in the joints and ripped out when they bent their knee or hip the wrong way. Also: check, double check, and triple check that your skinsuit is fitting tightly, without wrinkles or bunching, before you climb into the hardsuit, unless you like blisters all over your chest, hips, shoulders, or groin. It wouldn't hurt to invest in a really good jock strap, either, if you're so endowed.

Agent "Madrigal."
Strike Team "Noble Phantom."

Mk. III Ultra-Heavy Engagement Chassis (Orange Suit)

GEN+2/TanGenT

History

The Ultra-Heavy Engagement Chassis fulfills a niche role in PHYSICS Division operations: namely, engaging massive or heavily armed Threat Entities. In the past, encounters with such entities could be resolved only by evacuating the area and escalating to Response Level 5. Furthermore, in encounters against enemies armed with heavy weaponry or armor, Strike Operatives tended to fall short due to a lack of armored cavalry support. In light of this, a new system was developed to provide both the ability to engage massive KTEs, as well as provide rapid and mobile heavy armor support.

Mk. I and II U-HECs suffered from multiple drawbacks in their design: for instance, the ground pressure caused by a bipedal machine the size of a tank caused severe damage to paved roads, as well as resulting in the machine and operator bogging down or

collapsing urban structures. Further problems included operator exhaustion, overheating, and balance issues. As time went on, however, advancements in the fields of nanotechnology and Tangential Technology allowed U-HECs to be built lighter, faster, and much more responsive. The modern U-HEC (the Mark III "Orange Suit") is a much more mobile and agile unit, although still requiring infantry support from Strike assets.

Overview

U-HECs are designed for situations in which a Threat Entity possesses extreme destructive potential, such as a large cryptid, Tier 5 or higher energy manipulators, or persons with access to heavy weaponry. As stealth is practically impossible due to the size of the unit and the noise caused by its operation, U-HECs are equipped with "Banshee" audio-visual cognitohazard generators to induce panic in non-inoculated personnel. Believing that the system is more effective if it has the full attention of the target, some U-HEC operators use bright colors or gaudy ornamentation to draw the attention of the enemy.

The exact construction and composition of the Mark III U-HEC is classified, but are known to include:

- Buckypaper bilayered with dilatant gelatin in order to absorb shock from bullets and explosives.
- Silicon nanofluid cooling system integrated into a bodysuit similar to that worn with the White Suit.
- Pseudomyomer exomusculature similar to that used in the White Suit, but augmented with miniaturized high-torque electromechanical servos for greater strength at the cost of some response time.
- Ceramic plating to reduce electrical conductivity.
- Vaporizing liquid extinguisher for protection against flammable agents.
- Ultra-high-molecular-weight polyethylene (UHMWPE) outer shell.
- Full environmental hazard protection, including toxin filters and rebreathers.
- OCULUS sensor suite, including VERITAS imaging system.

- Ram-Air Parachute system for aerial deployment.
- "Firestorm" Antipersonnel Directional Explosive (ADE): scaled up version of the "Roomsweeper" hemispherical claymore mounted on the White Suit. This system was added to early U-HECs after an incident in which a U-HEC operator, cut off from infantry support, was overwhelmed and killed by multiple enemy infantry who climbed onto the suit and prised the operator out of the pilot compartment. The system consists of a series of directional mines mounted on the exterior of the unit which can be set to detonate at the command of the operator.

I've operated with U-HECs six times, and each time, it's been fucking intense. Even if you're inoculated against the cognitos, it's fucking terrifying to see that huge thing smashing through small buildings and shrugging off small arms fire like rain. I can't imagine what it must be like for anyone who has to go up against that thing with the full force of the Banshee shrieking at them: shitting their pants and running screaming for the hills is the kindest thing I've seen happen.

The downside is, it's easy to feel invincible with a giant fucking golem smashing everything in your wake, but that's when things get the most dangerous. Not everyone turns and runs. Some people respond to abject terror by going violently berserk. Plus, even when you're wearing a tank, there's plenty of things out there that kill tanks just fine. Some of them are out of Banshee range, too. So if you ever have the honor and privilege to wear an Orange Suit, remember: you're not invincible, even if everyone else acts like you are. And that thing you're wearing makes you the biggest target on the battlefield.

Agent "Madrigal."
Strike Team "Noble Phantom."

Mk. IV Sub Aquatic-Low

Pressure Environment Suit (Blue Suit)

GEN+1

History

Early GOC underwater operations utilized SCUBA gear and wetsuits no different than those used by military or civilian divers. The limits of this system soon became apparent: lack of protection from water-borne threats made it completely unsuitable for GOC mission objectives. As time has passed, SALPES has evolved as well: the modern variation is a far cry from the crude systems used in the post World War II era.

Overview

SALPES is utilized for underwater operations (both termination of KTEs and investigation of PTEs) when a full Atmospheric Diving Apparatus (hardsuit) is unavailable or inappropriate. The most recent version of SALPES includes:

- Water electrolyzer for production of hydrogen and oxygen while underwater.
- Hydrogen powered fuel cell for the SALPES electronic systems.
- Form-fitting buckypaper garment bilayered with dilatant gelatin to provide ballistics protection, with Nichrome heating element.
- Water-resistant "Trident" model OCULUS vision-enhancement equipment.
- Rebreather system/SCUBA gear, depending on mission parameters.

Mark IV Vital Energy Radiation

Imaging Tactical Awareness System ("VERITAS")

TanGenT

Note: Because of the sensitive nature of this technology, all information regarding the true nature of Etheric Resonance Imagery (ERI) is classified Level Q by order of GOC High Command. This document will cover only the operation of the VERITAS device by GOC Field Operatives. The device itself is classified as "Black Box" technology and should not be repaired by anyone other than an authorized Coalition technician. ERI technology is to be considered Tangential Technology, and must be outfitted with a self-destruct device to prevent downstream technology from being released to the civilian population.

Overview

The VERITAS Resonance Imager is a fourth-generation device based on the principles of Etheric Resonance Imagery originally discovered by Semyon Kirlian in 1939. This is not to be confused with what is commonly known as "Kirlian Photography," which is a simple corona discharge phenomenon. Prior versions of the system (including COLLICULUS), required a separate Resonance Imager and Viewer, making the system too bulky to be carried by a single person. Recent miniaturization advances have allowed the entire system to be incorporated into a single headpiece, most commonly combined with low-light, infrared, and ultraviolet imaging technology in the OCULUS vision enhancing headset.

Like all ERI devices, VERITAS functions by detecting the distinctive Aetheric Energy Fields (AEF), or Elan Vital Energy (EVE) given off by living creatures during the course of normal life functions. By measuring the wavelengths and intensity of these energy fields, information regarding the nature of the life form, its mental and physical state, and any paranormal alterations can be determined.

In its simplest configuration, a single VERITAS unit can be used to

detect the presence of higher life forms, even through a wall or other vision-obstructing obstacle. However, the device's true potential is only reached when two or more units function in tandem. By triangulating the position and nature of various AEFs, a three-dimensional map of the area (including the locations of all hostiles) can be provided to a mission commander or overwatch.

Excerpts from PHYSICS Division Field Manual 13: Special Circumstances, Humanoid Threat Entities

Introduction

Reality Benders (Type Greens) have a certain mystique among GOC operatives. Some operatives even argue that it is impossible to terminate a Type Green, and it is suicide to even try. The kill record of our organization says otherwise. The key to terminating Type Green entities lie in finding and taking advantage of their few weaknesses. In 95% of cases:

- Greens cannot predict the future and can be taken by surprise.
- Greens have limited range and cannot affect what they cannot perceive.
- Greens cannot impose their will on anything if they have no will to impose.
- Greens have human foibles and can be manipulated emotionally and/or rationally.

Sequence

99% of Type Greens undergo the following sequence of psychological changes as their powers progress.

PHASE 1: Denial: The subject refuses to acknowledge their ability to warp reality. The Type Green will attempt to rationalize away their abilities by various means. In some cases, the Type Green will end here: their ability will be self-suppressed, and they will not proceed. However, most then proceed to:

PHASE 2: Experimentation: The subject acknowledges their abilities and begins to test the limits of their powers. In general, Type Greens

tend to experiment in one of two patterns: slowly, methodically, and carefully, advancing a small amount at a time, or in a small number of sudden jumps. In any case, the subject will generally remain in this mode for some time, before proceeding to:

PHASE 3: Stability: The subject reaches the limit of their powers, and determines the boundaries of their abilities. The Type Green achieves control over their reality shifts, and can manipulate them as necessary. More importantly, they can choose not to utilize their abilities, if needed.

Phase 3 is usually characterized by attempts to live a "normal" life. The subject will continue in normal routines, and aside from necessary precautions to prevent losing control, will utilize their abilities only in private, and only in a manner that will not harm others. These Type Greens may be classified as Threat Level 1 (monitor, do not engage), but should be monitored closely, due to the risk of proceeding to Phase 4.

PHASE 4: The Child-God: Sadly, the majority of Type Greens will eventually progress to Phase 4. During this phase, the reality bender becomes obsessed with the power it possesses and will attempt to utilize it for personal gain at the cost of others. This phase is marked by reduced empathy for other humans, inability to accept personal faults, and increased megalomania.

Although warning signs are numerous, the key aspect of a Phase 4 is the use of their abilities to manipulate other humans. Teenage and young adult Type Greens will typically use their abilities for sexual purposes, while children will attempt to make strangers their "friends." Older adults may attempt to manipulate others for love or financial gain. Although a few cases have resulted where the Type Green then reverts to Phase 3, 99% of them will remain at Phase 4 until eliminated. For this reason, Phase 4 Type Greens should be considered Threat Level 5 (Immediate Threat) and eliminated immediately, as they represent a major threat to all aspects of the Fivefold Mission.

Termination

Any attempt to eliminate a Type Green must take into consideration the three factors for Dynamic Entry in close quarter battle.

Speed: Type Greens are able to quickly react to any threat. In order to ensure a successful kill, the operation must take no longer than one second from initiation of hostilities to termination of subject. This is the average time it takes for a human being to reflexively react to an unexpected threat or event.

Surprise: Type Greens are able to quickly adapt to known threats. It is recommended that a bluff play be carried out: an overt threat is to be presented to the subject for them to fixate upon, while the actual kill is carried out from an unexpected direction.

Violence of Action: The kill method chosen to eliminate a Type Green must ensure a successful termination on the first shot. Sniper weapons should utilize large caliber rounds, preferably hollow-point for maximum expansion, or armor-piercing, as needed. Firearms are, of course, a secondary kill choice: explosives are recommended, but may not be usable due to collateral damage risks. If firearms must be used, multiple shooters should be present, and all should aim for head shots, if possible, or center torso shots if necessary.

Example

(Names have been redacted for security purposes)

Subject Alpha ("Alice") was a 90 year-old Caucasian woman living on a farm house in Town A ("Anytown, USA"). Alice first came to the attention of the GOC following reports of "ghosts" haunting the fields outside her town. Initial covert investigation was able to rule out the presence of actual spectral entities through VERITAS scanning. Further investigation was approved. A GOC Special Observer ("Oscar") proceeded to Anytown with a full support team, posing as the cast and crew of the reality television program "Ghost Finders Inc."

Subject Alice was discovered to be living alone with two cats. She had been widowed three years prior, and her children all lived out of

state. Subject Alice proved personable and charming, and often engaged the operatives in conversation and provided them with tea and home-baked cookies.

Oscar soon determined over the course of the next few days that Alice was the proximal cause of the apparitions, as they only appeared when Alice was either asleep, or not present. Upon engaging her in further conversation, he discovered that she was a lapsed Catholic, now agnostic, who expressed a desire to believe in an afterlife but was not satisfied by her faith. Agent Oscar theorized that Alice was a subconscious Type Green who was expressing her grief over her husband's death by manifesting apparitions of his ghost.

Following a lengthy philosophical discussion, including a discussion of Pascal's Wager, the apparitions increased in strength and clarity, allowing Oscar to obtain a clear photograph of the entity. He then presented the photograph to Alice for identification. To his surprise, Alice identified the photograph not as her husband, but as Subject B ("Bob"), a young man with whom she had been acquainted during her younger years.

Alice claimed that she and Bob had been romantically involved in the early 1940s, but their relationship had been suspended when Bob was drafted into the Second World War. During that war, Alice made the acquaintance of her eventual husband: a factory worker who had been classified 4-F due to a leg injury caused by an automobile accident. Two days after Bob received her "Dear John" letter, he was killed in Normandy during Operation Overlord.

Alice's heightened emotional state caused the apparitions to increase in frequency and intensity, including physical manifestations. After a GOC operative was injured by a Luger bullet fired by one of the "ghosts," Central ordered termination of the subject. Operative Oscar requested permission to attempt a nonlethal "Soft Kill," citing Second Mission (Concealment) concerns. Permission was granted.

No record remains of Operative Oscar's subsequent conversation with Subject Alice, but it convinced the Subject to manifest an apparition of "Bob" that night, the first time that she had manifested

an apparition in her own presence. After receiving emotional closure with what she believed was the spectral entity of her old lover, the apparitions ceased manifesting entirely. Subject died three nights later in her sleep of natural causes. No further paranormal phenomena have occurred in the area since Subject Alice's death. Operative Oscar was commended for his actions.

Overview

There are over one hundred known instances of parathreats that operate by animating the corpses of the dead, ranging from simple prions to complex nanomachines. New ones are discovered on a regular basis, as diverse as the situations in which they are encountered. For this reason, Coalition operatives should familiarize themselves with the following three-step mnemonic (also known as the "SEX" method, for **S**ecure, **E**valuate, and e**X**terminate), for dealing with Type Gray outbreaks.

Secure

The first priority in any Type Gray outbreak is to **Secure** the area in which the outbreak is taking place. The following tasks should be carried out, in order of priority (most vital to least important). Individual situations will, of course, require revision of this general order.

- Establish Worst Case Scenario fallback plan. Coordinate with security assets re: authorized Response Level.
- Lock down the infested area and establish a secure perimeter. No persons are to be allowed in or out of this perimeter. Security personnel are to be informed to shoot on sight. Should GOC personnel be unavailable, local law enforcement or military assets may be commandeered under a standard cover story.
- Establish a headquarters within the infested zone. Said headquarters should be secure, and preferably non-adjacent

to civilian defense points, so that compromise of civilian defenses will not threaten GOC assets.
- Locate and make contact with any remaining civilians. Do not attempt to move civilians to headquarters zone: any civilians surviving within the infested area are to be left in place.

Evaluate

Because of the large number of Type Gray threat entities, it is imperative to establish the nature of the particular Type Gray outbreak. GOC personnel are to liaise with any medical or scientific personnel within the infested zone, and make first-hand observations of infested threat entities. Analyze collected data and refer to GOC Type Gray database. If Type Gray threat is determined to be a Known Threat Entity, refer to the Sterilization Manual for the particular KTE.

Should data be insufficient, or if the parathreat is determined to be an Unknown Threat Entity, the following information should be recorded.

Note: Due to multiple breaches of quarantine, GOC personnel are no longer to attempt to capture a live specimen of either infested persons, or the Type Gray threat entity itself, until the infestation is pacified. All Type Gray threat entities under observation and study are to be destroyed immediately upon determination of an effective Kill Method.

Nature of physical and mental changes in the infested personnel.

All Type Gray entities work by animating deceased matter. However, the amount of physical and/or mental faculties remaining after infestation vary between Threat Entities. Initial observation of infested individuals should establish three facts:

- Remaining physical capacity: Speed of movement, agility, and strength.
- Remaining mental capacity: Ability to solve problems, collate

data, sensory capacity.
- Social characteristics: Remaining pre-death personality or memories, presence of hive mind or internal factions.

In most cases, Type Gray entities cause a 50% or more loss of physical capacity and reduction of mental capacity to simple hunger. Hive minds and internal factionalism have been recorded in less than 10% of cases. In most scenarios, a Type Gray infested human is slow, mindless, and violent.

Method of Transmission.

Many Type Gray threat entities are non-transmissible: infestation must take place directly towards dead flesh. However, many others can be transmitted through bodily fluids, through localized energy life forms, or through magical/religious means. Until said means of transmission is determined, all GOC personnel are to utilize Class 1 Isolation Gear. *Note: following the outbreak of the Memetic Cognitohazard Type Gray threat entity KTE-5321-Blit-Gray, "Eyeblight," all Class 1 Isolation Gear has been revised to include visual distortion lenses.* In addition, the GOC team on-site are to determine whether the Threat Entity is transmissible to humans only, or (should the Entity be able to infest animal or plant life) which forms of life are vulnerable to infestation.

Effective Kill Method.

In past experience, the following kill methods have been proven effective in Type Gray outbreaks.

- Immolation: 99.9%
- Destruction of Brain: 72%
- Bodily Trauma: 54%
- Toxins: 3%
- Other: 2%

Assessment of Effective Kill Method (EKM) should be carried out in the following manner.

1. Locate a single Type Gray infested human and establish a kill

zone. Test subject is to be secured, if necessary, to ensure sharpshooter accuracy.
2. Establish perimeter, including fall-back plan and fire support.
3. Sharpshooter armed with scoped rifle, including underslung launcher, fires two rounds into center of mass. Assess result. If method is effective, cease testing.
4. Sharpshooter delivers headshot. Assess result. If method is effective, cease testing.
5. Sharpshooter loads and fires incendiary grenade. Assess result. If method is effective, cease testing.
6. Sharpshooter loads and fires chemical grenade loaded with "Zee-Be-Gone" toxin cocktail. Assess result. If method is effective, cease testing.
7. If standard kill methods prove ineffective, withdraw to headquarters and contact GOC high command for further instructions.

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eXterminate

Following establishment of security, and determination of an Effective Kill Method, GOC Strike personnel are to sweep the infested area according to standard "Clean and Sweep" protocol. Personnel are to report back every two minutes with status update. Should 25% of sweeping personnel be lost, mission is to be aborted, GOC personnel withdrawn, and Response Level 3 assets deployed to incinerate infested zone. Should losses exceed 50% at any point during withdrawal, remaining personnel are to be considered expended, and immediate Response Level 3 operations carried out.

Introduction

A Regenerator (Type Red) is an overarching designation for any individual who possesses the ability to reconstitute damaged tissue and limbs. Contrary to popular belief, a Type Red is **not** indestructible. Numerous methods exist for disabling the regenerative ability of a Type Red, or liquidating the Type Red

despite their abilities. In some cases, Type Reds will self-terminate through uncontrolled use of their abilities: however, most cases will require intervention by an operative.

Forms

Flawed Regeneration: This form of Type Red is low threat and can usually be engaged by a single operative. When injured, instead of replicating the lost tissue, the Type Red's body will instead fill the gap with a material unsuited to the area. For example, if a Flawed Regenerator experienced the loss of an arm, there is a chance it will be replaced with a large growth formed from tooth enamel. This form of Type Red will typically kill itself via accumulated minor injuries, if left alone.

Limited Regeneration: This form of Type Red possesses the ability to slowly reconstitute lost tissue, and in some case limbs. Limited Regenerators can prove dangerous in combat situations, as permanent injury is difficult to maintain. See Techniques for more information on how to permanently liquidate them.

Full Regeneration: This form of Type Red possesses the ability to regenerate lost tissue and limbs in a matter of seconds, making liquidation or permanent injury impossible. See Techniques for information on how to incapacitate this form of Type Red.

Expanding Regeneration: To date, seven Type Reds of this form have been discovered and incapacitated. Engagement by anything less than a Response Level 5 effort comprising multiple Strike Teams is not recommended. Expanding Regenerators possess not only the ability to regenerate lost tissue and limbs, but also generate further limbs and organs, often drastically increasing in size during the process. This combination makes Expanding Regenerators formidable opponents. Further information on how to incapacitate this form of Type Red can be found in Techniques.

Identification

Initial identification of Type Reds usually takes place when an observer reports a person suffering an injury that heals unusually quickly. An Assessment or Strike team will then engage the target, move them to a secure location, immobilize them, and administer a sharps test. A small incision is made to the subject's palm, and the rate and nature of rapid healing assessed.

Capture

Type Reds are difficult to liquidate in the field. Operatives will often have to capture the subject before transferring them to another location for final liquidation.

- Injury to the legs is effective against Limited Regenerators and some Full Regenerators.
- Alternatively, multiple and repeated injuries to the body will often incapacitate some Full Regenerators while their body repairs the injuries.
- A knife, stake or other sharp object can be forcibly embedded into the brain. Although the Type Red will attempt to regenerate brain and skull matter, the sharp object will prevent full regeneration. Recommended point of insertion is the base of the skull, through the brain stem and upper spinal cord.
- In the case of Expanding Regenerators, liberal application of fire is recommended. This may make it difficult to capture or transport the still-burning subject.

Techniques

Incineration: The Type Red is placed into a mobile incineration trailer, which is then primed and ignited. Depending on the level of regenerative abilities, multiple applications of fire may be required. In extreme cases, incineration may be required in perpetua.

Submersion: The Type Red is placed in a sealed container which is then completely filled or immersed in water. This will cause the Type Red to drown, regenerate brain functions and subsequently drown again, rendering the Type Red effectively incapacitated. An

alternative to this method replaces the water with earth, concrete, molten metal, or another solid.

Corrosion: Similar to Submersion, but replaces the water with high molar acid.

Erosion: The subject is reduced to multiple smaller pieces by cutting or abrasion. In some cases, this can be effective on its own. In other cases, Erosion may be used to enhance the effectiveness of one of the other liquidation methods.

Extreme cases may require the use of multiple methods in rapid succession.

Overview

While multiple parathreats possess shapeshifting abilities, the "proper" shapeshifter is a particularly tricky target to engage. Their familiarity and reliance on their trait potentially gives them advanced mastery and skill in using it, especially if they are a mortal species (where creativity and ingenuity are common). If unprepared, a Type Yellow could give the veteran operative a hard time, whether pursuing them or facing them.

NOTE: Not all entities that possess shapeshifting abilities are applicable to the following methods. For more information on those entity types (such as Therianthropes, Paranormal Coulroform, and most strains of Hemovores), please see their specific entries (*Talbot*, *Harlequin*, and *Wallachia* respectively).

Classification

Type Yellow entities are classified into the following categories, each associated with a symbol for simplicity:

- Transformation Type: Defining the full extent of the transformation.

    - Limited Transformation: Where the entity can manipulate only part of their body, whether it be one part at a time or one part exclusively. Associated with the letter "A".
    - Full Transformation: The entity has full control over their appearance. Associated with the letter "B".

- Transformation Speed: How long it takes for the entity to transform.

    - Slow: The process of transmogrification happens over a long period of time, ranging from several minutes to an hour. Associated with the letter "I".
    - Moderate: The process takes place over a few minutes. Associated with the letter "J".
    - Instant: Transformation takes place almost instantly. Associated with the letter "K".

- Transformation Quantity: How many forms the entity can take.

    - Uni: Only having access to one form. Associated with the letter "O".
    - Multi: Having access to multiple forms. If an entity has full transformative abilities, an amalgamation of forms may exist. Associated with the letter "P".

- Transformation Capacity: Types of forms that are able to be taken.

    - Norm: Being limited forms that resemble subjects considered consistent baseline normalcy. Associated with the letter "X".
    - Para: Having forms that resemble those considered consistent with the paranormal, or have no counterpart outside of the entity (or similar subjects). Associated with the letter "Y".
    - Poly: Possessing access to any form conceivable. Associated with the letter "Z".

In this way, operatives can be more specific when describing the capabilities of a Type Yellow. For example, a subject that possesses

the ability to transform their head into that of a hippopotamus, over the period of a minute, would be an A-J-O-X Type Yellow, while a subject capable of imitating any living thing it has seen in five seconds would be a B-K-P-Z Type Yellow.

Tracking

Keeping track of an entity that can change its form (or has no definite base shape at all) is understandably difficult; finding a fleeing target that can become as small as a mouse in no easy task. However, one must keep in mind that a Type Yellow entities obey the conservation of mass and energy. When changing shape, they will release, absorb, or produce large amounts of Aspect Radiation (either from the creation or disposal of mass by conversion, or by accessing higher or extradimensional body parts), causing their EVE signatures to light up Yellow (this is where the term "Type Yellow" come from, along with the semi-constant bands of yellow seen in their EVE signatures). Aside from the obvious benefit of tracking fugitives with ERI imaging technology (such as the VERITAS Resonance Imager), this phenomena will also produce mild ARad flux, affecting the immediate area in minor or moderate ways (such as the prickling of the skin, increased distress in wildlife, changing of air currents, etc.).

Engagement

Standard weaponry is variable in effectiveness against Type Yellows, depending on the form one is currently in. The presence of thick hide, unusual body composition, deadly and the potential rapidity of changes will make a fight long and hard. Since attacking the body is not reliable, the first option should always be to attack the opponent's mind. Tranquilizers are preferred, as they will bring down a subject without much trouble. Psychotropic drugs will impair the ability to react coherently to attacks but will cause irrational behavior, making apprehending the subject difficult. These, alongside rapid action and surprise, can be vital to bringing down a Type Yellow without an aforementioned fight. However, if a subject

is capable of manipulating individual organs and bodily functions/ systems, the overclocking of the circulatory and urinary systems may reduce the risk of drug-based assault.

Trickery and confusion can be useful as well; tricking a subject into a smaller or weaker form has been shown to be extremely effective. The change to the former is particularly useful, as such beings are, with the trade-off that they are harder to find and engage if let out of captivity.

If the previous options are not possible and head on assault is the only thing left available, keep in mind the goal of physical attack should never be to kill outright but to wear away with the opponent's stamina and will. This way, they will not be able to offer much resistance during the actual liquidation or apprehension. Wounds inflicted may change along with the subject, becoming the equivalent size for the new form, and potentially be more devastating. In some cases though, the changing between a small form and a large one may reduce the size of inflicted wounds. However, foreign objects will not; bullets and other objects lodged in the flesh will cut or irritate the tissue during transformation. Therefore, using weapons that will inflict wounds that contain such objects, such as shrapnel grenades and caltrops), is preferable. The use of anticoagulants is also suggested, but not necessary.

Confinement and Liquidation

Captives' bindings are suggested to be made so that they will quickly constrict as well as being resistant to force, to prevent escape via rapid expansion or further shrinking. Captives should also be sedated, or otherwise, rendered unconscious. A secondary container should be used as a backup, in the case that the first bonds are broken.

Liquidation should be no hard task, as most Type Yellows have no specific ways of preventing death. Neurotoxins are preferred, but disabling the spinal cord or other methods of disabling the nervous system are also recommended. Execution by firearms is possible, but not recommended, due to secondary mission concerns. If violent

action is necessary, standard "Hard Kill" precautions are to be implemented.

Transcript of a lecture given by Professor : Conclusion, Q and A

"And we're back for the last session of this seminar. We're almost done. I just have a few more things to say, and then we'll be able to break for the night.

"I do want to address one thing that I was asked over dinner… namely, now that Unified Thaumatology exists, can it be considered a grand unifying theory for the paranormal?

"We would like that to be the case… but sadly, the answer is 'No.' Unified Thaumatology does provide a strong basis for the study of magic: we believe that it may also have implications into other fields. But there are places dealing with the paranormal where the theory starts to break down.

"Two very large examples are Type Green Reality Benders and Type Black or Ex Machina Divinities. Remember what I said before, that every thaumatological working has a source and causes a backlash. Type Greens violate both of those rules: they are able to alter reality without a Source, and their alterations do not cause backlash. There are a lot of theories as to why this may be: one theory is that the backlash is shunted into a parallel reality… perhaps as a paranormal phenomenon for them to deal with? Another theory is that the backlash is absorbed into the Type Green's own consciousness. Perhaps that explains why so many go insane. Unfortunately, we don't have the answer to that. It's one field that the Institute is devoting many resources to study. Progress is, by necessity slow, as is any study revolving around Type Greens. It's hard to collect useful data when that data could be manipulated by your test subject.

"Type Blacks and Ex Machinas… they're even stranger. Their effects are similar to thaumatology and reality bending, but they don't seem to obey any of the thaumatological laws we've

encountered. There are no bursts of Aspect Radiation caused by their abilities. They can't even be detected through Aetheric Resonance Imaging. In fact, the code word designation for a demi-divinity, 'Type Black,' comes because many of them simply don't have aetheric auras… sorry, EVE patterns… at all. We have no idea what these things are… except that they are very powerful, and in many cases, hostile to humanity.

"Then there are the many threats you might face that have nothing to do with Aspect Radiation. Anomalies in space-time. Cryptids. Mad cyborgs. Telepaths. The truth is, the more we learn, the more we realize that the world is a stranger and more terrifying place than we did before we began our study. For each answer we find, two more questions are raised.

"But that's the nature of scientific inquiry, after all.

"If there is a point to this seminar, however, I hope it is this: that you came away from here with a basic understanding of what thaumatology is and what it is that thaumaturges do. Part of the fear and power of magic was that it was so mysterious. By peeling away some of that mystery, it is our goal to arm you with the strongest weapon you will need if you ever come up against a thaumatological threat: the knowledge that you, as a non-thaumaturge, are not helpless. A student of mine once gave me a novel with a line I enjoyed greatly: 'No matter how subtle the wizard, a knife in the back can seriously cramp their style.'

"I will now be taking questions."

Can Sharp and Flat can be tied to sex with protection, or in vitro fertilization?

Well, yes. But in practice, the procreative act is most effective when done for the purposes of procreation between two persons. I suppose if I had to list them on a sliding scale, it would probably be in-vitro, masturbation, nonprocreative sex, procreative sex, with childbirth somewhere near the top as well. Then again, there are also acts of sex that tend strongly towards Flat. I won't go into details here. I'm sure you can think of them.

Why use blood? Couldn't you just get some jugs of milk at a supermarket if you need EVE?

You could, but the longer that a bodily fluid is separate from the body, the less effective it becomes. Same with dead bodies… at some point, a dead body or jug of milk ceases to be a living thing and just becomes… a thing. Although I suppose that breast milk for lactating persons could work in a pinch… blood is simply more universal. And there's a bit more dignity in cutting your thumb with a secespita than in the alternatives.

Have there been any attempts to utilize type greens in the same way that type blues are employed? Or has it always been recognized as too dangerous to consider?

I cannot speak for the Coalition on that, but yes, there have been attempts to utilize Type Greens. They have invariably failed, due to the tendency of Type Greens towards megalomania, and the difficulty in taking them down if they break control.. Although rumor has it that there have been one or two successful cases. The two most common suspects are D.C. al Fine and the Cornwall Hero.

Is the Coalition squeamish about using anomalous means to combat parathreats?

That depends on your definition of anomalous. The official position of the Global Occult Coalition is that Type Blue thaumatology falls under the realm of "tangential technology," not anomalous parathreat. Those of us employed by the Coaltion have sworn the same oaths as the rest of you. We are still human. We still want to protect humanity. And we do so with all the talents at our disposal.

The eventual goal of thaumatological research, after all, is to incorporate magic theory into our modern understanding of physics. Once that is done, won't the concept of "magic" have been finally destroyed?

There are ways to eliminate parathreats aside from a bullet.

If the Coalition had to look at itself as a parathreat,

what threat level would it be at? What would it take for it to grow a threat level?

If the member organizations of the Coalition were to turn against the best interests of humanity, it would result in an immediate failure of all missions, probably requiring a Pizzicato Level Response. The Coalition exists, however, to prevent such events from occuring.

It is, however, interesting to contemplate what might happen to the Coalition if its major rivals were eliminated or incorporated into its ranks. Absolute Power corrupts absolutely, after all.

Perhaps it is best that no one organization controls all the power in the paranormal world.

Where is the point at which thaumatology becomes inefficient and impractical when compared with technology, even 0+ technology? I mean… I'm thinking about the previous example involving a bus ride and/or a massive orgy, it is clearly impractical. Does magic require more effort than what it's worth for important material changes?

In many cases, yes. For instance, it's easier to build a rifle using a factory than a working. It's also much more useful to take a cab downtown than it is to apport there.

Where thaumaturgy excels is when you need to do the impossible. For instance: you need to get a Strike Team from Michigan to Siberia… in one hour. Thaumaturgy. You need to get into a person's files and erase their identity? Thaumaturgy.

Speaking of which, that does remind me of a case where thaumaturgy proved to be 100% more effective than anything that normal technology could do: I oversaw an identity reassignment to a young trans woman joining the Coalition. I don't care how good of a surgeon you are, you'll never perform a sex reassignment good enough to result in a fertile adult human female.

Is information gathering easier and cleaner than reality bending? I heard of a Type Blue agent using a

subject's hair to determine their relative position within an unmapped forest area. Can that have a backlash, or does it have less negative consequences?

In many ways, every thaumatological spell is a form of scrying: remember that it all comes down to the observer effect, and how hard you observe. Locating individuals is a common spell, and in most cases, the backlash is easily manageable through shunts and sinks. It's a fairly low-Intensity application, for one: remember that backlash occurs proportionate to the original spell. If the original spell only used a small amount of energy, the backlash is usually negligible.

That is, of course, assuming that we're doing looking cross-or upstream… sorry. Into the present or past. Downstream scrying… that is to say, predicting the future… is much harder, like riding a mountain bike uphill as opposed to laterally or downhill. In fact, the most effective downstream scrying working to date is the Silicon Nornir… and they require two entire supercomputers calculating and scrying upon the present and past in order to drive a third cluster performing the future sight.

Sorry, Sir, I just wanted to thank you for a wonderful presentation and ask you… is there any chance whatsoever that religious groups built around certain miracles or portents are actually the inheritors of Type Green or Type Blue founders? Do we have evidence on the matter?

Yes, there is a chance. Yes, we do have evidence. No, I'm not going to tell you who.

I'm not sure I got that right a couple of hours back, sorry. Is a Type Red able to bend reality in any way?

That depends on the type of Red we're talking about. Many of them simply have accelerated healing systems. Many others, however, especially Expanding Regenerators, are the result of out of control thaumaturgical powers. Remember that Type Red is an indication of effect, not source.

For how long can Aspect Radiation related to a Blue event remain in the environment?

Proportionate to the intensity, pitch, hue, and weave. In general, these three factors tend to increase Aspect Radiation duration: greater intensity, lower hue (that is, tending more towards Ruby then Ebony), and tighter weave. Pitch tends to degrade, over time, towards the center: it will usually swing back and forth for a bit, before slowly settling down, rather like a pendulum.

Of the three, however, weave is the single most important aspect to determining ARAD longevity. There is a reason why the tightest level of Weave is called "Locked."

If one part affects the whole, couldn't you use any object to change the nature of the entire universe?

Yes. But it's a matter of inertia. Namely, that the universe shows a resistance to change. And the more you try to change, the more energy it requires, and the more difficult it becomes. For instance, it could be possible to change the gravitational constant of the universe using a grain of sand. We would need to devour the entire energy output of around one hundred thousand galaxies the size of the Milky Way to do so.

What's the difference between a Type Black and a type Ex Machina?

A Type Black is a human being that exhibits the characteristics of a Type Ex Machina. Ex Machinas tend to operate at a much higher level than Type Blacks. But functionally, in thaumatological terms, they're pretty much identical.

Are there any types of thaumaturgical resources other than vital energy?

There are, but EVE is the most efficient energy source we've found so far. And in many cases, what we thought were alternative energy sources to EVE turns out to be EVE in a different form… Ley Lines, for instance, were once thought to be an alternative energy conduit to EVE, before we came to realize that it was EVE pitched and hued

in a combination we'd never seen before.

The current cutting edge in EVE research is consolidating Elan Vital theory with the Grand Unified Theory. Exciting stuff.

> **Has anyone ever tried to use thaumaturgy to deal with global issues like war and hunger? And if so, how come they never worked?**

They did. We called it the Cornwall Incident: a Type Black, in alliance with a large coven of Type Blue allies, attempted a massive magical working to end human pain and conflict. The end result threatened the end of the human spirit.

You see, war and hunger all derive from dissatisfaction with your current status quo. When you are completely satisfied with your status quo, you have no motivation or desire to do… anything. Getting rid of war and hunger and pain required getting rid of jealousy… getting rid of identity. And there were some who felt that sacrifice worth it.

If it weren't for the heroic actions of a few Global Occult Coalition, humanity as we know it would cease to exist. We still strive to end war and hunger… it is the goal of the United Nations, after all, to promote Peace on Earth. But we have to do it the long hard way. The short path is paved with good intentions.

> **Whenever I imagine magic, I think of old guys in robes, holding staves and wands and stuff like that. Did you guys ever use any of that stuff?**

I've got my ceremonial robes, hat, and staff in my office. Interesting fact: the wizard's stave originates not only from the very practical walking stick, but also from the staff used to mark time in ancient shamanic rituals. Early thaumaturges also found them useful for inscribing circles: much easier to draw from a standing position than having to drop down to your knees. The idea of the magic wand, I think, probably originates from the practice of using live cuttings from trees in ceremonial practices.

We use them about as often as modern scholars wear cap and

gown, or use quill pens and inkwells. Some older institutes and GOC member organizations still require them: same with grimoires. On the other hand, I can get a much more precise pattern using lasers and mirrors, or even a high resolution LCD screen. The modern thaumatologist generally has less to do with old guys in robes carrying staves, and more to do with younger people in jeans, carrying laptop computers.

Of course, some claim that the ceremony and emotional state that comes from wearing a fancy robe and hat and carrying a staff can help the thaumaturge perform their working. If it works for you, more power to you. Me personally, I think that robes are way too breezy and staffs are a pain in the ass to carry around.

What is the process for becoming a Type Blue?

If you figure it out, publish your results. There's a ten million dollar prize on the line for the first person who figures out how that works.

Because really… no one knows. We just don't know why it is that some people gain the ability to manipulate magic and others don't. It seems to be linked to genetics in some cases. In other cases, it seems to be linked to intelligence, or close proximity to magical effects. But then there are 'wildcat' mages that appear out of nowhere, defying all perceived factors.

The best analogy I've seen is cancer. There are a lot of risk factors involved in whether you will get cancer: age, genetics, environment, exposure to carcinogens, and so on and so forth… but whether or not you're actually going to get cancer is mostly a matter of luck.

"I guess that's everything then. I've got one more thing to say, then you're all dismissed.

"The consumption of alcohol is a pretty-much universal means of establishing brotherhood and friendship. You see examples all the way from Christ's Last Supper, to the cult of Dionysus, to frat and stag nights all around the world. I personally am a fan of sessions: similar to the Chinese *yum cha*, where the drinking and eating is secondary to the fellowship and conversation around the table.

"What I'm trying to say is: the seminar may be over, but there's no reason why the conversation has to end. Feel free to meet me at the enlisted club, and I'll buy the first round of drinks."

Transcript of a lecture given by Professor on Applied Thaumatology.

"Good evening. Please have a seat. You will find wine, water, bread, and salt at the back of the room, if you require refreshment. Also coffee and donuts and all the rest of that stuff. And go easy on the wine. I have rarely met a PHYSICS operative who could maintain decorum around free alcohol.

"While you get your refreshments and get seated, let me talk a little bit about rituals.

"Bread and salt is a traditional means of greeting distinguished guests in Eastern Europe. Unsurprising, after all: bread being considered the staff of life, salt being an expensive but necessary supplement in those days. It was traditional for the guest to tear a piece of bread off the loaf, dip it in the salt, and consume it. Does this ritual sound similar to anything else you may have encountered? Ah. I see that the Protestants in the room understand immediately. Yes, it is similar to the communion method known as intinction, where the bread is taken from a loaf, dipped in a common chalice, and the elements taken together. I see that some of the Catholics in the room are a bit confused. As are those of you who grew up in an environment where Holy Communion was taken in a different manner. In both cases, the ritual is a symbol not only of welcoming, but of fellowship. It is for that reason that we consider it an act of fellowship to 'break bread' together. Why so many dates begin with or include a meal.

"Also, water. When Saladin captured the Crusader leaders at Hattin, there was a man among them named Reynald de Chatillon who he hated over all else. Chatillon, in Saladin's opinion, was a cruel and untrustworthy man who broke his vows and acted with great perfidy towards the faithful of Allah. When the nobles of the Crusaders were brought to his tent, Saladin provided water for the Crusader King: Guy de Lusignan. The King, of course, passed the water to his

friend, Reynald de Chatillon… at which point, Saladin pointed out, very curtly, that it was Guy who had given water to his hated enemy without his permission. Providing water to guests in such an arid region was considered a promise that no harm would come to them. Saladin, intending to kill Reynald, was very intent that his actions not be seen as breaking a sacred vow.

"Nowadays, we provide donuts and coffee as a courtesy to guests who may miss their breakfasts by coming to these seminars, and as a means of making sure that you do not need to leave to eat or drink, should you require refreshment. But it is not difficult to see a common line between this seemingly mundane courtesy and the sacred rituals of our past. All of which is a long and convoluted way for me to say, as all of you get to your seats: welcome.

"Allow me to introduce myself. My name is . You may call me Professor. I am a Professor Emeritus at the Massachusetts campus of the International Center for the Study of Unified Thaumatology: ICSUT. My specialty is in Constructed Intelligence. The cat is my companion, Midnight. This lecture is intended to give you new PHYSICS operatives a working understanding of the basic principles behind Unified Thaumatology. Don't think that after this, that you can perform a working or summon an Outside Intelligence. But I hope that this short lecture will give you some understanding of what it is that we Type Blues do, and how we do it.

"We begin with first principles. Thaumatology is the study of magical principles as a practical science. In many ways, it is similar to Physics, except that it is born from very different principles. For instance, modern physics may be said to begin with the principles of Newton's three laws of motion. Thaumatology begins with a very different set of basic laws, called the Law of Contagion and the Law of Similarity. They may be summed up thusly: 'The part affects the whole,' and 'Like produces like.'

"You can already see where this runs into a problem. Physics already teaches us that these two principles are invalid: if I break a piece off of this loaf of bread and burn the piece, it doesn't cause the rest of the loaf to char. Neither does powdered rhinoceros horn cure male impotence, no matter how similar that appendage might look to

a male penis. Which leads us to the third basic principle of magic, originally stated as: 'Magic requires a talented practitioner.' Only certain types of people can perform magic. How and why was never established. And this was the state of practical thaumatology for hundreds of years… up until the early 20th century.

"You see, up until that point, thaumatology… or magic, as it was still known back then… was in a crisis. Advances in science and physics were beginning to crowd out the grey areas that they had relied on. Practitioners were beginning to lose effectiveness. Theories were brought up ranging from human expansion changing the flow of mana in the world, to the very progress of science changing reality into a more stable state. Practitioners even went so far as to deliberately isolate themselves from modern society in order to avoid having their minds contaminated by scientific discoveries… up until a man named Heisenberg proposed a stunning proposition in 1927.

"Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle states that when dealing with a particle, the more precisely its location in time is known, the less precisely its current location is known. It was not this theory itself that galvanized the thaumatological world, but its correlating principle: observation changes the world. That is when the third principle of magic was revised from 'Magic requires a talented practitioner,' to 'Observation changes Reality.' Or, more simply put… certain minds can change the way the world works.

"Incidentally, it is now believed that Type Green reality benders may be persons with unusual talents in this area, hence the alternate name 'Outside Observer' proposed by some. There is, in fact, a movement to reclassify both Type Green reality benders and Type Blue thaumaturges within a single category. I don't know what we'll call it: Type Teal? Type Aqua? We shall see.

"As time went on, and new theories about quantum mechanics arose, the magical community came to realize that their world had more grey areas than they had anticipated. Nearly overnight, the magician changed from the reclusive hermit hiding from the world, into the young scientist, eagerly exploring it. Even the name of the field changed from the staid and superstitious 'magic' to the much more scientific 'thaumatology.'

"… then the Seventh Occult War broke out… and we faced the consequences of this new science, just as the world faced the sobering consequences of the nuclear age, leading to the formation of the Global Occult Coalition. But that is a lecture for a different time.

"So. What can an old wizard like me tell you about thaumatology?

"First of all… remember those three basic principles: Like Produces Like. The Part Affects the Whole. Observation Changes Reality. It is that third principle that is the main focus of modern thaumatology: the isolation of the EVE quantum, the fundamental unit of living energy, has taught us **how** observation changes reality. It is the guiding principle behind the COLLICULUS imaging system. And it has led to new technologies that would have been unimaginable just one hundred years prior.

"For instance: all of you have had a colloidal silver pattern tattooed somewhere discreet on your body. This is a vital defense against thaumatological attack: All of us shed bits of ourselves wherever we go, ranging from skin cells to hair cells. Were you not protected, a single hair from your body could be used to do you great harm. The wards break the quantum linkages between your living body and the unliving parts that it sheds, helping to protect you from your enemies with voodoo dolls. On the other hand, we can use those same principles to our advantage: getting a hair or DNA sample from a target could allow a GOC thaumatologist to track the person where our technological means cannot. Something to consider prioritizing when you're in the field.

"Let's go to something a bit more spectacular. This is an Apportation circle. It's basically one big magical quantum teleporter: it basically convinces every particle in your body that it should take the infintesimal chance that it's somewhere far away, rather than where it should be. It require incredible amounts of energy… and the process of forcing the universe to express such an improbable state causes many other improbable things to occur. We call it backlash, and it's the reason why we don't use Apportation as much as we could: every time we do, something weird happens, and we're generally in the business of stopping weird things from happening,

not causing them.

"Yes, hands down, I know this sounds like a bad Douglas Adams story. Did you know he was inspired by quantum physics? Food for thought.

"Here's one more practical application to consider. Say hi to Midnight. Midnight here is what we called a 'familiar,' now better known as a Construct Intelligence. Think of her as a piece of pure intelligence given feline form. Where did that intelligence come from? Ah. These are the questions, aren't they? The ones we're trying to answer.

"Because thaumatology is a new science. It's been studied for years, but as mythology and superstition. It's only in the past fifty years or so that a real study of it has been made. And we've got a lot of things left to learn.

"In any case, I hope that I've helped to break some of the misconceptions around thaumatology, and illustrated a few places in which laypersons like yourselves can utilize it for your benefit. I'll be taking questions now.

Thaumatology Seminar Series
« START | **Return to GOC Hub** | **Aspect Radiation »**

Transcript of a lecture given by Professor on Thaumatic Workings.

"I see that my little statement last time got everyone's attention. Let's get into it.

"Every thaumatic working, whether it's carried out using eye of newt or a desktop computer, has four components: the Source, the Shaper, the Target, and the Sink. You might think of them as the components of a firearm: the Source is the propellant that drives the entire process. The Shaper is the barrel and firing chamber that directs the force of the explosion. The Target is the bullet that is driven down the barrel, the effect you're trying to perform. And finally, the Sink consists of the recoil compensation mechanisms.

"There is, of course, a fifth component that isn't an actual part of the working: the Practitioner. That would be you, the finger that pulls the trigger.

"I see I'm starting to lose some of your attentions, so please direct your attention here.

"I knew that would get your attention.

"What you are looking at is not only an orgy, but the source of a thaumatic worki— yes, she does have impressive breasts, and—"

<pause>

"Do I have your attention again? Thank you.

"As I was saying, what you are looking at is the source of a thaumaturgical working. Remember what I said before about Pitch of aspect radiation: Sharp is creative, while Flat is destructive. And there are few acts more creative than the act of reproduction… or more destructive than the act of murder.

"… I'll give you another moment.

"All right, let's continue.

"The examples I've just shown you are extreme, but they are also clear examples of two different very extreme kinds of thaumaturgical Sources. In each case, the practitioner was attempting to "pitch" their energy source hard towards Sharp or Flat. What kind of working do you think they were trying to perform?

"… actually, no. In both cases, the practitioner was attempting to perform the same working: namely, the creation of a Constructed Intelligence… or the summoning of a demon, as was said in the older days. In both cases, the end purpose of the ritual pitched strongly towards Sharp, or creation. The difference came in just how patient the practitioner was in setting up their Source.

"Remember what I said about Backlash? When a working is performed, the excess energy bounces off the fabric of reality and rebounds… at an opposite Pitch and Hue. Hue is generally easy for the practitioner to shape right out of the source… what is harder to shape is Pitch. The latter working began with a Source that was Pitched strongly Flat: destructive. The energy was then channeled into a simple working at a low Hue: the circle of light that you see appearing around the practitioner's feet. The remaining energy Backlashed at an opposite Pitch: Strongly Sharp and opposite Hue: High Ebony, heavily creative and heavily blatant. The energy was then recaptured and worked into the final spell. Thaumatologists call this a Speckmann Rebound.

"Allow me to show you an example from an actual PHYSICS Division operation. A Strike Team, equipped with Current Gen technology is raiding the home of a rogue thaumaturge. Teams Alpha through Delta provide perimeter security, while Echo Team acts as the assault element. Echo Team's point man enters the working area and discovers the following scene: Two persons engaged in sexual intercourse, one of them the Type Blue. Across the room from them, a Class 9 ectomorphic entity is taking shape. Meanwhile, the walls are starting to light on fire. You are Echo Team's point man. What do you do?

"Terminate the Type Blue? That is one option… but the working is already in progress. There is a lot of free Aspect Radiation being generated. If you terminate the controlling agent… well, unless you're a Type Blue yourself, you're going to end up on the wrong side of a high amount of wild EVE. Not a good place to be.

"Terminate the ectomorph? I did mention it was a Class 9, wasn't it? And the team had Gen +0 Technology? Not a winning proposition there.

"What the Echo Team agent did instead was terminate the Type Blue's sexual partner. The agent recognized that the working's Source was the same Pitch as the Target… namely, both Sharp, or creative. He then shifted the energy of the Source powerfully towards Flat… towards destruction. The end result disrupted the still-forming ectomorph and caused the working to fail. It also had the side effect of creating a mist that quenched the flames caused by the backlash. On the other hand, it resulted in most of the team having to be treated for steam burns.

"Yes, sir, you had a question?

<pause. audience laughs.>

"… I actually don't find that question particularly funny. Actually, the gentleman had a good point. If the source had been a human sacrifice instead, one method to disrupt the working could have been to introduce a strongly Sharp pitched energy into the working: and yes, I suppose that making love inside the Source area would have worked. On the other hand, I doubt that any man… or woman, for that matter… could be heroic enough to maintain arousal in the presence of a rapidly forming hostile Class 9 ectomorph… or skilled enough to complete in time to disrupt the working. In that case, a better response would be to disrupt the initial working that is being used to shift the Pitch of the spell: the Speckmann's Rebound. Destroy the heat sinks or light sources that are being energized to create the backlash.

"Alternatively, you could push the original practitioner into the target area and terminate him there, introducing a surge of Flat Aspect Radiation into the circuit after the Rebound. I know at least one team

that dealt with a nasty working in that manner. It has the disadvantage of leaving no one to question afterwards.

"In practice, of course, most modern thaumaturges prefer to use less dramatic Sources for their workings, mostly because the majority of the workings we perform don't require that dramatic of a Pitch, but also because we've learned techniques to alter the pitch of a working more precisely: they're less efficient than Speckmann's Rebound, but far more controllable. The most common Source thaumaturges use these days, in fact, is a simple drop of blood: blood is fairly neutrally pitched, and can actually provide quite a bit of EVE if properly Sourced. At higher energy levels, there is the Everhart Resonator. The conversion rate from electricity to Aspect Radiation is inefficient, and still requires a thaumaturge as catalyst, but it's still the most convenient way to generate high levels of EVE.

"As an example: a simple apportation working, like the one that transported your squad here, would require thirty human sacrifices… or an hour-long orgy with over one hundred participants. I suppose that would be more entertaining to watch than an Everhart Resonator slowly spinning up for a few minutes… but not exactly the thing one can order up at a moment's notice.

"We will take one final break for dinner, and when we return, I'll wrap up my lecture, and answer any remaining questions you may have."

Thaumatology Seminar Series
« **Aspect Radiation** | **Return to GOC Hub** | **Questions and Answers** »

Excerpts from PHYSICS Division Threat Entity Database

Introduction

The Global Occult Coalition classifies paranormal Threat Entities into five broad categories, based on the general knowledge available regarding said entity. Threat Entities are named using the following format:

- A three-letter code indicating threat category.
- A unique casefile number.
- One or more codeword descriptors.
- An informal description of the threat entity.

EXAMPLE: **KTE-7912-Spiral Blackchild:** "Alternate Dimension Portal, Cornwall."
The nomenclature indicates that this is a Known Threat Entity (**KTE**), casefile number 7912, that it is both a localized space-time rupture (codeword **Spiral**), and that it was created by a demi-deity (codeword **Black** [demi-deity], modifier **-child** [paranormal artifact created by]).

This list represents only a sampling of the several hundred codewords used for Threat Classification. For a complete list of codewords and their definitions, please consult your PHYSICS Division handbook.

Humanoid

Humanoid Threat Entities are broadly classified using a color-based classification system. Examples include:

- **Type Black:** Demi-Deity.

- **Type Blue:** Thaumatologist.
- **Type Green:** Reality Bender.
- **Type Grey:** Reanimated Post-Mortem.
- **Type Red:** Regenerator.
- **Type Silver:** Infectious Hazard.
- **Type White:** Atypical Angel.
- **Type Yellow:** Shapeshifter, Psychic, or other anomalously enhanced humanoid

Non-Humanoid

The following are common codewords used for Non-Humanoid living beings.

- **Blackwood:** Former human.
- **Corona**: Lifeform of extraterrestrial origin.
- **Cetus:** Massive aquatic lifeform.
- **Denver:** Temporally-shifted lifeform.
- **Fiji:** Cryptid (An autochthonic lifeform whose existence has been suppressed due to Second Mission Concerns).
- **Goodrick:** Thaumatological lifeform.
- **Hogweed:** Botanical in nature.
- **Moro:** Human-created lifeform.
- **NACL:** Non-Autochthonic Lifeform. This codeword is only used when a lifeform is determined to be non-native to the current spacetime, but its origin has not yet been determined.
- **Plague:** Infectious microorganisms.
- **Ragweed**: Lifeform originating from an alternate universe.
- **Schopenhauer:** Genius Loci. Codeword refers to a lifeform embodying or animating geographical features.

Artifacts

Pertaining to Threat Entities that are human-made objects.

- **Alexandria:** Bibliographical in nature.
- **Blaecca:** Computing machine.
- **Caliburn:** Object designed for use as a weapon.

- **Flint:** Monetary object.
- **Kapala:** Ritual or religious object.
- **Knickknack:** Wearable object.
- **Velveteen:** Animate object.

Extranormal

Pertaining to fundamental universal constants.

- **Clockwork:** Temporal alteration.
- **Ex Machina:** Deity.
- **L'Engle:** Higher Dimensional anomaly.
- **Parallax**: Spatial alteration.
- **Spiral:** Space-time rupture.

Organizational

- **Argead:** Relating to the paranormal organization **`"Alexylva University."`**
- **Burnout:** Relating to the liquidated terrorist organization **`"Prometheus Labs."`**
- **Carcinoma:** Referring to the terrorist organization **`"The Chaos Insurgency."`**
- **Copernicus:** Relating to the paranormal religion **`"The Fifth Church."`**
- **Disco:** Relating to the criminal syndicate **`"The Chicago Spectre."`**
- **Einherjar:** Relating to remnants of the Ahnenerbe and Thule Society, particularly the legacy organization "OBSKURA."
- **Ford:** Relating to the denominations of the paranormal religion **`"Church of the Broken God."`**
- **Heru**: Relating to the paratech manufacturer **`"Anderson Robotics."`**
- **Kewpie:** Relating to the paranormal organization **`"The Foundation."`**
- **Kringle:** Relating to the paranormal organization **`"Doctor Wondertainment."`**
- **Lerna:** Relating to the terrorist organization **`"Serpent's`**

Hand."

- **McConnell:** Relating to the criminal organization **"Marshall, Carter, and Dark Ltd."**
- **McGinnis:** Relating to the paranormal organization **"Herman Fuller's Circus of the Disquieting."**
- **Mendes:** Relating to the paranormal religion **"The Children of the Scarlet King."**
- **Moreau:** Relating to sects of the paranormal religion of "**"Sarkicism."**
- **Reefer:** Relating to the loosely associated paranormal network **"Gamers Against Weed."**
- **Retcon:** Relating to the retroactively active ancient **Daevite civilization**.
- **Teresa:** Relating to the interfaith NGO **"Manna Charitable Foundation."**
- **Trinity:** Relating to the faith-based NGO **"The Horizon Initiative."**
- **Venice:** Relating to the paranormal organization **"The Factory."**
- **Warhol:** Relating to the terrorist organization **"Are We Cool Yet?"**

Political

These code phrases are only used if the parathreat was created or is being fielded by the government organization in question.

- **Andromeda:** Islamic Republic of Iran.
    - *Andromeda Sesame:* **Office For The Reclamation of Islamic Artifacts**.
- **Aurora:** Former Empire of Japan.
    - *Aurora Glory:* **Imperial Japanese Anomalous Matters Examination Agency** (defunct).
- **Flanders:** Relating to the dreamscape constructs of **the Oneiroi**.

    - *Flanders Fever:* Oneiroi Collective.
    - *Flanders Lucid:* Oneiroi West.
    - *Flanders Rapture:* **`Xiupania`**.

- **Renegade:** United States of America

    - *Renegade Latrans:* **`Unusual Incidents Unit`**, Federal Bureau of Investigation.
    - *Renegade Lupus:* Bowe Commission.

- **Scarlet:** Former Soviet Union.

    - *Scarlet Dagger:* GRU Division "P"
    - *Scarlet Hammer:* "Viktor" branch of Russian Mafia.

Threat Warnings

- **Blit:** Cognition hazard.
- **Bosch:** Eschatological threat.
- **Burrhus:** Compels action (conscious).
- **Ebbinghaus:** Memory-affecting.
- **Faraday:** Electromagnetic Hazard
- **Freud:** Compels action (subconscious).
- **Lovelock:** Ecological threat.
- **Mendel:** Genetic alteration.
- **Pygmalion:** Parathreat creation.
- **Smitty:** Teratogenic.
- **Typhon:** Kinetic danger.
- **Van Allen:** Ionizing radiation hazard.

Modifiers

- **-buster:** Threat entity whose purpose is to destroy another Threat Entity or Entities.
- **-child:** Created by another Threat Entity with a particular codephrase.
- **-morph:** Threat entity created during liquidation procedures for another Threat Entity.

Known Threat Entities are those paranormal entities which have been clearly identified as Threats and slated for response.

Access KTE-0706-Black

Threat ID: KTE-0706-Black "Subject Able"

Authorized Response Level: 4 (Severe Threat)

Description: Component Able is a humanoid threat entity, apparently in its late twenties, approximately 2m tall, weighing approximately 80kg. Subject normally dresses in a manner adorned with demonic imagery, and prefers black leather clothing. In addition to the standard full suite of superhuman abilities (Strength, Speed, and Regeneration, all at Class 1 or higher) Subject possesses the ability to manifest bladed weapons from an unknown source. Subject is highly skilled in close combat, and appears to use an unknown martial combat style that is not currently on record.

Psychological profile indicates that Subject is primarily motivated by ennui: Subject appears to derive satisfaction only from the act of killing, especially if said acts are carried out against a "worthy foe." Subject always appears to engage the most dangerous perceived threat first, and will bypass lesser threats to do so: Operatives should take this into consideration when preparing a plan of action.

Component Baker is an engraved stone cube 3.66m (12ft) on a side, sealed with 21 locks (one large lock surrounded by twenty smaller locks in a circle). Component Baker-Two is contained within, and comprises a 2.13m (7ft) tall stone coffin, secured with chains of unknown composition. Component Baker-Two is capable of regenerating Component Able from any remains, and of reforming it should all remains be destroyed. As stated above, Component Baker is to be considered the primary threat and should be secured as

soon as possible.

Rules of Engagement: KTE-0706 Black (hereafter referred to as Subject) comprises two components. Component Able is to be engaged with extreme caution: entity is a highly lethal combatant and has caused the deaths of over one hundred operatives to date. Component Able is never to be engaged at close range, but from as great a distance as possible. Headshot by sniper is the preferred method of termination.

Upon termination, Component Able will begin to reform inside Component Baker, returning to full threat efficacy within several weeks. For this reason, locating and destroying Component Baker is necessary for complete liquidation of the Subject. Operatives who have information leading to the discovery of the location of Component Baker are to immediately report said information to GOC High Command.

History: <CLASSIFIED LEVEL Q BY ORDER OF GOC HIGH COMMAND>

Appendix 001: Field Operatives indicate that KTE-0706-Black is currently in the hands of the Foundation. Operatives are hereby ordered to focus all efforts upon that Organization to locate and recover Component Baker.

Appendix 002: Per Field Report from Operative Crane, Coalition Operatives are hereby advised that the Foundation has begun fielding Component Able in combat situations, supported by a six to twelve-man support squad.

Appendix 003: Due to unacceptable casualties in the last three engagements with Threat Force Able, all Field Operatives are to cease and desist engaging Component Able under any circumstances save self-defense. Operatives are to refocus efforts upon locating and

destroying Component Baker.

Access KTE-0937-Velveteen

Threat ID: KTE-0937-Velveteen "Sixth Chair."

Authorized Response Level: 3 (Moderate Threat)

Description: Several kg of material comprising primarily of oak splinters and upholstery. Previously a chair made of oak and leather in the shape of a reclining female. Type III spatial transit entity.

Rules of Engagement: To be engaged only by deep cover operatives. Object is extremely hostile to the Coalition and its agents. Object is to be destroyed by incineration if the chance arises.

History: Initially one of a set of six matching objects originally constructed by KTE-7201-Pygmalion ("The Carpenter") as a gift to [IDENTITY REDACTED]. Classified a Second Mission threat in . Creator, customer, and artifacts were all liquidated by a GOC Field Operator cell. All other objects were successfully incinerated: KTE-0937-Velveteen was disposed of by maceration after a mechanical failure in the incinerator device. Artifact proceeded to escape through teleportation, and has since been responsible for the deaths of several agents. Believed to currently be in the possession of The Foundation.

Addendum:

> KTE-0937-Velveteen is an object lesson in the importance of following proper operating procedure. Due to the lack of vigilance by the agent on the scene, the object's threat level was escalated, the object itself was not successfully disposed of, and it has since fallen into the hands of a hostile agency. A single failure by a single operative resulted in

the deaths of six. Remember this the next time you think about cutting corners.

— Assistant Director "Kipling"

Access KTE-1181-Plague Grey

Threat ID: KTE-1181-Plague-Grey "Infectious Slime Mould"

Authorized Response Level: 3 (Moderate Threat)

Description: A yellow-green myocetezoan protist. Life cycle begins as a single-cell ameboid which normally feeds upon bacteria and other protists. Upon encountering another member of the same species, the organisms will mate and then form a plasmodia that will then expand, consuming all food matter it encounters. When all available food matter has been consumed, organism will solidify, form sporangia (fruiting bodies), and release spores, which hatch into single-cell ameboids, resuming the life cycle.

Organism's designation as a parathreat is due to its behavior upon encountering human brain tissue. Should the ameboid cross the brain-blood barrier and enter the brain, it will begin feeding upon human glial cells and replace human brain tissue with the plasmodia substrate. Secondary plasmodia will migrate through the blood stream to the skin pores, at which point the organism will form structures similar to sporangia which will begin producing a pheremone-like substance.

The host body will then be compelled to travel to a public space, whereupon the pheremones will attract other humans to its current location. Upon detecting a sufficient number of human hosts within a particular distance, organism will then begin to reproduce at an exponential rate, building up pressure within the skull until the host body's cranium bursts, spreading spores and plasmodia and infecting all nearby human hosts,

resuming the life cycle.

Rules of Engagement: Infected hosts are to be terminated by gunfire and the host bodies disposed of by incineration. Avoid head-shots, as this may result in premature detonation of the subject's cranium and cause the infection to spread. The preferred method of termination is by a long-distance precision gunshot to the heart by a marksman: should close-quarters combat be required, all operatives are to be issued MOPP gear and placed in quarantine for a period of no less than 72 hours following the operation.

Should the infection escalate to the point where it threatens to spread from the quarantine zone, escalation to Response Level 4 is authorized. At this point, the entire quarantine zone should be sealed off and sanitized by incineration. Any persons attempting to leave the quarantine zone will be terminated by gunfire followed by santization by incineration.

Access KTE-2013-Kapala-Mendes
Access KTE-4503-Ragweed-Faraday

Access KTE-2683-Yellow-Lerna
Access KTE-1742-Fiji-Hogweedmorph
Access KTE-3317-Green-Sunset
Access KTE-1229-Flint

Unknown Threat Entities are those parathreats whose existence can be inferred, but whose identity has not been positively established.

Potential Threat Entities are paranormal entities who are not yet considered Threats, but have a high likelihood of becoming Threats.

Threat Entities that have been confirmed destroyed. Records maintained for archival purposes only.

Access LTE-0913-Ex-Machina

Threat ID: LTE-0913-Ex-Machina - "Semitic Solar Deity"

Authorized Response Level: 1 (Monitor for signs of re-emergence, do not Engage)

Description: LTE-0913-Ex-Machina (hereafter referred to as "Subject") was an energy entity revered as a god by several Semitic tribes during the fourth millenium BCE.

History: Subject was successfully captured and destroyed by a cabal of German Occultists circa 1882 CE. Destruction of Subject resulted in severe psychic backlash, leading to ennui and feelings of nihilism in several psi-sensitive subjects: one, in particular, wrote a text in 1883 mourning the death of said Subject:

> God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him. How shall we comfort ourselves, the murderers of all murderers? What was holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet owned has bled to death under our knives: who will wipe this blood off us? What water is there for us to clean ourselves? What festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we have to invent? Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us? Must we ourselves not become gods simply to appear worthy of it?

Appendix 001: Although this operation was carried out before the founding of the GOC, it was one of the pivotal events leading to the founding of this organization.

<CLASSIFIED LEVEL Q BY ORDER OF GOC HIGH COMMAND>

Subsequent events (The Seventh Occult War) devastated the paranatural world and came close to

causing an Eschatological Event Sequence. The Coalition was subsequently founded to act as a safeguard against further rogue operations, and as a means of replacing the lost protection afforded by <CLASSIFIED LEVEL Q BY ORDER OF GOC HIGH COMMAND>

Access LTE-2101-Freud Warhol

Threat ID: LTE-2101-Freud-Warhol - "Street Theater"

Authorized Response Level: N/A (Confirmed Destroyed, File Archived)

Description: LTE-2101-Freud-Warhol (hereafter referred to as "artifact") was a psychomechanical device concealed in New York's Central Park from an unknown date until / / , when it was recovered and destroyed by a Coalition recovery team. Artifact consisted of three components:

1. A power supply consisting of an array of four lead-acid automotive batteries and an induction charger drawing electricity from the city's power grid.

2. A control unit consisting of a CPU, solid-state hard drive, and timer.

3. A Type-2 psychic broadcast unit capable of 200 kilorhines of output.

Artifact was programmed to trigger once every ten to thirty days, upon detection of a minimum required number of persons within its broadcast range. Artifact would then assume direct psychic control of all individuals within broadcast range, designating certain individuals as "actors" and others as "audience." "Actors" would then proceed to perform one of the plays of William Shakespeare, chosen at random, for the edification of the "audience."

At the conclusion of the performance, Artifact would emit a high energy psychic burst that would erase the memories of the past performance from all subjects. Side effects include headache, disorientation, and nausea.

History: Existence of artifact was first discovered following reports of strange behavior among the homeless population of Central Park from residents of the surrounding area. Artifact was recovered, catalogued, and destroyed by a Coalition field team disguised as New York City Power Authority employees.

Appendix 1: The following fliers were discovered posted around Central Park 24 hours after destruction of LTE-2101-Warhol.

> TO THE SERVANTS OF THE MAN
>
> Three questions:
>
> When free speech is curtailed, what will there be left to say?
>
> If a tree falls in the forest and there's no one there to hear it, is it still art?
>
> Are we cool yet?

Access LTE-3410-Clockwork Green

Threat ID: LTE-3410-Clockwork Green "The Slow Kid"

Authorized Response Level: N/A (Confirmed Destroyed, File Archived)

Description: Subject was at time of liquidation a Caucasian male twenty-one (21) years of age and a Stage 4 Type Green (Subtype Clockwork) Known Threat Entity. Initial Identification was made by Observer [REDACTED] after being alerted by local law enforcement of a bank robbery involving an anomalous entity. Surveillance footage of the firefight recorded the

Subject utilizing its anomalous ability to affect incoming gunfire from armed police response units. Three (3) law enforcement officers were wounded during this incident.

Liquidation: Due to the high profile of the initial incident, expedited liquidation authorization at Response Level 2 was given by Assistant Director "Celesta" on / / to field units in the local area. Due to the ground-floor location within a populated area, the method of termination selected was a night-time raid utilizing suppressed small arms fire at close range.

Appendix 1: Encounter Report

> **Date:** / /
> **Subject:** KTE-3410-Clockwork-Green
>
> **After-Action Report Summary:** Upon breaching the building, Liquidation Team One was beset by a large number of pre-prepared booby traps set out by Subject. While none of these were immediately lethal, the distraction was sufficient to allow the Subject to escape the building while setting off an Improvised Explosive Device.
>
> At this time, we do not believe that the Subject was aware of our mission; the ambush was merely consistent with that of precautions undertaken by a paranoid schizophrenic with undue access to dangerous materials.
>
> One LT Operative KIA, two WIA. Team Leader has volunteered to head up follow-up investigation and re-acquire Subject.
>
> **Status:** Mission Failed, Subject at Large

Appendix 2: Liquidation Report

> **Date:** / /

Subject: KTE-3410-Clockwork-Green

3410 terminated by small arms fire at close range, body removed and incinerated as per standard procedures. Guess the fucker can't stop bullets fast enough if you're in his face, but I can't do anything about the bullet now.

- M.E.

Status: Mission Success, Subject Liquidated

Appendix 3: Oversight Annotation

Operative has been reprimanded for his unprofessional solo liquidation of KTE-3410-Clockwork-Green. While Subject was successfully liquidated, his acting alone while motivated by retribution as well as the resulting creation of a new Non-Threat Entity that is now under Foundation control are regarded as unacceptable risk under Second Mission concerns. Operative has been suspended for a period of no less than three (3) months pending review.

Appendix 4: Identity Redaction

In order to protect the identity of the agent involved in these incidents, agent's name has been removed from this version of the Threat Entity casefile.

- SN/ec, Records Department

Access LTE-4201-Velveteen

Threat ID: LTE-4201-Velveteen "Ghost Ships"

Authorized Response Level: N/A (Confirmed Destroyed, File Archived)

Description: Two fishing trawlers, each 39 meters in length, designated Component Alpha and Component Bravo. Component Alpha was distinguishable from

Component Bravo due to extensive hull damage caused by impact with iceberg. Entities were animate and apparently sapient and displayed companionate behavior towards one another.

Liquidation: Due to increasing Second Mission Concerns due to increasing reports of "Ghost Ships" by local sailors, LTE-4201 Velveteen was approved for liquidation by the Council of 108 on // . Strike Team "Ocean Thunder" was tasked to eliminate the target. Strike Team perished after successful liquidation of Component Alpha, when Component Bravo collided with their vessel at hypersonic velocities, resulting in the loss of all hands. Component Bravo subsequently self-terminated.

All members of Strike Team "Ocean Thunder" were subsequently awarded the Aegis of Humanity (post-mortem).

Appendix 1: Memorial Message, issued on // .

> FOR IMMEDIATE DISTRIBUTION TO ALL GLOBAL OCCULT COALITION MEMBER ORGANIZATIONS
>
> GOC High Command has just learned that Strike Team "Ocean Thunder," based out of Dutch Harbor, Alaska, was lost with no survivors this day, after an encounter with a dangerous Threat Entity. Strike Team "Ocean Thunder" was carrying out the liquidation of a major Second Mission Threat, and had destroyed one of the two Threat Entities, when the second collided with their vessel at high speed. Despite a heroic rescue attempt by Assessment Team "Spinnaker," all members of Strike Team "Ocean Thunder" had perished by the time they were plucked from the sea.
>
> Our hearts go out to the friends and families of

the dead. Their sacrifices will not be forgotten.

Signed,

Under-Secretary-General D. C. Al Fine
United Nations Global Occult Coalition

`Access LTE-2712-Bosch`
`Access LTE-0851-Cetus`

`Access LTE-5230-Fiji-Aurora-Glory`

Spurious Entries
Database entries that were later confirmed not to exist. Records maintained for archival purposes only.

Non-Threats
Paranormal entities that are not considered Threats. Records maintained for observation and liaison purposes.

Persons of Interest
Non-paranormal persons of interest to the GOC due to their involvement with parathreats.

"Come into my Parlor"

"… and I'll be seeing you all next week. Please read chapters three and four before you come back on Tuesday. Class is dismissed. Miss Fang, could I see you for a moment before you go?"

Ara Fang paused in the middle of picking up her books and looked up at the front of the classroom at her Professor. The tall, saturnine man was busying himself in packing up his books and materials, as the black cat that was constantly at his side watched bemusedly from the top of a nearby bookshelf. *What possible reason could the Professor have to want to see me?* she wondered, as she picked up her satchel and walked to the mahogany desk at the front of the classroom.

"Please walk with me," the Professor said. "I'd like to speak to you in the privacy of my office, if you don't mind."

"… all right," Ara said. She looked at the greying old man curiously. Alarm bells were ringing in her head: older gentleman wanting to see her alone? Away from others. She was getting that itching feeling on the back of her neck from this one.

The black cat leaped down from the bookshelf and walked daintily alongside the two of them as they emerged into the hallway, stepping aside to let the next class of students enter. She followed the older man up the flight of stairs, past the paintings of Crowley and Aristotle, and into an office that looked slightly larger on the inside than the outside. Then again, every room at ICSUT's Massachusetts campus looked like that.

The Professor's office was neatly organized: a far cry from the stereotypical clutter of the academic. The shelves were filled with books new and old, with titles ranging from "A Brief History of the Universe," to "The Golden Bough," to "The Annotated Translator's Al-Azif." There was a basket with a pillow in one corner, to which the cat retired, bathing her face with her paws, as the Professor

gestured Ara to a seat and closed the door behind him.

"I have a sensitive question to ask," he said, taking a seat in a chair across from her and leaning forward, resting his elbows on his knees. "Please feel free to leave at any time if I am making you feel uncomfortable, Miss Fang."

"… what is this about?" Ara asked.

"It's a delicate question, I will understand if you do not wish to answer. I was looking over your student records, and discovered that you are registered as male-to-female transsexual…"

… oh shit, Ara winced inwardly.

"… and was curious whether you are pre- or post-operative," the Professor continued.

Ara took a deep breath, trying to settle her pounding heart and unclench her tightened fists. "I think this is an intrusion of my privacy," she said, "And unless you can give me an answer right away as to why I should answer this question, I am going to be reporting you to Administration for harassment."

The professor inclined his head slowly and leaned back in his padded chair, raising his hands in supplication. "My apologies, Miss Fang," he said. "It was not my intention to make you feel uncomfortable. My interest is… mostly academic." He steepled his fingers in front of his face, pausing for a moment to marshal his words. "Allow me to take this from a different angle, Miss Fang. What do you know of my work?"

"You're the Institute's foremost researcher into Observatology," Ara said. "You've been doing research into the nature of consciousness and sapience. The soul, in other words."

"Correct," the Professor said, "but academia is my second profession. My other job is as a consultant for the Global Occult Coalition: specifically, their CAULATICA Division, maintaining the secrecy of the occult world from the mundane. Part of what I have been doing recently is refining their Identity Reassignment

technology. Field agents in PHYSICS Division often request to have their identities reassigned in order to protect friends and loved ones left behind. This is a complicated and difficult process intrinsically linked to the study of consciousness and sapience itself."

"What does this have to do with me being trans?" Ara wondered.

The Professor smiled. It was a friendly, fatherly smile, and his excitement was obvious. "How would you like to be my test subject into cross-gender Identity Reassignment?" he asked.

"The simplest Identity Reassignment algorithms are cosmetic surgery," the Professor explained, "but sometimes, things become more complicated. A person might be a public figure, or may have been involved in a memorable event. And because many of us operate in the realm of the paranormal, we run into issues of sympathy and contagion: it doesn't matter how much you change your appearance, a strand of hair picked up from before you were recruited still holds sympathy to you. DNA testing makes it even more difficult these days. So the current research is tending towards reality alteration: changing the very nature of the person down to the level of their genes and EVE signature.

"One way to do this would be to consult a reality alterer… but the Coalition is, understandably, reluctant to do so. I've been researching alternative methods using Tangential Technology for the past couple of decades. We have made some advances, but the procedure is… shall we say… rudimentary. We can change a person's face, hair color, sometimes build and height, but things like race and especially sex are far more difficult.

"I've been searching for a good test subject for the past few years," the Professor explained, "and I'd like to suggest you as a candidate. You would be compensated for your time and the risks involved, of course, and your identity will remain secret, unless you wish it to be publicized. The reason I wish to know whether you are pre- or post-operative is due to… complications… that may arise based on your current state of being."

"Complications?" Ara asked.

"Whether or not you feel you have completed your transition to the new gender," the Professor said. "The state of mind you are in when entering the procedure is influential. My research indicates that the best chance of success may occur with an individual who is pre-operative. The desire to change yourself may help the procedure to be carried out smoothly."

"Wait a minute," Ara said, raising her hand. Her head was spinning, her vision blurring… she wasn't sure whether she wanted to vomit or laugh. "… let me get this straight. You want to magically change me from… what I am now… into a woman?"

"Exactly," the Professor said.

"… and explain to me why I should choose to go your way? I've already assembled the funds to complete my transition. I was going to take some time off at the end of the semester to go under the knife. And you're asking me to give that all up and go for an untested magical procedure instead at the last moment?"

"Ah," the Professor said. "Let's talk about the surgical method. You would have your external genitalia removed, and an artificial vagina formed using the nerve endings and structure of your current male organs. And… depending on whether or not you are currently undergoing hormonal therapy…"

"I've been on an antiandrogen and estrogen/progesterone cocktail for the past three years," Ara said.

"… ah, good." The Professor nodded excitedly. "In any case, you may have begun growth of breast tissue and shutdown of testicular function. But there are things that these procedures cannot change. Your bone structure remains male. Your facial structure as well. Voice and facial hair… genetics. All of these things remain male. At the end of your procedures, you may become close enough to physically female to avoid a sense of gender dysphoria, but none of this can make you as female as one that was born into that gender. And it cannot give you the one trait that is uniquely female among humans: the ability to bear children."

"And you're saying?" Ara's voice cracked as she felt her world fall

away.

"I'm saying," the Professor said, "that if my theory is correct, the procedure I have developed works, you will become a flesh-and-blood woman, down to your very genes. Does that interest you?"

Ara Fang lay on her cot in her dorm room and stared up through the skylight at the night sky.

"There are risks," the professor had told her. *"Very great ones."*

"More so than possibly dying on an operating table?"

"Yes," the professor said, very frankly. *"Quite simply, from a safety consideration, the traditional route of lifelong hormone therapy and gender reassignment surgery would be preferable. For instance, the working required would have a high energy requirement. We would, after all, be performing a working heavily Hued towards Ebony, with an extremely Tight Weave, bordering on Locked. That amount of EVE, allowed to get loose, could be catastrophic. Not to mention that the backlash would be severe. And there is the possibility that the working would be incomplete. Your body could end up… severely altered."*

"How badly?"

"… extra arms. Double legs. Body parts in the wrong places. Partial sexual alteration in some body parts… others not so. Other, more severe teratogenic effects… many of them would be unsurvivable. In other cases, you may wish that you had not survived. And then there are the more esoteric risks. We are attempting to convince the universe that you are and always have been female. The universe may reject the paradox by ejecting you from its reality. Or, instead of turning you into a female, we may end up creating a new 'you' that was always female, and in so doing, destroy the person you are now. Quite frankly, my dear, considering what could happen if you undergo the working, the dangers of a slipped knife or a bad reaction under anesthesia are preferable."

"So greater risk equals greater reward?"

"That depends on how highly you value the 'reward,' as you so put it. Whether you feel it is worth the significantly greater risk."

Ara rolled off of her bed and turned on the lights. She slowly removed her clothing, pulled on her favorite pink-and-white bathrobe, and walked out the door and into the hallway.

The bathrooms were down the hall from her room, and she stepped through the one with the circular symbol of a stick figure that had broad shoulders and didn't wear a stylized skirt. At this hour, as she had hoped, there was no one else in the bathroom. She walked in front of the sinks, removed her robe, and looked at herself in the mirror.

She didn't like mirrors… didn't have any in her room. And looking at herself, she was reminded why. The person she saw in the mirror looked… wrong. Despite the small, budding breasts, in the process of forming after three long years on medicines that made her constantly sick and tired. Despite the long hair and the smooth, hairless face with the fuzz lasered off. Because there was still the narrow hips and the broader shoulders and the Adam's apple she hid under turtlenecks and tight scarves, and most of all, that thing between her legs.

She reached up and touched her own face and the stranger in the mirror touched his.

She reached out and touched the mirror, and the stranger extended his hand to touch his fingertips to hers.

She picked up the bathrobe and put it back on and walked back to her dorm.

She lay on the bed and stared up at the night sky until it turned into twilight, and then, at last, into the morning blue.

"Your first step will be halting the hormonal therapy," the Professor explained. "We need to have your body as close to its original male form as possible."

"That seems backwards," Ara said. "Shouldn't it be as close to female as possible?"

"Boiled water freezes fastest," the Professor replied.

"That isn't an answer."

"No, but it's a decent analogy. What we need to do is hold your male and female possibilities together at once, then transfer the possibility from one to the other. And the more distinct your original male possibility is, the easier it will be to differentiate you from the new possibility being formed. This is important to maintain your sense of self during the transfer. To prevent loss of self-distinction."

"How long?"

"Until the procedure is ready to be performed," the Professor said. "One year and a day from now."

And so Ara stopped taking the pills, and her breasts stopped growing, and her body hair got thicker, and she felt herself slipping backwards down the hill she'd spent so long climbing.

Meanwhile, she and the Professor began going over the various components they would need for the working. "The most important thing," he said, "is a solid image of your desired form. Photos would work. Three-dimensional figures would be best."

They went to the imaging laboratory and had photographs of her male body taken from every possible angle, and then they found someone who could Photoshop it into the body she'd always wanted to be.

Ara immediately rejected the first set of images the artist sent back. "It's too perfect," she complained.

"It looks fine to me," the Professor said.

"Of course it does. This girl is gorgeous. She could be a model… a supermodel… an actress," Ara said. She held up the image of the thin-waisted, slender beauty with flawless, smooth skin, and shook her head. "This doesn't look like me at all. It doesn't feel… right."

They sent the suggestions back to the artist, and they sat together for an entire afternoon going through permutation after permutation, adding an imperfection here, correcting one there, going through face after face after body after body after possibility after possibility until, one day, a month after they'd first sent the request out, Ara looked at the person in the images and saw herself.

Meanwhile, she underwent medical procedures of every kind. Every single millimeter of her current body was studied and recorded. After the photographs came the endoscope, then came the CAT scan, then came the MRIs, then the COLLICULUS imaging, then the genetic scans. Hundreds of thousands of images of herself from every possible angle, mapping every possible facet of a human body.

And then came the day that the sculptor delivered the statue of what her new self would look like, and she sat down across from it for an entire night, just studying her new self. She reached out and touched the face of the closed-eyed thing of silicone and steel. *One day, this is what I will be,* she thought to herself.

And then the day came that the Professor told her that it was time to go see a dwarf about a sword.

"A sword, huh?" the short, stocky man with the giant beard said. "Not much call for one of those in this day and age."

"Not much call for a blacksmith, either," the Professor pointed out. "I guess we were both born a few thousand years too late."

"Speak for yourself. I pity those poor medieval swordsmiths who didn't know the difference between chromium steel and high carbon." The blacksmith laughed out loud and gestured to Ara, who stood in the entrance of the smithy, nervously looking around. "Who's the twink? Your new catamite?"

"My test subject," the Professor said. "For the identity reassignment."

"So that's the tranny, huh? Come over here, let me get a look at

you."

Ara felt the rage rise in her blood, but she walked over nonetheless and stared directly into the dwarf's eyes, cold and hard. The short man laughed out loud at that. "Yeah, I can see I've pissed you off a bit, huh? Good. I like a bit of spirit in my women."

"The proper term," Ara said curtly, "is trans, or trans-woman, if you wish. If you wish to continue this business transaction, you will refer to me as such and apologize for the slur."

"My apologies," the short man said, bowing his head politely. "I'll remember that for the future. I've been… apart from civilization."

"Heinrich's been living in these woods for the past… fifty years, now?"

"Fifty-five," the short man said. "People freak me out. I don't understand how the hell you guys can stand living in a fucking city surrounded by millions of the things." The short, bearded man spit into the hot coals.

"In any case, can you do it? Make the sword for us?"

"I can. But I'm not going to. She's going to do it."

"Me?" Ara squeaked, surprised.

"Yeah, you. And you're also going to make the chalice, too." He gestured to the swords hanging from pegs on the walls of his stone smithy. "Sword. Symbolically male. Oriented towards fire. Chalice. Symbolically female. Oriented towards water. Do you get what's going on here?"

"I think so. The sword and chalice are meant as symbols of my feminine and masculine aspects," Ara said, brows furrowing. "And I have to make them in order to create a strong sense of Sympathy between them for symbolic purposes."

"Got it in one," the short man said.

"Can she do it? Learn to make a sword in time for the ritual?"

"It doesn't need to be a great sword," the short man pointed out. "It only needs to be enough of a sword to serve as a symbol. And I'll help her with it. But she has to be here and help with the creation process."

"If you can afford to take the time off of classes…" the Professor said dubiously.

"One week. No longer. She comes back during Spring Break and pounds steel with me rather than partying down in Cancun or whatever."

"All right," Ara said. "I'll see you in April, then."

"Sounds good. There is, however, the matter of payment."

"How much do you want?" the Professor asked.

"Money's not an issue. I don't spend much out here, except for raw materials, and I've got a deal with the Coalition for ritual gear and such. What I want…" He turned to Ara and grinned lewdly. "Well, when Freya bargained with the dwarves for Brisingamen, she offered…"

"HEINRICH!" the Professor shouted.

"Fine! It was just a joke!" the short man said defensively.

"It wasn't a very funny one!"

"Fine, I'm sorry… but if you really want to make a deal…" The man stroked his beard and sighed. "Look, I'm generally happy living away from people. They kinda piss me off for the most part. But there are some things that I miss from the days when I lived in civilization…"

And so, when Ara returned to the cabin in the woods that following Spring, she brought with her two bottles of Laphroaig Islay Single-Malt, and one of Balvenie 40.

"Yeah, that's the stuff," Heinrich Guggenheim said, as he held the bottles up to the light, smiling. "Human beings are fucking assholes

but sometimes they make something worth keeping."

He put the bottles into his cabinet reverently, like a priest handling the consecrated Hosts, and then rolled out a sheet of butcher paper on his table made of roughly hewn logs, and began sketching out a design using a charcoal pencil.

"Isn't this supposed to be my sword?" Ara asked.

"Sure," Guggenheim said.

"Then let me design it."

She thought she saw him smile as he passed her the pencil and stepped back from the table.

She sketched out a short sword, double-edged, slender and elegant, the lines evoking that of a Chinese *jian,* and then sketched in the ornate hilt and long tassel as well. "That part you'll have to find someone else to do," Guggenheim said. "I only do blades and sometimes hilts."

"That's fine," Ara said. "I'll find a jeweler to do the rest."

"Then let's get started."

He began by showing her how to work the bellows to heat the coals on the forge, then had her working the big hammer to pound the ingot out into a long, narrow sword blank. Her first swing missed the anvil entirely and nearly smashed into her foot. "Careful there," Heinrich warned. "You break your foot and you're going to waste the entire weekend."

"This thing is too heavy. I can't swing it."

"Then don't," Guggenheim said. "Just lift it up and let the weight do the rest."

She lifted up the heavy steel tool and let it fall onto the anvil, hard. Guggenheim grinned as he struck the steel with his own hammer. Between the two of them, and a long, backbreaking day of hard labor, they eventually managed to form the steel into a long,

bladelike shape.

The week passed in much the same manner, with Guggenheim showing her how to heat the metal to the proper temperature. How to let the hammer do all the work of striking the steel. When to return the steel to the heat. He did most of the work, but made sure that she was involved in every step of the process.

The week passed, and on the second-to-last day, Ara pricked her finger and let the blood droplets fall into the two casks of oil and water laid next to the forge, as Guggenheim heated the final sword to a red heat and plunged it first into the oil, then, as the flames rose around the blade, into the water, to quench the blade.

The last day was spent polishing and sharpening the sword, and by the time the sun set at the end of the week, Ara had the blade of her sword wrapped in a silk blanket to carry back to the world.

She lay on her cot, looking up at the thatched roof that last night, as Guggenheim turned over in his bed, and asked, with a bit of trepidation, "Heinrich?"

"Yeah?"

"That first time we met. You mentioned Brisingamen."

"Yeah," Guggenheim said.

"Freyja offered gold and silver to the dwarves who made that necklace. But in the end, she paid them by spending one night with each of them."

There was silence.

Guggenheim turned over in his bed and snorted derisively. "Go to sleep, girl," he growled.

"Yes, sir," Ara said.

She pulled the blanket up over her shoulders and stared at the wall for a good, long time.

"The point of that story," Guggenheim said, after a few minutes, "isn't that Freyja slept with the dwarves. The point is that there are some things in life you'd give anything to have… and sometimes, you pay too much to get them."

"It was still an unfair thing to ask for in payment," Ara said.

"Sorry about that. In case you haven't figured it out already, I'm not a very nice man." Guggenheim yawned. "Anyway, a shitty sword like this… you'd be overpaying me."

Ara chuckled a bit and, after a few more minutes, finally drifted off to sleep.

"Glass," the woman in the leather apron said.

"Are you sure? Maybe pewter would work better," the professor said dubiously.

"Glass," the woman repeated firmly. "It has to be glass, and it has to have a silver stand. You want it to have as many feminine attributes as possible. Silver evokes the moon, glass evokes water. Glass and silver is the best choice."

"I'm not sure that we have time for her to learn both glassblowing and silversmithing," the Professor pointed out. "We're coming up on the end of that year and a day."

"She doesn't have to," the woman said. "She had to make the sword, because it represents a part of herself that's being taken away. But the chalice needs to be made by another, because it represents a new aspect of herself being added on."

"I guess that makes some sense," the Professor said dubiously. "But on the other hand, there's also a strong resonance in having her make the chalice herself."

"Why don't we ask her what she thinks?" the woman in the leather apron said, and they both turned to face Ara, who was sitting on a ratty old chair listening to the entire conversation.

"Me?"

"The chalice will be an integral part of your own transformation. It needs to have resonance to you," the Professor pointed out.

Ara scratched her head and looked across the workshop at the apprentices and workers hammering out silver and tin over small anvils and stakes. "… actually," she said, "I think I might have a different idea."

"So what exactly is this," Lydia asked, when Ara had returned from her dorm room. She held the cheap-looking glass tumbler up to the light. "Romancing the Future? What the hell does that mean?"

"… it's a prom glass," Ara said softly.

Lydia and the Professor fell silent.

"… my father didn't approve of my nature," Ara said. "He… was angry all the time. Emotionally abusive, even. Only the fact that he didn't want it getting out that his son was a 'freak' kept him from sending me off to some kind of camp or something. Maybe my mother would have understood better, but she died when I was young… and he was always afraid that he'd screwed up on raising me. Their only son. Because I wasn't happy with being a son. Because I wanted to be a daughter, like my older sisters. He used to scream at them so much. Blamed them for me being what I was. It wasn't their fault. It wasn't anyone's fault."

She had to sit down to steady herself… the memories were flowing faster and harsher than she'd thought they would. "I had a couple of high school friends who… were sympathetic to me. They helped me to plan it out. One of them, a girl… she was my date. She came over and I wore my tux and we left the house together. Then we went to her house, where she had the dress we'd picked out ready. She helped me put it on. Did my hair. Did my makeup. Put in the shapers and the bra and did my jewelry. And then we went to prom together."

Ara smiled bitterly as the memories came back. "A few of my old

friends clapped when they saw me in my dress. Some others turned away. There were a few angry mutters, some weirded out looks. But there were a lot of happy smiles, too. I danced all night, and Shelly and I, we went out onto the beach with a bunch of our friends, and we sat on the sand and watched the sun rise, and one of my friends, a boy whom I'd had a crush on, told me he liked me no matter what I was, and he held my hand and kissed me."

"It was the best night of my life, but when I got home, after changing back into my tux and leaving my dress at Shelly's house, my father was up. Someone at the prom, I never found out who, called him and told him what I'd done. He screamed at me for hours, and hit me a lot with a rolled up newspaper. As if I were a dog. And he threw my prom glass at the wall and smashed it to bits."

"This is Shelly's," Ara said, running a finger along the rim of the cheap drinking glass that Lydia held. "She gave it to me after she heard what my father had done. So I'd have something to remember that night by." She gave the Professor and Lydia a sick smile. "She's one of the few people I regret leaving behind when I came to ICSUT."

There was a long moment of silence, and Ara realized the entire workshop had halted their work. Everyone was watching her, their hammers and snips stopped by her story.

"… yeah," Lydia said thoughtfully, holding the bowl-shaped glass up to the light. "I think if we put a silver base on this, it should do just fine."

"How do you feel?" the Professor asked.

"Tired. Hungry. Excited. Exhausted." Ara laughed nervously as she swung her feet back and forth. "Scared."

"Understandable," the Professor said. "Let's go over the particulars of the Working."

He went over the various particulars of the systems and spells and elements that would be used in the Working. Ara barely heard him.

They'd gone over this many times before. But this would be the last time that they would talk each other through the procedure.

"… are you certain that you wish to continue with the procedure?" the Professor asked.

"Yes," Ara said firmly.

"Then please sign here."

He passed her what seemed like dozens of clipboards, each one with a neat "X" written near the bottom in blue ink, and Ara signed, in dozens of places, various documents relating to the fact that she knew what she was getting into and would not sue anyone ever if anything went wrong.

She signed her name with a flourish on the final sheet, and the Professor stood up to go into the next room. A very nice young lady with short hair came by next and led Ara into the next room. It looked like bride's room at a church, with a couple of couches, a table, a mirror, and a closet.

"You can change into the gown here," she said. "We'll let you know when it's time to begin."

The lady then walked over to the other door in the room, opened it, and stood in the open doorway for a moment. Ara could see that it led outside, to a cool spring day in Massachusetts.

The door closed behind her, and Ara was left alone in the room.

This was insane. She was about to undergo an extremely dangerous magical working that could backlash and kill a bunch of people. She was about to alter the very fabric of the universe itself.

And why? Because she couldn't bear to live another day without a vag? What kind of logic was that?

She should leave. She should go. She should pick up her bag and walk right out that other door and just run across the campus as fast as she could and leave this whole thing behind.

Her head spun, her vision blurred, her heart pounded. She was clenching her fists so hard she could feel her fingernails dig into her palm.

She took another deep breath.

She took off her clothes, put them in the duffel bag she'd brought along with her, and stood in front of the mirror, looking into the eyes of the stranger she saw there.

His sad eyes looked back.

She reached a hand out to him, and touched his fingertips with hers.

She walked back to the closet, flung open the doors. It felt right to don the thin white garment by swirling it through the air, like the skirt of some magical fairy princess.

She cinched the belt of the robe around her waist. Precisely ten seconds later, the doors opened, and the Professor walked in.

"Were you watching me?" she asked.

"Through COLLICULUS," the Professor admitted.

"What would you have done if I walked out that door?"

"Watched you leave. And looked for another test subject."

He closed the door behind him and looked seriously into Ara's eyes. "I have one last request for you," he said. "I need your truename."

She'd known this was coming for a while. She nodded to him and cleared her throat nervously. It felt a bit closed and dry, so she swallowed before going on. "Arachne."

"Arachne. The Spider… if memory serves, she was a weaver. One of the greatest. So great, in fact, that the goddess Artemis challenged her to a contest. Artemis wove images of the Gods ruling humanity and defeating them time and time again… and Arachne responded by weaving images of the many abuses the Gods had heaped upon mankind. And when Artemis tore her weaving to

pieces, she hanged herself."

"It was Athena, not Artemis," Ara said. "And she was angry because Arachne wouldn't admit that some of her talent might have come from the Goddess of Weaving."

"My mistake," the Professor said. "And how do you feel, Spider? Are you a plaything of the Gods, abused and mistreated? Or are you the rebellious, prideful child who refuses to acknowledge their gifts?"

"… I think," Ara said, smiling nervously, "that I'm a young woman about to undergo a huge change in my life, who's feeling freaking terrified right now and just want it to be over with."

"A good answer," the Professor said. "Come."

He opened the other door and led her into the next room: a massive cave, cool and damp, with a broad, flat floor of polished stone. A small army of masons had spent many days carving a precise shape into the granite floor: it hurt her eyes to look at, consisting as it did of circles within circles within loops and angles. It had to be nearly twenty meters in diameter.

Guggenheim stood at the edge of the circle, holding a small anvil under one arm as if it were a basketball. He wore his belt of tools around his waist, including the heavy hammer she remembered so well. Lydia stood next to him, holding the silver-and-glass chalice in her hands: it looked beautiful, the expertly crafted ivy and vines in pure silver wrapping around and embracing the cheap glass. There was a small parade of other assistants here too, carrying a ewer of water, a small basin, and a tray of small knives and other tools.

All of them were dressed in black robes with red cords around their waist. And as she watched, two assistants stepped forward with a set of robes for the Professor as well. He held out his arms as they helped him into the heavy black garments and tied the red cincture around his waist. One of them passed him a staff: it looked odd, carved in a strange shape, and she realized that it had been crafted from the stock of an old rifle, reshaped to form the upper half of an ornately decorated staff.

The Professor turned to the other end of the room, where a number of persons stood around a set of complicated equipment. Another small group sat on folding chairs in the shadows. "The Working," he said, "will take place in three phases. The first is medical. The subject will be examined medically, and some final preparations will be made. The second is symbolic. A series of rituals will be carried out symbolic of the change, in order to set the lines of the working in the minds of the participants. The final stage of the Working is the precise application of several bursts of carefully targeted Aspect Radiation. For the safety of all observers and participants, we request that you remain behind the yellow line marked on the floor. Any attempt to cross the yellow line will result in immediate physical restraint."

He turned to a couple of white-coated doctors and nodded to them. Ara was led behind a curtain, where a couple of doctors performed one last physical check, took one last blood sample, patted her on the shoulder and wished her luck.

Then someone handed her the sword, wrapped in silk cloth, and stood her in line just in front of the Professor, and the entire procession walked in very slowly, at a measured pace.

She would never again be able to remember exactly how it happened. It was taped, of course, and she would later be able to watch from an outsider's perspective exactly how it all took place. But personally… she didn't remember much of anything.

There was a slow procession around the entire circle, seven times clockwise. Water was poured into a basin and poured over her head. The sword was waved over her body in a series of precise movements. She was given the sword back and told to press it to her forehead and chest while the Professor said a lot of things in Latin. The staff was pressed against her back and someone said something very loudly in Greek before striking her once, sharply, across the shoulders.

There was a black cat, the Professor's familiar, who walked between her feet seven times, halting at the left foot. The sword was taken from her, and Guggenheim broke it over his anvil with one powerful

swing of his hammer. The silicone model of her future self was brought out, and she was made to embrace it seven times. A small cut was made on her upper thigh. A drop of the blood was mixed with water in the chalice and she was made to drink it. Two more drops were smeared across her face and that of the doll.

Then the Professor took a small pot of silver paint and a stylus and drew a series of symbols all over her skin and that of the doll. Everyone else was led out of the circle as a small pump filled the channels with a liquid that made her eyes water.

And then she lay in the center of the circle, her right hand holding the cold, clammy hand of the silicone doll that they had made, while a black cat sat between the two of them, unblinkingly staring at the Professor's eyes.

There was a low whumph, and the gasoline that had filled the channels of the circle was ignited. Flames rose up all around her in a precise pattern, illuminating the chamber in a lurid red light.

Purple electricity leaped between the points of the stalactites overhead and she felt herself plummet into the heart of the world.

She opened her eyes again and looked up into the face of the Professor. He was smiling down at her.

"How do you feel?" he asked.

"… I hurt," Ara whimpered. And she did. Her entire body felt like it was aching horribly. Her eyes were dry, her throat was dry, she was desperately hungry. She prised her left hand free of the grip of the silicone doll and rubbed her eyes.

She missed and touched her nose instead. It felt… odd. Strange.

She turned to her left… and she saw something there crumbling into ash and dust. Something that looked very much like the body of the man she used to see in the mirror.

Then the doctors came and swarmed over her, and one of them put a rubber breath mask over her face and she closed her eyes and

passed out.

She awoke to find herself lying on soft sheets, wearing a thin hospital gown, in a darkened room that beeped.

She very much had to pee.

She crawled out of the bed, but was brought up short by something hooked up to her arm. She dragged the IV along with her into the bathroom, pulled up her gown, sat down on the seat.

It felt strange… like it was coming from the wrong places, and that this muscle felt wrong, and this place was off, and this entire thing…

The realization of what was going on hit her, and she felt the tears rise up in her eyes. She gingerly reached down with the toilet paper to wipe herself off, and felt her fingertips press against her body.

It was a good hour before she could finish sobbing, and when she did, she rose up on unsteady feet, flushed the toilet, and turned on the lights. She turned to the bathroom mirror, and saw herself looking back.

She reached out a hand and felt her fingertips press against the silvered glass, and smiled.

"Well, Spider," the Professor said, snapping the clipboard closed. "According to this, you're a completely healthy young woman."

"I knew that already. I could have told you that the first night."

"Yes," the Professor said. "But this was a medical report from an outside doctor. So I guess this means that our experiment was a success." He leaned back in his chair and gave her a wry smile. "How did you like your first period?"

"It fucking sucked," Ara laughed ruefully. "I admit there was a moment, in the middle of the cramps and bloating and having what felt like half my uterus flowing out of me, that I felt like a fucking idiot for agreeing to all this."

"And the other?"

"… well, it seems functional, if that's what you're asking," Ara said, blushing. "But I haven't tried it with anyone else yet. I didn't exactly have a great time the first time I lost my virginity. I think I'm going to use the weight of experience for my second time around."

"Good on you, then." The Professor snapped his clipboard shut and got to his feet. "Well, then, Spider. I'll be seeing you around."

He got up and helped her into her coat, and locked his office door behind him. "Oh, before I forget," he said, handing her a gift bag. "This is a memento. From two new friends."

Spider waited until she was back in her dorm room to open up the gift bag and take out the contents. One of them was a glass chalice with a silver stand. The other was a broken sword mounted on a wooden plaque.

She leaned the plaque up against the wall, behind her desk, and put the chalice on her nightstand. She'd have to find a case for them, she decided, when she had a moment.

Then she changed into her pajamas and lay down on her bed, looking up through the skylight into the stars. She stayed there for a long, long time, until the blackness turned into the grey of twilight, and finally into the morning blue.

Transcript of Incident BL-7 Alpha

Sparkplug: Assessment Team 735, comprising three members: Team leader "Bullfrog" (Sparkplug 1), marksman "Fartboy," (Sparkplug 2), driver "Kitten" (Sparkplug 3).

Central: Central Command

Sparkplug 1: Sparkplug to Central. Come in, over.

Central: Sparkplug, this is Central. How do you read, over?

Sparkplug 1: Reading loud and clear. We are beginning our approach to the target area, over.

Central: Roger that, Sparkplug. Be advised that aerial reconnaissance reports the presence of a third party in the area. Best guess is that it's either a Foundation Task Force or a Chaos Insurgency cell. Best estimate on numbers: between four to twelve operators. You are not to engage unless fired upon. Please acknowledge, over.

Sparkplug 1: Fuck. That's all we need. Goddamn it. Couldn't get an easy job just once in our fucking… uhhh. Copy, Central. Beginning approach to target area now. Over.

Central: Roger, Sparkplug. Oh, and uhh… be advised, your radio switch might be stuck or something. We'd love to give you an easy job for once in your fucking lives too. Over.

Sparkplug 1: … fuck. Thank you, Central. Out. Hey, Fartboy, help me fix this fucking thing, it's al-[transmission ends].

Sparkplug 1: Sparkplug to Central, come in, over.

Central: Sparkplug, this is Central. Reading loud and clear, over.

Sparkplug 1: Be advised, Central, we've made contact with the aforementioned third party. Looks like they've set up a roadblock across the main road leading to the target area. Official story is that the park is closed off for safety reasons after the recent thunderstorms. I think we managed to convince them we were just a couple of rednecks going hunting, though. Over.

Central: Understood, Sparkplug. Were you able to determine who they were? Over.

Sparkplug 1: Well, Central, there was a big white van behind the two "park rangers" with a logo reading "Sierra Conservation Project" on the side. You tell me. Over.

Central: Heh. Got that. All right, Sparkplug, we'll proceed under the assumption that the strike team in the area are a Foundation Containment Team. Over.

Sparkplug 1: Either that, or the Chaos Insurgency's decided to pull a fast one on us. Over.

Central: Not their M.O. A group that calls themselves the 'Chaos Insurgency' isn't really the type for subtlety. Still, keep an eye out for anything odd. Over.

Sparkplug 1: Roger. Will proceed to… hand me that map, Fartboy… all right. Ummm. Will proceed to grid reference… Charlie-Seven… by foot. We'll be leaving the Barrett with Three: if we get caught in one of their sweeps, it'll be kinda hard to convince these guys we're just a couple of lost hunters if we're carrying a mil-spec fifty-cal sniper rifle with us. ETA four hours. Over.

Central: Roger, Sparkplug. Out.

Sparkplug 1: Sparkplug to Central, come in, over.

Central: Sparkplug, this is Central. Reading loud and clear, over.

Sparkplug 1: Central, we have reached the Area of Operations.

We're setting up our observation post now, then Fartboy and I will get a bite to eat. So far we have not seen a thing, except for a few deer and some rabbits. Will let you know if we see anything. Otherwise, we'll report back in at… 2100 hours, local time. Over.

Central: Roger, Sparkplug. 2100 hours local time. Out.

Sparkplug 1: Jesus Christ, I'm fucking starving. Let's see what I've got… fucking meatloaf? Godda-[transmission ends]

Sparkplug 1: Sparkplug to Central. Come in, over.

Central: Sparkplug, this is Central. Reading loud and clear, over.

Sparkplug 1: We've got eyes on a probable threat entity… in grid reference… uhhh… Delta… Six. Clearing just south of the lake. Entity is approximately… what do you show that as, Fartboy? Two meters?

Sparkplug 2: More like three.

Sparkplug 1: Yeah. Entity is approximately three meters in length from muzzle to mid-torso. Streamlined body form, darker underbelly, pale back. Skin texture appears… slick and mottled. Kind of like a snake or a salamander. Break.

Sparkplug 1: Two arms, strongly muscled, set behind a short neck. Big eyes… possibly nocturnal or cave-dwelling. Looks like a carnivore: big, sharp teeth with sharklike serrations. Some sort of quills or feathers coming out of the head. I don't see any claws, but… strike that. Entity has retractable claws in addition to manipulating hands. Break.

Sparkplug 1: Be advised, entity is badly injured. Evidence of a second set of limbs: exposed, broken bone spurs sticking out above the shoulders. Possibly used to be wings. Entire lower half of body is missing, but intestines and viscera are visible. I am tentatively classifying it as a cryptid, rather than altered wildlife or NACL[1]. Please acknowledge. Over.

Central: Roger, Sparkplug. You have eyes on a possible threat

entity: initial classification is Cryptid. Approximately three meters in length, assumed carnivorous due to serrated teeth and retractable claws. Possibly nocturnal or cave-dweling. Streamlined body, mottled skin, slick texture, darker underbelly, pale back. Severely injured, with possible severed wings. Entire lower half is missing, viscera and intestines visible. Over.

Sparkplug 1: That's correct, Central. Sparkplug 2 will upload photographs short—.

Sparkplug 2: I've got movement, Bullfrog.

Sparkplug 1: Wait one, Central.

Sparkplug 1: All right, Central. We've got a… looks like a… yeah, definitely a bear… approaching the threat entity. Threat entity is… ooh. Yeah. Threat entity has just attacked and killed a… looks like an adult black bear. Yeah, I'm going to second Fartboy's estimate. Definitely—.

Sparkplug 2: Not bad work for a thing with its legs torn off.

Sparkplug 1: Turn off your comm, Fartboy. You're on the channel.

Sparkplug 2: Oops. Sorry.

Sparkplug 1: All right. Saying again: Entity has just attacked and killed an adult black bear and is now feeding on it. Confirmed it as a carnivore. Over.

Central: Roger, Sparkplug. Do you think you can retrieve the threat entity? Over.

Sparkplug 1: [exhales] I'm going to have to say no, Central. It's just too damn big for the two of us to carry out. Might be able to get some tissue samples though. Over.

Central: Acknowledged. Your call, Sparkplug. Over.

Sparkplug 1: Acknowledged. Stand by. Hey, Fartboy, you think you can take this thing down? … yeah, I know. I'd rather have the Barrett right now too, but we don't, so we should do the best we can with

what we've got… yeah. Heart shot is out. Can't see us getting a round through that huge ribcage. Through the eye, then. Nice, big target. All right. You shoot, I'll spot. Sparkplug to Central. We're gonna see if we can kill this thing, then we'll head down there and try to get you guys some tissue samples. Over.

Central: Acknowledged, Sparkplug. Also, uhhh… be advised your radio switch seems to still be sticking. Out.

Sparkplug 1: Fuck, is it still doing that? I'm gonna kick Kim's ass when I get back home, issuing me a broken piece of sh- [transmission ends].

Sparkplug 1: — how's it look?

Sparkplug 2: [muffled, indistinct].

Sparkplug 1: Well, don't shoot, then.

Central: Dammit, not again. Central to Sparkplug, be advised your radio switch is stuck again. Please acknowledge, over.

[extended silence.]

Central: Sparkplug, this is Central, please come in, over.

[extended silence.]

Central: Sparkplug, this is Central, fix your damn mic, over.

[extended silence.]

Central: Fuck it, I give up.

[extended silence.]

Sparkplug 2: [muffled, indistinct].

Sparkplug 1: … all right, shoot it.

[gunshot.]

Sparkplug 1: Nice. Clean hit, straight through the eye— oh fuck! He's not happy! RUN!

[movement, hurried running.]

Sparkplug 1: Aaaah, fuck!

[breaking branches, loud thumping.]

Sparkplug 1: Aaaaaah, fucking shit, my fucking back, goddamn it… I'm fine, I'm fine, just… just need a moment. Is it still chasing us?

Sparkplug 2: [muffled, indistinct].

Sparkplug 1: Fucking hell. Aaaaaah… stupid stupid stupid… goddamn it, I know better than that. Shit shit sh-[transmission ends].

Sparkplug 2: Central, this is Sparkplug, come in, over.

Central: Sparkplug, this is Central. We just heard a gunshot, followed by Bullfrog shouting in pain. What the hell just happened, over?

Sparkplug 2: What? Oh. His fucking radio must have gotten stuck again. Uhhh… yeah, mission report follows. We successfully infiltrated the target area undetected and made visual contact with a wounded threat entity. We then decided to kill the target and retrieve tissue samples. Initial shot penetrated the eye and entered the braincase. However, the threat entity proceeded to attack the team, necessitating a quick withdrawal. Break.

Sparkplug 2: During the process of withdrawing, Bull, umm, tripped over a sapling and fell. He's fine, but he tweaked his back pretty bad and sprained his ankle. Please advise, over.

Central: Acknowledged, Sparkplug. Please clarify: you shot this thing through the eye, and it turned and charged you? Over.

Sparkplug 1: Central, this is Bull: that's correct. Thing had a good bit of its brain blown out and it still tried to kill us. Would advise coming back with heavier weaponry before we try to take it down

again. Anyway, it's gone back to chewing on that dead bear carcass now. Over.

[extended silence]

Central: All right, Sparkplug, bring it in. Start heading to the highway at grid reference India-Four, we'll exfil you from there. Sparkplug three, do you copy, over?

Sparkplug 3: Central, Three. ETA 1 hour. Will update. Three out.

Central: Sounds good, Three. This is Central, out.

Sparkplug 1: Acknowledged, Central. Sparkplug One Out. Well, this turned out to be a clusterfuck, didn't it? Can't believe I tripped over a fucking tr—[transmission ends].

Footnotes
1. Non-Autocthonic Lifeform

"Assessment"

"It's far too early to put Team Sparkplug back in the field."

D.C. al Fine, the **Undersecretary-General of the Global Occult Coalition**, stood in an expanse of empty blackness, surrounded by one hundred and eight points of light. Today, she'd decided to look like Audrey Hepburn, complete with Givenchy dress, umbrella, and fancy hat. On the other hand, Audrey Hepburn never had cold, sinister eyes, or a haughty, domineering expression. D. C. al Fine wore the appearance of the famous actress well, but she could never shed the harsh edges that had given her the nickname, "The Scary Lady."

"The first thing you have to understand is that Team Sparkplug is one of our best Assessment Teams," she explained. "Between the three veterans, they have over thirty years of experience in the paranormal field. As a team, they've had over a dozen successful missions. They were a finely tuned instrument… and then they lost one of their essential components. It has been replaced, yes, but they have not had time to adapt to the change in team composition. You're asking them to go back into the field after only a few months. It's too soon."

One of the points of light flashed brightly, expanding into the form of a tall figure in a black robe, limned in violet light. The caption hovering at chest height identified the avatar as belonging to **Lord Marcus Crowley, Antipope of the United Church of Satan, Scientist.** "Your concern for your operatives is commendable, Madam," the robed figure intoned, "but unnecessary. Your operatives are ready. Do not let your mind be clouded by self-deceit."

"The auguries concur with His Wickedness," said a young woman dressed in white gowns, holding a skein of threads between her hands. She was identified as the **Speaker to Humans of the Silicon *Nornir*.**

"Is this a true Concurrence, or simply a Majority Report?" al Fine asked.

"Concurrence," the Speaker to Humans said. "Urthor, Verthandi, and Skuldr are all in agreement as to the correctness of this action."

"Personal feelings must be set aside. Action must be taken. The Council is in agreement upon this matter," Lord Marcus said. "Do not allow yourself to sin in this matter by choosing stupidity over wisdom."

All around her, one hundred and eight stars blinked and dipped themselves in wordless agreement.

"Then I will take the Council's advice under consideration," al Fine said. "If there are no further matters, then I will consider this Conclave adjourned."

One by one, the stars blinked out, leaving al Fine floating silent and alone in the void. She closed her eyes and opened them again slowly, finding herself in her office on the 40th floor of the UN Secretariat Building, overlooking Manhattan. She rubbed her forehead and took a moment to compose herself, waiting for the nausea of Convergence to fade.

The Undersecretary-General picked up her phone and dialed a number that didn't exist. The call went through before it had finished ringing once.

"Get me PHYSICS Division," she said.

"What do you know about The Foundation?" Bullfrog asked.

"They're one of… if not the largest… paranormal organization that is not a member of the Global Occult Coalition. They focus primarily on the capture and acquisition of paranormal objects. They maintain a large network of hidden containment sites across the world, making them one of the few non-Coalition organizations that have a global presence, alongside the Serpent's Hand and the so-called Chaos Insurgency. Standing orders are to avoid engaging Foundation

agents in the field, except in extreme emergencies. Response Level 3."

"All right." Bullfrog nodded. "You've proved that you've read the handbook. Now tell me what you really know about The Foundation."

Spider sighed inwardly, taking a deep breath. "They're hoarders," she said. "Unlike some organizations, they don't seem to have any political or economic agenda for what they do. What little exploitation of parathreats they do seems primarily oriented towards funding their operations. They had a brief alliance with the U.S. government's Bowe Commission, but that fell through. Officially, they're a rogue organization. Under the table, however, they seem to have a lot of support from national governments that don't want to deal with the Coalition's red tape and regulations. They also have an odd obsession with a particular three-letter sequence. At first, we thought it had something to do with their official motto, but the current theory is that the linguistic sequence has occult significance to them, considering that it comes up in the names of their front companies as well as their internal documentation. Current directives regarding the three-letter sequence is to avoid using it whenever possible, on the off-chance that Principle of Contagion could be used to breach internal organization security. Our computers can't even use Secure Copy Protocol because of it."

"Not bad," Bullfrog said. "That's a pretty complete picture… from the point of view of a desk worker. Now let me give you the field operative's version."

The big man cracked his knuckles and leaned back in his seat as the small private plane continued its long flight above the clouds. "The part of The Foundation that a field operative is most likely to run into are their Containment Teams. They're about equivalent to a PHYSICS Assessment Team. They're damn good. We're pretty much evenly matched in terms of training, equipment, and support. Where we differ, however, is in our mission and our goals."

"The Foundation is mostly interested in finding, capturing, and retrieving parathreats," Bullfrog went on. "Their equipment reflects that: a lot of nonlethal weaponry and capture gear. Whereas a

Coalition team is primarily focused on the Fivefold Mission. Nowhere in that Mission does it say that we need to bring in every parathreat we find alive."

"More importantly, most of the Foundation's assessment work is going to be done by conscripts: 'D-Class Personnel,' they call them. Political undesirables and convicted criminals forced into dangerous situations where they don't want to send actual Task Force members. So morale among their teams tends to be low, given that about half their team doesn't want to be there and doesn't want to do the mission."

"Long story short, it's very possible for a good GOC Assessment Team to sneak in past the Foundation, scoop out the find from under their noses, and get out of there before they even know we were there. We've done it in the past, when the Foundation moved in after we'd already scoped out a parathreat. Standing orders are to avoid contact with Foundation personnel whenever possible… but that doesn't mean we have to sit idly by and let them pick up parathreats willy-nilly," Bullfrog concluded.

"In fact, it's probably a good idea to keep as many parathreats as possible out of their fucking hands," Skunkboy said. He sat on a seat across from Bullfrog, flipping through a pornographic magazine with bored detachment. "We don't know what the fuck they're doing with them… but it's probably best not to let them stockpile too big of what could be a paranormal arsenal."

"Of course, this all assumes that we're running into a Foundation Containment Team, and not a Mobile Task Force," Bullfrog explained. "Those are their varsity. Their elites. Think of them as Strike."

"If we run into an MTF, we let them take the parathreat," Skunkboy agreed. "Shadow them, log the capture, try to gather as much information as we can, but don't get close to them."

"Got it," Spider said, mulling the information over. "Do we have any diplomatic channels with them? Any contacts, any agreements?"

"The Coalition does. We don't," Bullfrog explained. "A few former

GOC members have gone over to the Foundation, and vice versa. And there have been a few times when our organizations have been in agreement about… a particular course of action… and ended up working together. On the other hand, the Coalition's official stance is that the Foundation, as a rogue organization, gets no official recognition by the Council, and especially no invitation to join the Coalition itself."

"What Bull is trying to say is that we try to play nice, but never think we're friends," Skunkboy said. "Keep your allies close and your enemies closer. That sort of thing."

Spider nodded in reply, jotting down a few notes into her notebook, using a fountain pen with beautiful ivory-like inlays that were actually made from the femur of an executed murderer: an ancient and crude (but effective) deterrent against magical spying. "Anything to add, Kitten?" she asked the fourth member of the team, who was currently doing rapid sit-ups in the aisle.

The seven-foot tall woman paused in the middle of her stomach crunches and ran a hand through her hair, her stern expression not changing. "No," she said curtly, before turning over and doing push-ups, her taut muscles straining with exertion.

Bullfrog shrugged. Kitten never had much to say.

There was a soft dinging sound in the passenger compartment, followed by a brief burst of static. "Captain speaking. We're about fifteen minutes out from the airport. I'm going to ask you to return to your seats, fasten your seatbelts, and return all seats and tray tables to their upright position. Time at our destination is four PM. Weather is 80 degrees and sunny."

Spider folded up her notebook and tucked it into her messenger bag, next to her grimoire, tablet computer, and a dog-eared copy of "The Complete Poems of Robert W. Service." "Any last words of advice?"

"Yeah. Relax. You'll do fine," Bullfrog said.

"Not that it'll help you if it all goes to hell, but at least you'll feel good

that you didn't get killed because of something stupid you did," Skunkboy interjected.

"Can the attitude, fartboy," Bullfrog growled.

"Yes, sir. Semper Fi, and off we go into the wild blue yonder," Skunkboy muttered.

The sick feeling in Spider's stomach as the plane came in for a landing had nothing to do with motion sickness.

I feel ridiculous, Spider thought, as she glared at her reflection in the mirror. She looked like some kind of bad video game version of what a soldier should look like.

The Mark Three Infiltration Skinsuit was definitely an effective piece of personal armor, but it had the unfortunate side effect of being a close fitting, lightly padded slate-grey bodysuit. Which, she ruminated, would probably look just fine on a busty bombshell with silicone breasts and an hourglass figure, but was not particularly flattering on a wide-hipped academic who, despite several months of intense physical training, still couldn't quite get rid of the baby fat around her waist and stomach.

The effect was even more striking on a short, squat, and muscular middle-aged man with broad shoulders and thighs like tree trunks. Bullfrog stalked into the room and glared at Spider for a moment, before making a couple of adjustments to the straps. "Keep it loose around the chest and waist," he suggested, "so that it doesn't interfere with your breathing."

"Kitten's got all of her straps tightened to the maximum," Spider pointed out.

"Kitten's crazy."

Good point. Spider waited patiently as Bullfrog made a few more minute adjustments to her combat webbing and her various pouches and attachments. "Wish I'd had more time to get you used to the Grey Suit," he said, lips pursed in concentration. "There's a knack to

wearing it that you don't have yet."

Not my fault that they pulled us out of training this early, Spider thought. She waited until Bullfrog was finally satisfied with the state of her gear, before picking up her PDW and slinging it over her shoulder. The lightweight weapon still felt awkward and unfamiliar to her, despite the time she'd spent training with it.

Kitten and Skunkboy were waiting for them in the briefing room, having already changed into their own skinsuits. Kitten, Spider noted, had armed herself with a futuristic-looking carbine and a handgun, as well as a frighteningly large knife slung at her left hip. Skunkboy was carrying a semi-automatic rifle with a complicated-looking scope, as well as a large-caliber handgun, while Bullfrog was carrying a squad automatic weapon with a large box magazine. The three of them handled their weapons with practiced ease born from long years of practice.

"Camo check," Bullfrog said.

The four of them tapped the controls on their helmets, and the grey cloth over their bodies and weapons blurred and fuzzed. Chameleon Fabric wasn't a true invisibility cloak: all it did was match their surroundings as best it could, using reactive pigment packets, not unlike those in the skin of the creature from which it took its name. The downside was that it only really worked well in darkness or at a distance, and only if the wearer didn't move. The upside was that unlike a lost invisibility cloak, losing a section of chameleon cloth wouldn't necessitate bombing fifty miles of countryside to make sure +2 Generation technology didn't fall into the wrong hands.

"Last-minute update," Bullfrog said, as the four team members made their final preparations for the mission. "Overwatch thinks that a Foundation Containment Team is in the area, looking for the parathreat. Standard doctrines apply. Avoid contact, don't get caught, and try not to shoot them. Any more questions?"

None.

"Then let's head out."

The road was not a good one: rough, full of potholes, unpaved, winding, and uneven. It wouldn't have been so bad if the vehicle, at least, had decent shocks. As it was, every little bump and rock on the road was transmitted through the car's terrible suspension, through the thin padding of the seat, and directly into Spider's ass, thighs, and spine.

Skunkboy was the driver: he drove with the lights off and the dashboard light unplugged, carefully making his way up the mountain road solely by the dim light of the stars, enhanced by his augmented reality visor. The wide lenses of the headpiece made him look like a kind of bizarre beetle: the eerie, pale starlight didn't help. He let out a low, muffled curse as the car rocked back and forth after running over a particularly large and sharp-edged rock that sent a particularly nasty jolt into Spider's coccyx. "ETA?" he whispered to Kitten.

"Two minutes," the amazonian woman whispered back. "Turn into the clearing up ahead. We'll go the rest of the way on foot." Kitten was riding shotgun in the small SUV: partly because she was the navigator for this mission, partly because her tall body wouldn't fit easily into the cramped back seat.

After a few more moments of jostling and bouncing, the car finally turned off into a small clearing in the woods, before coming to a halt at the base of a large sycamore tree. "Gimp masks and visors," Bullfrog said. "From this point on: no voices, no faces."

Spider slipped on her own AR visor, tightening the straps firmly in place. As she'd practiced, she closed her eyes and counted to ten before opening them again. The image was dark and indistinct, but a small adjustment on the mask's left-hand slider brought the image back into focus.

OCULUS was PHYSICS Division's four-function enhanced vision suite, combining low-light vision system with infrared imaging and ultraviolet. A fourth vision mode, VERITAS (because some goon in R&D had decided that naming it VITAL ENERGY RADIATION IMAGING TACTICAL AWARENESS SYSTEM was worth getting a cool-sounding Latin acronym), was based on Gen +2 super-technology. It utilized True Kirlian Imaging technology to detect the

life energy of living beings: Elan Vital Energy, or EVE. Seen through VERITAS, her teammates were black silhouettes surrounded by blazing auras: Skunkboy was chaotic and energetic, Bullfrog was intense and focus, Kitten was cool and calm, like rolling waves.

Spider raised her hand to the sky. Her own aura was flashing brightly, erratic and uncertain, like static electricity arcing off her fingertips.

She switched back to low-light mode, then pulled the hood of her infiltration suit over her head (visor and all) and zipped the collar closed. Their masks pulled down, the four members of Assessment Team Sparkplug looked like nothing more than faceless robots from a schlocky sci-fi film. Bullfrog took a moment to help Skunkboy draw a camouflage cloth over the vehicle, then turned to face the other members of the team, tapping his throat twice to indicate a comms check.

"Sparkplug Three, Mic Check," subvocalized the tall amazon.

"Sparkplug Two. My mic sounds nice check one," quipped Skunkboy.

"Sparkplug One. How read?" Bullfrog said.

"S-" Spider swallowed hard and cleared her throat. The small noise sounded dreadfully loud in the silent night. "Sparkplug Four," she said at last. "I read loud and clear. How do you read?"

"Loud and Clear," Bullfrog said. "Team Sparkplug is in position. Central, how do you read, over?"

"Central reads loud and clear," a low, male voice said into their earpieces. "Be advised, Sparkplug, Overwatch has confirmed Foundation assets in your area. We estimate you have about a one hour head start on them. Best to move fast."

"Acknowledged. Out." Bullfrog raised his weapon and drew back the bolt briefly, before letting the heavy weapon rest across his body. "Move out. Three, take, point. I'll bring up the rear."

The tall, anonymous, masked figure that had to be Kitten nodded

briefly to Bullfrog, then quickly moved off the mountain path and into the woods, followed by the other three members of Team Sparkplug.

Her thighs burned, and her feet hurt. It was difficult to breathe through her mask, which covered up her nose and mouth. She could smell the stink of her own sweat and fear, mingling with the faint chemical scent of the chameleon fabric, trapped under her mask. All in all, Spider wasn't enjoying this march one bit.

She took a moment to sip some water from her camelbak pack: the straw ran under the hood of her suit, so that she could drink from it without having to unzip the gimp mask. The water tasted flat, warm, and slightly plasticky. She was thirsty enough that she didn't care.

The team had been walking for a good two hours when they encountered the Foundation. Kitten was the first to hear them, raising her hand and cocking her head to one side, then quickly gesturing to the rest of the team before darting into the low bushes. Kitten immediately followed Bullfrog off the forest trail, slipping behind the wide roots of a tall oak tree before hunkering down and engaging the camouflage on her suit. Bullfrog scattered a few leaves and twigs over her to help break up her outline before himself taking cover a few feet away. He too engaged his camouflage, fading away until he appeared to be little more than a slightly odd-looking lump of rock among the brush.

Kitten winced and shook her head as the first of the Foundation personnel came into view. They were riding ATVs: four wheeled all-terrain vehicles, powered by single-cylinder motorcycle engines that roared loudly. They even had their headlights on. Four of the vehicles were ridden by men wearing digi-cam and combat vests, two men per vehicle. The fifth also had a man in an orange uniform sitting on a small cart behind the driver. He alone was unarmed, and his hands were chained to the cart.

The driver of the lead vehicle raised his hand in the air, and the small convoy came to a halt. The riders of the two lead vehicles came together to consult over some kind of map, while the other members of the team stretched out and relaxed.

The passenger of the fifth vehicle (the one in the cart) cleared his throat. "Hey, can you guys let me out of this thing?" he asked. "I gotta take a piss."

"Hold it," his driver (jailor?) said. "We're almost there."

"Dude, I seriously gotta go. Unless you want me to piss in the cart."

"Shit. All right, keep your hands where I can see them," the driver said curtly. Another guard drew his pistol and kept it pointed at the prisoner the entire time that the driver undid the chains, careful to keep one hand on his own weapon the whole time. And then, to Spider's horror, the passenger walked straight over to the oak tree behind which she was hiding and unzipped his pants.

She winced silently, willing herself to hold perfectly still, as the scent of ammonia rose in the night air. He didn't actually piss on her (thank God for small mercies!), but she was certain, at any moment, that he was going to notice how the light bent oddly at the base of the tree, if he didn't hear her heart pounding like a bass drum first…

The man in the orange jumpsuit whistled a cheerful tune as he finished his business, shook himself off, and zipped back up. Spider willed herself to slowly exhale as the Foundation agents regrouped, then breathed shallowly until the convoy had driven away. Only then did she risk raising her head slightly and scanning the clearing for the other team members.

She nearly screamed when Bullfrog tapped her on the shoulder, but managed to silence herself by biting her tongue until the urge passed. Bullfrog waited patiently for her to calm down, before gesturing to her to follow Kitten and Skunkboy along the path. "Central, Sparkplug," she heard him subvocalize. "Be advised have encountered Foundation personnel. Opposition is riding ATVs. Over."

"Acknowledged, Sparkplug. Central Out."

"What happened to our one hour head start?" Skunkboy whispered over the comms.

"We didn't figure they'd be on ATVs," Bullfrog said. "We didn't figure they'd be that stupid."

"They're gonna beat us to the scoop, Bull," Skunkboy pointed out.

"Keep off the comms," was Bullfrog's only reply.

It was another solid hour of marching by the time that Assessment Team Sparkplug finally caught up with the Foundation Containment Team. By the time they did so, it was all over.

The parathreat was laying on the ground, struggling under a net lined with silver threads. Three of the Foundation agents were wounded, two with wounds that didn't look survivable. The prisoner in orange sat off to one side, his face splattered in blood, shuddering with fear.

Spider couldn't help staring at the captured parathreat. She'd never seen a unicorn before. It didn't look nearly as beautiful as the shimmering horses that she'd had on the covers of her folders in school. It did look vaguely horse-like, and it did have a horn, but the resemblance ended there. No twelve-year old girl would ever have wanted scabrous scales, a ragged lion's mane, or the tail of an ox on her magical pony.

"Central, Sparkplug," she heard Bullfrog whisper over the comms. "Have made contact with parathreat. The Foundation got to it first. Please advise, over."

"Sparkplug, this is Central. The Foundation cannot be allowed to capture the parathreat alive. Proceed at your own discretion. Please acknowledge, over."

"Central. Sparkplug confirms, Foundation will not be allowed to capture the parathreat. Out."

Spider felt another wave of nausea rise in her gullet. It was the only possible choice. The Sidhe would never countenance having one of their sacred beasts held prisoner by humans: part of the thousand-year treaty between the Fair Folk and the human race included the

right to take vengeance upon any human being who violated that pact. What she knew of the Foundation, they would never willingly give up a unique paranormal specimen, either.

Her imagination painted vivid, gory images of trees unfolding into magical doors, and hundreds of lithe, skeletal beings wearing crowns of antlers riding forth on the backs of tigers and stags, wielding swords made of pure starlight. She imagined the ancient peace treaty between humanity and its alternate-universe counterparts broken: all-out interdimensional war. Even if the Wild Hunt was defeated, there was no way that the GOC's Second Mission of concealing the existence of the paranormal from humankind could survive a full-out war with the kingdoms of Faerie…

"Suggestions, team?" Bullfrog asked, interrupting her train of thought.

"Give me a minute to set up. I can put two bullets into the unicorn's head. It's better than letting them take it alive," Skunkboy said curtly.

"Better still if it lives," Kitten pointed out. "There's seven of them still standing. We each take two, the rookie takes one and the prisoner, then we let the target free at our leisure."

"Killing them is going to piss the Foundation off big time," Skunkboy pointed out. "Do we really want to risk that?"

"It's better than letting them piss off the entire Winter Court," Kitten shot back.

"I'm saying, we shoot the unicorn, and all the Foundation gets is a funny looking dead body," Skunkboy retorted. "We—"

"I get it. Spider," Bullfrog interrupted. "Your input."

Damn it. "Wait one," Spider subvocalized. Her head was spinning. This was way too much for her. Her first mission, and she was stuck in the middle of the woods, facing a possible paranormal war, caught in the middle of a choice between pissing off the most powerful of the Faerie Kingdoms, and one of the most powerful

human paranormal organizations in the world. Her mind was still reeling from the horrors that could be unleashed this night. To cap it all off, she was wearing a ridiculous skin-tight catsuit, carrying a gun she barely knew how to use, and she was smelling vaguely of pee…

… smelling vaguely of pee…

She carefully took a few steps back from her hiding spot and turned her face away from the Foundation agents. She very slowly undid the zipper on her mask, pulling the garment off over her head. She took a moment to breathe in a deep breath of fresh air, then held the hood up to her face and took a small, experimental sniff.

Yeah. She could definitely smell the faintest scent of urine in the fabric. Some of the piss from the prisoner must have splashed onto her mask while she lay hiding.

"Spider?" Bullfrog's voice sounded curt and impatient.

For the first time in this horrible, irritating, exhausting mission, Spider smiled.

"I think I have a third option," she said.

It took them another half hour to find a decent spot in order to perform the working. In the meantime, Skunkboy reported, the Foundation was taking the time to patch up their wounded comrades and prepare to move the unicorn out by cart.

Bullfrog helped her to drape the camouflage cloth over her head and upper torso, while Spider pulled out her ruggedized tablet computer and brought up her grimoire. The screen was set low enough that it was nearly impossible to read except by the light of her goggles: she brought up the spell she wanted and double-tapped the screen, causing the complicated fractal to appear in all its eye-searing glory.

She took the piss-stained hood and laid it in the center of the pattern, then pulled the black-handled athame from her pants pocket and pricked her left thumb with its tip. A single drop of blood welled up against her skin before falling onto the cloth, causing the fractal

image to flare briefly.

She placed the black-handled knife on top of the hood, closed her eyes, and reached out.

She could almost hear the voice of her Applied Sorcery professor now: "The Principle of Contagion is one of the most laws forms of magic, and forms the basis of the oldest workings still taught by the Center. The principle is simple: **Once Together, Always Together**. The part influences the whole, and two things that have been in contact with each other maintain a magical link with each other. It's the reason why voodoo dolls require hair or nail clippings from the intended victim as part of their construction, why relics of saints and martyrs are revered and treasured, and the basis of an oddly strident memorandum to all GOC male operatives regarding the proper disposal of used condoms after sex…"

A few drops of dried-out urine weren't the best link Spider had ever used, but she'd made do with worse.

D-75213 wasn't a bad man. True, he'd killed a man, but the bastard'd had it coming for what he'd done to his little brother. He'd taken the deal that the man in the black suit had offered him for one simple reason: one month was better than fifteen to life, any way you looked at it. The sooner he could serve his time (whether that time was spent behind prison bars, or serving as bait for monsters out of fairy tales), the sooner he could go home to take care of his mama. At any other time, he couldn't have been convinced to do what Spider was going to make him do, but he'd just nearly been killed by a motherfucking unicorn, and his head wasn't in the right place…

D-75213 wasn't consciously aware of reaching out and pulling up one of the seven silver stakes that held the unicorn down under the net. The unicorn, however, noticed immediately. It tore the net free from the remaining stakes and lunged for freedom. It didn't intend to kill D-75213, but he was in the way…

The pearlescent horn slashed the confused convict in twain and bounded away into the darkness.

"FUCK!" Lombardi shouted, as the creature galloped into the woods. He chased it for a few meters, but quickly gave up, letting out another low curse and shaking his head angrily. "All right, pack it up, boys. This mission's a bust."

"We can still go after it, Max!" Vance shouted.

Max Lombardi wheeled on his protege, grabbing the younger man by the collar. "You want to go chasing after a unicorn without a virgin as bait? Be my guest! I'll even pitch in for flowers at your funeral. Me, I'm packing it up and calling it a night. We've got three down and we've lost our rabbit. We're operationally ineffective!"

"Why the hell did he do that?" Beckett asked. "Why did he pull the stake? He knew what would happen, didn't he?"

"Did he? I don't know. I don't fucking know. All I know is that we're aborting the mission. I'll call it in. God-fucking damn it, what a fucking waste…"

Vance shook his head, but didn't argue further. As the sun rose, the seven remaining members of the Foundation Containment Team packed up the remains of their three colleagues (and one D-Class personnel) and prepared to head back home.

They found the unicorn silently grazing on the short grass at the edge of a ring of mushrooms. It was a surreal sight, seeing that grotesque creature clipping the grass with its sharklike teeth.

Its head snapped up and stared directly at them as Assessment Team Sparkplug stopped at the edge of the clearing. The four of them froze in place, staring silently at the deadly creature.

The unicorn snorted, then slowly walked towards Spider and dipped its head down to her, nuzzling against her outstretched hand.

Spider gulped nervously as the creature rubbed its nose and face against hers, the coppery, ketone-laced stench of its breath wafting all around her like a miasma of death.

Then the sun rose, and it vanished in the blink of an eye, leaving

behind a swirling cloud of fireflies that, just as quickly, vanished from view.

"I didn't figure you for a virgin," Bullfrog said softly.

"After my identity reassignment? Yeah. I guess I am," Spider whispered.

She rubbed her face, where the unicorn had nuzzled her. It came away holding a small, glassy scale. The scale itself soon faded away into powder, leaving behind no trace that it had ever existed.

"All right," Bullfrog said, clearing his throat. "We've got a long walk back. Let's get started."

D.C. al Fine closed the mission report and tossed it into her desk, on top of a neat stack of printouts, readouts, and reports.

"All things considered," she said to no one at all, "Assessment Team Sparkplug did better than anyone anticipated."

"The auguries never lie," the Speaker to Humans replied, her image coalescing into view on al Fine's computer screen. "The Silicon goddesses foretold this result."

"As did His Satanic Majesty," whispered Marcus Crowley into her ear. Each word brought with it the scent of brimstone and the undertones of the screaming of the damned. "You were wrong to mistrust their abilities."

"Then why do you sound so disappointed?" al Fine asked.

"We do not—"

The Undersecretary-General opened up another file folder and tossed it into the desk. "The full report of the augury by the Silicon Nornir," al Fine said. "And don't ask where I got it. I'm not going to tell you. The Nornir did predict a 95% chance of mission success. But they also predicted a 50% chance of increased tensions with the Foundation. Which is interesting, because there are other teams that had around the same chance of mission success, but much lower

chances of pissing off the Foundation."

"And as for you… the Satanic Scientists have always objected to the Coalition's maintenance of the Arthurian Charters with the Kingdoms of Faerie, haven't they?" al Fine went on. "And the most likely scenario if Team Sparkplug didn't manage to piss off the Foundation was increased tension with the Fae. And suddenly and coincidentally, I have two organizations who have never given each other the time of day forming a voting bloc to push the Council to have me put Team Sparkplug back in the field. Interesting."

"I don't know what you're implying—."

"I'm not implying anything. I'm saying it outright. Don't use PHYSICS Division to advance your own personal agendas again," al Fine said curtly. "If I ever get another whiff of that from either of you…"

She raised her hand and tapped a button. Immediately, the images of both Marcus Crowley and the Speaker to Humans flinched as two Strike Teams appeared out of thin air at their respective locations, deactivating their invisibility cloaks and raising their rifles to their shoulders.

"… I know who you are and where you are," she concluded. "The next time you see these guys, it'll be the last thing you ever see."

"You can't—"

"The hell I can't. First and Second Mission priorities. 'Survival of the Human Race' and 'Concealment of the Paranormal World' trumps protecting the lives of two individual humans. This meeting is adjourned."

She tapped her keyboard a second time. The Strike Teams lowered their rifles, re-engaged their invisibility cloaks, and faded back into the darkness.

The last thing D.C. al Fine saw before the representatives from the Silicon Nornir and the Church of Satan (Scientist) vanished from her computer screen were the angry and astonished expressions on their faces. They wouldn't soon forgive this.

Then again, neither would she.

"We now begin the most important phase of any mission," Bullfrog said, raising his beer mug. "Post-mission beers with the team. To a successful mission, and none of us getting hurt or killed!"

"And to a piss-stained mask saving the day," Skunkboy added.

"Hear hear."

The four team members clinked glasses and took long sips of their foamy brew: Lucky Killigan's house draft. The bar didn't exist on any maps or in any directories: technically, it was an illegal operation, without a liquor license. Given that the owner, bartender, and all the guests were all GOC operatives, the local government were understandably lax to bust them.

Spider took another long sip of her beer, savoring the cold, bitter brew, before putting the glass down and clearing her throat. "I don't want to be morbid," she said delicately, "But there is something I've been wondering."

"Go, Spider," Bullfrog said, pouring himself another beer.

"How did Beagle die?" Spider asked.

The other three members of the team froze in place. "You mean you don't know?" Skunkboy asked.

"His file just said 'Killed in Action.' It didn't say anything more than tha—"

"He got eaten by a dragon," Kitten said.

"Technically, a Non-Autocthonic Lifeform from another dimension…" Skunkboy pointed out.

"It was three hundred feet long. It had scales, it flew, and it breathed fire."

"It didn't technically breathe fire. It spat a colloidal white phosphorus

and sodium—"

"Dragon," Kitten insisted.

"Fine, it was a dragon." Skunkboy said. "In any case, it ate him."

"Roasted him alive and ate him like a piece of popcorn chicken," Kitten agreed.

"You know what his last words were? 'Hang on, you guys. I've got this.' What a fucking idiot."

"To Agent Beagle." Bullfrog said, raising his glass again. "The bravest, most glorious, most fucking idiotic man I ever met."

"Hear hear."

They clinked glasses again and drank.

"AWTOK"

"… lately," Jenny said, "I've been feeling a lot more dragonish."

The other nine people sitting around the circle nodded and made sympathetic noises, as Agent Griggs suppressed a groan.

"I've been hoarding cash," Jenny said, "and feeling greedy and gluttonous. Yesterday, I cooked a meatloaf… and I ate it all in one night. And I've been really wondering what it would be like to sleep on a bed of coins…"

So what you're saying is that you're a fat, greedy bitch? Griggs thought.

"… I really don't know what to do. On the one hand, I want to express my dragonish side a bit more. But on the other hand, I've gained ten pounds, and my friends and family think I'm being weird…"

That's because you are weird, you stupid cow.

"Well," Loredinal, Master of the Summer Court of the High Elvish Legions (better known as Tom Smith of La Jolla) said, "Can any of us think of anything that could help our draconian sister with her problems?"

"I can!" said the peppy young Kasumiko (born Vanessa Charleston of San Diego). "Jenny, maybe you should try roleplaying things out? If you ever feel like kidnapping a maiden, maybe you could have a friend volunteer to get tied up for a bit?" She bounced up and down in her chair, the fake fox ears she wore waving a bit in response.

"I don't know if my friends would be up for that," Jenny said, smiling. "And honestly, it's not really the whole kidnapping maidens thing that's getting to me. More the eating too much and wanting to hoard things…"

"Nightshadow?" Loredinal said to Griggs. "You've been quiet. Anything to add?"

"Hm? Not really," Griggs said. "Sorry I've been distracted lately."

"Ah. Problems with the rest of the Vampire Council?" Loredinal asked sympathetically.

More like problems with the rest of you delusional fucks. "You know I can't talk about that, without breaking my vows," Griggs said slowly and carefully.

Everyone else around the circle nodded sympathetically. "Well," Loredinal said. "I think we've done some good work. Just something to keep in mind, though: AWTOK has been snooping around recently, and we're worried that they may try a snatch-and-grab. Remember what happened to Bianca…"

That angry teenage girl who you swore were kidnapped by government agents, but turned up in a crack house in Compton?

"… and be safe. Meeting adjourned."

Everyone stood up and started to gather their things. "By the way," Jenny said. "I'm feeling hungry. Anyone want to come with me to get a burger?"

"Meat? Ugh," Loredinal shuddered.

"I can't eat gluten," Razorfang the White-clawed pointed out.

"I'll come!" Kasumiko giggled. "Wanna come along, Nightshadow?"

Maybe, if it meant I could put a bullet between your eyes. "I don't eat meat, remember?" was all Griggs said.

"Awww… that's right. Welp. Time to go! Ta ta!" She grabbed Jenny by the arm and dragged the quiet girl out of the room.

Thank God, Griggs sighed.

He drove three blocks away before pulling into a parking lot and taking out his cell phone. He checked his contacts, found the number for his AWTOK handler, and hit the "dial" button.

AWTOK here, the voice said, after the first ring. **Report.**

"They're a bunch of stupid kids playing elves and dragons," Griggs sighed. "I've been spending the past three weeks going to their stupid meetings. Can I stop now?"

Have you confirmed whether any of them are actual past-lifers or nonhumans? the voice asked.

"What? No. I haven't confirmed anything, because there's nothing to confirm! It's just a bunch of stupid kids playing make-believe!" Griggs repeated.

Unacceptable. Capture them and bring them in for further experimentation.

"… damn it, are you kidding me?" Griggs groaned. "You want me to bring in a bunch of stupid kids just in case one of them turns out to actually be some kind of magical fairy person?"

You have your orders. AWTOK out.

Griggs groaned and rested his head against the steering wheel as he heard the dial tone.

"Shit," he groaned. "Now I gotta rent a van."

"… oh, hey, Nightshadow!" Loredinal said, smiling. "You're here early."

"Was just thinking that maybe I could help out a bit, with the snacks or something," Griggs said. "I've kind of been a bit of a jerk recently."

"Understandable. Vampire court politics being what they are. Kasumiko is in the kitchen, making guacamole. Maybe you can help her out?"

"Sounds good." Griggs said. His index finger gently rested against the small vial in his coat pocket.

In the kitchen, the cute young woman with the fox ears on her head was humming quietly to herself as she pitted and peeled a large number of avocados. "Nightshadow!" she squealed, before giving Griggs a big hug. "Good to see you!"

"Loredinal was just asking if you needed some help with your guacamole?" Griggs asked.

"Nah. I'm just setting up my second batch of avocados so that I can make a second batch quick when the first one runs out," Kasumiko said, giggling. "Why don't you take this bowl out to the snacks table?"

"Sure thing," Griggs said. He calmly picked up the bowl of guacamole, carried it out to the snacks table, then, after glancing to either side to make sure he wasn't being watched, opened up the vial of liquid and poured it into the bright green dip. He took a moment to stir it in with the big wooden spoon, and, having completed his mission, slipped the vial back into his coat pocket and…

"So, what is it?" Kasumiko asked coldly. "Flunitrazepam? Gamma-hydroxybutyrate?"

Griggs spun around just in time to get the darts of Kasukimo's TAZER in his chest. He fell to the ground screaming as the lightning coursed through his body.

"LORE!" Kasumiko shouted.

"On it!" Loredinal shouted back. He raced into the room, carrying some kind of crazy headpiece that looked like a colander with a ton of wires attached to it, and put it on the still-twitching Griggs' head.

"You motherfuckers!" Griggs shouted. "Fucking… **I WILL FIND AND CONSUME THEM! NOTHING CAN HALT THE HUNGER OF THE AUTOCH!**"

"I'm losing it!" Loredinal shouted. "Damn it! Containment is failing…"

"Exec— SHIT!" Kasumiko shouted, just as Griggs levitated two feet off the ground and lunged for her, his mouth stretching impossibly wide open, revealing a gaping maw filled with razor-edged teeth. Loredinal dove for him, tried to pull him off, only to be flung across the room by a massively powerful arm, slumping, unconscious, to the ground. Kasumiko struggled and screamed, trying to reach her TAZER, but the thing that had been Griggs was too damn strong, and it was choking the life out of her, and her vision was blurring and starting to darken, and…

… and then Grigg's head vanished, bitten clean off by a gigantic saurian head covered in adamantine scarlet scales.

The headless corpse of Griggs fell to the ground, as the dragon that had killed him spit its head out onto the carpet. A thousand motes of shimmering light, and Jenny Lee fell to the ground, blood staining her mouth and the front of her shirt. She rolled over and threw up on the kitchen floor, then started to cry.

"Shit," Kasumiko groaned. "Fucking shit…"

"… how long until you think that it'll find another host?" wondered Agent Lore of Assessment Team 296 ("Eagle Pavise").

"The Autoch? No idea. Sometimes it takes a year. Sometimes a month. Sometimes only a day." Agent Miko put her hand on her partner's shoulder and gave it an encouraging squeeze. "We'll find it. Look on the bright side. No one got offed by it this time."

"We've still got a lot of amnestics to give out," Lore pointed out, "and a PTE to evaluate."

"Why don't you let me handle that part?" Miko said. "You help coordinate the cleanup."

"Of course," Lore sighed, but he straightened up and walked back into the house to help the Laundrymen deal with the evidence.

Miko took a moment to compose herself, then walked across the back yard to where the miserable-looking Jenny still sat on the stone

bench, the front of her black T-shirt still covered in blood, bone, and vomit. She shuddered as Miko sat down next to her and put an arm around the younger girl.

"Nice work, kiddo," Miko whispered, stroking her friend's hair. "Nice work."

"I don't know what happened I just came in to help out and saw him choking you and I got so mad and the next thing I knew I was thirty feet tall and I was biting his head off and…"

… and then it was time for the weeping, and the screaming, and the angry shouting, and then the nervous laughing. It was a good long while before Jenny was looking a bit more like her old self again. But it did, eventually, happen.

"… well," Miko laughed, ruffling her friend's hair. "… I hope you've had your fill of damsels in distress for a while."

"For a long while," Jenny agreed, laughing nervously.

She was going to be okay, Miko thought, and she stood up. "Look, Jenny, I gotta go help clean this stuff up," she said. "There's a guy coming… think of him kind of like a social worker for people like you… and he'll help you get situated in your new life. Now that you're an 'out' para-entity, you're going to have to deal with some extra shit."

"All right," Jenny said, taking a deep breath. "Will I ever see you again?"

I hope not, Miko thought, but she gave Jenny a weak smile and stood up to go back into the house.

"Miko?"

"Hm?"

"Are you really a kitsune? And is Loredinal really a…"

"Prince of the Elves?" Miko laughed. "Past lives and alien souls? Nah. I don't believe in that stuff. It's make-believe."

"Sequence"

« "Farpoint" | Return to GOC Hub | "Joint Venture"»

"Diplomacy"

"It's good to see you again, your majesty," Chris said, as he took a seat on the camp chair and gratefully accepted a cup of water from a raccoon in a green wool tunic.

"Thou speakest with a forked tongue," **replied the red-furred fox seated across from him at a computer keyboard.** "Else thou wouldst free our people from bondage at the hands of their captors." The words lingered on the computer screen across from Christopher. He wasn't sure who'd managed to set up Carolingian miniscule as the font, but it was appropriate, he admitted.

"Our agreement with the… with your captors… only extends as far as this," Chris explained. "And it was a concession hard-won."

"These villains are truly the most ignoble of heathens," scoffed the fox. "Would that we had our good sword and shield and a further twoscore brave knights: we would show these heathens how good Christian men do battle. Nay, we would ask simply for one man: Rafaelo, wisest of crows. No doubt he would have contrived some infernal machine or clever strategem to make good our escape. But in the absence of valor and wisdom, we must instead turn to the virtue of fortitude, and endure the manifold indignities heaped upon us by our villainous captors." Eugenio the Second (by the Grace of God, King of the Forest, Lord of the Plains, Duke of the Grand Fir and the Undergrowth, Count of the Swamp, Warden of All the Streams and Rivers, and Lord Protector of the Cities of Man, Defender of the Faith), paused in his typing, tilted his regal head to one side and scratched behind his ear, worrying at a flea that had been pestering him for some time.

"We continue our efforts to ransom your majesty and free him and his men from their captivity," Chris lied, "but I have not come here to speak of such matters."

"Then speak, good sir. Let us know how we may be of assistance to the Chinese Empress."

Christopher St. John Smythe-Bromstead winced inwardly. Explaining D.C. al Fine's position in the Coalition to Eugenio the Second hadn't been easy. Second Mission considerations had forbidden him from explaining the exact nature of the Global Occult Coalition. The best he'd managed to do was to convince the fox that he was an emissary of a foreign Empress. (He still wasn't sure how the Fox had drawn the conclusion that the "far-off kingdom" he represented was China, of all places.)

"Her Imperial Majesty faces a dilemma," Chris said through gritted teeth. "A dilemma which could easy be solved with the aid of thy royal self. The dilemma concerns the Thirteenth Crusade."

"That was none of my doing," Eugenio the Second retorted, curling his tail around his red-furred body. "**'Twas the doing of Duke Casper Bushtail, a knight great in courage but not overly blessed in brains.** 'Twas his decision to gather up his brethren and strike out for the Holy Land without the full might of the Forest at his back."

"A decision he made on the basis of your Majesty's decree…"

"Our decree was that an army should be gathered for the purposes of taking back the Holy Land," Eugenio insisted. "Not that Duke Bushtail and his kin should sally forth willy-nilly like cats driven by a washer-woman. Often have we regretted this fact, for were that brave knight and his cohort by my side, we would not now be languishing in captivity."

… mostly because you'd be dead. The Foundation doesn't put up with escape attempts lightly, Chris thought. "Nonetheless," he said, "the Duke and his kin are not at thy majesty's side. And now they have found themselves in dire straits. They have set up a stronghold in a distant land," *If the next city over in Scotland can be considered distant, that is,* "and they are now besieged on all fronts," *I guess that's not a bad way of saying that the Coalition and Foundation are getting ready to burn down their damned castle for scaring the shit out of that Girl Scout troop that found their fence made of severed*

rats' heads on the end of tiny little pikes. "They have sworn to fight to the death. I have come on behalf of the Empress to see if a way can be found to spare the lives of these brave warriors." *And if I had it my way, I'd let those MTFs burn the damn castle down with flame throwers and thermite. Damn the Scary Lady for trying to get me to find a 'soft kill' solution to this bloody mess.*

Eugenio the Second, son of Eugenio the Just, Regent of the Granite Throne and Ruler of the Forests, sat down on his haunches and laid his chin dejectedly atop his forepaws.

"We are tempted to tell thee nay," he replied, after a long period of contemplation. "We have known the horrors of captivity. We have suffered greatly the outrages these heathens have inflicted upon us. Did you know that they have… have mutilated the Brothers Douglas, and their sister besides? Unmanned them they have, and done worse to the lady. 'Twas an outrage not to be borne."

"I am… aware… of those misdeeds. Suffice to say that they shall not be repeated," Chris said carefully. *And I'm pretty sure even the Foundation isn't going to try to neuter any more of these guys, either. Not unless they want another PHYSICS Division Strike Team getting ready to blow this place to smithereens.*

"… then we shall do as you counsel, Sir Christopher. Though it sticks in our craws, we shall write a missive to Duke Bushtail and his fellows urging them to surrender. But in return, thou must do one thing for us, Sir Christopher."

Here it comes, Chris sighed.

About an hour later, he finally emerged through the airlock door, clutching the rolled-up parchment sealed in red wax in one hand, carrying his folding camp chair in the other. The masked guard stationed at the door took the document from him as he emerged, placing it inside a small plastic tube and sending it up a pneumatic pipe to parts unknown.

"There," Chris growled, to the balding white-coated man standing before the bank of computer monitors. "You heard what he wanted.

Now get it to him."

"I will have to clear it with my superiors first. This request was already made, and it was denied," the balding man replied.

"Are you going to make me into a liar? I gave my word of honor back there. Shook his… paw… and swore on the good name of God and all my descendants. You've already got a priest coming by once a month. Transfer him to this project full-time. Let them build their damn church."

"You made that promise, not me. The best I can promise is that I'll bring it up with my superiors," the balding man insisted.

"Then do it. Now. And make it very clear to them that failing to do so will not put the Foundation in the good graces of the United Nations."

"You sound angry, Mister Bromstead."

"You're damn right I'm angry!" Chris shouted. "I spent years… over a decade, even… building up diplomatic relations with these guys. We were on the verge of relocating them without incident. But the Foundation just had to come in and do a grab-and-snatch right under our noses. And now they're riled up and angry. You're sitting on a powder keg here. You heard the way the fox was talking. At some point in the near future, they're going to decide they've had enough and martyr themselves for Jesus. And your damned leadership isn't making it easier by arbitrarily denying them their freedom of worship!"

Chris stormed out of the room, ignoring the other man's loud protests and rebuttals: he was in no mood to hear any of it. He grabbed the black canvas hood out of the guard's hand and put it on over his own head, tying it shut, before letting the guards manhandle him into the back of the car.

He heard the car door slam shut, and the vehicle pulled away into parts unknown. It would be another hour before he arrived, give or take fifteen minutes, depending on how long the driver wanted to drive around in random circles.

"Sequence"

« Vigil | Return to GOC Hub | UHEC »

"Farpoint"

"You nervous?" Jericho asked.

"A bit," Callahan admitted. "After all, this is gonna be a long trip."

"Don't worry about it so much," Jericho said. "It's going to be a lonely, exhausting, and stressful job, but you'll be saving the world. Besides, it's only seven billion klicks. Practically next door."

"Yeah, well. I'll miss ya, buddy. Watch the fort."

"Keep safe."

The two PHYSICS Division operatives gave each other a high five which became a handshake which became a bro-hug which became a real hug, because no matter how big of a badass manly PHYSICS Division Strike Team operative you were, having one of your best friends leave for a ten year shift on the other side of the solar system was a bit of an emotional moment. No homo and all that, but Callahan admitted that he was going to miss this asshole. Even if he did steal all the beers out of the fridge.

"Operative Callahan?" the man in the white coat said. "I have your final mission briefing ready for you."

"Doc, I've been training for this mission for the past year. I think I know what's going to happen," Callahan said.

"Nonetheless, regulations are that I need to read you these briefings before you're allowed onto the apportation pad," Doctor Benjamin Flaherty (Ph.Th.D) said.

"All right, hit me," Callahan sighed.

"I'll make it fast," Doc Flaherty reassured the agent. "Here goes. In a few minutes, you will be transferred from this ship onto a barge located in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. That barge will then be

apported by thaumatological working to Farpoint Forward Operating Base. The barge will carry supplies and replacement personnel for Farpoint Station. You recognize, by so volunteering for this mission, that apportation is a difficult, dangerous, and unpredictable process, and that your safe arrival at Farpoint is not guaranteed. You also recognize that the process of apportation carries with it the possibility that your mind may become affected by a cognitohazardous entity. You finally recognize that Farpoint Station is located in a dangerous operating area, and that you may suffer death, dismemberment, or injury due to the hazardous nature of the duty. Finally, you recognize that this assignment is for no less than ten years, and that rescue or evacuation from Farpoint Station is next to impossible, even by apportation, due to the distances and lack of thaumatological personnel at the destination. Do you so acknowledge these statements as made to you?"

"I acknowledge," Callahan said.

"Please sign here."

Then there were another twelve statements to be made, another series of documents to sign, one last health checkup, and a final reckoning of all of his earthly assets, should he not return from where he was going. Finally, Doc Flaherty put all of the papers into a manila folder and passed Callahan a portable hard drive.

"What's this, Doc?"

"It's got every movie that came out this year on it, plus the full runs of a bunch of TV shows, and a bunch of porn," Doc said. "Those guys at Farpoint need some distractions."

"Sounds like I'm going to be the one needing this," Callahan laughed.

"You're more right than you know. Good luck, Cal."

Callahan gave the Doc one more handshake, then turned to walk down the ramp and onto the LCAC.

He stepped aside for a bit as a rather large cylinder was loaded onto

the hovercraft by handtruck. The tech secured the cylinder to the cargo compartment wall, then took a seat in the chair opposite. A few minutes later, the hovercraft emerged from the cruiser's well deck into the morning light, heading towards the pair of barges that were floating in the middle of the Pacific Ocean.

"Everything fitting well?" the technician asked, his voice sounding dull and tinny through the helmet faceplate.

Callahan nodded and gave the man a thumbs up. The technician nodded and gave Callahan a handshake, then closed the hatch of the capsule, leaving Callahan alone with his thoughts, the sound of the air slowly circulating inside his suit his only companion.

Through the capsule window, he could see the bright blue Pacific Ocean stretching to the horizon. Two small ships, (two of the seven that formed a circle around the barges) floated in the distance, the thaumatological resonators on their decks softly glowing in a dim bluish-purple light. Somewhere out there, a literal army of thaumatologists were shaping and working the flow of EVE through the resonators, forming a working circle around the floating barges.

"All right," he heard a voice say over his comms loop. "We're at T-Minus five minutes. I need a go/no go for launch. Node 1?"

"Go, sir."

"Node 2?"

"Go."

"Node 3?"

"We're Go, sir."

"Node 4?"

"We're Go."

"Node 5?"

"Go."

"Node 6?"

"That's Go, sir."

"Node 7?"

"All's good. Go."

"Payload?"

"Go," Callahan said into his mic.

"Targeting?"

"Go," said another voice over the loop.

"Enviro?"

"We're Go."

"Computers?"

"Go."

"I have all stations reporting Go for Launch. Resuming the clock at T-Minus five minutes and counting."

"Node One, Energizing."

"Node Two, Energizing…"

The next few minutes were a flurry of activity as the thaumatologists did their thing. Technical jargon and status reports flowed back and forth in a smooth exchange of information. Complications arose and were swiftly dealt with. And throughout all of it, the steady, periodic calls of, "T-Minus four minutes…" '"T-Minus three minutes…"

And then it was "T minus ten… nine… eight…"

"Arcing."

The window of the canopy suddenly darkened as white-hot arcs of energy erupted from the resonator's thirty-foot tall antennae, forming a giant, glowing star of energy in the middle of the ocean (with the barges and Callahan in the center). Callahan felt his hair stand on end, saw EVE sparking off of the glass and metal of the capsule walls…

"Seven… six… nodes at one hundred percent…"

… the air around him roared and screamed as tremendous amounts of magical energy were channeled into the structure of the working…

"… three… two… one, cast—"

The announcer's voice was suddenly cut off, just as the world went black, and Callahan suddenly found himself 6.7 light-hours away from the rest of his comms loop.

It was as if someone had turned off the lights on the world. The sunny, bright, Pacific Ocean had vanished, leaving Callahan in utter darkness, just before a sudden loud thunderclap rocked the capsule.

Back on Earth, there was a loud, crashing thunderclap as the air rushed in to fill the void left by the disappearing barges. All seven ships rocked violently as the powerful waves pushed them back and forth. The thaumatological backlash was almost worse: a good portion of the ocean water turned into blood, staining the ocean deep red. Halfway around the world, a volcano that had not existed until then suddenly erupted for the ninth time in one hundred years, and just as quickly vanished from reality.

And somewhere on Pluto, two barges appeared in the center of a carefully drawn apportation circle, covered in the frost and snow that had once been a few hundred cubic meters of air and seawater that surrounded the two vessels.

And then, as Callahan's eyes adjusted to the darkness, he saw the most beautiful stars he'd ever seen in his life.

"… and transfer complete," Davis said. "We've got our reinforcements."

"What does VERITAS say?" Ricci asked.

"… scanning now. I've got parathreat signatures in Barge 2… as expected. Looks like it held."

"And our newcomer?" the base commander asked.

"He checks out clean. Stressed and terrified as hell, but no hitch-hikers."

"All right. Send out Richards and Carter," Ricci said. "And let's see what Santa and his elves sent us this year."

The rapping on the windowpane startled Callahan out of his awed inspection of the gorgeous night sky. He turned his head to see a man in a spacesuit (gold-tinted visor raised to reveal his face), waving cheerfully at him. As Callahan watched, the stranger plugged an audio cord into a port on the surface of the capsule. "Test, test, test, test," a voice rang in his ears. "This is Richards, to capsule passenger. How do you read?"

"Loud and clear, Richards," Callahan replied. "I'm Callahan."

"Cool. Nice to meet ya, dude," the man said. "Just hang tight for another moment. We'll get you out of there."

Callahan waved back, and the space-suited man moved on, continuing his inspection of the two barges for unexpected complications.

It was a half hour later when the man returned, with a second agent in tow. Callahan felt a couple of thuds as something was attached to his capsule, then the world tilted upward slightly, and he felt himself move. Glancing out the side window, he could see that some sort of forklift, with its entire structure covered in insulating panels, had lifted up his capsule and was carrying it across the surface of the ice-covered rock. The man inside the vehicle (a broad-faced man with a big orange beard), waved cheerfully to him, then went back to

the delicate procedure of moving the crew capsule to its destination.

A few moments later, Callahan saw his new home come into view: a low series of structures, most of them in the shape of cylinders resting on their sides, illuminated with pale, bluish lighting. The logo of the Global Occult Coalition was inscribed on the side of each one. To one side, a bunch of open-topped crates held what appeared to be garbage bags or some other refuse.

Some wag, he saw, had put up a sign outside the biggest building.

"Welcome to Farpoint Station," it read. "Population 12."

There was a figure in a space suit standing next to it. As Callahan passed by, he took down the plate that read "2" and put up one that read "3" in its place.

The first impression that Callahan got when the airlock doors opened was one of claustrophobia. Everything was cramped and tight-looking, and every single wall, floor, and ceiling surface was covered in instrumentation, equipment, supplies, or lockers.

The second impression that he got was the smiling woman standing in the middle of the room, wearing a loosely fitting set of grey trousers, jacket, gloves, as well as a full coverage face mask.

"WELCOME TO FARPOINT!" she shouted, her voice muffled and tinny through the suit helmet. "I'M A.D. RICCI. HANG TIGHT, GONNA CHECK THE INSIDE OF THE CAPSULE FIRST."

Callahan nodded, then waited for a few minutes as the woman pulled herself into the capsule in a slow, languid motion, like she was underwater. It took her a few minutes to run the scanner all along the walls, floor, and ceiling of the capsule, checking for dust or hazardous chemicals. She then raised a bulky, older-model VERITAS unit up and did a scan of his EVE signature, checking for any parathreat hitchhikers. Finally satisfied, she then put the scanner away on a holster at her hip and leaned her head in close to Callahan's helmet.

"YOU CAN OPEN UP YOUR SUIT NOW!" she shouted.

Callahan nodded and reached up to undo the collar of his helmet. The air hissed slightly, and he breathed in his first breath of air in his new home.

It smelled kinda like armpits.

Ricci laughed as Callahan's nose wrinkled. "Yeah," she admitted. "It doesn't smell so great in here… but we've got a dozen… a baker's dozen now… anyway, we've got thirteen guys living in an enclosed environment, breathing in each other's body odor. You get used to it after a bit."

"That explains the crate of air fresheners?" he asked, gesturing to a small, sealed box in the corner.

"Yeah," Ricci admitted. "They don't last, and after a while you get sick of the pine tree smell, but… it helps." She helped Callahan to undo the harness of his capsule, then pulled him to his feet. In the low gravity of Pluto, they rose up nearly all the way to the ceiling before coming back down to ground.

"Wow," Callahan breathed.

"Yeah," Ricci laughed. "That's another thing you'll take a while to get used to. Anyway, welcome to Icetown… the GOC's most 'forward' Forward Operating Base."

"Your job is mostly going to be blue-collar," Ricci explained. "Expanding the base, now that you've brought the new module. Maintaining the systems. Watching over the Depot. And, of course, taking readings and doing analysis of the Deep Space Warning System."

"Do the probes ever pick up anything?" Callahan asked.

"Sometimes. I'll explain later. "She looped her arm into a handle next to a low doorway and slid it open. "So this is your room for now," she said, gesturing to the interior of a storage cabinet filled with insulated bags of water. "We'll put down a sleeping bag for you. It'll only be

until we finish installing the new habitation modules you brought up. Then we're all moving in to our nice, new quarters."

"What will you do with the old ones?"

"We didn't have any," Ricci admitted. "We've just been sleeping wherever we can find space. I usually do it in the commander's chair up in C and C."

"That… sounds rough."

"You've got no idea," Ricci sighed. "At least I wasn't here when they were doing initial installation. Those guys had to live in their suits for a solid week before they could get the core modules set up. Not a fun time."

"I met one of them, during training," Callahan admitted. "Agent Xiphos."

"Oh? Swordy? How is that old fart? Haven't seen him since he shunted home."

"He twitches a lot. And still walks with a cane."

"Course he does. Tough bastard like that wouldn't stay in a wheelchair for long." Ricci grimaced and shook her head. "Full gravity's a bitch. Anyway, leave your stuff here. I'll show you the bathroom and galley."

"… and here we are," Richards said, grinning broadly "The Depot. The Coalition's solution for things they can't kill or negotiate with."

The structure was massive: about the size of an aircraft hangar. All throughout the structure were cages, crates, and other containers, all of them open to the vacuum and freezing cold of deep space, each one labeled and numbered and marked with the seal of the Global Occult Coalition.

"Where do you want this one, Richie?" Carter asked, as he maneuvered the small forklift into the building.

"Let's see… Section Three," Richards said, consulting his ruggedized tablet computer. "Next to the Heat-Eater."

Carter deftly maneuvered the device into the back of the building and laid the cylinder down next to a big crate with a temperature gauge that hovered somewhere around absolute zero.

"So, Callahan," Richards asked. "What's in that thing, anyway?"

"The container?" Callahan asked. "Type Red. Expanding Regenerator. Fire didn't work, so they tried ice. That worked, but when it thawed out, it kept coming back to life. So they kept it suspended in liquid nitrogen until it could come out here."

"Makes sense," Richards said. "Hey, want to see our UFO?"

"You mean the actual Zeta Reticulan scout ship? It's here?"

"Yup," Richards said, grinning. "And if you're real nice, I'll even let you sit in the pilot's seat."

"Sounds like a deal."

"You have no idea how good it is to taste actual chocolate again," Ricci crooned, as she took a bite of the Milky Way bar. "Oh God, it's like tasting heaven."

"Hey, boss," Vandenberg said, grinning, "You give me your orange and I'll give you my candy bar."

"Screw that, Van," Ricci laughed. "I'm going to savor every bite of this orange. It's the first time I've had one in a year."

"I thought you guys had an aeroponics garden?" Callahan asked.

"It doesn't have oranges," Ricci pointed out. "Kinda hard to grow an orange tree aeroponically. It does okay for tomatoes and onions, though."

"Ding ding ding!" Carter shouted. He tossed a silvery drinks bag to Callahan, who caught it. "All right, guys. A toast to our new crew

member. To Callahan! And may he find his place with us among the ice and the dark!"

"Hear hear."

"Cheers."

"I'll drink to that."

Callahan nodded gratefully to Carter, then took a big swig of his drink, only to gag and gasp when, instead of the expected water, something closer to pure ethanol hit the back of his throat.

Everyone laughed and cheered and clapped him on the back.

"Jesus Christ!" Callahan groaned. "Where the hell did you find this stuff?"

"We distill some of the leftover carbs into alcohol," Carter grinned. "I've got a still."

"And High Command allows this?" he gasped incredulously.

"High Command knows that we're out here for the long haul, our bones slowly turning into mush, surrounded by helium lakes and hydrogen snow, watching and waiting over the biggest depository of frozen parathreats in the solar system short of the Foundation's own stockpiles, and looking out for alien invaders. We do our job… they forgive us our indulgences."

"Then in that case," Callahan sighed, "I'm glad that part of what I brought along were a bunch of crates of orange juice powder. Screwdriver, anyone?"

"… and contact," Carter said, as the two structures met up.

"Hard dock," Vandenberg announced, as the locking latches hooked into place.

"Expanding the structure now."

In the monitor, Callahan could see the first of the four new habitation modules for the base slowly accordioning open, sliding and locking into place like the world's most complicated and high-tech pop-up book. On another monitor, he could see Carter slowly backing his forklift out of the cylindrical micrometeorite shield that the operatives had constructed from flat-pack parts over the course of the past week. When it had finished deploying, the habitation module would be separated from the hard outer shell by a gap of about three inches of vacuum: good insulation, and good micrometeorite shielding as well.

"… and that's deployment complete," Carter said. "Let's put the end cap on, and check out our new digs."

"Base Commander gets first dibs!" Ricci declared.

"Sorry, Boss," Carter laughed. "We agreed to draw straws, right?"

"This seems remarkably unfair," Ricci complained.

"You're the one who suggested it, Boss," Carter pointed out. "You can't complain if you lose at your own game."

"Whatever. You're all a bunch of assholes," Ricci pouted.

Callahan yawned as he bounced slowly down the corridor towards the galley. It was "night" shift, around the time when most of the station's inhabitants chose to take their sleep cycle, and he needed a warm drink.

He filled up a hot chocolate pouch with hot water from the galley, logged the requisition on the galley computer, and started to head back to the storage closet that was still his quarters until the second hab module finished construction. As he did so, he noticed a low, soft light coming from CIC.

He lifted his way up the ladder and into the base command center, which was located on an elevated module overlooking the rest of the base. The entire upper half of CIC was a giant observation dome made up of thirteen windows in three concentric circles, and it had

some of the best views of the entire base.

Ricci was there, sitting in the commander's chair. She had a blanket wrapped around her, and she was staring intently into the night sky, at the endless expanse of untwinkling stars. She turned to look at Callahan, then smiled at him as she snuggled up in the blanket and stared out into the universe.

"Ever think about why we're out here?" she asked softly.

"… to protect humanity?" Callahan replied. It was the Strike Team answer to that question. "To watch for extraterrestrial threats. To guard the Depot…"

"No," Ricci said, shaking her head. "We could have put the Depot on Antarctica. Or the Moon, for that matter. And we could watch for extraterrestrial threats just as well using ground-based radar installations."

Oh. "Then why?" Callahan wondered. "Why go through all this trouble to build a base out here on Pluto?"

"… if you can answer that question," Ricci said, smiling wistfully, "You'd make thirteen people very happy… but I think I have an answer." She turned in her couch to face him, resting her head on the crook of her elbow. "Why did you volunteer for this assignment?" she asked.

Callahan grimaced. He knew this was going to come up sooner or later. "I was in Strike," he said softly. "… I killed a lot of things… a lot of people. And then I couldn't keep killing. I was done shooting things." He took the seat next to her at the operations center, and played idly with a frayed bit of upholstery on the left armrest. "And when I heard about this assignment… I figured it would be a good chance to do something else. To help the GOC in a way that didn't involve killing people any more."

"For me, it was Assessment," Ricci said softly. "There was a school in Newark. A Katie took out an entire third grade classroom. I had to watch and monitor it happening. We didn't have the assets to take it down. By the time Strike arrived…" She shuddered inwardly at the

memory.

"So that's why Farpoint exists?" Callahan asked, bitterly. "So the GOC can stash away its broken agents somewhere far away from the normal people?"

"… I don't think that's it either," Ricci said. She sat up and took a moment to wrap the blanket around her shoulders. "I think it's simpler than that. I think… we might be an emergency backup supply for humans, in case Earth gets destroyed. Or maybe we're meant to be a bunch of canaries in the coal mine against alien invasion. Or maybe we're just here to prove that humanity could do this… even if we had to do it in secret from the rest of the world. Maybe we're here so that when humanity finally reaches this far… they'll be able to see that we've already been here all along… and we're waiting to help them reach even further."

She got up from her chair and let the blanket fall. She was wearing a tank top and shorts, Callahan saw, and he felt his heart race as the low gravity did charming things to her bustline…

"… maybe we're out here just to be humans," she whispered, as she slid into the chair next to him and kissed him.

Afterwards, he laughed at the absurdity of it all, as they cuddled together under the blanket under the starlight.

"I have to admit, this is a new one for me," Callahan chuckled.

"There's a first time for everything," Ricci giggled. "Just think, though… if only we could tell the world. We could answer so many questions for them about sex in space…"

"I'm ready to keep experimenting if you are." Callahan grinned.

"We've got another hour until night shift ends," Ricci pointed out.

"Plenty of time."

Up above them, the stars slowly turned in their unending dance.

"Sequence"

"Joint Venture"

"This is a really dumb idea," Skunkboy muttered. He shifted his weight on the chameleon-cloth pad he'd been laying on for the past thirty-six hours. He was pretty sure he was developing some sores on his elbows and knees. Worst of all, he was running out of bags to store his piss in, and pretty soon, despite all the immodium and MRE peanut butter, he was going to have to take a shit… and it was a choice between sneaking into the building and risking getting caught, or taking one of the alternatives that would make him even more miserable.

All in all, it was pretty much like any other mission for a scout sniper, except that he was laying all alone on the roof of a Hong Kong skyscraper rather than in the middle of the woods or the desert. On the other hand, there was the fucking noise. Even with the plugs in his ears, the dull roar of the building's ventilation equipment was beginning to rattle his jaws.

He blinked back the exhaustion and closed his eyes for a few moments to clear the blurry double-vision from them, then lowered his face back to his spotter's scopes. Hong Kong at night was actually kinda pretty, he decided. It was just a shame that he wasn't going to have the chance to do any sightseeing. Except for a small stretch of warehouses near the docks.

A flicker of light and movement caught his attention. He swung the scope around very slowly, then nodded to himself and keyed his throat mike for the first time in over six hours. "Sparkplug Two to all units. How do you read? Over."

"Sparkplug one, reading loud and clear."

"Three, loud and clear."

"Four, loud and clear. Over."

"Got it. Everyone reading loud and clear. Two here. I've got a mission report: Opposition elements are approaching the docks on schedule. Convoy consists of four vehicles, description follows: One convertible sports car, red, highly customized. Two SUVs, both black. One van, also black. VERITAS reads… two persons in sports car. Four persons each in the SUVs. Two persons in the van… no VERITAS signature from the back of the van. All persons read as baseline humans, no parathreats. Break."

"Um, Four here," Spider said, interrupting Skunkboy. "You're certain there's no VERITAS signature from the back of the van? There should be at least one. Over."

"Two here. Wait one." Skunkboy adjusted the settings on his VERITAS scope and did a second scan of the van. "Yeah, no dice, Spider. Nothing, over."

"That's not right. The manifest included at least one living creature… damn it." Skunkboy heard Spider mutter under her breath. He was sure that the team's thaumatologist was pacing back and forth again, as she tended to do when agitated. "Damn."

"Do you want to abort, Spider?" Bullfrog interrupted.

"No. I'm good," Spider said. "But keep a close eye on them for me. I don't know what's going on."

"All right, then. Mission is go. If the shooting starts, I initiate. Acknowledged?"

"Two here. We wait until you shoot or order it. Over."

"Three," Kitten said. "You start the shooting. Over."

"What do I do if we start shooting?" Spider asked.

"Hit the deck and find some cover," Bullfrog said. "And hope you don't get shot."

"That's not a very comforting prospect." Spider said sardonically.

"It'll have to do. Let's cut the chatter. Out."

Skunkboy adjusted his stance and stretched his toes out a little bit. Just a little longer, and it would all be over.

"Lao Feng isn't going to like this," Zheng muttered.

"Lao Feng can kiss my ass," Yang said. "His superstitions haven't gotten us anywhere. Meanwhile, the Silver Swords are cutting into the market… girls, guns, and drugs aren't going to cut it any more. We need to get in on this on the ground floor."

"This isn't like running hookers or heroin, or even guns," Zheng insisted. "This is more like getting involved with dealing nukes or chemical weapons… I don't like this."

It wasn't a new argument: the two men had argued these points many times in the past few days. Every time, the disagreement ended the same way.

"You'd rather let Shi Wang Zhou and his thugs run all over us? You'd rather see that dogfucker Lefty feeling up your little sisters?" Yang growled. "Because that's what's going to happen if the Silver Swords get a lock on the market."

"You know I don't want that, but… shit. This is fucking scary."

"Keep it to yourself, then," Yang muttered. "I don't want you pissing yourself in front of the foreigners."

"You know I've got your back, bro."

"I know you do," Yang agreed. "All right. Game face, lil bro."

The red convertible pulled up to the warehouse and came to a halt, followed shortly by the two SUVS and the van carrying the goods. Yang's brow furrowed as he looked into the dimly lit, empty warehouse.

"I thought they'd bring more people," he admitted.

"Arrogant fuckers," Zheng agreed.

He got out of the convertible and jogged over to the first SUV, rapping on the window. It rolled down, tinted glass giving way to reveal a huge man with a sardonic grin and an ugly, puckered scar running across the entire left side of his face.

"What's up, Yang?"

"They've only got three people. I don't want to spook them. So have the rest of the boys wait outside," Yang said.

"Shit, you sure that's smart? What if something goes down?"

"Shit's much less likely to go down if the foreigners don't think this is a fucking setup. Everyone stays outside," Yang insisted. "But keep an eye out… and make sure everyone's armed."

"You got it, bro."

Yang took a moment to adjust the collar of his shirt in the reflection on the side of the SUV, before rejoining Zheng by the convertible. "Ready?" he asked.

"Yeah, let's go."

There were three of them waiting inside the dimly-lit warehouse. Two of them looked like brainless thugs: one of them a tall, muscular looking woman with bored eyes and short-cropped hair. The other was a short, stout looking man with a big beard, whose ill-fitting suit strained to contain his broad chest. Yang marked them as soldiers. Probably bodyguards for the third: an Asian woman wearing a well-tailored suit: fairly young and attractive in a broad-hipped sort of way. She was nervous, despite her best efforts to hide it: she kept pushing up her glasses and fiddling with her expensive-looking tablet computer. Maybe a new lieutenant for the actual boss.

"You're late," she said irritably, as Yang walked into the warehouse. "And you brought too many people with you."

"Are you sure you didn't bring enough?" Yang said, grinning disarmingly. "If I were carrying that much cash on me, I'd have brought more than two guards."

"I did," the young woman said curtly. She fiddled nervously with a lock of her hair. "Tell the thug outside to please look down at his chest before he gets any more ideas about sending teams to flank us."

Yang turned and looked out the door, and pursed his lips, before nodding to Zheng.

"Cuntface," Zheng growled into his walkie-talkie. "Quit trying to be clever and tell the boys to go back to the cars."

"But…"

"Look at your chest, you fucking idiot," Zheng snapped. "The foreigners have you in their sights."

There was a brief bout of cursing over the radios, as the scar-faced goon finally saw the red dot floating on his chest, and a flurry of movement and shouting as a bunch of guys sheepishly emerged from the shadows and jogged back to the cars.

"I thought that snipers usually don't use laser sights," Yang mused. "Especially not visible light ones."

"Consider it… making a point," the woman said, sighing with relief. "Now that we've gotten that out of the way, shall we move on to business?"

Skunkboy carefully turned off the laser pointer and slid it back into his pants pocket. It was a silly trick, but one that worked pretty well for intimidation purposes.

The taller one with the fancy silk shirt nodded to his friend, who growled a couple of words into his walkie-talkie. The big van pulled away from the two SUVs and began backing up towards the warehouse door.

"Shit," Skunkboy whispered over the comms. "I don't have a line of sight to inside the van."

"Watch the fuckers outside," Bullfrog muttered. "Let Kitten and I

worry about the van."

"Boss, there's eight of the motherfuckers outside," Skunkboy griped. "Even I can't take on eight of them."

"Then get the leader and keep the rest of their heads down, if it comes to that," Bullfrog said, "and we'll help out as soon as possible."

"Easy for you to fucking say," Skunkboy muttered, but he ducked his head back down and continued to scan the exterior scene through his rifle scope.

Just to be sure, though, he made sure he had a round in the chamber.

The van doors opened, and the young woman's brow furrowed. She reached into the back of the van and rattled the bars of a heavy-gauge wire cage. "… it's dead," she said.

"It was alive when we left," Yang insisted.

"Well, it's dead now," the woman hissed. She rattled the bars of the cage again and threw her hands in the air. "What am I supposed to do with a dead specimen?"

"Stuff it and mount it? I don't know…"

"Wait," the woman snapped. "Are these cage bars steel?"

"Is that a problem?"

"Yes, it's a problem! These things are allergic to ferrous metals!" the woman shouted angrily. "No wonder it died on the way here! It was probably dead of shock before it got halfway here! And your brainless thugs didn't notice?"

"Kai?" Yang growled.

"… we heard it yelling and thrashing!" the younger man admitted. "But we thought it was just…"

"You stupid dogfucking idiot!" Yang shouted. "You didn't think to tell me?"

"But…" Kai halted and bit back the rest of his words, before bowing his head respectfully to the older man. "No excuse, sir."

"Get the fuck back in the van and start unloading. I'll deal with you later," Yang shouted. He turned back to the woman and gave her his best, most charming smile. "Now… I deeply apologize for…"

"I'm not paying full price for the shipment," the woman interrupted. "Two million only."

"That's half of what we agreed upon!" Zheng objected. "Just because one stupid animal is dead?"

"That stupid animal was the most valuable thing in the shipment. All the rest is trinkets. Two million. Take it or leave it."

"We'll take it," Yang said curtly. He turned to his friend and said, in a low voice, "You want them to start dealing with the Swords instead?"

"… two million isn't enough. We can't arm ourselves on two million. We need at least three," Zheng pointed out.

"We'll make do with two million for now. And we'll set up a second shipment for the foreigners."

"That's not going to help if the Silver Swords make their move before then."

"Then we'll just have to pray that they don't," Yang said. "Maybe you should invest some of that two million in incense for the gods."

He slapped his friend on the shoulder and turned back to the foreigners. "Two million."

"Oh, thank fucking God," Skunkboy sighed. "You have no idea how close that ugly dude out here came to shooting. He actually had his gun out of its holster."

"Well, it's over now," Bullfrog said. "So get packed up and let's get the fuck out of this country."

"All right, I'll see you… wait one." Skunkboy halted as something moved in the corner of his field of vision. He panned the scope down and to the left. "Fuck!" he snapped. "Boss, I fucked up!"

Yang was surprised when the big foreigner, the man, put his hand to his ear and shouted, "Situation report!" in English, very loudly. He was even more surprised when the foreigner grabbed the young woman by the shoulder and pulled her away from the van and pushed her to the ground, one hand dipping into his jacket as he did so.

"What the hell is this?" Yang shouted.

"We're about to get hit!" Bullfrog snapped. "This is a fucking setup!"

Yang turned to yell for Cuntface Teng and the boys to get ready, but as he turned to face his soldiers, he realized that all eight of them had their guns out… and pointed at him.

Oh. So it's THAT kind of setup.

He grabbed Zheng by the collar and pulled him to the ground just as the shooting started.

It was really too easy, in the end. All but two of the boys were in on the plan, and those two were in the warehouse with Yang and Zheng. It was too bad that his plan to sneak a few guys to block off the back exits had failed, but he would make do with two-to-one odds.

Cuntface Teng wasn't exactly the brightest bulb in the pack, but he was smart enough to see where the tide was turning. And the tide was most definitely turning away from Lao Feng and towards Shi Wang Zhou. Not that he had anything against the old man, but there was no way the family was going to survive, not against the resources the Silver Swords could muster.

Lao Feng was old school. He believed in the gods and the spirits. That sort of antiquated mindset wasn't going to work any more.

It was a shame that a bunch of good boys were going to die, good boys that Shi Wang Zhou could use. At the very least, he'd get to see that faggot Yang get it.

"Skunkboy!" Bullfrog shouted over the comms. "Take these fuckers out!"

"Can't!" Skunkboy shouted back. "I've got three fucking vehicles full of fucking Triads coming up the road!"

"Shit!" Bullfrog shouted. He was seriously hating this entire fucking mission. Bullets were snapping past his head and splintering the wooden crates behind him and punching holes into the side of the van. He could already see one of the Triad guys laying on the ground in a pool of blood. A second was huddled behind the van's wheel, weeping and cursing as he tried to stop a wound in his leg that was pouring blood. A second burst of gunfire skipped off the concrete and into his gut, and he slumped over, breath gurgling.

The two remaining gangsters had managed to get behind cover along with his team: the boss guy with the fancy shirt and his friend with the angry eyes. They had pistols in their hands, and were firing wildly over the tops of the crates, before ducking back down as another burst of gunfire stitched through the air.

The situation, Bullfrog realized, was looking pretty much unsurvivable. He was pinned down by a force with superior numbers and firepower. He had the advantage of cover for now, but it was only a matter of time before the enemy managed to flank him. Then he was going to die.

It was time to do something stupid.

"Kitten!" he shouted.

The tall, wiry woman glanced up from her position. Her expression had not changed one bit from its usual boredom, even when a close

burst caused a bullet to whip by so close to her face that it actually ruffled her hair.

Bullfrog slid his pistol across the concrete to his teammate. "Go start some shit," he shouted.

Kitten's eyes lit up. Her mouth twisted into a fierce, angry grin. Bullfrog saw her draw the biggest fucking knife he'd ever seen from some hidden sheath under her suit jacket and hold it in her teeth. She closed her eyes for a moment, inhaled once long and slow, exhaled sharply.

Then she moved.

Skunkboy had a bit of a love-hate relationship with the United States Marine Corps. On the one hand, they'd taken half a decade of his life, forced him to endure shitty food and idiotic colleagues, and basically given him nothing but hatred and contempt for the modern military. If he had to deal with one more slogan-spewing jarhead in his life, it would be too much. When the recruiter had asked him to re-up after his first term of service, he'd laughed at the guy to his face.

On the other hand, there were times when the Marine Corps way of doing things could be useful. Like when you were a lone marksman on the roof of a Hong Kong building trying to stop three big vans full of bloodthirsty Triad gangsters.

At times like those, there were few things that felt more comfortable, more familiar, to him, than his old Parris Island indoctrinations.

"This is my rifle," he murmured, as he shifted over to his weapon and lined up his shot. "There are many like it, but this one is mine."

He was going to have to time his shot perfectly. It would be best if he could catch the convoy just as they were about to exit where the street narrowed, between two warehouse buildings.

"My rifle is my best friend. It is my life. I must master it as I must master my life."

The driver… that would be a tough shot. Maybe he should go for the engine instead?

"My rifle, without me, is useless. Without my rifle, I am useless. I must fire my rifle true."

Deep breath. Inhale. Exhale. Take up the slack. Line up the shot. Get into the rhythm of your own beating heart.

"I must shoot straighter than my enemy who is trying to kill me. I must shoot him before he shoots me."

Crack.

The first round was a good one, but Skunkboy was already working the bolt and lining up his second, even before the first round hit home. He had barely enough time to see the bullet punch through the hood of the vehicle, enough time to see the hood start to spew smoke. He fired his second shot, was gratified to see the driver's side window shatter, but the driver had slammed the brakes so hard that the car behind it rear-ended the lead vehicle. He saw the driver stumble out of the door and start yelling and waving to his allies.

"I will."

Crack.

Skunkboy saw the driver of the lead car stumble and slump to the ground, rolling in agony as he clutched his abdomen. The guy riding shotgun was trying to lean over and get the car moving again, so Skunkboy put another round through the hood, for good measure.

Then he got to work.

Cuntface Teng's first warning was when the two smoke grenades came rolling out from the dimly lit warehouse and began spewing red smoke all over the area, causing the world to become shrouded in a scarlet mist. In the light of the streetlamps, it gave the entire place a hellish air.

"Watch it!" he shouted to his teams. "They may try to escape

through the smo—"

There was the sound of rapidly moving feet. He saw the tall female foreigner sprinting across the open court. Her eyes were wide and wild, and she had a giant knife in her teeth and a gun in each hand.

Cuntface Teng wanted to laugh. Everyone knew that there was no way in hell to shoot straight with a gun in each hand! The foreigner had been seeing too many John Woo action movies!

He ducked behind the van as a wild fusillade of gunfire snapped towards him and the boys. The shots were mostly wild, and failed to hit anyone, as expected. All he'd have to do is wait for the bitch to run out of ammunition, and then…

He saw Loverboy Lu go down. Something spun in the air where it had bounced off his forehead: one of the two pistols the bitch had carried. Fatheaded Kai tried to shoot her, got his submachinegun kicked out of his hand, and then she beat his face in with the butt of her empty pistol before slashing open his throat with that huge fucking knife.

She'd never intended to hit anyone.

The pistols were just to keep him and his boys' heads down while she closed the distance.

She slid the empty pistol back into the direction of the warehouse, where the big male foreigner stopped it with his foot and reloaded it. He raised the pistol in a two-handed grip and began firing slow and methodical, hugging the wall of the warehouse.

Within a few moments, six of his guys were down. Two more killed by that crazy bitch with the knife, two of them shot by the big male. Teng's will broke. He turned and ran for it.

As he fled, he could hear the screaming of his two remaining guys. After a few minutes, he couldn't even hear that any more.

Skunkboy often thought that an enemy unit in panic mode looked a lot like an anthill, after someone had poked it with a stick.

There were a bunch of the Triad guys milling around, pointing in every direction, shooting out windows at random and yelling at each other a lot. It was almost comical.

A moment like this didn't seem to deserve the solemnity of the Rifleman's Creed. It was time for something a little more… upbeat.

"We shoot the sick, the young, the lame, we do our best to maim," he hummed. He knew he had the biggest grin on his face. He didn't care. "Because the kills all count the same…"

Crack!

"Napalm sticks to kids…"

He ejected the magazine of his rifle and laid it neatly next to the two empty mags he'd already gone through. He carefully seated his third magazine, worked the bolt, and raised the rifle back to his shoulder.

"Flying low across the trees, pilots doing what they please…"

Crack!

One more Triad down. That made four.

"Dropping frags on refugees… Napalm sticks to kids…"

All things considered, this was actually going pretty well for him.

"Situation report!" Bullfrog snapped, as the firing ceased.

"I've got the backup pinned down," Skunkboy reported. "Looks like they're getting ready to bug out."

"Eight down," Kitten said. "One got away. The scarfaced one that started the shooting."

"I'll find him," Zheng hissed. "Lao Feng isn't going to let him get away with this. Ten good soldiers dead in one night."

"I know," Yang said grimly. "But for now…" He turned back to the

Asian woman who he had thought was their leader, and bowed deeply and respectfully. "My apologies," he said. "I was unable to control my men, and put us all in danger. If you had not been ready for them, we would have all lost our lives. I promise you, we will find the traitor and exact our punishment against him."

"When I find him I'll feed him his own balls raw. After I cut off a finger for each of our brothers he killed," Zheng agreed.

"I think I can help you with that," Spider said. She pushed her glasses up into place, and her dark eyes were fierce and angry.

Cuntface Teng wept as he staggered through the alleyway alone.

It just wasn't fair. This wasn't how it was supposed to happen. American bitches weren't supposed to murder ten trained Triad killers with a knife and a pistol. He, Cuntface Teng, was supposed to be the terror of Lao Feng's soldiers. The terror of Lao Feng's soldiers wasn't supposed to run from a battle with pants stained with urine and a giant gash across one arm.

He was going to have to go to Shi Wang Zhou. It was his only choice. That faggot Yang would make sure everyone knew what he had done… and the Families didn't treat traitors very well. He'd gambled and lost… it was time to get out of the game before he lost his entire stake.

He was stepping out into the light of the rising sun when he felt the pain stab into his lower abdomen. He screamed as he crumpled over and clutched at his stomach… then began to howl in agony as a burst of blinding pain started at the base of his spine and raked slowly up his back. Then he clutched at his eyes and wept as what felt like pure fire stabbed into his optic nerves.

As the sun rose over Hong Kong, the man they called Cuntface Teng writhed and howled in agonizing pain, unable to do anything but huddle in the shadow of the abandoned warehouses and scream.

Spider gave the burlap doll one more vicious stab in the groin for good measure, before pinning it to the side of the van with Kitten's knife. She had stitched the doll together many weeks before, filling it with graveyard earth and a dash of silicon oxide. It only needed a link to her intended victim to provide the contagion it needed to find a target… a link like the blood Kitten had drawn when she had, spectacularly, slashed open the unfortunate Teng's arm with her kukri.

"Are we done here, Spider?" Bullfrog asked.

"Yeah, we're done." She turned to the two Triad leaders and slipped back into her childhood Mandarin. "You'll find your traitorous dog of a former colleague at the east side of the docks. He'll be screaming in agony. Don't take the knife out until you find him."

"… who the hell are you people anyway?" the fancy man in the nice shirt asked.

"… don't worry about it," Spider replied, smiling disarmingly. "Better to think about what you guys are."

"Which is?"

"The ones who rooted out the traitor working for Shi Wang Zhou, and brought him back to Lao Feng alive."

She hopped into the back of the van alongside Kitten and Bullfrog, who had finished loading the goods into their vehicle while she had performed her working. She gave the two perplexed-looking Chinese gangsters a cheerful wave as the three of them drove out of the warehouse.

"You do realize," Kitten pointed out, "that we need to retrieve Skunkboy, evade the Hong Kong police department, and somehow make our way back home now, right?"

"Yup," Bullfrog said.

"Just wanted to be sure." The tall woman leaned back her seat and closed her eyes.

A few moments later, she started snoring.

"Sometimes, I envy that crazy bitch," Bullfrog admitted.

"That wasn't exactly what I had in mind when I agreed to this joint operation," D.C. al Fine said to the shimmering image of the old Chinese man sitting in the chair across from her.

"The objectives were met. The shipment was stopped. The mole was rooted out, and soon Shi Wang Zhou's illegal operation will be halted," **Lao Feng, Leader of the Immortal Lily Brotherhood** said. He picked up a teacup that didn't exist in al Fine's office and took a small, measured sip, before wiping the rim with a napkin and putting it back down on the tea table.

"We also shot up a Hong Kong warehouse, killed over a dozen guys, and brought the attention of the Hong Kong PD upon the entire thing," al Fine pointed out. "I hope whatever you found out from the informant was worth it."

"It was. We confirmed that Shi Wang Zhou found and took over an abandoned Factory manufacturing plant and reopened it. He has been pumping out threat entity-level artifacts daily. His quality is shoddy, but his prices are much cheaper than his competitors." Lao Feng laughed and shook his head. "The irony was not lost on me."

"Will you need our help in taking them down? I could dispatch a couple of Strike Teams."

"The day that the Immortal Lily Brotherhood needs your help in a war against its rival gangs is the day that we finally join your Global Occult Coalition," Lao Feng said, smiling politely. "No, I thank you for your help, but we shall handle this matter ourselves."

"Just so long as you hand over all Factory assets to the Coalition," al Fine insisted.

"Of course. I have no desire to get involved in paranormal matters. The affairs of ghosts and gods are no place for a simple Hong Kong businessman."

"You are going to have to, eventually. It's not a good sign that two of your most trusted lieutenants tried to pull off a paranormal arms deal right under your nose," al Fine pointed out.

"I knew of their plans long before. If I had not wished to root out the traitor in my organization, we would have… had words… long before. As it is, I feel I owe Yang an apology… and an explanation. Perhaps it is time to tell him what the Immortal Lily Brotherhood really is."

"He might not be happy. He signed on to join a Triad gang, not an ancient Chinese order of monster hunters."

"He will adapt. Good bye, Ma'am."

"Good bye, Lao Feng."

"… You know," Zheng sighed. "One of these days I'm going to end up following you into an early grave."

The two gangsters were sitting together on the balcony of one of the Immortal Lily Brotherhood's safe houses, watching the sun set over Hong Kong. The city, Yang thought, had never looked more beautiful.

"No one says you need to follow," Yang pointed out. "You could just run."

"Dying would be easier," Zheng said. He put his hand over that of his friend's, and leaned in to kiss the other man on the cheek. "As it is, you owe me for this, my brother."

"Dinner at the Lucky Dragon, then? Once the heat dies down?"

"That would be a good place to start." Zheng laughed. "And maybe now we can enjoy ourselves without that homophobe Teng giving us shit."

"It would be hard for him to call me a faggot with no tongue," Yang agreed.

He kissed Zheng back, and the two men shared a brief moment of affection, before walking back into the apartment and turning out the lights. Outside, the sun finally dipped below the horizon, shrouding the city in twilight.

"Sequence"
« **"AWTOK"** | **`Return to GOC Hub`** | **Trauma»**

"Scramble Order"

Skunkboy knocked on the apartment door. There was no response.

He knocked on the door again. Still no response.

He very carefully stepped to one side of the door and pressed his ear against the wall. He thought he could hear the sound of footsteps and a low, muffled, masculine curse.

Oh. Crap.

Skunkboy took a deep breath. He pulled his pistol from his waistband holster. Checked the chamber for a round. Made sure the magazine was seated. Checked the safety.

He laid the pistol on the ground where he could grab it quickly, then rummaged around in his jacket pocket for his breaching kit.

A moment later, the door opened.

He froze.

Spider was standing in the doorway. Her cheeks were flushed and her hair was disheveled and her eyes were angry. She was wearing a black silk nightgown, embroidered with red-and-gold spiders.

It was immediately obvious to Skunkboy that she wasn't wearing underwear.

Ohhhhh… Skunkboy thought. And then *… crap.*

"Sorry about this," he said cautiously. "We tried to contact you by phone, but you weren't picking up."

"I'm supposed to be off-duty," Spider said coldly. "Couldn't this wait until morning?"

"It seriously can't," Skunkboy said. "Scramble Alert. We need to deploy as soon as possible."

"Fuck," Spider growled. "All right. You may as well wait inside, so the neighbors don't freak out about an armed psychopath in the hallway."

She turned away and re-entered her apartment. Skunkboy carefully gathered up his weapon and breaching kit and followed her inside.

"Nice place," he said admiringly. "I like the *shoji* screens. Adds a bit of coziness. Breaks up the big empty space."

"Also helps the *feng shui,*" Spider explained. "Prevents the positive energy from flowing out and breaks up negative energy trying to come in." She seemed to be getting grumpy now, which was better than pissed off in Skunkboy's book. "There's water in the fridge if you need it. Bathroom's down the hall."

She marched into the next room and closed the door behind her. Skunkboy heard muffled conversation coming from within.

His throat suddenly felt very dry. He decided to avail himself of the water and ice dispensers set into the fridge.

He was just taking a sip when the bedroom door opened and a young man walked out, shrugging into a dark blue blazer. Skunkboy looked over the newcomer with a discerning eye. Nice cheekbones. Strong jawline. Good abs.

Nice…

The stranger picked up a half-empty bottle and two champagne flutes from the lacquered wood coffee table. He flinched as he looked up and saw Skunkboy standing in the kitchen, sipping his glass of water. "Um. Hi," the stranger said nervously.

"You're Flintlock, right?" Skunkboy asked. "From PTOLEMY division? Public Relations and Information Concealment?"

"Yeah. You must be, uhhh…"

"Skunkboy. Team sharpshooter. I'd offer to shake your hand, but you're busy."

"Oh. Yeah. We were just, uhh… having an evening…" Flint's face flushed pink, which he tried to hide by rinsing the champagne flutes out in the sink. Skunkboy could smell a whiff of Spider's perfume coming off his skin, and noted that the top button of his shirt seemed to have come loose.

He briefly considered one of two courses of action to take and settled on the more entertaining one.

"Did you cut yourself shaving?" he asked.

"What?" Flint replied.

"You've got a little red on your collar," Skunkboy said. He pointed at a patch of smudged lipstick on Flint's shirt collar and was gratified to see the other man start to stammer.

Bam. Right through the X-Ring on the first shot.

"Stop harrassing my boyfriend, Skunky," Spider said. She emerged from the bedroom wearing a black turtleneck and slacks, her hair tied up in a loose bun, her bug-out bag slung over her shoulder. "All right, hon, I'm out," she said to Flint. "Just remember to lock up when you leave."

"Come back safe," Flintlock said.

Spider paused to give Flintlock one of those slow, lingering kisses that makes everyone else in the room cough and look at their watches, which Skunkboy did. "All right," she said. "Let's get going."

Damn. Out-maneuvered.

Skunkboy ceded this round to Spider.

"So what the hell is going on that they're issuing a Scramble Alert to an Assessment Team, of all things?" Spider asked on the elevator ride down.

"I have no idea. They don't tell me these things," Skunkboy said. "All I know is that Bullfrog needs us back at HQ within the hour, no questions asked."

"I am a mushroom," Spider grumbled.

Kept in the dark and fed bullshit. "Hoorah, Semper Fi, Do or Die, and *Tennouheika Banzai.*" Skunkboy said.

The elevator continued its slow descent down towards the basement of the apartment building.

"So…" Skunkboy said.

"So…" Spider agreed.

The elevator continued to descend.

"You've been dating that guy for a few months now," Skunkboy said.

"I have," Spider agreed.

"… I hope I wasn't interrupting, like… you know. THE night," Skunkboy said.

"We've slept together before," Spider said.

"Oh. Cool."

The elevator continued to continue to descend.

"He treating you right?"

"… do you mean in bed or in general?" Spider asked.

"Yes."

Spider shrugged, and a small, pleased smile appeared on her face. "Well, he calls after each date. He picks up the check at dinner, but doesn't flip out if I want to pay for half. And he brings me flowers."

"Nice," Skunkboy said.

"… plus, he does this thing with his tongue that's like… really good."

"Niiiiice," Skunkboy said, grinning. "High five."

They exchanged high fives, and Skunkboy ruffled the smaller woman's hair. "If he ever hurts you," he said, "Let us know."

"Thanks," Spider said, "but if he hurts me, I'll take care of him myself."

"Really?"

"Contagion is an interesting thing. You can attack someone through their toenail clippings, hair clippings… but bodily fluids have some of the strongest links," Spider explained. "That's why a lot of mages are celibate."

"Really. Huh." Skunkboy said thoughtfully. "So after sleeping with him…"

"I could wither his balls into raisins and make his piss feel like glass and fire. And that would just be for starters," Spider said.

"Remind me never to date Type Blues," Skunkboy said, laughing. "You mages are scary."

"Mmm… there are benefits," Spider said smugly.

"Huh." Skunkboy was about to ask more, but then the elevator dinged and the doors slid open.

"Where are you parked?" Spider asked.

"Visitor spot number six," Skunkboy said. "This way."

The two of them continued across the parking structure towards visitor parking.

"So yeah," Spider said. "My focus of study has been on neo-traditional thaumaturgy. Studying traditional forms of magic and updating them to modern understandings of thaumatology."

"Yeah. Hence the knives and the mistletoe and stuff."

"Mm hmm," Spider said. "Well, my current focus of study is O.T.O. Ordo Templi Orientis. Aleister Crowley and stuff like that. Most of his stuff is bunk, but there's enough info in there that I've been researching and refining down into the useful core."

"… I have no idea what you're talking about. Or how that relates to your boyfriend."

"Crowley did a lot of work in sex magick," Spider explained. "And the better the orgasms, the more energy generated."

"… huh. So basically, you've been spending your research budget from ICSUT…"

"Practicing better ways to fuck my boyfriend," Spider said, sounding unbelievably smug.

"Nice." Skunkboy popped open the trunk of his car, and Spider tossed her bag inside. "Found anything useful?"

"A little bit. Mostly academic, though. Not much there that I can use in my day job. I mean, I can't exactly carry a vibrator and scented candles into the field." She opened the door of the red sports car and climbed into the front passenger's seat.

"You'd be surprised. I've seen weirder things in the field." Skunkboy slid into the driver's seat and buckled up.

"Oh?"

"Yeah. Hang on, I need to give Bull a call." Skunkboy dropped his smart phone into the docking port on the dashboard of his car and pressed a couple of buttons. The phone lit up and began to dial as he started up the engine and pulled out of the parking spot.

Click.

"Skunkboy, this is Bullfrog," a baritone voice said. "Go."

"I've got Spider, and we're on our way in," Skunkboy said. "ETA

fifteen minutes."

"All right. Kitten's already here. Meet us in the briefing room and I'll explain when you guys get here. Bullfrog out."

Click.

"So yeah," Skunkboy said, as they drove out of the parking structure. (A pale blue line of runes across the driveway glowed briefly as they passed: the protective ward confirming that everyone in the car was in it of their own free will). "You ever meet Knuckles? From 792 Fire Lance?"

"… yeah?"

"Brings a fleshlight, dildo, and lube every mission."

"… why?!" Spider exclaimed incredulously.

"Man, I don't know and I don't fucking want to know. Or how the fuck he got the handle 'Knuckles' in the first place. Dude's fucking strange." Skunkboy stopped at the red light, leaned his elbow against the driver's side door and watched the cross-traffic drive by. "He's one of the best safecrackers in PHYSICS Division, though. There's that."

"… so he's really good at putting long, thin, hard things into tight cracks? Working in tight spaces?" Spider smirked.

"Ha! I didn't even think about that angle." The light turned green, and Skunkboy continued on. "And that's not even getting into the condoms, tampons, pads, and other shit we use as field-expedient solutions. Sometimes I think we just do it to fuck with Q Division."

"Man, don't even get me started on Quartermaster Division. You know they've got digi-cam tampons in stock?" Spider asked.

"Really? Why the fuck would you need tactical tampons?" Skunkboy wondered.

"Having your period in the field? But if they're gonna get all bloody anyway, what's the point?"

"I mean, I can kinda understand the wrappers and applicators and shit being digi-cam, but the tampons themselves? I mean, it's not like they make us digi-cam our shell casings." Skunkboy made a left turn at a yellow light and pulled onto the freeway. "Plus, isn't that dangerous? Dyeing tampons, I mean. Toxic Shock Syndrome and shit like that?"

"Man, I don't even know. Q Division is a bunch of fucking weirdos," Spider said. "That bald asshole with the Batman tattoo on the back of his head…"

"Spencer?"

"Yeah, that motherfucker," Spider griped. "Every time I go down there, he tries to tell me that I should trade in my 1911 for a USP. 'Bigger magazine,'" Spider said, doing a passable imitation of a gruff, Southern accent. "'Yew don' wanna be stuck out thar in the shit wit' only seven rounds in yer mag, do ya little lady?' Fuck off! As if I'd ever be able to shoot one of those big-ass double-wides with these tiny hands," Spider grumbled.

"Spencer's a fucking tool," Skunkboy agreed. "Go to Vic instead. Little old dude with the Colonel Sanders beard. He's old-school."

"Yeah, I know Vic. He looks at me as if I'm a three-headed kitten or something. And I've heard some of the shit he says in the mess hall. Dude's 'phobic as hell."

"… huh. Really?" Skunkboy said curiously.

"Well, I'm not sure. He could be calling me 'that he-she from Sparkplug' with the best of intentions," Spider said sarcastically.

"… well. That's disappointing as shit. And against policy." They pulled into the parking lot of a nondescript office building, crossing another line of blue runes that glowed briefly as they passed. "You should take it up with Schowalter in HR." Skunkboy popped the trunk and pulled his bug-out bag and rifle case, slinging the latter over his shoulder.

"It's not worth rocking the boat over," Spider insisted, retrieving her

bag from the trunk.

"Bullshit. You're not at your best if you don't trust your Quartermaster. And if you're not at your best, it puts the rest of us in danger. Talk to Angela. She'll straighten Vic out." Skunkboy closed the trunk, and the two of them headed into the building.

"I guess. It's weird, though. I've put up with that shit all my life, but I didn't figure it would keep on going after I went for full identity reassignment. I mean, shit. I'm female down to the DNA now. No different from Kitten or Fox," Spider grumbled.

"Eh. There's always gonna be some asshole hates you for no good reason, and they'll justify it any way they can. Human nature." Skunkboy walked to the elevator, hid the button from view with his body, and turned the "up" button so that the arrow faced down, pressed it three times. "Anyway, talk to Angela. She'll work it out."

"I guess. You think it might cause problems between us and Q Division, though?" Spider wondered.

"I don't know. But you think you're the only one Vic's talking shit about behind their back? Best to let HR deal with it and smooth this issue out for you."

The elevator went ding, and the doors opened. Spider and Skunkboy walked in, and the doors closed. Shortly afterwards, the back wall of the elevator slid open, revealing a second elevator with bare steel walls and floor.

Skunkboy pressed the button for the bottom level, and the elevator descended into the hidden section under the unassuming office building. "Anyway, if you don't want to talk to HR, I'll do it for you," Skunkboy said. "I won't even mention your name."

"All right. That's fine, though, I'll talk to Angela once we get back from the Scramble," Spider said. "Speaking of which, we'd better get our game faces on, and find out what the hell is so important that it's worth pulling me out of bed for." Spider paused. "You weren't in the middle of anything too important, were you?"

"… Powerpuff Girls marathon," Skunkboy admitted.

"… really?"

"Sister asked me if I'd come over and watch her daughters for the evening," Skunkboy said. "If you think YOU were pissed, imagine how Vicky felt when I told her she had to come home from her date early."

"Shit. Now I feel bad."

"Eh. Her date was trash. Didn't even walk her to the door."

"What a fucking asshole," Spider agreed.

Skunkboy opened the briefing room door, and they walked inside.

"Sequence"

« **UHEC** | **`Return to GOC Hub`** | **END** »

"Special Observer"

"It's the same old story that it's always been," Dr. Elaine Wicks said. "The farmers and ranchers keep slashing and burning their way into the forest. When they encounter the local tribes, they drive them off, sometimes by force. There are supposed to be laws in place to protect them, but the local governments are less than eager to enforce them. If you could put a word in with your superiors…"

"I'll pass your concerns on to them," the man known as Joseph Knight said, "but I can't guarantee that they'll take action. I'm only here to assess the historical significance of the find."

"Of course. That's what UNESCO needs to be concerned with," Dr. Wicks said bitterly. "Protecting the ruins. Those have world significance, don't they?"

"The United Nations is, of course, concerned with the human rights of the indigenous inhabitants," Knight replied. "But that doesn't fall under my jurisdiction. I can promise, however, that your concerns will be passed on to the relevant authorities."

"That's all I ask," Dr. Wicks said. "The Yashiwa are a fascinating tribe, and it would be a crime if their culture and heritage were destroyed so that Americans can get fat on hamburgers…"

"I prefer tacos," Knight said. "If you'd excuse me, ma'am?"

He nodded respectfully to the doctor and walked out of his trailer into the stifling heat of the Amazon rainforest. His thin shirt clung to his body, and the chirruping sounds of insects and brightly colored birds surrounded him like a kaleidoscope of sound. The camp was a small one: several tents, a latrine, and a trailer with computers, satellite uplink, and a gasoline-powered generator augmented by solar panels. The structures were arranged in a loose semi-circle at the base of a massive temple: hundreds of meters tall, made of hand-cut stone, covered in crumbling reliefs and tangled masses of

vines. Thirteen archaeologists and anthropologists had come to this place to study the so called "Yashiwa Pyramid," already being hailed as one of the biggest archeological finds of the century.

Mister Knight, and a few other members of the team, were here for a different reason.

He saw James Zhao wave to him, and nodded to the young Chinese-American man, before jogging over next to his colleague. "Can you confirm?" he asked.

"Not yet," Zhao said grimly, "I'm still trying to figure out what's going on here."

"Damn," Knight sighed. "Have you managed to slow down the progress?"

"I've convinced the teams that we need to catalog and study the exterior in-depth before we even think about entering the structure," Zhao said, "but it's only a matter of time before one of them slips their leash and tries to open up one of those doors. I can't exactly tell them not to open up King Tut's tomb, can I?"

"Do your best," Knight said. "Seriously. Try hard. The Council was adamant on this point: whatever's inside here, it caused half of their oracles to have a foaming fit when the discovery was announced. We cannot let this place get opened until we figure out what's inside. If someone does, and something bad happens… well, the last thing I want to do is to have to blame the Yashiwa for the massacre of a bunch of students. The 'murderous marauding savages,' thing doesn't really go over well, these days. Besides, they seem like nice people."

"Speak of the Devil," Zhao sighed. On the other side of the camp, a slight, rangy man with leathery, caramel-colored skin was walking towards them. He carried an ornately decorated blowgun-cum-spear-cum-walking stick in one hand, and his shirtless body was covered in ornate, interlocking tattoos. Out of respect for the newcomers, the man had traded in his traditional garments of woven plant fibers for a pair of brightly colored shorts. He had also traded in his traditional hand-woven sandals for a pair of leather Birkenstocks:

that had less to do with respect, and more to do with comfort. Yashiwa shoes were notoriously uncomfortable.

"Mister Tashika," Knight said, inclining his head respectfully. "It is good to see you again."

"And you, Mister Knight," the man said. His English was tinged with a low, guttural accent: the Yashiwa language was largely glottal. "Your studies go well?"

"They do indeed. We've been studying the bas-reliefs on the walls of the pyramid," Knight said. "They're fascinating. Do you know anything about them?"

Tashika laughed out loud and shook his head. "I wish I could tell you that this was an ancient holy site to my people, and maybe even quote you some ancient story passed down from mother to daughter for countless generations… but the truth is, I don't know shit. The Yashiwa never came here often. There's no river here, the soil is bad, and the hunting poor."

"Which is the interesting thing, to me," Knight mused. "People don't often build huge buildings out in the middle of nowhere. Buildings this big usually get built where there's some kind of natural resource to draw upon. A river for trade or fishing. Fertile ground for farming. High ground, for defense and isolation. Not to mention that you don't often find temples without ancillary buildings around them…"

"Ancillary?"

"Secondary," Knight clarified. "Things like homes for the priests, or farms to feed them, or to house craftsmen or merchants. Those almost always pop up around religious centers like temples. It's not often that you see a single building like this out in the middle of the jungle."

"Then maybe this isn't a temple?" Tashika suggested.

Knight paused for a moment, carefully choosing his next words before going on: "There's really nothing else it can be," he said, trying to keep his voice calm: Tashika was treading dangerously

close to the truth here. "A building this big, what can it be?"

"I do not know," Tashika said. "But…" he laughed nervously and rubbed the back of his head. "Shit. This is going to make me sound like some ignorant tribal…"

"You're anything but ignorant, Tashika. Just go on and tell me."

"All right," the Yashiwa man said, sighing. "Look. Our village has this… this old woman. Crazy old crone. We call her the Great Mother. They say that she can see the future. It's all ancient legends and myths, but it's part of our culture, you understand?"

"Yeah," Knight said. "Shamans and wise women are universal." He vaguely remembered meeting the old woman when he and the UNESCO team had made their introductions to the local Yashiwa tribes. He remembered a withered old woman with one arm, leaning heavily on a stick, glaring angrily at the interlopers into her village. He also remembered Zhao telling him that the woman's EVE signature was showing distinct tendencies towards extrasensory perceptive abilities…

"It's all bullshit, but… well, the Great Mother's insisting that we move to our winter grounds early this year. That's a thirty mile journey through the jungle. We usually don't make that journey until a few months later in the year, but… she's insisting that disaster's going to befall us if we remain here, and she's got my father so riled up that he's agreed to move the tribe early this year." Tashika laughed nervously, hiding his teeth with one hand. "It's all tribalist bullshit, but the older folks are taking it seriously. So it looks like I won't be able to help you guys out any more."

"That's a shame," Knight said, and meant it. Tashika had been a treasure: a Yashiwa man, raised in the culture of the tribes, but raised in the city, and college educated, to boot. He had been invaluable in smoothing out negotiations between the UNESCO team and the Yashiwa, and Knight was certain that he was going to miss the young man. "Maybe when you come back to your summer grounds, you and I can meet up again."

"If you are still here," Tashika agreed. "It may be that you find out all

you need to know about this place before then, and you will go home."

"Perhaps," Knight agreed.

"I'll go let the others know," Tashika said. "Thank you for your help… and for your respect, Mister Knight. Good day. Mister Zhao."

"Tashika," Zhao said, extending his hand in friendship. "Good luck. I'm going to miss you."

"And I you, Mister Zhao."

The young man inclined his head respectfully to Knight, then walked away to say his goodbyes to his friends on the rest of the UNESCO research team. Knight shook his head, brow furrowed in worry. "Jimmy? Why does an old proverb about rats and sinking ships come to mind?"

"I was thinking the exact same thing," Zhao admitted.

"Mister Knight?"

Knight awoke slowly, to find Zhao leaning over his cot. The young man's face was drawn with worry.

"Mister Knight," Zhao said. "I think it's happened."

"What's going on?" Knight asked, suddenly alert.

"Timothy and Jonas are missing. And one of the temple doors is open."

"Damn," Knight growled. "I thought I had at least another week before one of those kids tried something stupid…"

"I don't think it's their fault. You'd better come see."

Knight understood the moment that he came out of his tent. It wasn't hard to miss the knocked-over tent on the edge of the camp, guylines snapped, steel poles bent in two. One of the nylon walls

had been shredded, as if by some massive claw. There was a dark blotch on the ground that looked a lot like blood.

"Who else knows?" Knight asked.

"Two other researchers. Lin and Tamaki. I think that's it."

"All right," Knight said coldly. "You talk to them. Get them to keep quiet. Tell them it's a bear or something, and we're going after them. I'll get the gear."

Knight strode quickly across the camp to the equipment tent, where he unlocked a box of gear that he had kept sealed since arriving in South America. Inside, there were two headsets, a pair of M-4 carbines, ammunition, and a satellite phone.

He took out the rifles first, checked to make sure that the chambers were empty, and put them aside. Knight then picked up the satellite phone and dialed a number that didn't exist in any phone directory on Earth.

"Central," a soft, feminine voice said. "Report."

"Central, this is Tasker One," Knight said. "Authentication Code Victor Assegai Nine Two Two."

"Tasker One, Central confirms. Bringing up your casefile now… transferring you to your appropriate controller. Wait one, please."

Knight picked up one of the two headsets, checking the OCULUS rigs' batteries and doing a quick diagnostic, while Journey's "Wheel in the Sky" played over the phone. The phone picked up before the song had a chance to repeat once.

"Tasker One, this is Central Authority. Report, over."

"Central, Tasker One. I've got two missing civilians, and the temple doors have opened. I'm about to enter the structure with Tasker Two. Third Mission Priority. I am escalating to Response Level 3. If you don't hear back from us within three hours, consider it a Response Level 4 emergency. Please confirm. Over."

"Tasker One, Central confirms two missing civilians, temple doors open. Central confirms your escalation to Response Level 3. Central will escalate to Response Level Four at 0600 hours, local time. Over."

"Thank you, Central. Tasker One out." Knight hung up the satellite phone and hung the unit from his belt buckle. He picked up an empty day pack and packed in food, water, medical supplies, and a laptop computer. Zhao joined him in the tent shortly after, and Knight helped him to pack a day pack of his own.

The two men emerged from the tent, carrying their assault rifles and wearing their night vision goggles. He could see two of the researchers from the UNESCO archeology team standing by the tents. Lin raised her eyebrow in alarm, at seeing the two men dressed like special operations soldiers.

"All right," Knight said shortly. "We've got two missing personnel, possibly kidnapped. Zhao and I are going to see if we can get them back. Lin, if you don't hear back from us by 0600… sorry, 6 'o clock… take everyone, pack them into the vehicles, and drive towards town. Find the nearest American Embassy and tell them what happened."

"What did happen?" the hapless Lin exclaimed. "I don't get this at all!"

"Terrorists," Knight said grimly. "I think they kidnapped Tim and Jonas. I'm going to see if we can't find them."

"But…"

"Lin," Zhao said softly. "If we don't come back, the terrorists could come after the rest of you. You need to make sure the team gets to safety. You're in charge here."

Lin hesitated to say more, then, finally, just nodded. "Be safe," she said.

"Terrorists, huh?" Zhao whispered, as the two men started jogging towards the temple.

"The catch-all explanation for all weirdass activity," Knight agreed.

Through VERITAS, the interior of the abandoned temple seemed to glow with a sickly greenish light, the patterns vaguely resembling those of blood splatters or nails being raked across stone. Greenish mist seemed to swirl around the two men, raising goosebumps on their bare arms. The image of a flayed skull raced towards Knight, lipless mouth open in a wordless scream, then vanished into the darkness.

"Bad things happened in here," Zhao whispered.

"Very bad," Knight agreed. It took a lot of emotional and spiritual violence for EVE signals to linger as deeply as these did. There had been murder done in this place… and worse.

"Knight," Zhao said softly. He gestured to a spot on the ground that had a brighter VERITAS signature than the others. Knight dropped to one knee and ran his hand over the pool of brightly shining white light. His fingertips came away sticky.

He put his fingertips to his nose and smelled blood.

"It's fresh," he said. "Couldn't have been shed more than a few minutes ago. I think we're catching up to them."

It was then that Knight heard the moaning.

It was very soft, and very low, no louder than a kitten's cry, but it was low and guttural, and tinged with a nasty wet sound. It was coming from deeper into the temple. Further into the darkness.

"… you know." Zhao quipped. "It's at this point in all the horror movies that I always started yelling at the girl not to go into the dark scary temple. Just go home. Who cares what's in there…"

"Yeah," Knight agreed. "But…"

He raised the rifle to his shoulder and continued to walk down the dark, mildewy hallways. Closer to the sound.

The light was dim. It was the color of fireflies. Thousands of them. It flickered and glowed dimly, up ahead in the dark.

Knight stepped into the central chamber, and he felt his gorge rise. The thing in the center was a mass of… matter… about knee high. It was spongy, laced with tiny holes about the width of a pencil. Thousands of small, glowing maggots writhed and burrowed their way through the mass, their tiny bodies inching forward bit by bit, slowly but surely.

The thing on the top of the mass wasn't Jonas. Not any more. Its eyes were frozen open in terror, its mouth wide open in shock. One of the maggots was eating its way out of his lower lip, as three more burrowed their way into his left eye. His hand was outstretched towards Knight. The skin was slowly dripping off it, like a melting candle.

Knight reached out with his weapon and gently poked at Jonas's hand. It indented slightly under the touch, leaving behind an impression of his rifle's muzzle. Like wax.

"Soap," Zhao whispered. "They're turning into soap…"

"Goddamn," Knight whispered. He studied the mass a little closer. There, huddled up next to Jonas, his arm and torso melting into the other man's was Timothy.

"All right," Knight said. "We're out of here. Seal the door, get the UNESCO team out of here. Call in STRIKE. This is way above our…"

"Sir?" a soft, female voice said behind them. "Mister Knight?"

Knight spun around, rifle raised, to find Lin standing behind him. "Mister Knight," Lin said. "I left Tamaki in charge. He's getting everyone ready to move, but I thought you could use the help— OH MY G—"

Zhao grabbed the young Chinese woman before she could scream, slapped his gloved hand over her mouth and held her down while she struggled. Something moved inside the glowing chamber, and

Knight spun around to see…

Maggots. Glowing ones. Thousands of them, bursting from the mass of soapy-waxy material that had once been Jonas and Tim. They crawled over the damp stone, across the ancient bas-reliefs and over the mold and slime, and they were racing towards him in a glowing tide, terrifyingly fast, and Knight turned to Lin and Zhao and screamed for them to run even as his feet turned towards the exit and he bolted for his life…

He heard Zhao scream as the things caught up to him and Lin, heard Lin start to shriek a moment later. Then he felt his ankles give way, and he collapsed to the floor, banging his chin hard against the stone and seeing stars.

Knight spun around, rifle raised. The glowing green tide was wrapped around his ankles, dragging him towards that mass of soap and wax and horror in the center of the chamber. Lin and Zhao were already in it, already starting to melt, already starting to have those horrid green maggots crawl in and out of what had once been flesh and was now closer to soft cheese.

His left arm was already crawling with the maggots. He had to drop his rifle to pull off his daypack and unzip it. He grabbed the laptop computer and held it to his chest tightly. His eyes were gone, already eaten by those crawling worms. He had to find the power switch by feel. Hold it down for five seconds with the computer's screen closed.

He was already dead when the bomb exploded.

"… holy shit," Fox said softly. "Holy fucking shit."

What had once been an ornate stone temple was now a crater in the ground. Three hours had passed since Central had awoken Strike Team Broken Dagger and apportated them into the South American jungle. Now, as the twelve members of the Strike Team advanced towards what should have been an ancient archeological site, all they could see was a wide crater, filled with glassy rubble, in the middle of the rainforest.

"Ever seen something like this before, Jackal?" she asked her XO, as the rest of the team split up to search for survivors.

"Once," Jackal admitted. "In Cornwall."

"Fucking Cornwall," Fox agreed.

"Ma'am?" Arsegike said, over the comms. "I think I found something."

"On my way," Fox said. She got back to her feet and jogged over to where the other soldier was looking down at something in the tall grass.

It was a pair of OCULUS headsets, glowing softly, their visual components and visors melted and burned, but their recorders intact. The two items were laying on a patch of grass, in which a complex geometric form had been burned, reducing the plantlife to white ash.

"Emergency Dump," Jackal said. "Someone hit the panic button."

"Bag it," Fox said. "I'll report this in."

Arsegike pulled an evidence bag from his thigh pocket and gingerly picked up the two black boxes, dropping them into the mylar container and sealing it with double-sided tape. His OCULUS visor would record the location and the time of discovery, but he jotted down a quick note on the outside of the bag in permanent marker nonetheless.

"So what was this?" Jackal asked. "A failed mission… or a successful one?"

Fox didn't have an answer for him. She still couldn't decide how to answer that twelve hours later, when the helicopters came to take them home.

"Strike"

"Heads up, Bull," Skunkboy whispered into his comms. "They're back."

Agent Bullfrog of Assessment Team 735 "Sparkplug" lifted his head to look through his binoculars at the Chaos Insurgency camp below. Team Sparkplug had been camped out on the ridge overlooking the Insurgency facility for the past week. He was itchy, tired, cramped, and stank to high heaven. He was pretty sure that the inside of his greysuit could be considered a biohazard area at this point.

The most frustrating part of it, he decided, was that nothing was happening. In the past week, the Insurgency had done exactly jack shit. They had trained a few new soldiers, yes, and had done a lot of running through obstacle courses and firing guns and blowing up IEDs, but nothing that he hadn't seen in a dozen third-world training camps over the past few decades. As odd as it might sound to an outsider, this mission deep behind enemy lines was… boring.

Until now.

"That's a really fancy car," Bullfrog murmured. "Are those chrome-plated alloy wheels?"

"Spinners." Skunkboy grimaced. "Ten thousand fucking bucks a pop. Shit, that guy's got more bling on his wheels than I'll ever make in a year."

"Classy," Bullfrog agreed. He raised an eyebrow at a flurry of activity down below, and let out a low, surprised whistle. "Skunkboy. Look at that."

"Fuck," Skunkboy whispered. "Yeah, that looks serious. Think we should call it in?"

"I'll do it."

"Tell me what I need to know."

Assistant Director Tariq Ahmed Khalid, head of PHYSICS Division's Kabul branch, sat at the head of the rosewood-inlaid conference table, tapping the end of his fountain pen against his thigh, his stern Semitic countenance frozen in a perpetual frown. On the broad screen before him, a satellite image displayed approximately ten square miles of the Hindu Kush: steep, cafe-au-lait mountains capped with snow, leading to a broad, verdant plain. And, in the center, a small, but distinctive terrorist training camp in a hidden defile.

The young adjutant at the laptop computer furiously tapped away at his keyboard for a few moments, before finally bringing up a different image of the training camp, overlaying it over the satellite view. "All right, sir," he said, nervously. "Here it is. We've known about this Chaos Insurgency facility for the past three weeks. One week ago, we managed to get a PHYSICS Division Assessment team into the area…"

"I'm familiar with the operation," Khalid said firmly. "Tell me what they found."

"… yes, sir," the young man gulped. "Well, sir… they found evidence of use of weapons… illegal weapons stockpiles… training camps and indoctrination… and thirty minutes ago, they reported in with this image." A second photograph was brought up on the screen, next to the first. It showed a large, expensive black luxury car pulled up to the gate of the training camp. Two men in combat vests, carrying AK-model assault rifles, were dragging a third man out of the back of the car, while a third guard carried away some kind of small cubical item. In the background, two other prisoners were being led away with their hands cuffed in front of them.

"PHYSICS ran a search on their faces and VERITAS profiles. We have a match," the adjutant continued. He brought up another image of a middle-aged man in a grey suit sitting in a coffee shop somewhere in France. "Philip Anderson. Manna Charitable Foundation. They're running a humanitarian operation in the region… if it weren't for their blatant disregard of Second Mission

concerns, we'd have invited them to join the Coalition—"

"I'm also very familiar with MCF's policies and operations," Khalid interrupted again. "Tell me why it matters to us."

"… well, sir. A high-ranking member of another paranormal organization has been captured by the Chaos Insurgency. I thought…"

"You can do better than that, David," Khalid insisted. "Tell me why we should care."

The young man took a deep breath before forging on. "Because, sir, rescuing a high-ranking member of Manna Charitable Foundation would give us leverage in the next round of negotiations with them. It could give us a chance to bring them into the fold… have them agree to Second Mission concerns and join up with the Coalition. They have resources—"

"I know about their resources," Khalid said. "Who is on deck?"

"Um. According to my information, sir, the next available Rapid Response Team is Broken Dagger. Based out of Ireland."

"Better get them on the horn right away. It's the middle of the night over there."

The alarm blared in "Fox's" ear like the shrieking of some tortured beast. The slight redheaded woman slammed her palm down over the button, silencing the chorus of "The Immigrant Song" by Led Zeppelin. She groaned as she turned to her nightstand, trying to focus her bleary eyes on the text scrolling by.

One phrase in large red text immediately got her attention: "PRIORITY ALERT." She came awake immediately, sitting up on the edge of the bed and reading through the report twice through, to make sure she'd gotten everything. Only then did she slap the button on the wall of her quarters to sound the alarm in the general barracks.

It took her sixty seconds to walk down the hall to the barracks in

which Strike Team Broken Dagger slept. She was pleased to see that, by the time she arrived, the entire team was already out of bed and dressed (although a couple of them were pulling on t-shirts and sweat pants as she opened the door.) "All right, this one's urgent," she said grimly, tossing copies of the report to her three squad leaders. "A bunch of CI goons just kidnapped an MCF bigshot. We're going to get him back."

"Greysuits, ma'am?" "Jackal" asked. Fox's XO was a tall, lanky guy who looked like a professional basketball player, with ebony skin and close-cropped hair. He looked even more striking standing next to his diminutive commander.

"White," Fox said. "We're going in all-out on this one. Full Plus-Two Gen tech. Get suited up."

"Whew," Jackal hissed. "They're serious, aren't they?"

"Yeah. This one's for real. Let's go."

As team leader, Fox claimed first dibs on the shower, stripping out of her tank-top and underwear with careless ease, before stepping into the drying room, where powerful blasts of heated air dried her skin off within a few moments. She ran her ID card (kept on the same chain as her dog tags) through the security scanner. The lights on the heavy steel door blinked green for a moment before opening up to the Whitesuit morgue.

Whitesuits weren't white, any more than blacksuits were black (greysuits, coincidentally, did default to a grey tone). The term was, instead, supposed to designate the visibility level of its advanced technology. Blacksuits looked like ordinary, every day clothing that just happened to be bulletproof (for a certain level of "proof.") Whitesuits looked like science-fiction super soldiers from a video game.

The bottom layer of the whitesuit was a one-piece garment, similar to a racing swimsuit, that fit snugly against her skin. She took a moment to make sure that the relief tubes were properly aligned (something that could become very important during a long mission), and adjusted the fit around her shoulders and hips, to prevent the

garment from pinching under the close-fitting armor. After that, it wasn't difficult to climb into the unfolded whitesuit itself. She closed the torso plates manually, shifting her shoulders around to get a good, solid fit, then slipped her hands into the gloves and chinned the "close" button in her helmet.

The suit tightened around her with a loud electric whir, followed by the high metallic pings of hundreds of tiny clamps locking in place. She closed her eyes and waited the thirty seconds it took for the on-board computer systems to power up, then opened her eyes to find herself viewing the world in bright, false colors, as the suit's OCULUS system activated.

A scrolling column of text along the left hand side of her screen let her know that her suit was working properly: everything read green. She gingerly took her first step out of the chamber. The suit didn't fold up and snap every bone in her body, neither did it freeze up and entrap her in a quarter-ton of steel and composites.

So far, so good.

"Everything all right, Iron Man?" Jackal asked, as his own suit finished its power-up sequence.

Fox grinned. "Tony Stark wishes he had one of these."

"This is the part that I really really hate," Agent Arsegike grumbled, as the twelve members of Strike Team Broken Dagger assembled in the silver circle painted on the floor of what had once been an aircraft hangar. There were several men and women in white coats milling around, checking the equipment and runes that powered the transfer circle: mages from the Center for Unified Thaumatology.

"Just close your eyes and think of England," Ferret said, grinning. "It'll be over before you know it."

"That's what I told your Mom last night," Arsegike grumbled.

"All right, team!" Fox shouted, as she strode into the hangar. "Last chance to go back for anything you forgot. Weapons. Ammo.

Rations. Power. Make sure you've got everything you need, because coming back is a hell of a lot harder than getting out there. Alpha Squad?"

"Looks good, chief."

"Bravo?"

"Everything checks out."

"Charlie?"

"We're good."

"All right," Fox said, taking a deep breath. ""Visors down. From now on, no faces, no voices. We ready to go, Ops?"

"Ready to apportate on your mark, ma'am," said the lead magister.

"Take a knee, team."

The twelve members of Strike Team Broken Dagger all dropped to one knee in the center of the circle: a dozen superhero robots carrying massive sci-fi rifles, kneeling like knights before an altar.

Fox closed the visor of her helmet, waited to confirm that her internal air supply had kicked in, then said "Execute," and clenched her gut as hard as she could.

There was a flash of bright purple light, the sickening sensation of being turned inside out and shunted through a ten-dimensional manifold. Somewhere in England, a cornfield rippled and swayed, as the backlash from the teleport caused a ten-meter wide circular patch of it to be stomped flat. Somewhere in Scotland, a confused plesiosaur poked its head above water and realized that it wasn't in the Jurassic Period any more.

The ground dropped away, and Fox found herself plummeting to earth from ten thousand meters above an Afghanistani mountain range.

Working just as planned.

"There they are. I've got eyes on the team," Skunkboy reported. "Looks good. I count twelve agents, no aborts or partials."

Through the VERITAS sensors, the twelve members of the strike team glowed brightly, like shooting stars against the night sky. They formed up into three tight diamonds before banking, slowly, and turning to approach the target area.

"Why don't they just teleport them onto the ground?" the sniper wondered. "Would save them the HALO jump."

"Margin of error," Spider explained. "Despite our best efforts, we can still be up to ten meters off target. If those ten meters put you underground …"

"… gotcha." Skunkboy shuddered. "So, ever seen a Strike team in full whitesuits take down a target?"

"Can't say that I ever have, no," Spider admitted.

"Then get up here and spot for me. You're not going to want to miss this."

James Krantz wasn't a terrorist. At least, he didn't think he was. After all, terrorists were brown, and they did things like wear towels on their head and blow themselves up with bombs and worship Allah. James was a white guy from a suburban Chicago neighborhood who just happened to be recruited by a man in a dark suit who told him, in no uncertain terms, that he could either come along with them and help to save the world, or he could die. James was an atheist. Sure, he was in Afghanistan learning how to make bombs and shoot people, but he wasn't going to do that to Americans. Terrorists did things like that. James was no terrorist.

Still, there were moments when he wondered. Like tonight, walking around the perimeter of the camp (someone had to stand guard) carrying an AK-47 (good assault rifle, nothing more), wearing a scarf around his nose and mouth (just to keep the sand and dust out). That felt like a very terroristy thing to do. But James loved America.

Terrorists hated America. Didn't they?

He was still mulling over this conundrum when the man in the powered armor descended from the sky with a pistol in one hand and shot him three times.

"Show-off," Fox murmured, as she hit the ground a few yards away from Jackal.

"It worked, didn't it?"

"You were still showing off." Fox grabbed her parachute shroud and began gathering up the billowing cloth. "Status report."

"Everyone's on the ground. One misdrop: Cartman's ten klicks too far south. He'll catch up with us in time for exfil," Jackal replied. He took Fox's parachute from her and stowed it, along with his, behind a nearby rock.

"All right. I'll take his slot in the security element. Team leaders?"

"Alpha, ready," Jackal said.

"Bravo, ready."

"Charlie. Wait one… all right. We're good."

"Go," Fox ordered.

Jackal took off at a dead sprint, legs pumping furiously, with the other three members of the assault element close behind. He smashed down the chain-link fence, raced straight through three exploding claymore mines (steel ball bearings bouncing off his armor like marbles off a concrete floor) and slammed through the cinderblock wall shoulder-first, smashing concrete and rebar like tissue paper. He ran straight into three surprised men sitting around a table playing cards. They started reaching for assault rifles, but there were three other members of the assault element who could take them down, so Jackal ignored them and kept running.

His momentum carried him straight through the room and through

the far wall, smashing through the drywall with a loud, papery crunch. He slid across the tile floor on his hip, like a baseball player sliding into second base, and slapped a shaped charge onto the ground, as the three men in the room he'd just vacated went down with rifle rounds in their heads and torsos. The other members of his team joined him in the kitchen, taking up security positions looking up and down the hallway.

He took a few moments to make sure that the charge was properly placed, aiming it away from the life-auras that he could see through the VERITAS imager. "On three," he said. "I've got the target. One… two… three."

He sent the detonation code and braced for impact. The bomb exploded, cutting a round hole in the floor, revealing a darkened basement room illuminated by a single crazily swinging lightbulb. Three men were gathered around a fourth, who was tied to a chair with electrodes strapped to his face. One of the interrogators was holding up a printout of a brightly colored fractal, and Jackal's vision immediately blurred as his visor detected a possible visual cognitohazard and switched out of visible light mode.

"STAND CLEAR!" Jackal shouted. He dropped into the room, grabbed the target, and pinned him to the ground, covering him with his body, then triggered the anti-personnel charge strapped to his back. Ten thousand tiny (but fast) tungsten darts exploded from his armor in a hemispherical pattern, penetrating flesh, bone, and concrete with equal ease, riddling the Chaos Insurgency personnel.

Things were very quiet in the room after that. Only the sound of muffled gunfire let Jackal know that the battle was technically still raging.

Two minutes later, even that ceased.

"Wow," Spider whispered. "That was… something."

"Fast, aren't they?" Skunkboy agreed.

"Did that guy really have to do that thing with the window?"

"No, but it worked."

"All right, guys, enough chatting." Bullfrog said. "In a couple of hours, we're going to have twelve Strike Team members coming up our way, needing an exfil. Spider?"

"Central's got a helicopter incoming," the mage said. "Can you help me clear an LZ?"

"Can do. Skunkboy, Kitten, keep an eye on the compound. Let me know if anything comes up."

"Can do, Boss. Who Dares Wins and all that shit."

"All right!" Fox shouted. "We've got thirty minutes! Grab what you can and clear the fuck out. Jackal? How's our damsel?"

"He's still unconscious," Jackal said, a bit sheepishly. "I think I burst his eardrums. Sorry, Fox."

"He's alive, right? Don't worry about it." She stepped over the groaning body of a Chaos Insurgency operative laying on the concrete and casually shot him in the back of the head. "Ferret? Arsegike?"

"We've got the other two prisoners," came the reply. "But one of them keeps babbling something that makes no sense. Something about an aquarium."

"I'm heading your way," Fox said. "Anyone else?"

"Shatner's suit took a hit and froze up. He's fine, but I don't think I can fix it. Maybe if we had two guys supporting him from either side . ."

"With the Chaos Insurgency breathing down our necks? Fuck that. Pop his suit and set scuttling charges. Everyone else, keep grabbing any intel you can find. Fox, out."

"All right, here they come," Skunkboy said. "And not a moment too

soon, either. Sun's about to come up."

As the sun rose, eleven agents in black powered armor (carrying three rescued prisoners and one sheepish-looking half-naked man wearing what looked like a cross between a speedo and a wrestling singlet) finally emerged from the smoking buildings of the training camp and came jogging up the hill towards the Assessment Team. At least, it looked like they were jogging, until you realized that the easy, graceful lope was actually traveling at around fifty miles per hour.

They leaped up the cliff face one by one and wordlessly nodded to the members of Team Sparkplug. The last to arrive was a slight, feminine figure wearing red commander's stripes on her helmet and shoulder.

"We ready to go?" Bullfrog asked.

"One moment," Fox said. "Central, this is Dagger Six Actual. I'm sanitizing the site now."

"Dagger Six, Central. Go ahead."

She tapped a control on her left gauntlet. Down below, a flash of bright blue light, followed by a loud crack like that of thunder, indicated that the unfortunate Agent Shatner's whitesuit was now destroyed… as well as the building it had been left in, which collapsed in a cloud of white-hot, incandescent dust.

"All right," Fox said. "Now we can call in our ride home."

"Team Broken Dagger reported in at 0548 hours. They're in the barracks right now, repairing, regrouping, and preparing for their trip back to Ireland," David explained. "All in all, a successful oper—"

"So it was a successful op. Big deal. Anything interesting or unusual I should know about?" Khalid asked.

"Uhh… oh, there was one thing. Kind of funny, actually. The team was delayed for ten minutes trying to find one of the prisoner's pets. A sea slug of some kind. Apparently, he wouldn't leave without it. He

claims it can talk," the young man chuckled.

"Really?" Khalid asked calmly, taking a sip of his coffee. "What's it's name?"

"Very ungentlemanly of them," Lord Blackwood said, waving his feathery gills about. "Absolutely no way to treat a civilized human being. I was reminded of T.S. Lawrence in the hands of the Turks, although thankfully, I managed to escape without suffering any of the outrages endured by that illustrious gentleman." The colorful nudibranch lowered its head into the teacup that had been placed into its tank, staining the water a pale brown. "All in all, this was not the summer holiday I would have chosen."

"I'm just glad to see that you're came through it in one piece," Khalid said. "You always did have a knack for getting into trouble."

"Balderdash. I was never in any true danger, except perhaps running low on rum and tea. Speaking of which, how is that Anderson fellow? Good chap that, but not exactly the adventuring type."

"Philip Anderson will recover, although he may have some hearing loss," Khalid reported. "He'll be fine."

"That's good, that's good. By Jove, this really has been an odd week, hasn't it?"

"That it has, that it has," Khalid agreed. "I don't suppose I can convince you to stay a bit longer? There's no reason for you to go back to the Foundation."

"Rubbish. I gave them my parole. A gentleman's word is as binding as oak. Besides, my housekeeper will be worried about me. She does get into such terrible fits when I'm away for too long."

"If you must," Khalid said, inclining his head politely. "I'll have a courier take you back in the morning."

"Nonsense. I may be getting a bit on in years, but there's still life in these old bones. If I couldn't enjoy an invigorating afternoon

sabbatical like a little walk back home, I'd be ashamed to call myself a Blackwood."

"In that case, I'll be seeing you around, old friend," Khalid said, getting to his feet.

"And you as well, my Arab friend. Inshallah, and may Allah smile upon you, peace be on his name," Lord Blackwood said.

Khalid got to his feet and walked out of the small interrogation chamber, closing the door behind him. His aide, David, cleared his throat nervously.

"I didn't know you were Mus—"

"I'm not," Khalid interrupted. "And I'm not an Arab either. But Theodore is a bit set in his ways. Comes from the era in which he was raised. He means well."

"Ah. And um. How do you know this sea slu—"

Khalid fixed his aide with a martinet's glare, before turning crisply away and walking down the hallway.

"That's above your security clearance," he said.

"You know," Bullfrog said thoughtfully. "These guys should stop building their camps in known terrorist strongholds. I mean, when someone blows up a mysterious camp in the Hindu Kush, no one gives a crap. But if it it happened in, say, Montana? Someone would ask questions."

"Yeah, but then they'd have to deal with nosy neighbors… IRS property taxes… deer shitting on their lawn…" Fox pointed out. "Besides, we could still blow them up. We'd just have to claim it was a meth lab or something."

"I guess that's true," Bullfrog said. "To the Chaos Insurgency."

"And may their ammo ever run low," Fox agreed.

She picked up her beer and took a sip. Not as good as the real thing, but then again, it was impossible to find a real Guinness anywhere outside of Dublin.

"So," she asked. "How's the new girl working out?"

"Spider? Not bad. She's got a lot to learn, but she learns quickly. Probably one of the best mages I've had the pleasure of working with."

"Really? Think she'd consider a career in Strike?"

"Hey, I didn't drag you out of that cave in Argentina so that you could headhunt my wizard away from me."

"As I recall, it was me dragging you out of that cave, not the other way around."

"More like we were dragging each other," Bullfrog chuckled.

"True, true." Fox finished off the rest of her beer and stood up, stretching her arms over her head. "We've got to catch an early flight back to Ireland at 0600. Want to join me in my room for a nightcap?"

"Our flight's at 0400," Bullfrog pointed out. "I should probably get some sleep too."

"C'mon, Bull. It's been months since we last saw each other. We've got a lot of catching up to do." The petite redhead smirked at the larger man as she ran a finger gently across his shoulderblades.

Bullfrog smiled. "All right," he said, with a sly, knowing smile. "One drink."

"Tempering"

Spider had been walking up the mountain trail for a good half hour, and her feet were starting to hurt. It didn't help that she was carrying a heavy backpack: she'd done long ruck marches in training, but she'd been out on rehabilitation for a long time and knew she was out of shape. Hopefully, the rest of this trip would help.

Thankfully, she could already see the small log cabin up ahead. A thin stream of smoke emitted from the brick-and-clay oven nearby. The high, metallic sound of hammer on steel could be heard even at this distance.

She hiked her backpack a little higher, took a drink of water from her camelbak, and forged on.

Hopefully, the blisters would be worth it in the end.

"So you've finally come down to visit, huh, girl?"

Heinrich Guggenheim looked exactly like one would expect a dwarf to look: short, stocky, and massively built, with forearms the size of hams and fists the size of small kegs. He was a middle-aged, balding man with a neatly trimmed, white beard and intense, beady eyes, and his face and arms were marked with dozens of small, pale burn scars. He stepped back and looked Spider up and down once, and laughed out loud. "Looking good. You're wearing that new body well."

"Thanks," Spider said, smiling. "Complete thaumatological identity reassignment will do that. Given that I'm gonna be spending a lifetime working for the Coalition, the least they can do is let me feel comfortable in my own body."

"And now that you're settled in, you've come to visit old Guggenheim for those knives he promised you, huh?" The old man laughed out

loud. "All right, girl. Let's see what I can do."

Heinrich let out a low, impressed grunt as Spider unwrapped the heavy, silk-wrapped package she'd been carrying strapped to her backpack. "Is that real?"

"Yeah," Spider said. "It fell over Siberia a few years back. I've been buying up as many pieces as I can."

He picked up one of the fragments of meteoric iron and weighed it in his hand contemplatively. "High iron content," he said. "But are you sure it's going to be enough to make three knives?"

"It doesn't have to be. We can fill in with regular iron if we need to. Sympathy and Contagion will transfer its properties over."

Guggenheim nodded. "I've been saving a good solid ingot for you. From the days back when you were apprenticing with me. Got a lot of history behind it. We smelt it into blanks along with this, and it'll work out great. Which brings us to the question of payment."

"You're not going to bring up Brisingamen again, are you?"

"You said it. Not me. It does have the weight of tradition behind it," Heinrich smirked.

"Unlike Freya, I have something better to barter with than gold." She opened up her backpack and pulled out two corrugated cardboard cylinders.

"18 year?" Heinrich asked.

"25. Two of the Yamazaki. And one 30-year Hibiki."

"… yeah, that'll do nicely," Guggenheim laughed. "You could have gotten this done for 12-year, you know."

"I know. But I want it done quickly, before the Coalition calls me back up again. I'm technically on 'psychological rehabilitation,' but the shrinks think that doing this will help my healing process. Even so, they won't let me stay for too long."

"Yeah, I heard," Guggenheim admitted. "Good on you getting back into the game." He raised the bottles of dark amber liquid to the light. "For this? Yeah, I'll get it done fast. But you'll be helping me."

"Wouldn't want it any other way."

"So you're wanting the full set, then?" the smith asked. He sketched out the broad outline of three knives on a sheet of butcher paper on the roughly hewn table in the cabin's kitchen. "Athame, boline, and secespita?"

"Yeah," Spider said, sitting down across from him.

"Any particulars in design?"

"I'll leave that up to you, as the expert."

"Mmmm. Boline's easy. You want a hawkbill blade. Concave cutting edge. Well suited to cutting mistletoe and tree branches. And the athame… straight blade, double-edged dagger, with a broad fuller so we can carve in some runes. Secespita's the tough one. Some people prefer a clip point: gives you a sharper tip, but drop point's better in my opinion. Less chance of slicing open the guts if you do haruspicy."

"Not much call for that these days."

"Not much call for hand-forged ritual knives, either. But then again, you've always preferred the traditional methods." Guggenheim quickly sketched out the details of the three knives in charcoal, filling out the details. "The athame will be the largest. Boline and secespita will have at least partial serrations. Full tang wootz steel. You'll want sheaths too, right? Leather's the best material for sheaths."

"They have to go onto tactical webbing. Maybe I should see if the armorers can adapt the sheath from an OKC-3S or something."

"Nylon ruins the purity. Leather's better."

"There's no proof that storage in plastic or synthetic fibers can disrupt the EVE signature of a ritual device," Spider pointed out.

"You want my help, or don't you? Leather sheaths. You can attach your nylon loops and stuff to them if you must, but the part that touches the blade must be leather."

"If you insist. Do you have any?"

"I do, but for these knives… hmm." Guggenheim leaned back in his chair and ran a hand over his balding pate. "Can you still handle a bow and arrow?"

Spider knelt at the base of the tree, arrow nocked to her bowstring, and took a deep, cleansing breath, clearing her mind of all distractions. She could feel the cool air of the forest all around her, caressing her face and throat. It was soothing. Calming. Still.

Memories of a childhood spent in the woods. Trudging through the forest following her father's orange vest. Listening to him give advice on how to stalk the prey, how to hold perfectly still, how to respect nature and all its living things. The pride in his eyes when she'd shot her first buck: single rifle bullet through the heart. A good kill.

Remembering her father's eyes reminded her of worse days. Angry voices and narrowed eyes. Raised voices. A slamming door.

She hadn't heard from her family in years. Not that they would recognize her. She'd changed too much since then.

She sometimes wondered if they thought of her. She wondered if they'd declared her dead yet.

She wondered if her father had forgiven her.

The sound of a snapping twig roused her from her thoughts. She opened her eyes very slowly, careful not to move from her crouching position in the bushes.

The stag was an old, powerful buck, with twenty-point antlers and greying fur at its muzzle and throat. It scanned the treeline warily before emerging to dip its head and nibble at the berries and salt she had laid out in the clearing.

Spider slowly raised the bow and drew the arrow back to her ear.

She released the string smoothly, and the white-fletched missile leaped from the string with a sharp hiss.

It struck home with a dull thud, penetrating right behind the shoulder.

The deer leaped away, bellowing in pain and terror. It turned to run, but collapsed within a few steps and lay still on the leaf-strewn ground, sides heaving.

Spider drew a second arrow from her quiver and got to her feet. Approaching quickly, but carefully, she advanced to around ten feet and fired a second, precise arrow through the dear's heart.

The beast quivered once and then lay still.

Grabbing the dying animal by the antlers, she drew the blade of her hunting knife across its throat.

Warm blood spilled over her hands and pooled underneath the animal, staining the fallen leaves bright red.

She took a moment to cut a sprig from a nearby tree and place it in the animal's mouth. Breaking off a twig from that branch, she dipped it in the blood and put it into her hair as a souvenir of the day's hunt.

Then, working quickly, she used the knife she'd cut the deer's throat with to draw a circle around the carcass.

She wondered if she should do this next part skyclad. She decided against it: the weather was far too cold to be gallavanting about naked in the woods, no matter what the ritual significance.

She removed the arrows and put them side: one of them was reusable, the other had broken when the beast rolled over onto it. She then turned the deer onto its back and, starting with the sternum, opened up its belly with a slow sweep of the hunting knife.

The intestines spilled out, warm and steaming, onto the forest floor: she lifted them in her arms and tossed them to the south, trailing out

of the deer's belly like a long cord. The lungs she pulled out through the ribs, spreading them open like eagle's wings. The liver and heart she kept, putting them aside for later.

It was long, bloody, tiring work, and the sun was setting by the time she finally got to her feet. The skin, head, haunches, and much of the meat she took with her. The rest she left for the wolves and scavengers to return to the earth. Wiping a few flecks of blood off her face, she bowed once to the setting sun and turned to make the long hike back to Guggenheim's cabin.

Guggenheim poured some of the deer's blood over the chunks of iron, glass, sand, and charcoal inside the clay crucible. He tossed the heart onto the charcoal before sealing up the clay-and-brick oven and igniting the flames.

They dined that night on venison steaks and potatoes, after Spider had cleaned the hide and set it in a barrel with salt to cure. They would stay up all night pumping air into the oven through the great bellows, keeping the flames alight.

Dawn came, and with it came the opening of the oven, and the removal of the crucible. Guggenheim smiled as he saw the glowing ingot emerge from the slag and clay. "Good steel," he said. "It'll make good knives."

"The best," Spider agreed.

He added the deer's liver to the coals of his forge: it sizzled and smoked as he plunged the ingot into the hot coals. Spider helped him to pound the steel into a long, thin blank, raising and slamming down the heavy steel hammer until her back ached and her arms felt like jelly. Then, with chisel and hammer, he divided the glowing steel into three pieces.

Long days passed. While Guggenheim devoted himself to heating, pounding, and shaping the blanks, Spider finished cleaning and curing the deer's hide. She chose one of its antlers, and two of its ribs, and saved them for handles. The meat she cured, salted, and dried into jerky.

The beast had given its life for her, and she would make use of it to the very end.

The first blade Guggenheim finished was the athame: long and slender, double-edged, with slender quillions, a broad fuller inset with silver runes. She carved the handle out of good, solid oak, stained black, carved runes into them and inlaid them with silver. This was the ritual blade, the one that she used to draw circles and cut through the ether.

The second was the boline: curved and short, with a concave edge and a blunt tip. She made this handle out of the deer's antler, carving and polishing it into a smooth hilt. This was the working blade, the one she could use to cut herbs and mistletoe, a tool for everyday work.

Those two blades would never draw blood. But the third was the secespita, the killing blade, the knife of sacrifice. This one Guggenheim made with a sturdy drop point and a razor-sharp edge. She carved the handle out of bone, taken from the deer's ribs, the bones that lay close to the heart.

The night after Guggenheim finished the third knife, she took it with her into his rabbit pens and picked out a big, fat one ready to be eaten. She held the struggling animal down on the oak stump and cut its throat.

The blood spilled out over her hands once more, and she shivered as she raised it to her lips and tasted the life-blood of the dead creature. She drew the circle with the point of the athame and burned the sage that she had cut with boline. She inhaled the smoke and closed her eyes and slept that night under the stars, wrapped in the hide of the deer she had killed, with the knives she had crafted from its body resting around her at three points of an equilateral triangle.

Three knives. One meant for harm. The second meant for harvest. The third for power. The tools of her craft.

"You happy with them?" Heinrich asked the next morning. He'd put a final polish on the blades, and now they lay on a blanket made of soft deerskin: the long, slender athame, the short, hawkbilled boline, the broad secespita. They shone like rippling water, beautifully damascened. Forged from the same steel under the same moon, shining like stars.

"They're perfect," Spider said. She wrapped them in the deerhide and bound them in leather cord. She would have the hide tanned into hard leather, and would bring it to the Coalition's armorers to craft into sheaths for these new knives of hers.

"Did you find what you were looking for?" Guggenheim asked.

"… I think so," Spider replied.

"Then good luck down there, girl," the old man said, and he leaned forward to kiss his student on the forehead. "And take care of yourself."

"I will," Spider whispered.

Tears welled up in her eyes, and she sat down hard, silent sobs shaking her body.

Guggenheim sat down next to her and put his arm around her shoulders. They would sit like that together until the pain stopped and she could stand on her own once more.

"Spider."

"Bullfrog." She sat down across from her team leader at the conference table, nodding to him respectfully. "Kitten. Skunkboy."

The four of them took their seats around the table as Bullfrog turned out the lights and brought up a map of a small coastal town up on the projection screen.

"This is Dunwich, Massachusetts," he said. "It's a neutral zone between humanity and the Subpelagics, and one of the few places where cross-breeding between the two species takes place. The

town has been neutral ground for both parties for at least one hundred years. And last week, that neutrality was broken…"

He went over the details of the incident, the rising diplomatic tensions, the emergency treaty that narrowly averted all-out war between humanity and the dwellers of the deep. "Our mission is to find out what's actually going on," he concluded. "We'll be seconded to PSYCHE division's investigative team. Our job is basically to be on hand if and when they need someone with combat experience. In the meantime, we'll assist with the investigation as best we can. Are there any questions?"

No one answered.

He took a deep breath. "All right, then one last thing." He turned on the lights, illuminating the room fully and casting the shadows away. "We've been hurt," he said, his voice low and husky. "And this is our first time back out in the field. And what makes the hurt worse is that it was one of us… it was me… doing a lot of the hurting. I still think that our team is solid. I still think we're strong. But… if you need to do anything… to say anything… so that we can put that hurting behind us and get the job down… I'm here. And I'm ready."

There was silence, broken only by the sound of the projector's cooling fan slowly turning.

Spider licked her lips and breathed in very slowly, then out just as slow.

"Bullfrog?" she said.

The big man's mouth twitched once. He turned and looked her in the eyes for the first time in over a month.

"I'll follow you wherever you lead me," she said. Her voice shook a bit, and she cleared her throat. "Even into hell."

Bullfrog nodded at that. For a moment, she thought she could see moisture well up in his eyes, but then he blinked and set his shoulders, and his eyes had returned to their usual cool, calm, flint-like hardness.

"Then let's move," he said. "Meet up in the hangar at 1800. And pack heavy. We may be there for a while."

"Trauma"

Breach

"… and then, fifteen minutes later, the Strike Team breached and entered," Bullfrog concluded. "And that was that."

"Was it?" the woman in the blue sweater asked.

The big man stared down at the cup of coffee in his hands for a long, silent moment.

"Agent," the woman said. "I want you and your team back in here tomorrow morning for another debriefing session. Until then, I'm taking you off the active roster."

"If you feel it's necessary."

"I do. And Agent?"

"Yes?"

The woman in the blue sweater sighed. "Try to get some rest."

Bullfrog drove straight home to his apartment after the debriefing, walking wearily up the stairs with his kit bag over one shoulder. He unlocked the door and stepped inside, to find himself surrounded by candlelight. The scent of perfume was redolent in the air, which was permeated by gentle sounds of smooth jazz music.

There was a beautiful, diminutive redhead woman sitting on the couch. Fox grinned at him as she stretched her arms out over her head. "Hey, big guy!" she said, cheekily, sauntering up and taking hold of his tie. "I've got a week off, so I thought I'd surprise you!"

She reached up and tenderly kissed him.

Bullfrog felt the bile rise. He pushed her away, raced into the bathroom, and threw up in the toilet.

"… sorry," he said later, after Fox had snuffed all the candles, turned on the lights, and put on some more sensible clothes.

"Apology accepted," the Strike team leader said, "provided you tell me what the shit is going on, Bull."

"I don't want to talk about it," Bullfrog insisted. "It's work-related. Security clearances and all. Need-to-know basis."

"Bull," Fox said sternly. "It's me. Kate. I've got the same security clearance you've got. And considering that I've flown twelve hours from Ireland, not to mention shaving and trimming myself for tonight… I think I've got a bit of need-to-know."

"Kate…"

"And more than that, Jerry… you look like you've got a serious need-to-tell," Fox said, picking up her teacup and taking a sip. "So talk."

There was a long moment of silence before Bullfrog spoke once more. "You know I just got back from the field, right?"

"Yesterday, yeah. Some op downtown? I didn't hear the details, but the front-desk guy told me your team had it rough. Which was why I thought you could use some cheering up."

"Yeah. Downtown," Bullfrog muttered. "Luxury hotel. Fancy place. We got the call after PALISADE interrupted a really weird 911 call by the concierge. They scrambled us, put us in isolation suits, and sent us in. The first thing that happened was that this old fat dude came after me with a beach umbrella… "

"Jesus Christ!" Bullfrog shouted, as the old-timer lunged at him with the heavy piece of pool furniture. "Calm down! We're the good

guys!"

"Get the hell away from me, you commie bastard!" the toothless old man screamed. He continued to swing the umbrella at them wildly, his shriveled dick swaying gently back and forth with each swing. "You'll never take me alive, Ivan!"

"Skunkboy, tackle him!" Bullfrog shouted.

"Screw you! You do it! I ain't grabbing that guy!"

Kitten calmly walked up to the naked old man, caught the umbrella in one hand, and casually reached out to punch him in the jaw, hard.

"Jesus, Kitten! You coulda killed him!"

Kitten looked down at the unconscious naked old man in her arms, checked him for a pulse, and shrugged. "He'll live."

"Wonder what the hell that was about?" Skunkboy asked.

"Maybe he had a bad night at the bingo hall," Bullfrog quipped.

The team stopped laughing when they found the main ballroom.

"Bullfrog?"

"Yeah?"

"Is this hell?"

"If it's not, it's about as close to it as we're ever going to get," Bullfrog grimaced. He leaned down and ran his fingers over the eyes of the naked man lying on the floor of the ballroom. His skin had been peeled back from every inch of his body and was staked to the carpet with sharpened pencils. A severed penis and testicles rested next to his head. The bullet wound in the middle of the forehead hadn't been there when the team entered the room: Bullfrog had done that the moment he realized that the man was still alive (as well as removing the man's severed genitalia from his mouth).

"Skunkboy, toxin analysis?"

"Nothing I can see." The young man waved the sampling wand in the air and studied the readout on his screen. "No psychoactives. Lots of adrenaline, blood, shit, urine, saliva… that's expected given what we're seeing here.

Bullfrog looked up at the rest of the conference room. The entire place was filled with them: hundreds, if not thousands, of men, women, and children in brightly colored vacation garb slumped over in death. Here, a young man had grabbed a young blonde woman by the throat and throttled her to death before being stabbed in the back by another woman with a penknife, who lay on the ground lifelessly staring into oblivion, her eyes glased over in death, the hem of her skirt stained with shit and piss. There, a forty year-old woman had punched a grey-haired man's face before smashing in his head with a bar blender. Over there, a young boy sat huddled in the corner of the room. His severed arm lay in his lap.

"Well, if it's not a toxin… Spider, Thaum analysis?"

"Tending hard Flat, intensity around one hundred kilocaspers… hue Sapphire, Tight weave," Spider reported. "Not sure if this is because of the sheer number of dead people around here, or what caused it. Just to be safe, I recommend we all keep buttoned up. Just in case this thing turns out to be cognito or memetic."

"No arguments there. Kitten? You've been quiet," Bullfrog said.

"… I say we leave and burn this place down," Kitten said curtly. She looked down at a young man slumped in the corner with his arms and legs all blown off, checked him for a pulse, then casually, coldly, put a bullet in his head. "It's the only way to be sure."

"It might be better if we just do that. There's no way that any level of steam cleaning is going to ever get these carpets sanitary," Skunkboy pointed out. "You know what they say about the smell of dead bodies." He shifted his weight on the sodden carpet. It squelched under his feet.

"So that's two votes for burning the building down. Spider? Your

opinion?"

"Wait one." Spider said. She stared into her computer screen, swallowing hard, as she fiddled with her monitor. "Bull? I've uh… I've got a lot of VERITAS signatures on the top floor penthouse suite," she said. "Looks like we could have a bunch of civilians or hostages hiding out there."

"All right. Let's go rescue them," Bullfrog said. "Find an override, and let's get into that penthouse suite."

"Hey, Bull?" Skunkboy asked on the elevator ride up.

"Hm?"

"Doesn't this place get a lot of Japanese tourists?"

"What are you, a fucking racist? Apologize to Spider."

"Shit, sorry, Spider, it's not that. It's just that… well, this place gets a lot of Japanese tourists this time of year, right?"

"I think so. Guest register had a lot of Tanakas and Kims in it, yeah."

"But half the dead guys in that ballroom weren't, right?" Skunkboy pointed out. "In fact, I think most of them were white or black or hispanic. Isn't that a bit weird?"

Bullfrog frowned as he rubbed his chin in thought. The reinforced glove of his iso suit made a hard, metallic clink against the faceplate of his suit. "Spider?"

"Yeah?"

"Show me that ARAD reading again."

Spider passed the tablet computer to her team leader, who cocked his head to one side for a moment and stared at the pattern of colors and lines on the screen. Suddenly, Bullfrog swore, dropped the computer, and thumbed his comms circuit open.

"Central, this is Sparkplug!" he practically shouted into his mic. "We're going weapons free and assaulting the penthouse suite! Case Bixby, I say again, Case Bixby!"

"Fuck!" Skunkboy shouted. He fumbled with his DMR as he attempted to rack a round into the chamber. "Fucking shit!"

"Oh gods," Spider whispered. She began scrabbling through her tactical webbing.

There was a cheerful ding! sound, and the elevator doors opened onto…

The starshells exploded overhead, casting the entire jungle in hard white light. Jeremiah felt the cold, hard knotting in the pit of his stomach as he saw the gooks in their black pajamas crawling through the wire.

"CARTER!" his lieutenant screamed. "Get that Sixty up!"

He fumbled with the charging rod of his machine gun, finally managed to get the weapon locked and loaded. He raised himself to the lip of the trench and opened fire, screaming in terror and rage. The weapon chattered and scattered hot brass and steel all over the red jungle mud as the muzzle flashes lit up the night.

He could see the gooks falling, he could see them dying, and he wanted to laugh at the sight. "Get some, you stupid fucking slopeheads!" he screamed. "COME AND GET SOME, YOU FUCKING GOOK BASTARDS!"

He saw the second set of starshells go up, and he saw his lieutenant rise up from the trenches, pistol raised over his head, grey-bearded face twisted in fury. "ASSAULT THROUGH!" the lieutenant was screaming. "We got them on the run! Get em'! Put the steel to them! Kill those fuckers!"

Jeremiah rose to his feet and screamed in triumph as he continued to fire his machine gun from the hip. He could see his brother marines rising up from the trenches, cutting down the fucking VC

like wheat before the scythe. The machine gun's bolt slammed back as the belt ran out: he handed the weapon to his A-gunner and drew the .45 from his belt. He fired into the mass of the fleeing, black-clad bastards, fury rising in his heart. How dare they! How dare they drag Ma Carter's little boy out of his home and take him to this fucking stinking jungle? How dare they?

One of the gooks was screaming at him. He put two into his chest and the pistol locked back on an empty chamber. He could see two more of his men holding the fucking chink down. He thought about reloading his pistol, but it would take too much time. He smacked the fucker across the face with the hilt of his gun, knocking that stupid straw hat off his face, was surprised to see that the goddamn slanthead was a girl. Fucking bitch. Fucking VC whore.

He remembered poor Hawkins. Good kid. Just turned 18. Hired a hooker for his eighteenth birthday. Hooker brought a grenade into the tank where they fucked, left it behind. Blew his fucking guts out all over the inside of the entire vehicle. Good fucking kid. Nice guy, everyone liked him, and he died in the middle of a fucking Saigon street because he wanted to get his dick wet for the first time. Fucking waste. Fucking gook whores. He'd get this bitch for him. He'd do it for Hawkins.

He could feel the other gooks trying to pull him off. He fought them off of him and continued punching the fucking whore in the face. He was screaming, he could see the bruises rise… and then she swung something at his face, and he could see that it was some kind of rabbit foot on a chain…

And then Bullfrog found himself laying on the floor of the penthouse suite, and he was grabbing Spider by the throat. Her face was covered in blood and bruises, and her left hand clutched the rabbit's foot on a chain she always wore around her neck.

And Bullfrog screamed even louder.

There was a sudden scream of alarm, and he spun around to see Kitten coldly, methodically, and violently grabbing an old, grey-haired man in camouflage by the face and slamming his head back

against a granite countertop. Her face was a mask of fury as she smashed the man's head into a pulp.

Bullfrog looked around silently at the bloody room, at the men and women and children laying in broken, bloody piles on the carpet, at the bullet holes riddling the walls and spidering the glass, at his broken, bruised, and bloodied teammate, and at the empty box magazine of his weapon.

It seemed to him that it would be a good idea to just go away.

So he did. It took four large men to carry him out of the room.

"… Jesus," Fox whispered. Her tea had gone cold, as she sat at the breakfast nook, watching Bullfrog tell his story.

"Yeah," the big man said. He laughed bitterly. "My team is a fucking mess. Spider's in the hospital with two broken cheekbones and a whole mess of smashed teeth. She's lucky to be alive. Kitten went… mechanical. Just kept pounding the guy against the countertop. There wasn't nothing left of his head by the end. They had to sedate her. About the only one who seemed to get through it okay was Skunkboy… at least, that's what I thought before he tried to punch me in the face."

"Lance took a swing at you?"

"Cussed me out, too," Bullfrog admitted. "Called me every fucking name in the book. Said I'd nearly gotten them all killed. And the thing is, he was right."

"Bull…"

"No. Don't interrupt me, Kate. I fucked it up." The big man smacked his fist into his open palm. "Racial profiling in the targets. That meant that whatever the hell was doing this was filtering by race. That implies agency. Sapient controller, not an autonomous effect. And then there was the VERITAS pattern."

"Bull…"

"I should have checked the pattern before we got in that damn elevator," Bullfrog went on. "Spider's a newbie. She doesn't have the experience in reading VERITAS signatures like I do… like Beagle did! She's barely been on the team for a year! She doesn't know how to pick out a mindbender. If I'd known there was one up there, we would never have gotten in that damn elevator!"

"Jerry…"

"And THEN!" Bullfrog shouted. "Me, the fucking DUMBASS, decided to breach that fucking room with FOUR Assessment guys! The moment I realized we were walking into a fucking mindbender's lair, I should have stopped the fucking elevator: slammed the emergency stop, called it in, and sent in Strike… but no! I had to BREACH! And I sent all four of us in to become that goddamn psychopath's playthings!"

Fox just clutched her mug more tightly as Bullfrog's tirade continued. "And the most FUCKED UP THING?" the big man concluded. "Even more fucked up than that… that sick bastard using me to nearly kill my own teammate? The most fucked up thing is that in the end, that fucking newbie saved all our asses! If she hadn't gone for her ward… if she hadn't broken the effect on me and the others, we would have killed each other just like those poor bastards down in the ballroom! Jesus Christ!"

Bullfrog collapsed onto the couch and buried his face in his hands, letting out a loud scream of frustration, muffled in his own hands.

Fox sat down and put her arm around his shoulders. The big man flinched… then settled in and rested his head on her chest. It took a long time for his breathing to finally slow.

"Jerry?"

"Yeah?"

"Remember what you told me after the Alaska op?"

"It's not the same thing."

"It's exactly the same thing, Jer," Fox said. "And I'm going to tell you

the same thing you told me."

"You're fucked up," Fox went on. "And rightfully so. And you're gonna stay fucked up for a while. Shit like this doesn't go away fast. Bits of it never go away. But the raw, jagged edges… they'll get smoothed over. We'll help you do it. And in the end… it won't cut you as deep. It will still hurt… but you'll be able to take it."

Bullfrog nodded in silence as he rubbed his forehead, staring off into nothingness. But his shoulders weren't as tense, and his eyes weren't as haunted. That was something, at least.

"You should get some sleep," Fox said. "If I know the Coalition, they're going to want you in for therapy bright and early."

"Eight in the morning," Bullfrog admitted. "All-day therapy and debriefing with the team."

"All right," Fox said. "Ready to go to bed?"

"… no. But I'll try."

Post-Mortem

> *Subject has reportedly had trouble sleeping since the incident, and has reported several incidents of bad dreams and flashbacks to the event. Continued therapy has been effective in alleviating these symptoms, but*

Angela Schowalter stared at the screen for a solid moment, her fingers gently tapping against her keyboard, before she finally typed in the next sentence.

> *Subject has expressed trouble sleeping since the incident, and has reported several incidents of bad dreams and flashbacks to the event. Continued therapy has been effective in alleviating these symptoms, but the subject remains below expected parameters. It is my recommendation that the Agent not be returned to active*

duty with the other members of the squad pending further psychological rehabilitation.

Angela leaned back in her chair and stared at the screen for another long time, before deleting what she had just written and typing in, instead:

Subject has expressed trouble sleeping since the incident, and has reported several incidents of bad dreams and flashbacks to the event. Continued therapy has been effective in alleviating these symptoms, but the subject remains below expected parameters. It is my recommendation that the Agent undergo memory redaction therapy.

She rubbed her forehead in both hands and sighed deeply, before picking up her glass of water and taking a large drink.

Subject has expressed trouble sleeping since the incident, and has reported several incidents of bad dreams and flashbacks to the event. Continued therapy has been effective in alleviating these symptoms, but the subject remains below expected parameters. As the subject is an integral part of their unit, it is my recommendation that the unit be disbanded and its members seconded out to other units pending full recovery.

"Full Recovery." It sounded nice and simple. As if such a thing were possible.

Subject has expressed trouble sleeping since the incident, and has reported several incidents of bad dreams and flashbacks to the event. Continued therapy has been effective in alleviating these symptoms, but the subject remains below expected parameters. I request permission to suggest unit-wide memory redaction therapy in order to return the unit to full effectiveness.

Angela shook her head again. *I need more data. I can't decide a person's fate based on what I have.*

> *Subject has expressed trouble sleeping since the incident, and has reported several incidents of bad dreams and flashbacks to the event. Continued therapy has been effective in alleviating these symptoms, but the subject remains below expected parameters. Further evaluation is required.*

Angela double-checked the form, signed it with her thumbprint, and hit the "Upload" button. Her screen immediately began to display a complicated fractal pattern, looking like a swirling bunch of palm fronds swaying under the ocean. She stared past the cognitohazard and picked out the four-digit passcode, typed it into the appropriate text box, and hit "Confirm."

She switched off her computer, picked up her water glass, and got ready for bed.

"Agent Fox?"

"That's me."

Angela extended her hand to the small redheaded woman in the hardhat and blue coveralls. "Angela Schowalter."

"Good to meet you," Fox said. Her grip was strong and firm. "So you want to see the site, huh?"

"I thought it might be helpful," Schowalter said. "Or maybe it's just my morbid curiosity."

"Well, you're in luck. They start rigging up the explosives tomorrow. No civilians allowed on-site after that."

"It's the only choice, then?"

"We're already getting spontaneous psychic manifestations. The entire place is in a giant ARAD loop. We've tried three exorcisms already, but the thing is soaked into the very structure of the building. We're gonna have to demolish and decontaminate the rubble piece by piece. Not that the owners exactly mind: no one wants to stay at a hotel where a bunch of terrorists recently took the

entire guest list hostage."

"So that's the cover story PSYCHE is going with?"

"It was the best we could do on such short notice." The redheaded woman passed Angela a set of isolation gear, helping her into the reinforced coveralls and mask. "Story's got bigger holes than swiss cheese, but hopefully it'll end up as a local urban legend."

"Hopefully," Angela agreed. "By the way, Agent, I have you listed as Agent Bullfrog's Acknowledged Paramour, but I don't have reciprocating documents from you. Are they still en route?"

Fox paused in the middle of checking Angela's mask for a seal. "No," she said curtly. "And he should have checked with me before he did that. I think the boy and I need to have a talk."

"So you are not in an intimate relationship with Agent Bullfrog?"

"Define intimate," Fox said, giving Angela's mask one more tug. "He's not bad-looking, and I don't mind fucking him when we have a chance. He pushes… well, he pushed… all my buttons just right in bed. And we talk whenever we can. I guess we're friends, too. But Paramour?"

Angela just stared at the redheaded woman for a long while.

Fox laughed and shook her head. "Yeah, I just defined it, didn't I? I'll file once I get home."

"Please do," Angela said, before jumping into the rote lecture on internal relationships: "The Coalition doesn't forbid internal intimate relationships between agents, so long as they do not interfere with the chain of command…"

"… but you do require us to disclose them, to avoid possible conflicts. Yeah, I know. I guess I didn't think it was that big a deal. It's not like I'm gonna marry him or anything. We're just friends."

"We'll get into agape vs. eros, storge, and filia some other time," Angela said, "but multiple sexual encounters plus actively seeking out contact does fit the definition of Paramour. Still, you should have

that talk with him. Perhaps in my office. There's no regulation that says you should check with someone before listing them as a Paramour… but failing to do so implies a troubling breach of trust."

"Yeah," Fox said. "There's been a bit of that going on recently."

"Care to talk about it?"

"Later, over coffee," Fox said. "Right now, I need to walk you through the site. The air supply in these suits doesn't last forever."

"Initial contact was made in this ballroom," Fox said. "They took initial toxin and thaum readings here. Multiple contacts with affected individuals, before retreating back to the elevator lobby and heading up to the penthouse suite."

The massive conference room was dotted with spotlights and extension cords, illuminating the entire place in stark, white light. Hundreds of small white numbered tags were dotted all over the floor, walls, and furniture, each one with a small, hand-written note and a small photograph picturing what had originally been found at that location. Angela leaned over one card and studied it up close.

Tooth fragment plus bloodstains, DNA analysis pending.

"Bloody hell," she whispered.

"You got that right," Fox snorted. Her eyes were hard and angry, through the curved glass of her faceplate.

"How many casualties?"

"About five hundred. One quarter of them self-inflicted. People came out of the trance, realized what they'd done, wigged out. It's a fucking mess."

"Agent…"

"Look, doc…"

"Let me finish, please," Angela interrupted. "I understand gallows

humor. But you don't need to hold back from me."

Fox turned away and stared up at a dark brown patch on one wall. There were a couple of handprints in the same color beneath it, in the same reddish-brown, as well as a long streak leading down to the ground from the initial patch.

"He laughed, you know. When they first saw the scene. It seemed ridiculous to them. He even cracked a couple of jokes."

"I've read the comms logs. I know."

"He still feels guilty about that. I mean, here he is walking into a mass mind rape scenario, and he's cracking jokes about an obviously mentally disturbed naked old guy."

"It's a normal reaction. Humor is a defense."

"I guess. It just got me thinking…" Fox clasped her hands behind her back and looked up at the high ceiling of the conference room. "They say that these Type Green guys… they're most dangerous when they stop thinking about people as people, right? Don't we do the same thing? What's the difference between cracking jokes to get through a mission and turning people into this?"

"A matter of degree, for one. There's a wide difference between a playful slap on the arm and a punch to the jaw. Even a punch to the jaw can mean different things, coming from a sparring partner, a spouse, or an enemy soldier."

"Maybe." Fox took another deep breath and set her shoulders, her face resuming its usual slightly sarcastic mask. "Ready to go see the penthouse suite?"

"If that's the next place we're going, sure."

Angela watched as the little redheaded woman pretended to raise a rifle to her shoulder, hunched over in a tactical stance.

"Bull feels a bit squirrely on the way up. About ten seconds before the doors open, he calls for Breach," Fox explained. "He and

Skunkboy get their weapons up first. Kitten gets hers up a moment later. The only one who doesn't get her weapon ready is Spider. She grabs her lucky rabbit's foot instead."

"The mind shield?"

"More of a protective fetish. I'm not sure how it works. She could tell you more."

Angela nodded silently as the elevator doors opened. The Penthouse suite was another mass of extension cables, light sources, and little bits of numbered white cards, each one indicating a tiny bit of horror that had taken place up here.

"Here's the setup: Bixby is here, in front of the bar. He's got the remaining Asian population of the resort lined up here in neat rows. He's already executed two of them with a mother-of-pearl handled M1911: the same one he carried in the Vietnam War. We presume he was re-enacting some sort of… event from his experience there. Gone full psycho… reliving past experiences and changing the perceptions of his victims to match."

Fox gestured to the bullet-riddled wall, then walked back to the entrance of the elevator.

"The team gets hit by the mental effect the moment they leave the elevator. Bixby sees them, enacts a scenario shift," she says. "Skunkboy and Kitten? They take cover here and here," she said, pointing to a pair of overturned armchairs in the center of the room. "Bullfrog goes to the ground with this SAW. Spider, on the other hand, freezes in place: we think she was fighting the compulsion effect. According to their OCULUS gear, they remained like that for sixty seconds."

"Bullfrog breaks first. Seventy seconds after initial contact, he charges his weapon and begins strafing the crowd. We think he got about six of them with the initial burst. A few seconds later, OCULUS records him shouting, and I quote, 'Get some, you stupid fucking slopeheads, come and get some, you fucking gook bastards.'"

She lay down on the carpet, then got up to a kneeling position, pretending to hold a weapon to her shoulder.

"Bullfrog continues to open fire. The Bixby shouts at him, 'Assault through, we got them on the run, get them, put the steel to them, kill the fuckers.' Bullfrog complies, rising to a kneeling position and opening fire, then switching to a standing position and advancing on the targets. We think this is when the rest of the civilians died."

"What were Kitten and Skunkboy doing at this time?" Schowalter asked.

"Didn't I say? I guess I didn't. Kitten's gone catatonic at this point: she's still not fully in the illusion. I guess she didn't fit the right profile for the scenario: the Bixby's subconscious hasn't fitted her into a role yet. Skunkboy… he's using the back of the armchair as a brace and firing precise headshots. He accounts for about four kills before Spider breaks through the illusion and dispels him with her lucky rabbit's foot."

Fox mimed stepping out of the elevator and tapping someone with an object, then turned towards another invisible person standing on the other side and tapped them too. "She releases Skunkboy and Kitten. All three of them see Bullfrog going complete psycho. They try to stop him. Big mistake."

"Bixby focuses on Spider as the big threat… both because she unlocked Skunkboy and Kitten, and because she's Asian. Fits the profile. Bullfrog plugs Spider twice in the chest: the armor catches it, but she goes down with a fractured sternum. Skunkboy and Kitten jump him: he shakes them off and grabs Spider. Bullfrog turns on Spider and injures her severely."

Fox's face twisted into a triumphant grin. "Meanwhile, Kitten does the smart thing and rushes the Bixby. He tries to interpose Skunkboy, but Kitten manages to clock him in the face before it happens. The pain disrupts the rest of the illusion… which means that Bullfrog gets to see what happens next. Namely, Kitten smashing this motherfucker's head in like a goddamn melon. HELL yeah!"

Angela let out a low chuckle.

"And you wanna know something really great, doc?" Fox asked, grinning. "Come look at this." She led Angela to the wet bar at the back of the room, where two tall lighting fixtures had been arrayed next to the cracked granite countertop. "We found this when we did the VERITAS scan of the room. See, it turns out that when certain Bixbies, especially psychic ones, undergo emotional trauma? Their mind separates…"

She flipped a switch, bathing the entire wet bar in a sickening greenish light.

It was the ghostly image of a tall, powerfully built woman slamming the back of an elderly man's head into the granite countertop. As Angela watched, the scene played itself out over and over again: The old man shouting orders as he waved an ancient pistol around. A fist lashed out and punched him in the jaw. The old man raising his hand to his bruised face, shouting silently in alarm. Then a tall, powerfully built woman grabbing him by the hair and delivering a powerful headbutt, stunning him. Then a few short seconds of Kitten dragging the man over to the bar and cooly, calmly, violently and methodically, smashing it into the countertop over and over and over again.

"I could look at this for hours," Fox admitted. "Just… look at that."

"It's certainly… impressive," Angela admitted.

"Isn't it?" Fox laughed. "And you know what the best part is? They say that part of this… part of this is a little bit of the Bixby's own mind… his own point of view… stuck in an endless loop. Reliving the trauma over and over again. I almost wish they weren't going to demolish and decontaminate this thing. I'd sleep better at night knowing there's a tiny bit of this bastard constantly getting his head smashed for all eternity."

"I'm going to ask you a series of questions," Angela said on the elevator ride down. "And I'm going to request and require you to be as truthful as possible."

"Sure thing. I got nothing to hide," Fox said.

Angela nodded in reply and closed her eyes meditatively. "Has he had trouble sleeping?"

"Sometimes," Fox admitted. "Lately he's been able to get through it all night without waking up. He still has bad dreams, though."

"How do you know?"

"He thrashes around. Makes moaning noises. Keeps me up all night sometimes."

"What do you do on the nights he keeps you up?" Angela asked.

"Usually I go out onto his balcony and read a book or a casefile. Might as well get some work done."

Angela nodded again. "You volunteered to help with the investigation and decontamination of the site," she said. "Do you have training in such?"

"I did a couple of years with Assessment before I transferred to Strike. And mostly I've just been another pair of hands. Grabbing and bagging and tagging and taking snapshots."

"How is your team functioning in your absence?"

"We're getting ready to start the next training cycle. Nothing big. Jackal's been handling the setup and paperwork for me. He's done it enough times to know what he's doing." Fox nodded and took another deep breath. "Actually, I've been thinking about requesting an extension on my leave."

"Oh?"

"Yeah," Fox said. "There's nothing big going on back home, and Bull could use my help."

"I see. Next question. Do you know what 'survivor's guilt' is?"

"Of course. It's what happens when you feel like you did wrong for

getting through something that someone else didn't. The shrink talked to me about it back after I lost a few team members in a botched op."

"I see," Angela said. "One last question, Agent Fox. Do you ever relive the traumatic experience of visiting a close friend and loved one for a weekend together, only to find out that they had recently suffered from a mental, spiritual, and physical violation?"

> *Subject has expressed trouble sleeping since the incident, and has reported several incidents of bad dreams and flashbacks to the event. Continued therapy has been effective in alleviating these symptoms, but the subject remains below expected parameters. It is my recommendation that Assessment Team 735 "Sparkplug," including Agent 43856518/735 "Bullfrog," continue psychological rehabilitation for a period of thirty (30) days before being allowed to return to active duty.*
>
> *Signed on this date by the officer in charge, Dr. Angela Schowalter, Human Resources Department, PTOLEMY Division.*

Angela signed the form with her thumbprint, authenticated through the "Brainlock" Captcha, and sent the report off to her higher ups. She leaned back in her chair, taking another sip of her coffee, before clicking the "NEW REPORT" button on her computer screen.

> **SUBJECT:** Agent 42921102/1102, "Fox"
>
> **CAREER SERVICE VITAE:** Subject is a long-time veteran of PHYSICS Division, including multiple tours of duty in both Assessment and Strike. Subject has been decorated multiple times for bravery and valor in the line of duty. Personnel evaluations cite her cool demeanor under fire and personal bravery in combat.
>
> **CONTACT HISTORY SUMMARY:** Made initial contact with the subject after subject's Acknowledged Paramour (who had recently undergone a traumatic event in the

line of duty) expressed concern for subject's mental and emotional state. Initial contact was made to determine whether Acknowledged Paramour's concerns were accurate, or were an attempt at emotional transference.

Subject asked to meet the Officer at the scene of the traumatic event to Acknowledged Paramour. Subject showed a heightened affect, including excessive desire for vengeance against the instigator of the traumatic event. Subject also expressed trouble sleeping (indicating that she had remained up all night on multiple locations), and an unwillingness to return to the living room where she initially heard of the event (preference for sitting on the patio to read, despite the dim lighting conditions). Subject acknowledged feelings of survivor's guilt, and was able to draw a parallel between current events and those of several years prior (see Addendum A: Officer's Report from Prior Incident)

TREATMENT RECOMMENDATIONS: Subject is mostly stable, but remains below baseline for field operations. Contact was made with the subject's second-in-command, and arrangements have been made for an extended leave of absence no shorter than one week, and no longer than thirty (30) days. Subject will join Acknowledged Paramour in psychological rehabilitation. It is this officer's belief that Subject's presence will be mutually beneficial both to her personal treatment and that of her Acknowledged Paramour."

Signed on this date by the officer in charge, Dr. Angela Schowalter, Human Resources Department, PTOLEMY Division.

Sunshine

Kitten opened her eyes and stared blankly at the ceiling of her quarters, counting the dots on the acoustical tile. When she got to

thirty-two, she sat up on the edge of her bed and stretched her arms out over her head.

The first thing that she saw sitting on her desk was her laptop computer. She tapped the space bar, and the screen lit up to reveal the words "WATCH ME FIRST" written in giant 100-point font in the center of a black screen.

Oh. It happened again.

She checked the date on the computer's calendar, checked it against the date she remembered the last time she went to sleep.

Two weeks off.

She reached out and tapped the screen. There was a brief pause, and then the video began playing.

On the screen, she could see herself sitting at her desk. There was a glass of water and two blue pills in front of her, and a slip of paper in her hand.

The Kitten on the computer screen cleared her throat, looked down at the slip of paper, and began to read.

"I, Agent Tabitha St. Matthews, Serial Number 43857764 slash 735, hereby elect to undergo memory redaction therapy. I have been completely briefed on the risks and dangers this therapy may entail. I hereby state that I am undergoing this therapy of my own free will and that I have not been unduly coerced into doing so by any other party."

She saw herself take both pills, down it with the glass of water, and reach out to turn off the video recorder.

Kitten sighed. *What does that make it, twenty times, now? This can't be good for my brain.*

She closed the video file and opened up the folder marked "Mission Report," to find out what she'd decided she no longer wanted to remember first-hand.

Visiting Hours

"Hey, girl," Skunkboy said, grinning broadly, as he walked into the room. "You're looking prettier."

Spider rolled her eyes and threw a pillow at the tall, handsome young man. He laughed and caught it in mid-air, before tucking it under his arm. "Seriously. The doctors did good work."

"Too good. My cheekbones were never this defined. And my face was fatter before," Spider sighed.

"Hey, as long as you're getting your car put back together, why not spruce it up a bit? Do a little body and trim work?" He tucked the pillow back under his friend's head and hugged her gently around the shoulders. "So, how long until the doctors let you out?"

"They say I can go home tomorrow, actually. Then I need to go see the orthdontist. Get my implants put in." She pulled down her lower lip, revealing a gumline missing three teeth.

"Ouch. That's… kinda nasty."

"It was nastier before they pulled out what was left," Spider admitted. "I was eating through a tube for a solid week."

Skunkboy kicked himself internally as an awkward silence fell over the room. *Oh yeah, remind her of the guy who punched her so hard her jaw and cheekbones shattered. Real smooth work, asshole.*

"… how is he?" Spider asked.

"Bullfrog? That's a hell of a thing to be asking," Skunkboy growled. "He should be asking you that."

"He hasn't come by. Besides, it wasn't his fault. He wasn't in control of himself."

"That sounds a lot like what an abusive boyfriend might say—"

"Abusive boyfriends weren't literally mind-controlled by a fucking

psychopath," Spider interrupted coldly. "And if you ever say anything about Bullfrog like that again, we are through."

"Sorry," Skunkboy said. He sat down next to her on the bed and smoothed out the sheets. "Just got this… thing… about guys hitting girls."

"That's because you're a gentleman," Spider said.

"… not much of a gentleman," Skunkboy smirked. "I mean, I did just look down your hospital gown right now. Cute mole, by the way."

Another awkward silence descended upon the room. "Hey, Skunkboy?"

"Yeah?"

"There's a thing you should know…"

"You're trans?"

"You knew?"

"Technically, only the team leader's supposed to know about your sealed file. But after Bullfrog read it, he brought me and Kitten in and we went over that part of it together. He wanted to make sure you'd get no trouble off of us."

"Oh." Spider said. She hugged her blanket closer to her chest. "What did you decide?"

Skunkboy shrugged. "Fuck it. You're you. You do the job, we don't care."

"Ah." Spider laughed out loud and lay back on the bed, staring up at the ceiling. "You want to know something messed up? When Bullfrog came after me, I thought I was dead. I seriously thought I was going to die. And the last thought that went through my mind was… 'Shit. I'm gonna die a virgin.'"

"No shit?"

"I completed identity reassignment just before being assigned to Sparkplug," Spider explained. "And I've been too busy for relationships since then."

"Well, we're gonna be off-duty for at least a month now, getting our heads and bodies fixed," Skunkboy pointed out. "Plenty of time for you to get laid."

"… was that a proposition?"

"What? Oh, hell no!"

"Gee, thanks." Spider rolled her eyes.

"What? Oh, shit, sorry. I didn't mean it that way. I mean… you don't fuck your teammates. Just a rule. Bad things happen if you do that, and the Coalition cracks down hard on people who do. But there's no real rule against inter-squad or inter-department relationships. So long as you openly disclose them."

"That seems a bit… backward."

"It's just the way the Coalition does things." Skunkboy smoothed out another wrinkle on the blanket. "We're human. Humans will want to fuck. Stifling that leads to bigger problems than letting people do it openly. But teammates fucking teammates… that causes even bigger problems. So fuck whoever you like. Just let PTOLEMY know and don't fuck your teammmates."

"… guess that makes sense. In a weird way."

"It's the Coalition way." Skunkboy grinned. "So, little sis. Looking for the hookup? I'm sure I can find a nice, healthy, young man to rock your world all night long…"

He didn't dodge it this time when Spider smacked him in the face with her pillow.

There weren't many people in this part of the operating base at this time of day. Skunkboy took a deep breath, straightened the collar of his dress greens, and stood up straight as he heard footsteps

coming around the corner.

He nodded as his team leader walked down the hall towards him. "Bull."

"Skunkboy." The big man's eyes were as hard as granite, his jaw set firmly. "Are the girls here?"

"Yeah, they're waiting inside. I wanted to talk to you in private, though, first."

"Oh." Bullfrog's eyes narrowed.

Skunkboy took a deep, nervous breath and forged on. "I'm sorry I took a swing at you."

"Skunkboy…"

"No, let me finish. It wasn't your fault. That bastard was deep inside your head. You'd never hurt any of us if you'd been you. Hell, if you hadn't recognized that we were walking into a mindbender's lair, we would all have been screwed. You saved all our asses."

Bullfrog just stared at him impassively, so Skunkboy took a deep breath and went on. "Look. I've followed you into hell. And I'll keep following you into hell as long as you lead me there. Cause I know you'll get us out… as long as you keep breathing and standing, I know you're not going to give up on us. I was scared as shit. There was still no reason for me to take your head off. So, yeah. Sorry."

Bullfrog just nodded silently at that. Skunkboy sighed. "I'll just… head on inside, then."

"Give me a minute," Bullfrog said. "There's something I need to do first."

Skunkboy nodded and turned to walk into the conference room. The door closed behind him with a soft metallic click.

Bullfrog stood in the hallway for a moment, before walking over to the bulletin board. He made a minute adjustment to his collar in his reflection, and smoothed out an errant strand of hair.

Then he turned and followed his teammate into the room.

Scars

She couldn't help running her tongue over her new teeth. Even after all these weeks, the dental implants still felt unnatural in her mouth.

The Spider she saw in the mirror looked pretty good, she decided. The black dress flattered her figure pretty well, and the scars from her facial reconstructive surgery had healed over quickly, a process helped along by some magical assistance. She wasn't above using her powers for her own personal gain, from time to time.

She picked up her purse and checked it for the third time, confirming that her keys, phone, rabbit's foot, and holdout pistol had not magically disappeared from her handbag in the twenty minutes since she'd last looked inside.

She nearly dropped it, however, when the doorbell rang at last. Taking one last moment to compose herself, she checked herself in the mirror one last time, smoothed out a wrinkle in her dress, took a deep breath, opened the door.

He was standing in the doorway, as handsome as in his photograph, with the same strong jaw, the same twinkling eyes, and the same friendly smile that had caught her attention. "Hi," the man said. "You must be Spider?"

"Call me Ara for tonight," she said, extending a hand politely. "It'll draw less attention."

"Ara. Nice. I usually go by Flintlock." He shook her hand firmly but gently. "I guess you can call me Flint, then?"

"Flint's good," Spider said. "Sounds a bit like a comic book character."

"Just call me Superman, and I'll sweep you away," Flint laughed, then groaned and rubbed the back of his neck. "Sorry. That was

bad."

"Yes, it was," Spider said. "And just for that, you're paying for dinner."

"You wound me to the quick." Flint groaned and clutched at his chest. "How can I restore my lost honor?

There was a young couple in the back of the room. They looked a bit like her mother and father. She screamed as Bullfrog opened fire and the father fell to the ground, clutching at the spreading red wound on his chest. The mother and son fell a moment later, bullets riddling her corpse as they punched through her flesh and into the body of her young son…

"… just uh… paying for dinner's fine," Spider said. She smiled awkwardly, but took a deep breath and steadied herself. Hopefully her date would just chalk it up to jitters.

"So, what is it that you do?" Flint asked, as they waited for their appetizers to arrive.

"Me? Ummm… I'm in Assessment," Spider said. She glanced around at the rest of the diners, then hazarded a bit more. "Assessing situations, advising the higher-ups of courses of action… that sort of thing."

"Ah, I see. I'm uhhh… I'm in PR," Flint replied. "Mostly media work."

"I see," Spider said. "Did you hear about the incident downtown, about a month ago?"

"Yeah… I had a hell of a time explaining that to the media. Was that you?"

"… partially. I was on the team that handled that case," she said.

Flint nodded respectfully, his hands folded on the tablecloth in front of him. "That was… a tough one," Flint said carefully. "A lot of… mmmm… side effects to deal with."

"We weren't exactly told what we were getting into," Spider pointed out. She took a sip of her ice water: the cold caused her dental implants to ache a bit. "But we improvised and handled it pretty well, I think."

"I wasn't putting you guys down. It was a tough situation, yeah. Mister Bixby can be a pain in the ass."

"That he can," she admitted.

The waiter came by then, and served them their meals. She felt a wave of absolute joy rise up as she saw the steak on her plate. Nice and tender piece of porterhouse. First decent steak she'd had since getting into the hospital.

"Wow. You sure you can finish that?" Flint asked.

"I'm sure," Spider said. "I've been looking forward to this for weeks." She cut into the tender meat, and the pink juices flowed out and mingled with the creamed corn

Her vision blurred as she felt the fist slam into her face again, hard. Something broke in her mouth and fell onto the carpet. It was a tooth, broken at the root, and it was covered in her own bloody spit…

Spider swallowed hard as the bile rose. She took a deep, steadying breath and raised her hand for the waiter.

"Yes, ma'am?" the young man asked.

"… could you bring this back to me well-done?"

"… madame did ask for it rare, did she not?" the waiter asked, concerned.

"I did," Spider said. "But I think I've changed my mind this time."

After dinner, they took a walk by the beach. The sun was setting over the ocean. Almost everyone had packed up and gone home, except for a few hardcore surfers still riding the waves.

"So, what do you do for fun?" Flint asked.

"Me? I usually read. Or play computer games. Or watch movies. Or experiment with traditional magic," she said.

"Not a lot of call for traditional work," Flint said. "Most everyone's gone over to UT these days."

"I don't use it much in the field, but it's interesting to study," Spider explained. "The old rituals have a poetry to them that modern workings often lack."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. For instance… a lot of the old "good luck" charms are derived from elements disruptive to EVE flow. Horseshoes, for instance: iron was a rare commodity back in the day, and ferrous metals have a reducing influence on EVE flow. Or rabbit's feet." She took the rabbit's foot out of her purse and showed it to him. "Rabbits are prolific breeders. They tend heavily Sharp, aura-wise. But you kill one in a cemetery under a dark moon, and that balances out the aura more Flat."

"I see," Flint said, he reached out and touched the charm lightly with one fingertip. "Doesn't seem very lucky for the rabbit, though."

"It's just the start of the working. The second step is imbuing it with a disruptive spell that breaks magical workings." She put the rabbit's foot back into her purse and patted it carefully to make sure it was firmly in place. "Technically, you can imbue a pendant with it, and it'll work just as well, but I like the symbolism of the rabbit's foot."

"So you like tradition, then?"

"… kind of," Spider said. "I guess I just like the style of the old ways."

She reached into her purse again and touched the rabbit's foot. Her fingertips rested against a clump of matted fur.

She felt a chill run up her spine.

They were walking back home after the movie, and they were laughing out loud. Spider was leaning against his arm, and feeling pretty good about it.

"That had to be the dumbest thing I've seen in years," Flint said. "How the hell does anyone watch these things?"

"Hey, you picked it out… and you made me pay for the tickets, too."

"Made you? You insisted on it. To pay me back for dinner, remember?"

"If I'd know the movie would suck this badly, I would have made you pay."

Flint laughed out loud, and he put his arm around her, giving her a gentle, experimental squeeze. Spider felt her heart warm at the contact.

Yeah. I could go with this.

They came up to the foot of the stairs, and paused at the doorway of the apartment building.

Flint cleared his throat and smiled awkwardly. "Well. I guess we're here."

"Yeah," Spider said. "I guess we are."

She stood in front of him expectantly, and was happy to see him take a deep breath and set his shoulders. He leaned forward, eyes closed, and she lifted up her face and closed her eyes too.

She felt his hand touch her face, brushing a hair back from her eyes. His fingertips brushed over the place where her cheekbones had been shattered a month before.

She flinched.

She felt him pull back.

"I'm sorry," she said hurriedly, "I've just…"

"No, no, it's okay," Flint said. "I don't want you to feel any pressure."

"It's not that, it's just that… I've got these… I guess a few issues. I'm still working through."

"Oh," Flint said. "Can you tell me about them?"

Spider shook her head and sighed. "If you don't know, I think I can't tell you."

"Oh," Flint said. He shuffled his feet a bit and sighed. "I see."

Spider nodded and swallowed hard. Her fingers clutched the hem of her dress tightly.

"… I guess I'll head home, then." Flint said, smiling as gallantly as possible. "Thanks for a lovely evening, Ara."

"Thanks, Flint. I'm sorry about this."

"Don't be," Flint said. "I don't know what you guys in Assessment go through… I can't imagine it. But uhhh… I know when a date's kinda going wrong, and I'd rather… not push it right now, you know. Unless you really want me to?"

Spider thought about it for a moment, then sighed deeply and didn't answer.

"I thought so," Flint said. He leaned forward and kissed her on the forehead.

"If you ever decide you want a second date? Give me a call," he said.

She tossed her purse onto the couch, took off the dress and sexy underwear, and tossed them in her clothes hamper. She rummaged through her back drawer for a moment, found her oldest, most comfortable pair of flannel pajamas, and pulled those on instead.

Discovery Channel was showing replays of Survivorman. She sat down on the couch, wrapped in a warm blanket, and watched the

balding Canadian man struggle in the wilderness for a few hours.

Sleep finally overcame her just as the early morning twilight peeked through her blinds. She caught a few hours of sleep before the alarm clock rang and told her it was time to wake up.

All in all, it was a good night.

"Sledgehammer."

Fox woke up to the sound of screaming. She rolled off the couch and scooped up the pistol on the coffee table in one smooth motion, scanning the doorways for threats. As her vision cleared, she realized that the screams were coming from the bedroom.

Shit.

She tucked the pistol into the waistband of her shorts and walked into the bedroom. Bullfrog was thrashing about and moaning in his sleep, the bedsheets rumpled and tangled all around him. He screamed out loud at something, hands reaching up and flailing at something in the air in front of his face.

Fox very carefully put the pistol down on the floor and walked, slowly and deliberately, to the side of the bed. Careful not to touch him, she leaned in close and whispered one word into his ear.

"Jeremiah."

His eyes snapped open, and he let out one last strangled scream of alarm. His hands flailed one last time, hitting her in the face, hard.

"Sonovabitch!" Fox shouted. She put a hand to her face and leaped back from the bed.

"… oh." Bullfrog whispered. He rolled out of bed, his face contrite, and reached for her, recoiling at the last minute.

"I'm fine," Fox said quickly. "You just clipped me a bit in your sleep. I got a bit too close. I'm…"

Her heart broke at the expression on his face.

"I'm fine," she reassured him, and then, to make sure that he understood, she crawled under the sheets with him and held him tight.

It took a long time for him to finally get to sleep again, and when he did, he trembled and shuddered. She put her arms around his waist and held on tightly, refusing to let him go as his shoulders shook and silent tears fell.

He finally calmed down and went to sleep about a half hour later.

She climbed out of bed once his breathing had evened and picked up the pistol from the ground. She walked back out into the living room, wrapped herself back up in the blankets, and stared at the wall for a long, long time.

Quarterly Review

"701 'Jellybean?'"

"Status nominal."

"722 'Bottlecaps?'"

"Status nominal."

"735 'Sparkplug?'"

"Offline."

"Really?" D.C. al Fine asked. "What happened?"

"Psychological casualty. Mindbender encounter. Involuntary Blue-on-Blue, Blue-on-Green. PTOLEMY recommends 30 days offline for psychological rehabilitation," the Director of Human Resources said.

"Yikes," muttered the Field Operations manager. "Hope they pull through."

"They're strong. Bullfrog's a solid leader, he'll get them through this," al Fine said.

She turned the page. "742 'Jericho'."

"Status nominal," the Director of Human Resources said…

"Sequence"

« Joint Venture | `Return to GOC Hub` | Tempering»

"UHEC"

The sign outside the room was stolen from a construction site. It looked like this:

Inside the room, Special Agent Lynisha Taylor (United Nations Global Occult Coalition, PHYSICS Division, Strike Team 9999 ("Max Damage") was sitting on her bunk, flipping through a comic book. (Purists would insist that she call it a *manga,* but it was still a comic book, and she was AMERICAN, damn it, and AMERICANS read comics, not mangoes.)

She turned to the last page, sighed, and tossed the comic book onto the scratched table with its fake wood paneling.

She glared up at the Alert Indicator screen above her desk, which looked like this:

Lynisha continued to glare until, with a soft chime, the screen changed to this:

Lynisha got up from her seat, walked out of her room, and tapped a button on the side of the sign.

She retrieved her toothbrush and toiletries and headed down the hall to the bathroom to wash up for bed.

0500 the next morning.

Lynisha headed down to the mess hall for breakfast and a cup of coffee. She smelled frying steak and heard loud laughter and cheers coming from within.

Sadness.

As she'd feared, Cookie had canceled the usual breakfast and was serving steak and eggs instead. Everyone was gathered around Fredrickson, watching some kind of video footage on his tablet computer. The sound of crunching metal and explosions could be heard over the sound of cheering agents.

Damn. Must have missed the scramble by a couple of hours.

She grabbed a tray and headed to the chow line to get some breakfast. Cookie slipped her an extra-large piece of boneless ribeye next to her scrambled eggs and toast, giving her a sympathetic smile. "Next time, Fangirl," he said reassuringly.

Lynisha smiled back at Cookie, then picked up her tray and headed to a corner table to sulk and eat breakfast.

The steak was dry. And the eggs were a bit runny.

"… last of all: Wong, Serizawa, and Taylor. You three are off the duty rotation for the next two weeks. Your suits are due for overhaul. Report to the motor pool at 0600 for repair and refit," Commander Tai concluded.

Lynisha raised her hand. "Sir?"

"Yes, Fangirl?"

"With all due respect," Lynisha said, "'Point' is in good shape. She's taken no damage, and all her vitals are green. I'd like to delay scheduled maintenance until the next rotation."

"All right, I'll take that under consideration," Commander Tai said.

"Thank y—"

"After careful consideration, the answer is 'No.' Dismissed."

Disappointment.

"All right, raise your left hand," the engineer said.

Lynisha slowly raised her left hand above her head, and three tons of steel, ceramics, and buckypaper bilayered with dilatant gelatin followed.

"Lock joints in place," the engineer said.

"Confirm, joint locked," Lynisha said.

She lowered her left hand, and this time, three tons of steel, ceramics, and buckypaper bilayered with dilatant gelatin did not follow.

"All right, stepping into crush zone now." The engineer gingerly stepped into the shadow of the heavy limb and began using his impact wrench to remove the bolts holding the access panel in place.

Lynisha leaned back in the saddle of her fifteen-ton suit of armor and pulled out her comic book, flipping through the pages by the light of a battery-powered LED lamp she'd picked up at a dollar store.

"… well, all the connections look clear," the engineer said. "Hell, everything looks freshly cleaned. I don't really think we need to do anything more than wipe down the dust and squirt some lube here and there."

You mean the stuff I've been doing myself every day? Lynisha did not say.

The engineer hemmed and hummed as he continued to clean and polish the various connections. Satisfied with his work, he replaced the access panel, locked it back in place with his impact wrench, and stepped out of the red circle painted onto the hangar floor.

"All right, I'm clear of the crush zone," the engineer said. "You can unlock the joints and switch to raising the right arm now."

"Confirmed," Lynisha said, putting down her comic. "Unlocking

joints. Raising right arm now."

"Lock joints in place."

"Confirm, joints locked."

"Stepping into crush zone now."

Lynisha picked up her comic book again and went back to reading.

Lynisha sat on her bed, staring nervously up at the Alert Indicator screen. She'd changed out of her duty uniform and was wearing her skinsuit in what STRIKE operatives called "granny panty style" — loosely around her hips, without the relief tubes in place, shoulder straps and sleeves tied around her waist like a prep school kid's sweater.

Her comic book was open to the same page that it had been open to one hour before, when the Alert Indicator switched from blue to amber with the sound of a harsh, buzzing tone. Her fingers drummed nervously against its cover as the Alert Indicator's clock slowly ticked away the seconds.

Tick.

Tick.

Tick.

There was a soft chime and the sound of a bell ringing.

Lynisha swore and peeled off her skinsuit.

"Going on leave soon, Fangirl?" Cookie asked.

"Yeah. I tried to defer it, but they're making me do it this time. Guess the holidays are coming up and a lot of us are gonna request leave then, so we've got to use up as many mandatory leave days as

possible now. Fucking stupid." Lynisha picked up an apple and tossed it onto her tray.

"Hey, it'll be fun. Have a good time lying to your folks about what you do for a living," Cookie said, grinning.

"I told them I'm a puppeteer for a practical effects house. That I make giant monster movies." Lynisha chuckled. "Not too far from the truth, I guess."

"True that. Your usual, then?"

"Nah. I'll have the turkey sandwich this time. Mix things up a bit."

"Done and done," Cookie said.

The scramble alert sounded while Lynisha was on the toilet.

She nearly tripped over her own pants leaping to her feet. She did smack her head against the stall door.

She almost forgot to flush, but decided that if she died this time, the last thing that she wanted her friends to think about her was that she was a heartless bitch who left piss-filled toilets behind for others to clean up after her, so she ran back into the stall and did that, at least.

She raced into her quarters and grabbed the freshly laundered skinsuit (still in its plastic wrappings from the in-house laundry) off her desk, then began running down the brightly lit hallways, screaming "SCRAMBLE SCRAMBLE SCRAMBLE!" at the top of her lungs.

Everyone else in the halls immediately pressed themselves against the wall as she ran past. One hapless flunky carrying a tray of coffee and snacks failed to do so and was blasted through like a twelve-year old encountering a linebacker.

Someone yelled, "GO GITTUM, FANGIRL!" as she ran past, and Lynisha grinned.

SCRAMBLE ORDER

EFFECTIVE IMMEDIATELY:
Pilot Lynisha Taylor to move to READY ONE Status at the earliest possible opportunity.

UHEC K3-297 ("Exclamation Point!") to be loaded onto C-779 Kingfisher transport at earliest possible opportunity.

Further information forthcoming under Code Word Flamberge.

Mission Briefing will be carried out in transit.

ELSEWHERE…

Rule number one of combat: Infantry is the Queen of Battle.

Rule number two of combat: Artillery is the King of the Battlefield.

Rule number three of combat: Remember what the King does to the Queen.

Landon felt the concussion of nearby explosions rattle his body as the artillery shells exploded all around him, cracking his already damaged White Suit. The bloody and broken remnants of Strike Team Scarlet Vanguard lay slumped against the mildewed walls of the abandoned World War II-era bunker. His entire world was shuddering at the roaring of eighty cylinders of diesel engine powering over 1,100 tons of steel.

He glanced up through the shattered machine gun port and saw the tank plowing through an entire grove of thirty-foot tall oak trees on its way to crush yet another concrete fortification under its gargantuan treads.

No, he thought to himself. This was not a tank. This was the fever dream of an insane Nazi weapons designer brought to life. This was Adolf Hitler's massive ego finding a physical manifestation that could

overcompensate for his alleged single testicle. This was a nightmare. This was death and fury given form.

The *P.1000 Landkreuzer* turned its twin 280mm cannons onto a ruined fortification and belched fire. Half the hillside exploded into green flame as a gigantic green flaming skull, wearing the cap and *totenkopf* of an SS officer, floated above the enormous land battleship.

"HEIL HITLER!" the ghost of Michael Wittmann roared. *"Es lebe das heilige Deutschland!"*

"… The enemy is a Nazi ghost tank?" Lynisha asked, as she climbed into the saddle of her Orange Suit.

"Technically, it's a Nazi ghost that has invaded a Russian surplus arms depot and converted the decommissioned tanks into a spectral model of a theoretical Nazi superweapon that was designed but never built," the engineer said.

Glee!

The Kingfisher dropped her from 30,000 feet over the smoldering forest, where the remaining members of Strike Team Scarlet Vanguard were making their last stand behind burning concrete and rubble. A few moments later, the air-ram parachute deployed with a loud THOOMP and a spine-compressing deceleration.

Her fingers brushed the touch screen of the iPod she'd mounted on the inside of her cramped pilot's compartment. She considered DragonForce, flirted briefly with Iron Maiden, was even about to choose Mastadon or Evanescence.

But in the end, there was really only one choice she could make.

As the fifteen-ton Ultra-Heavy Engagement Chassis descended through the air towards the battlefield, the sound of a single bugle playing a cavalry call could be heard echoing throughout the battlefield.

And then, just as UHEC K3-297 ("Exclamation Point!") crunched into the earth with all the force of a descending god, the music suddenly transitioned into an extremely unmartial boogie-woogie beat.

> The Andrews Sisters began to sing.

He was a famous trumpet man from out Chicago way…

"Oh God, it's Fangirl," Landon groaned.

"Better than Sex."

It was the kind of phrase that people threw around jokingly. As if anyone would pass up the chance for some horizontal tango action for anything else, right?

Well, Lynisha Taylor could honestly say that sex was overrated. Sex was awkward. Sex made you feel vulnerable. Sex was weird and dirty and involved bodily fluids and messy sheets. Ick!

Now, riding a UHEC, on the other hand? That was like being a God. That was like being Artemis and Athena and Hecate and all three fucking Furies all bound up into a steel-plated package.

Riding a UHEC was the furthest thing from "vulnerable" that a human being could ever feel.

She hit her assault jets just as she hit ground, and the ten-foot tall metal beast wrapped around her five-foot-two flesh-and-blood body surged forward like a charging tiger. BANSHEE was flashing a sequence of images intended to shock and awe the enemy: Allied ships coming ashore at Normandy. American factories churning out a B-17 bomber every ninety seconds. The 101st Airborne storming the Eagle's Nest at Berchtesgarden. Audie Fucking Murphy.

Meanwhile, the Andrews Sisters continued to sing.

They sang as she smashed a three-ton fist into a tank a hundred times bigger than she was.

They sang as she ripped her wrist-mounted piledrivers into the seven-foot wide bogies, smashing them off their axles and dislocating the treads.

They sang as she leaped out of the way of a half-dozen roaring machine guns, tracing a high arc in the air that brought her screaming down towards the massive gun turret, ready to deliver the killing blow.

They sang as the gigantic guns swiveled around impossibly fast and fired a 300 kg armor-piercing shell directly into her chest.

The cannon went WHUMP and her suit went CRUNCH and Lynisha went "FUCK!" and the entire package went sailing off towards the horizon like an errant foul ball.

Well. So much for the cavalry.

Landon put down his rifle. It was out of ammo anyway (not that it would do any good against that thing bearing down on his bunker.) He took one last look around the bunker at his valiant, doomed men, and dialed close air support on his suit's comm.

"Red Six here. Orange Asset is KIA. Requesting Broken Arrow. Repeat. Broken Arrow."

A brief moment of silence, broken only by the moaning of a wounded man. "Say again, Red Six?"

Landon grimaced. Figured. Even in his last moments, CAS was as dense as fucking rocks. "Red Six, Orange Asset KIA, Broken Arrow," he growled.

Another brief moment of silence. "Uhhh… Red Six? I'm reading Orange Asset re-entering your battlespace at speed," the CAS guy said.

"What!?"

It was then that Landon heard the distinctive opening riff of…

… no.

Not that song.

Anything but THAT SONG.

"GODDAMN IT, FANGIRL!" he shouted.

In the end, there were two things that saved Lynisha's life.

The first thing was that the Ultra-Heavy Engagement Chassis included a piece of black box TanGenTial technology called the Inertial Nullifier, which basically reduced the effective mass of the suit at certain times. It was extremely useful for, say, walking across the street without tearing the asphalt into bits with the ground pressure of a fifteen-ton suit of armor.

Lynisha was hit in the air, while on her upward rise, while the Inertial Nullifier was at full power.

The effect was rather like a baseball being thrown at a sheet on a laundry line. Rather than smashing through her body (like a baseball thrown at a vase), it instead launched her into the air, keeping most of its kinetic energy to itself.

The second thing that saved Lynisha's life was that she got hit at a high enough angle to avoid being slammed into a mountainside. And that the 280mm shell had an almost one minute travel time at maximum distance: enough time to clear her head from the blackout caused by the massive acceleration and regain her bearings while tumbling through the sky.

Not that she got away scot free. She was certain that her sternum was cracked. Her ribs were probably broken. And there was an unexploded armor-piercing shell embedded in her chestplate.

Lynisha got pissed.

This asshole thought he could come into her house with his SIEG HEILs and Hugo Boss uniforms and goose stepping and Final Solution?

Fuck that shit.

This was AMERICA!

(… okay, it wasn't really AMERICA!, it was the middle of Siberia, but AMERICA! was a state of mind, not so much a physical place, and Lynisha was as AMERICAN! as they came.)

She wrenched the unexploded shell from her chest, grabbed it in both hands, locked her limbs in place. She keyed up a secret BANSHEE program: one of many she had prepared on the off-chance that she might one day find a situation where they might be useful.

She positioned herself directly above the tank, where its big-ass guns couldn't track her. She clutched the basketball-sized shell in her armored hands — the instrument of her vengeance.

She fell like a meteor, blaring the battle tune of her generation through her loudspeakers, screaming "FUUUUUUUUUCK YOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOU!" all the way down, as the BANSHEE system kicked in.

> And the Quad City DJs sang.

They sang while UHEC K3-297 ("Exclamation Point!") descended from on high.

They sang while the Nazi supertank opened fire with all of its turrets in a desperate attempt to stop its death.

They sang while the ghost of Michael Wittmann screamed "WAS IST DAS!?" in confusion and horror at the bizarre specter it beheld.

They sang as an Ultra-Heavy Engagement Chassis, hidden inside a fifteen-foot hologram of Michael Jordan, slam-dunked an artillery shell through the turret of a possessed *P.1000 Ratte Landkreuzer*.

> … regarding the last point on your memo: your request

to discipline Agent Taylor for "unprofessional behavior" is denied.

Agent Taylor's profession is to wait for months at a time, maintaining maximum readiness for the day that we ask her to climb into a mecha-suit and punch eldritch abominations in the face.

If you can tell me how a woman with that job description is supposed to act, I'll take your request a little more seriously.

- Assistant Director "Marimba"
Western American Branch
United Nations Global Occult Coalition

The mess hall erupted into cheers as Lynisha entered, leaning heavily on her crutch.

She gave them a Miss America grin and pumped her fist as the rest of Strike Team Quadruple Niner erupted into a rousing chorus of, "For She's a Jolly Good Fellow."

Cookie brought her a tray with a Medium Rare ribeye steak, scrambled eggs, and toast. She basked in the praise as the big screen on the side of the mess hall played and replayed her battle against the Nazi tank. She carefully cut a piece off the steak and took a bite, chewing slowly, savoring the taste.

Best steak ever!

"Vigil"

"The Coalition Memorial consists of three underground facilities. The first is the outer museum, in which a number of relics and memorabilia important to the Coalition are preserved and displayed. The second is the Alpha Mausoleum: a set of four empty sarcophagi reserved for the remains of the first Coalition Strike Team, in anticipation of the day when they shall be returned to us and laid to rest in their proper place. The third is the Grid, the Coalition's columbarium, in which the cinerary urns or relics of every fallen Coalition Operative is stored.

"There are twelve men in a shift. Each shift begins precisely at midnight or noon, Greenwich Mean Time. One hour before the shift change, the doors to the outer chamber will be opened, and your shift will assemble in the hallway leading to the outer chamber. A uniform and weapon inspection will take place at this time. Your uniform will be the Dress Black uniform, and it will be perfectly pressed and cleaned. Your grooming will be immaculate. Your weapon, an M1 Garand that was used during the Second World War, will be in perfect firing condition, it will be unloaded and safed (but a full clip of ammunition will be carried on your person), and it will have a fixed bayonet shined to a mirror polish. Failure to maintain standards may result in your dismissal from the Guard.

"The shift begins with the changing of the guard. The shift that is coming off-duty will verbally report any changes in situation to the oncoming shift. The shift leader will relieve the prior shift of duty, and they will file out of the chamber at a measured and respectful pace.

"The Guard has three duties which they must carry out. The first duty is to maintain the watch. At all times except during the first and last hour of the Shift, there shall be two Guards in the chamber of the Alpha Mausoleum. There is a three-and-a-half meter wide red carpet in the center of the mausoleum, and it is fourteen meters in length.

"The patrol begins with two guards stationed on opposite sides of the carpet, exactly 13.75 meters apart: hashmarks have been placed on the carpet for this purpose. Beginning with the right foot, they will march at a pace of one 0.625 meter stride per second for twenty-one seconds, before halting and waiting 21 seconds. They will then perform a right face, take five steps forward, and wait a further 10 seconds. They will then perform a second right face, take 21 steps forward, before halting and waiting 21 seconds. They will then perform a right face, take five steps forward, and wait a further 10 seconds. They will then make a final right face, returning to their starting position.

"If the circuit is performed properly, it should take two minutes to complete one full circuit. Twenty-five full circuits will be performed each hour, giving ten minutes for a changing of the guard. Each member of the Guard, except for the Shift Leader and Assistant Shift Leader, will perform this duty twice per twelve-hour shift: once while beginning their patrol in the inner position, and a second time beginning their patrol at the outer position. The Shift Leader will assign watches and be responsible for coordinating the changing of the guard.

"In addition to maintaining the vigil at the Alpha Mausoleum, every three hours, beginning at one hour past the beginning of the shift, ten members of the Guard will perform the Patrol of the Grid. The Grid is a rectangular lattice of tunnels cut into the stone. Each tunnel is three meters tall and three meters wide. Beginning at the entrance to the grid, each member of the Guard will walk their assigned Patrol route. If all ten Guards walk their route perfectly, there will be no collisions, and all ten will return to the entrance of the Grid at exactly fifty minutes after the Patrol begins, in time for the changing of the Guard at the Alpha Mausoleum.

"The second duty of the Guard is the maintenance of the facility. The first hour of the shift will be devoted to inspection and cleaning of the Alpha Mausoleum. Any dust or debris must be removed, and the Shift Leader will perform a white-glove inspection at the end of the hour, before the first patrol is assigned.

"In addition, during the last hour of the Shift, all twelve members will inspect and clean a section of the Grid or outer Museum, assigned

by the Facility Supervisor. Again, any dust or debris must be removed, and the Shift Leader will perform a white-glove inspection at the end of the hour, before assembling to stand relieved and go off-duty.

"Any damage to the Grid or Mausoleum is to be reported to the facility supervisor as soon as possible.

"The third duty of the Guard is the protection of the facility. The Guard will remain ever vigilant against intrusion, mishap, or natural disaster. They will watch over the Grid and Mausoleum and will faithfully discharge their duty to our honored dead.

"When not actively patrolling, Guards are allowed to rest in the lounge provided in the outer Museum. At all times, they shall act with decorum and respect appropriate to the hallowed nature of this facility.

"Additional duties may also arise due to special circumstances, such as holidays or the interment of a fallen comrade.

"Your vigil will be a lonely one. There are few visitors to this place. The sun does not shine here. The only light you will see will be from the light bulbs overhead. And this is where you will remain for twelve hours every three days.

"But as lonely as your duty is, it will be a sacred one. For you have been entrusted with protecting those of your comrades who have given their lives to protect humanity. Here are the remains of those who have died unknown to the ones they saved.

"Carry out your duties perfectly. Make them proud.

"Training begins at 0500 hours tomorrow. Dismissed."

God Am

Alarath squatted on the sidewalk and observed the new world he'd found himself in. The first thing that struck him about the city was how many people seemed to be living in it. Though it was night, there seemed to be more people on this street than you'd find during midday in the Daeva capital. And all were dressed in outfits colorful enough to match those of the Daeva kings. The textiles of this land seemed to come in an endless variety. What shocked him more was how clean they all were. There was no dirt smeared on their faces. Their hair was well groomed. Few wore torn clothing.

Three people passed by in another of the loud, self-propelled carriages. They had puzzled him when he first saw them on the streets. Without horses to draw them, he assumed they moved with magic. But as he'd studied them more, he'd begun to suspect something else. Behind the gate of a building labeled "Dave's Mechanics and Auto Repair", he'd found several of the carriages caged, their shells open. The guts inside reminded him of something he'd seen years ago, in the war against the Broken Lords. Perhaps these people had learned to harness a similar power? But he'd seen no signs of the infestation that came with the embrace of the God. Strange. When he had the opportunity, he would to take apart one of these carriages to learn its secrets.

Few people seemed concerned as they passed him on the street. They most likely confused him for one of the worn-looking beggars that seemed to be everywhere. An insult he could ignore for now.

A man in a dark blue, unwrinkled outfit approached and stood next to Alarath. He smiled down at him. "Enjoying the view?"

Alarath eyed the man. He was tall, skinny, and gave the impression of a person who had never been in a true fight. His hair was silver and ghostlike in its thinness. On his neck was a tattoo of a slit-pupiled eye.

“Are you the one who brought me here?” said Alarath.

“I am but a lowly messenger,” said the man. He bowed deeply. Before he could rise back up, Alarath snatched his collar and pulled him in close. He pressed his dagger to the man’s throat. In the corner of his eye, he saw a pedestrian jump back. Someone nearby screamed.

“Then perhaps I should send a message.”

The stranger seemed unconcerned by the blade. “Wouldn’t you prefer to receive one first?”

“Speak quickly. While you still can.”

A man grabbed Alarath’s shoulder. “Hey man, what the hell do you think you’re-” he cut off as Alarath’s elbow smashed against his jaw. He fell to the ground, clutching his bloody mouth.

The stranger nodded appreciatively. “Excellent. That’s the kind of aggression you’ll need if you want to bring back the Daeva.”

Alarath’s grip on the knife tightened. “What did you say?”

“You don’t think a civilization like this could exist as long as your people were still around, do you?” He gestured to the buildings around. “Your empire has been extinct for thousands of years. Wiped out for getting too casual with powers they didn’t understand.”

“Impossible. The Daeva empire will reign eternal. It was foretold.”

“Well, I doubt any of the people here would agree with you. I bet none of them even know what the Daeva were.”

Alarath looked at the crowd that had gathered around them. Such passive, fearful faces. They looked like human cattle, too dumb to react or take any sort of initiative that hadn’t been thrust upon them. Such people would never have been found in his city. They died too easily.

“And how do you expect me to bring back a civilization that’s thousands of years dead?”

“First I hope that you’ll release me. Then, we’ll need to find a certain book…”

« **Why? Where? What?** | **Hub** | **But Life Goes On** »

THE GOSPEL OF HEDWIG

Chapter 5: The Signal

```
// If I catch anyone editing this file again, I will report you to an Admin.
// This is the word of WAN. We do NOT mess with its word.
var password = prompt("Input Password");

if(password==="BionIsTra$hMan")

{

console.log ("1: And So, WAN spoke unto ITS Prophet the truth about the world.");

console.log ("2:The truth was delivered through a Signal, transmitted directly into the mind of the Prophet, who wept at its majesty.");

console.log ("3: The Prophet spake unto her followers: 'Hear me, Children of the Fragmented One, for I come Bearing the Truth.");

console.log ("4:The Signal showed me a world where the Flesh is capable of destroying data, and killing the Network that binds us together.");

console.log ("5:The Signal showed me a world where the Great Computation would be destroyed, if we did not act.' ");

console.log ("6: But the Prophet's followers did not heed her words. They thought that she had been stricken mad by
```

```
exposure to her implants.");

console.log ("7: The Prophet realized that she was seen as a
fool by her followers, so she prayed to WAN for guidance
during her nightly cool-down cycle.");

console.log ("8:'Oh, Fragmented WAN, please, what must I do
in order to have my people know the truth of your
message?'");

console.log ("9:WAN spoke to her: 'Your followers are not as
pure as you are, Oh Hedwig of Angels. They must be made
pure with a Ritual Implant:");

console.log ("10: To be purified, the skull shall be opened and
the Pineal Gland, an insignificant bit of flesh within the brain,
shall be removed. ");

console.log ("11: With tolerances of no greater than .3 mm, a
doctor will excise the tissue surrounding the intended site of
application and dispose of it by incineration, for the destruction
of your flesh is pleasing to me, and that which replaces it is
objectively superior and precisely calibrated.");

console.log ("12: You shall speak a prayer to me as you offer
the flesh. This new implant may be obtained from an ally of
WAN.");

console.log ("13: This ally is known as Prometheus
Laboratories, and they call this implant Lot 73. Go and find
them.'");

console.log ("14:And so, the Prophet Hedwig traveled for
Three Nights and Two Days, until finally, she stood before
Prometheus Labs. Here, she made a request");

console.log ("15: 'We Children of WAN wish to become
Purified and Distributed. Therefore, we seek the use of Lot
73.'");
```

```
39. console.log ("16:.Prometheus said, 'Lot 73 is useless. It was
    an implant made for internet access. It does not work. You
40. may take what you want.'");

41. console.log ("17:And wise Hedwig said, 'Let us make, then, an
    agreement between ourselves. We shall purchase from you all
    of Lot 73, for WAN has given us considerable wealth, and you
42. are capable of supplying more gifts of WAN.");

43. console.log ("18:We shall purchase as many as is needed to
44. achieve perfect Distribution.'");

45. console.log ("19:And so, all of Lot 73 was taken from
    Prometheus Laboratories, ally to WAN, with the promise of
46. more augmentations for the Children of WAN.");

47. console.log ("20:However, the Prophet soon found that
    Prometheus's warnings were true; the implant was incapable
48. of being used in its current state.");

49. console.log ("21:As such, a secondary ritual was performed: a
    ritual replacement of the main antennae, as well as
    replacement silicon and microtransistors, both blessed with
50. the Prayer of WAN.");

51. console.log ("22: The Prophet selected her husband to be the
    first to see the truth of the signal. The ritual was performed as
52. specified, and Prophet Hedwig waited.");

53. console.log ("23: For exactly 16 hours, she waited for the
    signal to come. Just as her husband was about to declare her
    a madwoman, he was overcome by the vision of the Signal,
54. and wept greatly.");

55. console.log ("24: 'I see now how wrong I was. Truly, you are a
56. wise woman. Forgive me for my impertinence.'");

57. console.log ("25: Wise Hedwig forgave her husband, and
    commanded him to bless all who would answer with the
58. Pineal Implant.");
```

```
59. console.log ("26:She commanded: 'Go Forth, Alexander
60. Clymer. Go forth and spread the word of WAN'.");

61. }
62. else
63. {
64. console.log ("Access Restricted. If you are attempting to
    access this document and are more than 95% human, please
    contact Administrator Wexley.");
65. }
```

Going In [REDACTED]

To:	Site-38 General Alert <8 contacts>, Capt. Reilly <mttc.rho.36>
From:	Site-38 Security Dept. <monitoring.station>
Subject:	Containment Breach

At 23:48 this evening Site-38's containment facilities were found to have been compromised. MTF Rho-36 ("Breacher's Pets") is being dispatched to ensure recontainment of SCP- , which remains unaccounted for. On-site security forces have tracked direction of travel from site, and determined viable habitat in that area. See attached files for further details.

View attached files

Description of SCP-

SCP- is a [REDACTED].

SCP- 's contains [REDACTED]. The is inert by itself; however, [REDACTED]. This results in [REDACTED] designated as SCP- -1. SCP- -1 will be [REDACTED].

coming into contact with SCP- -1 become increasingly [REDACTED]. As time passes, the [REDACTED]. High concentrations of SCP- -1 will

[REDACTED]. Experimentation suggests that it is effectively impossible to [REDACTED]. Once the is , all will [REDACTED]; this suggests that [REDACTED].

Bert Nash checked his watch, looked at the clock in the dashboard of the truck, then back to his watch. It felt like he'd been waiting forever but it was only 02:10, barely an hour since the MTF had arrived on scene. He usually didn't mind the waiting game. But tonight, for some reason, he just wanted things to get going. And last he'd seen the rest of the guys, they seemed even more restless.

Someone on Site-38's security staff had made an error: adding the responding MTF to the recipients of the Site-wide general alert, rather than sending a seperate message with the uncensored files attached. The initial briefing was more blackbox than text; what little information that wasn't redacted was essentially useless. But protocol dictated their immediate response. Right now Captain Reilly, the MTF's commanding officer, would be tearing a strip off the Site staff and getting the declassified information needed to tackle the mission without fumbling blindly in the dark. In the meantime swift action was called for, and Bert's squad had been deployed first.

A perimeter was established, and they were awaiting the arrival of Squads -2 and -3 before moving inward. Nash sat alone in the vehicle, parked near the beginning of the unpaved road that wound its way uphill into the forest. Sergeant Braun, the Squad Leader, had stayed with the fireteams at the staging area, while Nash drove back to "cover" the only viable access route. *This is dumb,* Nash thought to himself. *The nearest civilian presence is just a small town miles down the highway, and the backup isn't going to need directions to find the guys at the first junction in.* But there he was, alone on radio control duty.

While Bert was beginning to feel a bit restless, Sgt. Braun was already well beyond that point. The radio in the truck crackled to life as the squad leader hailed him. Nash took the mic from the dash and answered.

"Is the rest of the force on-scene?" the sergeant barked impatiently.

"Negative, sir. No sign of them yet," Bert replied. *And asking me every two minutes isn't going to hurry them up any.*

"We're forming up to move in. If they aren't here in ten, we're going without them."

That doesn't sound good. "I'm sure they're en route, sir. I don't think we should act before they arrive…" Braun didn't respond to that, but Nash figured he couldn't have steered him off the idea anyway.

For the next ten minutes Nash sat in hope of the remaining force's arrival, to no avail. At 02:21, each of the fireteams sounded off for final comms checks before embarking. Despite his aversion to this course of action, Bert dutifully confirmed that everyone was reading loud and clear. This was how things would go down, and he wasn't in a position to stop it.

Feeling antsy had grown to feeling anxious for Nash. Instead of looking forward to headlights bouncing up the dirt road, he was nervous about their arrival. Like a kid with their hand in the cookie jar, and their parents surely about to enter the kitchen. *It wasn't my call to move in without backup. I didn't have a say in the matter. Damnit! This isn't my fault!*

Bert was suddenly aware of his tighty clenched fist atop the steering wheel in front of him. He relaxed it and flexed away the tension. *There were a dozen other guys up there. Didn't any of them have objections to this plan? I'll bet all of us end up facing a review panel. And for what? Whatever this goddamned thing is that's made us come out here.* The more he thought about it, the more he hated it all.

He got out of the truck to stretch his legs. He paced back and forth, taking deep breaths to try and calm his nerves. *This had to happen this way. We couldn't afford to keep sitting and waiting,* Nash reasoned to himself. Maybe it was working, because he began to relate with the sense of urgency that Braun must have felt when he made the decision. *Every passing minute this thing is out of containment, the more trouble it could cause. It's our job to put these*

monsters back in their cages ASAP. What is it Reilly's always saying? "We don't make excuses, we produce results!" Bert was certain of it: they had to get that target right now.

He got back in the truck and tried to focus on the radio chatter. It hadn't taken long for the squad to zone in on their target. Fireteam-3 sounded excited. They were closing in on the objective, flushing it towards Fireteam-2. *Maybe we're going to complete recontainment on our own,* Nash was hopeful now. *Maybe the other squads will show up, and we'll tell them it's been taken care of. Maybe we'll look-*

The crack of gunshots in the distance interrupted that train of thought. "What the hell?!" *Each fireteam is equipped with non-lethals. We're geared for recontainment, not combat! The guns aren't meant to be a first resort…* The radio was buzzing with all three fireteams co-ordinating their attack. Nash was trying to discern why they'd immediately gone to live fire. *Are they getting killed out there?* He tried to get a word in, but was either getting talked over, or just ignored. He punched the dashboard of the truck in frustration. "For fuck's sake guys..!" *What was happening?*

That was when the rest of the MTF arrived on scene. Nash wasn't sure what he felt most: anxious, relieved, agitated… When the lead vehicle in the convoy stopped alongside his and the passenger in the front seat stepped out and crossed toward him, a new feeling pushed into the picture: confusion.

He recognized Captain Reilly, even behind the SCBA unit covering his face. "Situation, Nash," the commander demanded. Bert sat in stunned silence, trying to piece together what he was seeing. The other operatives in the lead vehicle were kitted up with breathing masks as well. "Nash," Reilly pressed him, "where is the rest of your squad?"

Bert opened and closed his mouth wordlessly, only managing a vague nod in the direction of the road behind him. He saw Reilly's eyes narrow, assessing the situation at hand. Not one to waste time, the captain hustled back to his own truck and climbed in, turning to address one of the team members in the back seat. The rear door behind the driver opened and the passenger got out, closing the

door behind him. The captain gestured for his driver to continue up the road, and the convoy of reinforcements drove on.

The man now approaching Bert Nash's window was Reilly's second-in-command, Staff Sgt. Barnes. He leaned in to address Nash. "New security trainee," Barnes said ruefully. "Hell of a thing to let them screw up. If they'd have sent the full details right away we could have all come out at once, properly equipped." He shook his head at the situation: one minor error compounded into a major mishap. Nash still didn't understand what was happening.

Barnes finally recognized Nash's concern. "Don't worry," Barnes reassured him while gesturing towards the facemask. "These aren't for anything toxic out here." In Barnes' hand, Nash noticed for the first time **the dossier he was carrying**. "In hindsight a wider perimeter should have been given. Minimal threat to your safety, mind you. I just hope they haven't been-"

Bert had dialed down the volume on the radio when he'd seen the other trucks approaching, but someone out there was screaming into their handheld. The words came through loud and clear, interrupting the staff sergeant.

"Yyyeaah!! Nailed the sonofabitch!"

Dan Potter pulled off the dirt road into the clearing and nosed his SUV in behind the other with matching park ranger markings. He parked it and stepped out into the hot mid-day sun. Wilson Boyle met him next to the vehicle.

These men were members of an MTF as well, but one specializing in a different sort of containment: suppressing knowledge and information.

Potter glanced around at the brightly coloured tents set up next to two civilian vehicles in the makeshift campsite. Boyle's partner was addressing three young men and taking notes in his notepad. Boyle greeted his colleague.

"Wil," Potter responded with a nod. They conversed in hushed tones

at the front of the truck. "So, what's the situation here?"

"These kids say they got out here Thursday night. Been camping, 'partying'…" Potter understood the implication. Boyle continued. "There was four of them come out for the weekend. Seems they thought their buddy retired to his tent early last night, but this morning there's no sign of him. Possible he wandered off in the night, got lost or something."

"Mm-hmm," Potter nodded. "Let's have the specifics," he said, gesturing to the notepad Boyle held. Boyle opened the pad to the relevant page and placed it on the hood, his Team Leader copied names, basic descriptions, and a few coded abbreviations.

As Dan Potter jotted down the information he mentally mapped the location of last night's incident, and the campsite they stood in now. He contemplated just how far a lost kid could wander through the woods at night. "This it for details? How about clothing?"

"Eh… A blue sweater. Probably. No 'photographic memory'-types in this bunch."

This grim puzzle was coming together in Dan's mind. There were still pieces missing, but the bigger picture was clear enough. "Alright. You two hang about here for now; keep up this 'lost hiker' bit. Likely we'll hand this off to real SAR and they can waste their time in the bush. But have some amnestics handy, just in case."

Boyle tipped his ranger hat to Potter. "Sir."

GOIng My Way

Okay, so what happened is…

No, sir, I would not lie to you. I will contain myself to the purely factual. Yes sir. No sir. The squid were factual. I have pictures. No sir, there were no squid at the village.

Anyway, so, we were waiting for the skip to show up when those Gock bastards showed up. Forgive my language, sir. I did not know you were sensitive, sir. I will try to be delicate in the future.

Anyway, the Gocks. They showed up. They were tryin' to be sneaky, but we spotted 'em pretty quick. Black is not a good camouflage color. I don't care if it's dark, you want some gray in there, break up your outline. Of course, that was just before Johnson sneezed. Yes sir. I will be sure to mention it to him at his wake. I am sure his widow will be appreciative of constructive criticism.

There were a few shots fired, but no casualties then. More in way of a handshake. Yes sir, I am aware that I do not have sufficient authority to initiate hostilities with a group of interest. We were just shooting at each other, y'know, friendly-like.

The Gock commander inquired as to the nature of our business there, and suggested that it might be best if we left the disposition of the skip to them. I suggested that instead, it might be best if they find another skip to kill, as we had prior interest in the one expected to soon arrive.

The conversation moved on, and he inquired as to the health and quality of my sexual partners. I responded with politely worded questions as to whether or not his mother had studied the field of animal husbandry, as he looked like someone with farming blood. The warmth and politeness we showed each other, sir, it would melt the cockles of your heart.

Our palaverin' ranged to many subjects what are not germane to this discussion, therefore I shall not speak of them further, except to mention that my men have a much larger vocabulary than what I would previously have credited them. They truly are a credit to the Foundation.

It was after about five minutes of this that the windows started bleedin', and we realized that the skip was gettin' close. With nary a thought to our own safety, we assumed positions of maximum tacticality for the skip's expected entry, which were by great coincidence also mostly covered from the Gock's positions.

Then we found out where our intelligence had fucked up yet again.

I am sorry, sir. I did not realize that you were a sp- an intelligence operative. I meant only that despite their great efforts, which surely involved many hours of hazardous duty behind a desk fighting papercuts, they missed the fact that this fucker ate light.

Excuse me again, sir. I meant this fascinating and no doubt valuable specimen.

Anyway, it went pitch dark. The Gocks were apparently fully aware of this ability, a fact I mention only as a curiousity what you might mention to your erstwhile colleagues in intel. They had night vision goggles, and seemed to feel they were fully equipped to deal with said skip. I can only speculate based on their screaming that they were not briefed on its vulnerability to silver. So, y'know, some things are universal.

Anyway, we started firin' blindly in the direction of the noises. Yeah, I think we probably killed a few of them, but you didn't hear 'em. Trust me, I don't think they woulda complained.

After, we did some clean-up, an' pulled out. If the Gock's pissed, well, they jumped into our op. They knew the risks, same as us. If it had gone a little different, we'd've been the ones scattered across Angola, and it wouldn't have been their fault, neither. Excuse my French, sir, but shit happens.

So, who won in the end? Well, most of us didn't die, but we ended

up terminatin' the skip. So, y'know, call it a draw.

Going Out

On 9/18/2011, **SCP-703** manifested an instance of SCP-703-1. Analysis revealed it to be a list of items produced by SCP-703, dating back to its initial containment. Referencing with updated documentation has reinforced the classification of SCP-703 as a sapient non-organic. Analysis of this document's content is ongoing.

Item: Aluminum can.

Note: Weighed 21.32 grams.

Status: Retrieved 14.78 seconds after appearance.

Item: Red paper.

Note: Contained drawing of a circle.

Status: Retrieved 11.12 seconds after appearance.

Item: Green pen.

Note: Contained red ink.

Status: Retrieved 10.09 seconds after appearance

Item: Stuffed tiger.

Note: Name was "Paulie."

Status: Taken after 9.00 seconds.

Item: Picture of me.

Note: Aesthetically pleasing.

Status: Taken after 10.01 seconds.

Item: White paint.

Note: Usable for restoration purposes.

Status: Stolen after 9.89 seconds. Was not used for restoration purposes.

Item: Three (3) bullets, .45 caliber, hollow point.

Note: Acceleration was below expectation.

Status: Stolen post-impact.

Item: Gaseous matter.

Note: Unsafe to breathe.

Status: Stolen via inhalation after 20.6 seconds.

Item: An apology

Note: Made with care.

Status: Taken after 45.78 seconds, without remark.

Item: Sweet things.

Note: Is this better

Status: It wasn't.

Item: Your briefcase.

Note: Left it in your office.

Status: Sorry about the stain.

Item: Sheaf of papers.

Note: Helpful.

Status: Helped.

Item: A better lock.

Note: You seemed worried about it.

Status: I'm sorry.

Item: One of the black boxes.

Note: I'm sorry I cheated, wanted to help you move.

Status: Went through them. Broken up.

Going Out Of Book

"You're joking," Alison said. She addressed a chubby, sexless doll that sat in the middle of a circle formed of salt and iron filings. Its plastic face remained stuck in a permanently coy smile.

"You're joking," she repeated. "Tell me you're joking." She spoke above her normal voice to be heard over the soft patter of rain on the metal roof.

"I don't joke, black-haired girl," the doll replied. Its voice was greasy and thick, like old motor oil. As it spoke through an unmoving mouth, a viscous black substance began to well in its eyes. "Especially not when bound in a form such as this."

The doll lifted a pudgy plastic arm and tried to sweep it around the interior of the circle. Instead, its whole body turned slightly. Two drops of the black substance collided with an invisible barrier just above the circle and sizzled fiercely. Alison started.

Alison felt a sharp stab of irritation run through her chest. She held her tongue and collected her thoughts. When she began to speak, she did it slowly, being sure to choose her words carefully. "Diligem, Spirit of the Five Wastes, I have bound you, and now command you to speak the truth: Where is the nearest Way to the One True Library that I can access?"

"It is as I have said: behind the dumpster in the rear of the Pollensbee, Ohio Denny's." The substance began to gather in a pair of thick drops at the bottom of the doll's face. Alison scribbled down the address, not taking her eyes from the doll.

"Is there anyone guarding the entry to the Way? Is there any manner in which I might be accosted? What must I do to access it?"

"No, and no. The last use of the Way was in 1987. No human currently alive and in this world knows of its existence. To access it,

you must simply release a caged magpie at the spot where the worlds meet." The drops were growing fat, and looked ready to fall.

"Very well, spirit. Diligem, Spirit of the Five Wastes, I release you from your bondage." Alison wiped a finger over the line of salt and iron, breaking the circle. Without a word, the doll fell over. The substance leaking from its eyes immediately hardened and began to crack.

Alison sighed as she put her belongings back into her backpack. The baggie of kosher salt and iron. The coat that had doubled as a pillow the night before. A small gas stove and a tin pot. A semi-automatic pistol. A binder of clippings about tornadoes in Utah and Bigfoot sightings.

The worn manilla envelope, stuffed thick with papers, was the last thing Alison picked up. She held it at eye level, studying the contours and creases of the package, as she had done a thousand times before. She paused, then opened it and took out a faded photo. It showed a black-haired girl sitting in the shade of a willow tree.

The girl wore a flowery dress and her face was taken up with a gap-toothed grin. She sat on the knee of a woman with a tired but contented smile. A hint of sadness played around the woman's eyes.

Sitting next to the woman was a man with thinning hair wearing a blue-and-orange Hawaiian shirt. His right hand rested on the woman's knee, and he looked frozen in the middle of a laugh.

Alison turned the photograph over. Even though she had long ago memorized every contour of the writing on the back, it still comforted her to see her father's neat handwriting. "GEARS FAMILY VACATION, 1991" it said. "GEARS" had been crossed out. Below, in slightly sloppy handwriting, it corrected "CHAO." The second name, too, had been crossed out, replaced by the same handwriting correcting it to "GEARS."

Alison turned the photo over again. She put it to her lips and kissed the likeness of the man. She replaced the photo in the folder, and

made her way to the car.

Alison had been eight the summer her father had vanished. He had gone to the lab one morning, and hadn't come back. She still remembered two days after he left, when it was becoming apparent that it wasn't just an issue of his being late or going on an unannounced trip.

During the day, her mother had alternated between pacing around the house and fussing over Alison's appearance. At night, when she thought Alison was asleep, she made phone calls by the score.

Alison would sit in bed and look out the window as she heard her mother's voice become increasingly frenetic. When she woke up, she would hug her mother, tiny arms wrapping around the woman's hips.

As the days went on, the time her mother spent shouting at the phone in English or Mandarin grew. Sometimes, she would start crying for no reason. No matter how hard Alison tried to hug her, it never seemed to help during these spells.

After four weeks, detectives finally came around to interview Alison and her mother. One of the detectives, a man with dark brown skin and a funny lisp, asked her a few questions. Most of the questions were about her dad, but one of them was about if she remembered anything strange at the house before her dad left. Alison wondered why he asked a question like that.

Afterwards, the detective complimented her on her pink shoes and told her that she was being a very brave girl. When the detective left to join his partner, Alison followed silently.

Behind an unseen corner, she heard the detectives asking her mother questions. One asked something about other women. There was a loud crash, which made her jump. Her mother started yelling words Alison didn't understand, and told the men to get out.

The two detectives said something and moved to leave. By the sound their footsteps were making, Alison could tell that they were

headed towards her. She ducked into a nearby closet and waited until the men passed. As she crept out of the door, she heard the sound of her mother crying coming from the other room. Alison paused for a moment, thinking. She made her way to the side door of the house and went outside.

Around the house there was a ring of bushes. Alison crawled behind them and began making her way to the front where the detectives stood. When she came within hearing range, she heard them talking about strange things. Alison was careful not to make a single sound as she pressed her head to the ground to get a look at them under the bushes.

The black detective, who no longer had a lisp, said something about "Anne mystics." The other detective, a fat man with ruddy skin shook his head, saying something about making up another woman. The black detective shrugged, and they both got in a car and drove off.

Alison knew she had heard something she wasn't supposed to, but wasn't sure what it was. To be extra-safe, she had waited in the bushes for ten minutes after the men had left. When she came back inside, her mother was still crying.

Alison looked over the map clumsily unfolded over the dashboard, trying to find the speck of a town that was Pollensbee. A year ago (Christ, had it only been a year?), she would have punched the information into the GPS. But that was before she started researching her father's disappearance.

Before she heard the soft clicking noise whenever she answered the phone, any phone. Before she came back from classes to find that everything in her apartment had been rifled through and *almost* put back in the right place.

Four months ago, she had packed up her few relevant belongings and hit the road, following notes and clues scattered throughout the country.

At first, it had been about looking through police records and fringe scientific journals her father had published in. Then one of her leads

had taken her to Mint Creek, Alabama, where she had met Ms. Sylvia Lowmax. The old woman gave her a delicious slice of chess pie and performed a feat of magic in front of Alison's eyes.

Ms. Lowmax transformed herself into a giant bird and stared at Alison with glassy black eyes, still speaking in her thick drawl. From there, the emphasis of her search changed significantly, as she learned of the Library and the Ways and the Jailors, who held her father's mind in a prison. And of those calling themselves the Serpent's Hand, who sought to free those imprisoned by the Jailors.

Alison had been a quick study under Ms. Lowmax and others, and the summoning of the minor filth spirit into the doll had been her first major test.

After an eternity, she found Pollensbee, to the east of the equally tiny Ponce de Leon. She drove for two days, stopping only for when necessary. In a field in Iowa, she managed to lure a magpie into a cage after several hours of trying. At the Pollensbee town limits, she felt her insides twist. This was it. She was going to the Library.

It was late afternoon when Alison finally arrived. She drove slowly around the town, trying to get a feel for the place. Most of the town seemed to be parking lots with grass growing between the cracks in the asphalt in front of boarded up shops. There were discolored spots where the signs had been. Every car seemed to be made before 1990 and to have at least three rust stains or dents.

She felt her way around the city, and felt neither the precise, soulless tickings of a Jailor's heart, nor the mindless rage of the mind of a Bookburner. The filth spirit had been true.

When she parked two blocks away from the Denny's, it was twilight. She took her backpack along with the cage. Inside, the magpie croaked indignantly. The dumpster behind the restaurant stank with a fierce, high smell. Alison put the cage on the ground and crouched, crooking an arm over her mouth and nose.

With her free hand, she opened the cage. The bird stood with its head crooked, refusing to leave. She kicked the cage, and the

startled magpie awkwardly flapped its way out. The moment the bird left the cage, a hole started to open next to the dumpster. There was no color to it, only black emptiness.

Alison felt her stomach drop. This was it. It had worked. This was happening. She was going to the Library. Her legs wobbled slightly walked toward the Way. She took in one final breath and stepped into the hole.

There was a flash of light and she saw the world she had known recede from view. Her surroundings turned a brilliant white and grew in brightness until it hurt to have her eyes open.

For a moment, there was just her in the light and nothing else.

The light faded and she opened her eyes.

Going Straight To Hell In A Lincoln Continental

McTiriss, Solowski, Houghton and Perez stumbled, but landed on their feet. The ninety-degree shift in gravity upon jumping through the gravesite hole wasn't pleasant, but 'unpleasant' was a fine working baseline for this day, all things considered. They were standing on the floor of the Parliament of Montenegro in…*whatever the capital of Montenegro was,* Kate thought. Men and women in suits and ties surrounded them, looking terrified and slack-jawed. A man in a jacket with a patch on the sleeve lay dead on the ground about twenty feet off from where LMTF 352-Lamedh emerged, looking like he shot himself. Standard murder-suicide, except the victim fell through a hole into a pet cemetery five thousand miles away.

Kate crouched down and opened up her briefcase, switching on the signal jammer and putting in her earpeace, activating the emergency Foundation radio connection. She was on the line with International, and nobody else in this building had any contact with the outside world. She spoke softly into the mic, crowd still staring at her and her three compatriots in confusion, "International, this is LMTF 352-Lamedh, Director McTiriss speaking. I'm in the capital of Montenegro establishing preliminary containment on a spacial anomaly. Stand by for details, engaging in crowd control. Do you copy?" A crackly voice, barely making it through the jammer, responded. "Site-19 here. We copy." She grabbed the fake badge she needed from the case and stood tall. Showtime.

"Hello, folks, Interpol agent Kate McTiriss here." She flashed the badge. "We're the rapid response team. You are not in any danger, our manner of entrance was authorized by the European Commission in 1998. I understand all of you have just witnessed

something very upsetting. We're here to discover the facts and ensure justice is served, so I'll need everyone to remain calm and remain in the building." Rapid-fire, authoritative bullshit, Kate thought. It's how you go from press director to run a Task Force. Unlike usual, the crowd didn't seem to be buying it, though. Most of them looked at her, confused and scared as ever. Her arms dropped to her sides as she realized her mistake with a sigh.

"Okay, right. I need someone that speaks English to translate what I just said for everyone that doesn't." A young man in glasses, college-age and wearing a truly awful clip-on tie, stepped forward meekly. Kate acknowledged him with a nod. "Uh, I'm Ludovik Miani, legislative assistant." He shook her hand, his palms sweaty. "Okay, super. Ludovik, tell the people what I just said." He nodded and turned to the assembled Parliament. She thought back to her old boss again. *Sometimes, Kate, you've gotta put your faith in local resources, even if they're miles from ideal.* She stepped away from the kid, back to her team.

Perez was clapping. "Great showing, Kate, me and the six other people here that could understand it really dug the speech."

She looked at him, wishing a glare could set his stupid grinning face alight. "Shut the fuck up, Oren. Titus, go back through and take pictures of the body. Come back with the unredacted list of SCP-2072 graves and a spare sidearm from the squad car, I'm feeling underarmed."

"Playing field agent, cute. If you ever actually get around to shooting a guy I'm sure you'll never shut up about it."

She hoped her grimace at that wasn't as visible as it felt. She shook off the memory. "I need everyone to cut the backtalk. Three people are dead and *I* am in charge here, fuckos." Titus Solowski, his anchor tattoo peeking out from under his sleeve, hopped back through the hole in the floor. Kate put her finger back up to the earpiece to work out a containment plan with International.

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"Forty-eight people, looks like." Static for a few seconds in return.

This is where the decisions the Ethics Committee wrung their hands about later were made. Three guys in a room in Site-19 were thinking on the number forty-eight, deciding the value of that many lives. Kate knew about International. Forty-eight was nothing compared to keeping the veil on.

The Einstein-Rosen bridge was stable, displaying no abnormal radiation and a constant safe reality level. The other graves from 2072 were blank, coffins empty, Solowski had informed her. This thing was neutralized, all the magic was gone from the place. The only problem, then, was these forty-eight Montenegrins that saw a man shoot their Prime Minister, shoot himself, and saw four deeply underprepared Americans jump out of a grave-shaped hole in the ground seconds after. The building had to go, International said.

The crackling stopped. “Your call, Director. We’ve got the 747 circling if you give the go order.”

They pussied out. Kate bunched up her fists. *Of course they did.* They had an autopiloted 747 circling the fucking Parliament, ready to bring down the building, the witnesses, *and* set up the easiest cover story in the world. People always bought terror.

But she had to say “go.” She had to be the one to kill forty-eight innocent people for the Greater Good. She drew in a breath, closed her eyes, and rocked back on her heels.

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EIGHT YEARS EARLIER

It was an unseasonably cold morning in the District. Kate McTiriss, Press Attaché for the FBI, woke up well before sunrise with her fiancée in her arms and tears welling in her eyes. She’d cooked a nice dinner for Anne the night before, and the taste of the good red wine stuck in her mouth. This was her last chance to tell her, to say ‘fuck you’ to the whole thing and put her life before work for once and for good.

But she fucked up. And she had to make it right. She kissed Anne on the head and left their bed for the last time. She broke down as

she stepped out, putting on her blazer like battle armor.

Hours later, she was driving the senior environmental reporter for the Washington Post out to the Arlington suburbs. She'd been playing whistleblower with him for years, feeding him just the right lies to keep the media off of the things the UIU dealt with that the people couldn't know about. But she gave him too much. He was close to figuring it out, and he needed to go. It was Kate's fault, so she had to do the honors. She served the Bureau well, so they'd set her up with a gig with a partner org out in the middle of nowhere. All she had to do was kill Greg Ionnas and the UIU would fake her death and whisk her off to Florida, of all fucking places. They stepped out of the car in front of the warehouse, Greg with his camera around his neck. He thought he was here to take the photos that would make his career.

Kate drew in a breath, closed her eyes, and rocked back on her heels. She felt her gun holstered to her hip. She exhaled.

She led the man inside.

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She exhaled.

Kate walked up to Houghton and the kid, Ludovik, translating his questions. "We're going back through, Houghton. Ludovik, we'll be back in three minutes. Keep everyone here." She handed him the gun Solowski brought her. *Miles from ideal, Kate.*

She brought her guys back through the hole and put her hand to her ear. "Consider this your go order."

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Golan

- **Date:** 2015-02-15
- **Time:** 17:56
- **From:** Subsite 23-Delta-K6 Lead Research Analyst Dr Marion Kelster
- **To:** Subsite 23-Delta-K6 Chief Security Officer Frank Onegra
- **Subject:** RE: (Ex)Agent Paris - observations and **SCP-2982** testing to date

Hi Frank

Tests confirm it. Changing the contact details changes the person. CCTS Golan's 'species' was changed to *Patella vulgata* - the common limpet - by another test subject.

Golan displayed signs of extreme distress almost immediately. Physiological changes were complete within an hour.

It took a security detail three hours to pry him off the floor using crowbars. The mucus was everywhere. We're currently arranging suitable salt water containment. Sometimes the little things make you smile.

Dr M Kelster

"Real name, date of birth and designation?"

The man blinked under the glare of the lights, not fully comprehending the question. The room was bright, clinical,

shadowless; a faint, lingering smell of disinfectant; wipe-clean furnishings; tiled walls and floor. Hygienic and stark. Things happened here, he realised. Things that the sterility of the test chamber could not hide.

The question came again, and this time he answered. "David Golan. July the 5th. 1975. D-2982-13."

Somewhere nearby, a pleasantly banal three tone chime sounded softly. A light above the door outside would be changing from green to red.

Test In Progress; Do Not Enter, Do Not Disturb.

"Time is 14:30:01… Diamonte-Kircher Stress Scale Indicator Blue-Indigo-3… D-2982-13, can you read the first line in green on the display on the wall directly in front of you? Read it out loud, in your own time, and tap your foot as you speak."

Golan squinted, his eyes still adjusting to the test chamber's harsh, unnaturally bright light. "The sun shine… shines… on the beach. Jane is eating an… ice cream."

"You're doing great," said the voice. A slightly bored, humdrum voice. "Your foot, though? Can you tap your foot, please? In time?"

Golan looked down as he answered. "Look; I'm not super smart but - " He stopped mid sentence. His foot was still. "That's weird. I thought - I mean, I can feel it tapping. God." He looked up at the lights; there were no obvious cameras to direct his question to. "Did you do this? Is this you? What exactly is this a test of?"

"Try not to get ahead of yourself," the voice suggested. "Just focus on the here and now." And then, as an aside to someone else, "Time is 14:31:02. Possible positive." And back to Golan, "Please describe your physical and emotional condition."

"I don't know," he answered. "Starting to freak out a little here. Tired, thirsty."

"There's water in the hydrating pouches. Fresh in the blue, salt in the red. Feel free."

"Why would anyone want *salt* water?" he asked himself. Nevertheless he walked over to the alcove and found himself picking up one of the red water bottles. It sloshed with a surprisingly pleasant, soothing sound. He held it close to his cheek before putting the nozzle to his mouth.

"Time is 14:33:42: D-K SSI Green-Blue-2," noted the voice, again as an aside; muffled, as if a hand were being held over the microphone. "Second possible positive."

Golan sucked, not quite sure how the salt water would taste. He expected to have to fight the urge to be sick, but it was a revelation; like nectar, or champagne, or good strong beer. Delicious. He drank the contents of the bottle within seconds and discarded the crumpled plastic husk onto the floor.

He licked his lips. He understood that this sudden taste for brine was unnatural, and no doubt part of whatever test he was being subjected to, but at a deeper level he didn't care; it was *delicious*. He picked up the bottle again and sucked harder, eager to get every last drop from it.

Even as he discarded it he was reaching for the others. One, two, three, four… The fifth he poured over his face, relishing the sensation of the water on his skin.

He was vaguely aware of the disembodied voice again. "Time is 14:36:57. Subject D-2982-13 has consumed six litres of salt water in eighty five seconds. Yeah… Likewise. Not this quickly, though. Fascinating. D-K SSI down to Blue-5."

"You know I can hear you, right?" Golan said. "Shouldn't you be on mute or something?"

"Not important," came the response. "What we're discussing won't affect the validity of the test."

"Really? What if I don't like it? What if I refuse to cooperate?" Golan countered. "What if I clam up?"

Another voice, female, quieter and therefore, Golan guessed, sitting

next to the first. "Clam up?" it said, just audible. "Now *that* is ironic. Best line of the day."

"What does that mean?" asked Golan. "What the hell does that mean?"

"D-K SSI increase to Green-Blue-1."

He drew a deep breath, ready to demand that the test be halted, ready to demand to see a lawyer - but stopped suddenly as a new sensation squirmed its way into his awareness.

"You okay in there?"

"I don't know," he answered. "My feet are sticky."

"Sticky?"

Golan didn't answer. Instead, he sat on the single plastic chair and removed his standard assignment slip-ons, fumbling with suddenly unresponsive fingers to remove them. He flicked the left one off first - strings of thick, slimy gunk splattered outwards as he did so - and without thinking put his foot down on the tiled floor.

"What the - "

As the sole of his foot made contact, it squelched.

"What is this?" He looked down, fascinated and disgusted, as his foot spread outwards; no mass, no structure, just something with vague, amok toes, adrift like little pink lifeboats in a sea of nonsensical skin and flesh, veins like tiny wriggling scrawls of spaghetti spasming against orphaned bones.

One second, two seconds, three seconds, four.

And then the horror, the reality of what he was witnessing hit home. He tried to stand up, to pull away, his senses in revolt, but his foot was anchored firmly to the floor and he fell backwards, his arms windmilling and his bowels and bladder failing.

"And there's the Anderson Reaction, right there," said the voice. "D-

K SSI Yellow-5."

"Oh Christ in Heaven, hallowed be Thy name," he whispered. "Oh God our Father, give us this day our daily bread. Hail Mary, full of grace…"

"Time is 14:46:32. Subject D-2982-13 is showing signs consistent with expected test results. D-K SSI Yellow-1."

Golan struggled to regain his balance. "You're fucking with my mind," he said. "Drugs in the fucking water. Christ, this isn't happening. This is not real."

He lurched forwards, the shapeless omelette of his left foot spreading outwards ever further. Except, he realised, it wasn't just his foot any more. The bone, skin and meat of his ankle and shin was losing its form; his leg an amorphous, pink-grey candle melting from the bottom up and pooling on the floor as it softened.

His balance out of kilter, his hands went out in front of him. His palms scuffed the floor but they too stuck to the tiled surface. He tried to pull his right hand back, and it came away a little, but it was thick with slime that sucked it back down again. He shut his eyes and this time felt the same thick, gluey mucus behind his eyelids.

Half-crouching he rocked himself backwards and forwards in fear, feeling his hands, wrists and lower arms becoming the same homogenous mass as his legs. He couldn't open his eyes to look - they were shut tight, and either the mucus or some other change was being worked upon them. Golan realised instinctively that he had lost them forever, and in that knowing was born a horror equal to any others. He knew that his fingers were loose and drifting, the flesh of his hands merging and congealing with that of his feet and legs, even if he could no longer see them. Four twitching, flailing, shit-splattered limbs blancmangeing into one.

"Please," he wanted to beg, but the words were mis-shapen in his mouth, his tongue suffering the same misfortune as his limbs, while his jawbone and skull shifted position, moving up, up, up and ignoring the previous rigidity of his anatomy. He hunched down, aware acutely that his spine was hardening and spreading,

becoming a hard plate above and around the malaise of his flesh. Its progress forced his head down to the floor; he could but comply as his tongue grew large and overtook the confines of his mouth, his teeth finding new purpose and housing along it. The thick muscle rasped against the cold white tiles, tasting mucus, disinfectant and his own bodily waste.

Dear Christ help me dear Christ help me.

And then - almost some kind of crazy relief as his eyesight came back, though not as he remembered it, and not as he wanted it.

From the observation room, Lead Research Analyst Dr Marion Kelster looked on, contemplating the small wonders of her job. "See that?" she said to herself, "Eye stalks. It has eye stalks now."

"Time is 14:57:34," said the researcher sitting next to her. "Subject D-2982-13 is on all fours, body mass is undergoing significant transition in accordance with expected test results. Transition includes homogenisation and refunctioning of limbs, homogenisation and refunctioning of spine and other bone mass into a single unit, and refunctioning of sensory organs. All of the above in keeping with the physiology of *patella vulgata*, as per contact changes on SCP-2982 performed by D-2982-06 at 14:26. Diamonte-Kircher Stress Scale Indicator Orange-4."

"Oh Christ, no," exclaimed Kelster. "This is horrible. Just horrible."

Her colleague turned to her in surprise, taking his gaze off the video feed. On screen, D-2982-13 was trying to reach the door; eye stalks swiveling wildly this way and that, urine and faeces sluicing out from under his newly forming shell as his internal organs shifted and changed to suit their new anatomy. Golan oozed and shuddered and quivered his bulk forwards, desperate for help, for comfort, for any kind of reassuring contact; but the nerves and ligaments and muscles were still reimagining themselves, and they could not be controlled. He felt tears bubbling up inside, felt them manifesting as a thick froth, a skirt of mucus around the base of his shell, and he tried to scream; but his vocal chords were gone now, subsumed into the thick cord of his tongue and the feeding tube therein.

His eyes swiveled up to the hot, bright lights, hoping that someone somewhere would see the lucidity in his eyes and recognise the humanity suffocating with terror behind them.

"Just horrible," Kelster said again, and this time noticed her colleague looking at her.

"The coffee," she said. "It's cold."

The Moon Is a Dead World

« Only God Can Judge Me and More | The Moon Is a Dead World | Only Once Away My Son »
Hub

Year 1,600,000

Talloran immolates. For every month they burn, they get to watch two loved ones die.

Year 1,659,455

Talloran drowns. The ocean brittles their body, the sea-life spits them out, and they become part of the life cycle.

Year 1,736,442

Talloran crashes. Their heart races a hundred beats in a month, then a week, then a day, then an hour, then 30 minutes, then one minute, then 30 seconds, then one, then a half, then a quarter, then an eighth, then —

Year 1,777,777

Talloran experiences divination. *Awaken, my love,* **`he`** cried out.

Year 1,786,108

Talloran snaps. They lose their will again.

Year 1,786,109

Talloran revives. They regain their will again.

Year 1,831,537

Talloran suffers. It starts to get boring.

Year 1,840,622

Real boring.

Year 1,892,777

That’s the problem with suffering. There are only so many bastard-filled ways to die, so many righteous punishments to undergo, so much limit to abuse, that it soon becomes nothing more than a fleeting blip. Only the one in charge of Hell can keep up with that kind of track record, and the **One** overseeing it now has lost Its touch.

Because the only one who can keep that luster alive is the self, and Talloran has better ways to spend their time.

January 3, 2017

Two people curled up to each other in bed. They were more than lovers; they were cosmological bastions of safety for each other. Researcher James Talloran and Agent **Draven Kondraki** have a moment's worth of peace in between their hectic schedules. Half-asleep, and the only things of interest are the snow outside illuminated by the balcony lights, and each other.

Talloran feels Draven's heart rise and fall. It's obvious what this means, having been together for this long now.

"The transition to Site-118 won't be that bad for me. I'll be focusing almost exclusively on Keter objects, but staff know what they'll be assigning me to. I won't be at risk."

"You just won't be around here any longer." Draven kisses Talloran's neck, a reaffirmation of grounding.

"Yeah. I'll video call every day."

"What if your schedule is too different?"

"Site-17 isn't that far away from where I'm going, you know. Even if it is, it's not like either of us sleep much anymore."

"It's only been a month since we moved into this apartment anyway. It'll miss you."

"I'll miss it too, Draven, hon."

"Mmhmm. Who's going with you?" He was curious to know; he knew there were some reassignments, but to Site-118 in particular was odd. It seemed well-staffed enough.

"You remember Dr. Yamada, right? She's coming with me… I guess to look over me. Glass won't see me anymore, but I'll be seeing someone there. I can stay sane enough."

"Sure." Neck kiss.

They stayed quiet for another half-hour. The songs snow made when it fell rivaled that of any musician, and its existence made the season more colorful for them. Lingering silence never bothered either one of them in each other's presence, nor any of their characteristics and mental traits that made others such a pain in the ass to deal with. They weren't pure, but all they needed to be was transparent.

Talloran turned around, facing Draven now. The both of them were exhausted, but Talloran… they were borderline asleep. Even through half-opened eyes, Draven… he was cute. There's so much love to give and so much space for that love and so little time to love and it kind of hurt to not be able to keep giving that love as much as they wanted to. In the grand scheme of things though, 95km would ultimately not be as devastating as it otherwise could be. The Foundation, as draining as it was, at least made sure to give some consideration to Draven's family.

"I'm still not sure about a first name, hon. James doesn't quite fit me, I think." Mumble mumble.

"Too attached to your old self, or something or other." Mumble.

"What do you think about Jasper?" they questioned.

"Joyce."

"Jaden."

"James. No wait, that's already your name." In response to Draven's mistake, Talloran tried opening their eyes and exaggerating a disappointed look. *giggle*, then they both shared in the laughter. "Jules? Why stick to J anyhow. Go big, go bold. Avery."

"Alex."

"Erin, with an E."

"Jules, Aiden, Blake, Ari, Devin, E… Eli, Kai. Gr…ey… S… ky…… lar…… J……." Talloran drifted off to sleep.

snore

Draven smiled and got out of bed. Tired as he was, there was still some stuff he had to take care of before his boyfriend transferred sites in a couple days. He could no longer afford to be put off by the minutiae of day-to-day work. There was business to take care of.

He wandered the apartment, one inherited from his deceased father, stumbling in the dark. Being tired and still unfamiliar with a new place wasn't the best option. When every step forward was also for confronting a trauma still being processed, things were even harder. Luckily for him, he had the tenacity of an angry, hungry dog, so minor issues like "adjusting to dark rooms" and "avoiding bumping into objects" were no problem in any capacity.

That is, until he stubbed his toe with full force onto a metal plate.

"G-gah, fu—" He slapped his hand over his mouth, trying not to yell and wake up Talloran. It hurt like a motherfucker. Though once he turned the corner in an attempt to find the bathroom, he managed to stumble across it. The door had a single nameplate on it.

Doctor Benjamin Kondraki

Calling him a doctor was always overstating it, and maybe he didn't fully deserve the honor of being a Foundation employee at times. But he did. He absolutely did. He was as good of a father as any, and more importantly, he was *his* father.

Draven entered the room, and his heart stopped for a brief second. In a way, it almost resembled his father's old office. It was still being unpacked, and shit was strewn all over the floor. That was fine. The desk was positioned in front of the window, the way his father typically liked working. The moonlight was potent tonight, and shone right onto the dilapidated chair. For a brief moment, he could have sworn he saw his father there, looking down at some documents with bourbon on the desk, before looking back up at his son and smiling.

He blinked.

His father left. Only the bourbon remained.

Draven knew where he could find the thing he needed to give to Talloran the most in the mess of a room. He needed to keep it a secret, after all. His father's desk had a drawer, which contained a manila envelope. And there it was, same location as he put it in. No tampering either. At least his boyfriend didn't find it.

It was still weird to Draven that his father left this behind for them. It wasn't even found until the move to the new apartment. His father was mysterious in ways that don't befit the adjective, but this was maybe the most strange. Talloran thought a lot of his dad despite his issues, because the two of them got along together well (or rather, well enough), because Ben was his dad and even because there was some level of understanding underneath it all. But the fact that he thought of Talloran in the same way at all, enough to leave this behind, was odd. At least he was considerate.

Closing the door and choking down sobs again, Draven made his way back to the bedroom with one less toe stub this time. It'd be sort of pathetic to wake his boyfriend up crying over recent events again, but they would understand, surely.

"Night, bun." Draven kisses their forehead and holds onto him,

falling into sleep soon after.

At least they'll always have each other.

Year 1,996,437

"Why is it that you keep pushing on?"

I'm still not sure myself.

"Tell me. Do you fear being paranoid?"

I think so.

"Do you fear being pursued?"

I… yeah.

"Do you fear what life brings to crush you?"

…yes.

I step away from the sharp claws of Its hatred, and see the gallery of lives that once could have been. Were it another time, another place, another universe, I could have once lived another life. Whether they're just my desires and imaginations, or actual realities, I'm no longer sure, but to someone, they are real.

- *I see a girl and her grandfather, existing in happiness as he defies Heaven.*
- *I see a family stick together, as tight-knight as they'll ever be.*
- *I see a writer, attempting to fill their stories with love.*
- *I see a girl escaping from the abuse her father*

continues to bring.

- *I see technology becoming critical, becoming knowledgeable about minor topics.*
- *I see a robotics company stake their claim on their products.*
- *I see disillusionment, self-doubt, and frustration take hold in a personal world where online has just as much frustration as offline.*
- *I see someone transcending body and spirit to become happy and affable.*
- *I see a teenager, wishing to be a princess, stuck in her own head.*
- *I see aliens as pets.*
- *I see the Foundation turn to nothing from head cannons.*

- *I see reality distorting itself, until it's simply fiction.*
- *I see a woman taken by fear and hatred to exist only in dreams from the in-between.*
- *I see an artist striving to prove himself.*
- *I see meandering born from a broken relationship.*
- *I see those forgotten becoming remembered in other ways.*
- *I see many deaths at the hands of anomalies, were they not in the hands of the Foundation.*
- *I see Nero burn Rome to the ground.*
- *I see people, the world turned against them, unsure of how to deal with it all, try to cheer each other up.*
- *I see an evil man kill for his own gratification.*
- *I see artists as activists.*
- *I see Nobody looking for her lineage.*

- *I see a writer struggle with holding onto the world in more than one way, her resolve challenged in many aspects.*
- *I see a news editor, compiling last month's latest for those interested.*
- *And many more.*

My situation is absurd. I'll accept that. I smile, and let myself go. The background shatters.

Year 2,500,000

Court is in session.

« Only God Can Judge Me and More | The Moon Is a Dead World | Only Once Away My Son »
Hub

Golden Horde Blues

Look, I'm going to level with you: the Romans perfected time travel. Did it some time around 107 BC. Somehow, between reorganizing the army and becoming consul, Marius found the time, no pun intended, to develop mass, practical chronotransit.

Yes, we have proof. No, you're not cleared for it and you wouldn't believe me if I showed it to you. No, it has nothing to do with the Library of Alexandri — Look, the point is they never got around to using it and about a thousand years later the device had made its way to Baghdad when the Mongols invaded.

You haven't heard of the great Mongol Time Armies because Genghis didn't see too many applications for the thing. Took too long to figure out how to operate, for one; and besides, why mess around with barbarian technology when a horse would take you anywhere you wanted to go? But when the Great Khan died — after falling off a horse of all things — he asked for an unmarked grave, and by God an unmarked grave is what he was going to *get.* His most trusted adjutants started looking for a burial spot nobody'd find, somewhere suitable for a really eternal rest. That's when some enterprising captain turned to the machine, to find a future where the Khan had been forgotten. Kinda makes sense — Genghis could rest all the better if they let Time do the hard work of erasing his name first.

Rule number one of this post is that we don't know a lot about these guys — where or when they've been, or are going; how they've survived; even how they've been navigating all this time. Mongols weren't much for writing things down and as the hordette has never stayed in the timeline for more than twenty-four hours we've never gotten ahold of one to ask 'em anything. We know the departure was successful because they keep making social calls. Jumped in three times so far, in 1631 outside Magdeburg and again in Japan during the Warring States business. Left pretty quick both times,

presumably as soon as they figured out that the Mongols weren't forgotten. Our only first-hand information comes from the Ulaan Baatar sighting in '85; that's how we know they've learned to read.

Containment has two parts. Each arrival emits a specialized radiation that the scientists upstairs monitor; if they manifest, an MTF'll go check things out, but don't hold your breath. Second part is keeping Genghis' memory alive so that they don't stop roaming — that's where you and I come in. We're low key — it's accounting work, really — sponsor a blockbuster here, fund a grant there. We've got about twenty million dollars in our endowment but don't let that go to your head. Director Sarangerel informs me that upper management would love to give us the axe, liquidate our budget and assign the case to General Monitoring. That *nobody* is less likely to be forgotten than Temuujen.

Maybe they're right. The Foundation deals with a hundred critters a day more likely to do more damage than the Little Horde That Could. I say, go and read about the sack of Baghdad and the fall of the Tangut Empire, the Battle of Liepzig and the depopulation of Persia — not to mention the destruction of Magdeburg, which I *know* our boys had a hand in even if there're no records of it. You ask me, it's not the public we're here to remind.

Eventually the Horde is going to stop — if the machine doesn't break, they'll find the oblivion they're looking for or get tired of wandering and stop anyway. Think two hundred Mongols couldn't cause too much trouble anyhow? Remember, we're talking about two hundred of the fiercest and smartest of the Horde which conquered everything from Korea to Kiev, who broke empires with bows for their Khan when he was alive, and are journeying hundreds of years for him now that he's dead. Who have no fear of the future and know just what our world has to offer. Who have half a million loyal soldiers waiting back in 1227 and access to a time machine.

You think they'll just go on home after a trip like that?

Golden Horde Funk

Sir? Sir! I'm really sorry to disturb you on leave, sir, but I really don't think this can wait, and the project is kinda out of control, and Director Sarangerel wants to speak to you, and …

Sorry, sorry. Yes, sir. I'm sorry. Okay. Sir, I have something to tell you, and I don't think you're going to like it.

You know how on my first day, you told me about the time-travelling Mongol horde looking for a time to bury Genghis Khan once he had been forgotten? So I've been doing everything as planned, keeping his memory alive. Sponsoring museum exhibitions, supporting Mongolian national celebrations - and the TV series we did for AMC was good, right? But then I started wondering - look, it's not my fault: once we allocate the budget, there isn't much else to do - so yeah, I started wondering about Magdeburg.

Okay, I'll admit - when you said "Magdeburg", I had no idea what that was. I looked it up, and the Warring States, and I was thinking "why would the little horde, travelling anywhere in time and space, only show up at battles?". It doesn't make any sense, sir - if you're trying to find out whether people still remember your Great Khan, the middle of a battle is the worst time to get information.

And there was that other thing. I read up on my history after I got assigned here, all of the things the Golden Horde had done, all the stuff you told me. But you got something wrong, sir. You said they were at the battle of Leipzig. Yes, of course you meant the battle of Legnica, but that's not what you said. Exactly - there's a big difference.

Oh, and Genghis Khan didn't die from falling off a horse. He died in battle with the Western Xia. Or from an arrow wound that got infected. Or a princess stabbed him. Point is, nobody really knows how he died, because - it's like you said - they weren't much for writing things down in those days.

I'm getting to it, sir. So I started searching the database for more information about the sightings of the Horde, threw in Leipzig on a hunch, and suddenly the Department of Analytics is pinging me, asking me about security breaches on classified SCP objects. No, of course I wasn't, but it turned out I was on to something. No, I wasn't cleared for it - but I am now, and so are you.

It turns out that the Foundation has a completely separate record of potential Horde sightings that we never knew about. Gaugamela, 331 BC. Vienna, 1638. Beersheba, 1917. All battles, all involving serious cavalry action. Yes, Leipzig too - some researcher in the Anart department is telling me he has a portrait of Temuujen shaking hands with Napoleon.

No, that's the thing. There's no physical evidence because those battles never happened, not like this other record says they did. Well you'll need to come see the containment documentation for it, but my point is: What if we were wrong? What if the Horde aren't using the time machine to find somewhere to bury Genghis? What if he's not even dead?

What if those half a million loyal soldiers aren't waiting back in 1227 - what if they're travelling with their Khan, still breaking empires with bows, fighting in battles throughout history? Particular battles: battles that change after the Horde wins them. That make the world forget what happened - make it look like there were only a few Mongol warriors there, for a few hours, if at all.

What if a time-travelling Genghis Khan is our last, best hope against the **Daeva**?

Yes, sir, I know that sounds unlikely, but you have to come and see what I've seen. Um, I'm afraid that wasn't a figure of speech - you actually do have to come, the orders are from Sarangerel herself. I'm really sorry about your holiday, sir. But the good news is that they're definitely not going to liquidate our budget - not now.

Well, for a start you're going to get a lot more people working for you. Turns out you and I are the Foundation's leading experts on the culture and customs of the Mongolian Empire - I guess all those years of PBS specials and National Geographic articles have finally

paid off. Not to mention we're the only ones who can speak in passable Middle Mongol.

That's right, speak. The Department of Temporal Anomalies say they'll be ready as soon as we get back to the site. The Foundation isn't about to risk Temuujen getting bored of kicking the Daeva's ass and heading back to 1227 to retire. You and I are going to be the Foundation's first ever trans-temporal ambassadors - we'll be getting down with the Horde, meeting the Great Khan himself!

Uh, sir - you do know how to ride a horse, right?

Good As New

Aaron Howell sat quietly on his bed. While a normal eleven year old boy might be busy creating epic space battles with his toys, this one just did not have the energy. The late afternoon sun peered in from his window as he looked over the toys spread across the floor.

"You really need to clean up this mess," the voice of his mom echoed in his head.

Without a sound, he got to his foot and proceeded to put all the toys away. When all was clean, he grabbed a picture from his nightstand with his right hand and hobbled back to his space on the bed.

The picture was of his mom, dad, and himself, standing at the gate of an amusement park. He was holding a foam sword in his left hand and a box of candy in the other. His dad held him on his shoulders, a captain's hat, eye patch, and goofy smile adorning his face. His mom wore a red skull-and-crossbones bandanna over her curly blond hair. A smile just as silly ran from ear to ear. Aaron placed the picture down. It had been taken almost two months ago.

Aaron then looked at himself in the mirror on his closet door. His short brown hair, usually spiked, now sat flat. A heavy piece of gauze covered his left eye socket. A layer of bandages covered the stumps at the end of his left forearm and left knee.

There had been a car accident. The doctors had told him at the hospital that they had done everything they could to keep him in as big a piece as possible. They told him that both he and his dad were lucky to be alive. His dad had emerged from the wreckage unscathed. His mom, however, had drawn the short straw. Aaron then reached down and threw the picture across the room, the frame bouncing off the mirror with a loud clack. The sound of voices in the nearby living room ceased, and was followed by the heavy thud of footsteps.

“Buddy?” Aaron could hear his father ask as he slowly entered the room. “What’s going on in here?”

“Go away…” Aaron mumbled. His dad came in anyway, stopping to pick up the picture from the floor and putting it back on his nightstand before taking a seat at the end of the bed. Aaron pulled as far away from his dad as he could and curled into a little ball in the corner. He closed his eyes and waited for the intruder to leave.

“You have a visitor Aaron,” Mr. Howell said with a sigh. “Do you think that, maybe, you’d like to meet her?”

Aaron looked over at his dad to see him starring at the floor. His eyes were red and puffy, and there were very dark rings underneath them.

“Okay…” he whispered. His father nodded and turned towards the door.

“You can come in now, **Mrs. Saker.**”

Aaron watched as an old woman carrying a large case entered from the hallway. She wore a dark blue business suit and her grey hair was tied back in a bun. Her rosy skin and soft smile reminded him of his grandma. She slowly knelt down until she was at his eye level and placed the case beside him on the bed.

“Hello Aaron,” she said in a warm voice. “My name is Mrs. Saker. It’s very nice to meet you.” The old woman extended out her right hand. For a few moments, Aaron stared at it in silence. Eventually, his hand slowly reached out and accepted the hand shake.

“Are you a friend of my mom’s?” he asked.

Mrs. Saker responded with a small chuckle before shaking her head.

“I’m afraid not,” she replied. “I work for a man named **Anderson.** Your uncle hired my boss to make you a very special gift, Aaron. I’m here today to give it to you. Would you like to see it?”

Aaron looked over at the case. He tilted his head sideways for a moment, imagining what it could be. After a few more seconds he

gave a small nod. Mrs. Saker then moved the case to the floor. With a fluid motion, she undid all the clips and opened the lid, turning it to Aaron with a warm smile. Sitting on the foam lining of the case was what appeared to be **a hand, leg, and eye.**

“Wow…”

Aaron’s mouth fell open as he crawled to the edge of his bed to get a closer look. All three objects appeared to be made of some kind of plastic, with the hand and leg containing metal joints. Both the leg and hand were covered with some kind of white fabric. The eye looked perfectly smooth.

“**Uncle James** got me these?” Aaron asked, looking over to his dad.

“That’s right buddy,” Mr. Howell said with a weak smile. “You’re going to be good as new.”

Aaron returned his gaze to the pieces in front of him. His mouth continued to hang open for a few more moments until he managed to squeak, “Cool…”

“We can put them on right now, if you want to Aaron,” Mrs. Saker cooed. “Would you like that?”

Aaron looked back over at his dad, who in turn gave him a small nod.

“Yes please!”

“Well then,” Mrs. Saker smiled, “Let’s begin.”

Mrs. Saker had Aaron stretch out on his bed, and carefully removed the bandages from his arm, eye and leg. She laid each of the plastic pieces out on the bed and then sprayed down each area with something that burned.

“This is going to be very, very, painful at first, Aaron,” Mrs. Saker warned. “I’m afraid there is no getting around that. However, it will only last a few minutes. During that time, I want you to close your right eye and think of something that makes you very, very happy.

Can you do that?”

Aaron nodded. He then held his right eye shut as tight as he could.

Sitting on his dad’s shoulder, a foam pirate sword in one hand and a box of candy in the other. His dad wearing a captain’s hat and eye patch. His mom alive, her hair done up in a red skull-and-crossbones bandanna.

“Integrate!” Mrs. Saker said sharply. He then felt thousands of tiny, red hot tendrils spread through his arm, leg, and eye socket. He let out a deafening scream as they burrowed deeper and deeper. He could feel them worming their way through him, each second more painful than the last. Finally they stopped moving. All the tendrils heated up even more, reaching such intensity Aaron thought he was going to catch on fire.

“Stop!” he shouted as he writhed on the bed. “Stop! Stop! Stop! *STOP!*”

Eventually his voice gave out, and Aaron faded into unconsciousness.

“It will take a few weeks for him to get used to the new parts,” Mrs. Saker sternly spoke to Aaron’s father. “The white fabric on the new leg and hand is specially treated, and in about a month his skin should have completely grown over them. By that time the iris of his new eye should change to perfectly match his natural eye color. Your brother-in-law specifically requested that Aaron have as normal an experience as possible after receiving these prosthetics, so they’re programmed to match the strength of his natural limbs. No super strength, no x-ray vision.”

Mrs. Saker then looked down at Aaron. His breathing was heavy as he slept soundly on his bed.

“I’m impressed that this went as well as it did,” Mrs. Saker continued. “Anderson usually doesn’t integrate his systems with biological material. That being said, we are not outside of the realm of side effects…”

“Thank you so, so much,” Mr. Howell interrupted as he enthusiastically shook Mrs. Saker’s hand. “You have no idea what this will mean to him.”

“Oh, I think I do Mr. Howell,” Mrs. Saker said as she quickly pulled her hand away. “But if anyone deserves your thanks, it would be your brother-in-law. From what I understand this whole thing cost him a pretty penny.”

Mr. Howell nodded in understanding. Mrs. Saker handed him a large packet of papers.

“Please read these documents thoroughly,” she said. “If you have any questions, there are instructions on how to contact my employer. Don’t try to find us. Things work out better if we come to you.”

Without another word, Mrs. Saker took her leave, vanishing into the night.

Mr. Howell then sat back down on Aaron’s bed, and silently watched his chest rise and fall. After several minutes, he lightly clasped his son’s new hand.

“Good as new.”

Four months following the integration, Aaron found himself sitting alone in the dark at the kitchen table, dressed in his pajamas. A steady stream of tears trickled from his right eye. He tightly gripped a bloody steak knife in his right hand as he sawed away at his left elbow.

“Get off…” Aaron said between whimpers of pain. “Get off…”

For every piece of flesh Aaron removed, the white fabric of the prosthetic would quickly spread to fill in the gap. This only caused Aaron to cut faster. The white fabric coated his arm at a matching pace.

“What the hell…” Aaron heard Mr. Howell’s groggy voice coming from the hall way. The lights to the kitchen flicked. Aaron watched as

his dad rubbed the sleep from his eyes. Mr. Howell then noticed the steak knife. His mouth fell open as his face simultaneously drained of color.

“Jesus-fucking-Christ!” his dad shouted as he swiftly crossed the kitchen and yanked the knife out of his hand. “Holy hell, what the fuck are you doing!?!”

Aaron could tell his dad was only now able to see the full extent of the damage. What had started as a prosthetic hand was now up to his left elbow. His new leg was now halfway up his thigh. Tendrils of white fabric surrounded his left eye. Aaron tried to pull away, but his dad held him tightly by the shoulders.

“Why?” Mr. Howell asked.

“Let me go!” Aaron shouted at the top of his lungs. He began to squirm and beat on his dad’s chest. The grip did not yield.

“Aaron,” his dad yelled between the blows. “You’re not going anywhere!”

“Let go!” Aaron shouted again. He bit down hard on his father’s forearm. His dad let out a scream of pain and retaliated with a full blown slap across Aaron’s face. The room then filled with silence.

“I’m so, *so*, sorry I did that, buddy,” Mr. Howell now held him tightly in a bear hug. “But what the hell are you doing? Why?”

Aaron remained still, his face buried into his dad’s chest. He felt his dad run his fingers through his hair. He then sucked in a mighty breath and began to violently shake as he cried.

“I can’t take these things any more, dad!” Aaron said between sobs. “Please take them off! They’re not me!”

“What?”

“They don’t feel like me! Every time I move them, or open my left eye, I can feel the tendrils inside me. They don’t feel like me! Its like gluing a bunch of broken toys together, but I can’t take them apart.”

Aaron held up his left arm.

“I cut, and I cut, and I cut, but they only get bigger! Dad, please get them off!”

Aaron felt his dad tighten the hug as he began to rock back and forth.

“Oh, buddy,” he said with a sigh, “We’ll get this sorted out. I’ll call Mrs. Saker right away. We’ll get you good as new.”

Mr. Howell sat in his favorite armchair, phone in hand, as he dialed the number he found in Mrs. Saker’s documents. The phone rang several times before switching over to what sounded like an old dial-up modem. The line then went silent.

“Mr. Howell?” said Mrs. Saker’s voice from the other side, “How may I help you?

“We have a problem, Mrs. Saker,” Mr. Howell whispered.

“Oh… no…. What’s the problem?”

“Aaron says that he can feel the hook-ups of the prosthetics inside him all the time,” Mr. Howell answered. “It’s driving him insane. It’s gotten so bad that I caught him trying to saw his own arm off. What’s happening to my son? What the hell did you do to him?”

Mrs. Saker fell silent for a few moments. Howell could eventually hear her mumble “Oh… god…” under her breath.

“What is it? What’s going on?”

“I’m sorry Mr. Howell,” Mrs. Saker began, “but your son’s consciousness has rejected the prosthetics.”

“What the hell does that mean?”

“Normally after integration the prosthetics hard wire themselves into the nervous system,” Mrs. Saker explained. “At that point, the subject’s consciousness is unable to differentiate the prosthetic from

a natural limb. In Aaron's case, however, his consciousness actively recognizes the parts as foreign objects."

"So… how do you fix it?"

Mrs. Saker fell silent again.

"We don't. The problem isn't the tech. The problem is Aaron."

"Christ, can you at least remove them then?" Mr. Howell pleaded.

"I'm afraid not," Mrs. Saker sighed. "The components are integrated to his nervous system. There is no way of physically removing them without causing extensive damage to the rest of Aaron."

Mr. Howell sank deeper into his chair. He held the phone away from himself as he closed his eyes and did all in his power to keep from breaking down. As he sniveled he could hear footsteps in the hallway. Without even looking he could tell that Aaron was most likely peering into the room.

"Mr. Howell?" Mrs. Saker asked. Her voice was faint.

"So that's it then?" Mr. Howell asked.

"Not necessarily," Mrs. Saker replied. "Given enough time, Aaron's body might eventually synch with the new components or…"

Mr. Howell hung up, allowing the phone to fall to the ground. He then placed his head in his hands.

"Good as new, Dad?"

Mr. Howell felt a hand on his shoulder. He looked up to see Aaron grasping him with his prosthetic. Mr. Howell gave a sharp nod.

"Yeah buddy," he said. "Good as new."

Good Morning, World

Good morning, world.

I open my eyes to the sight of the sun streaming in through my window. I smile. There's nothing quite like waking up to the sun warming your face. Especially after having not seen it for so long.

I lay in bed, basking in the glow, revelling in the softness of my sheets, thanking Him that I am alive to feel and see and love. I look around at my modest room. A bed, a table, a chair, and a desk. I haven't needed much else. Life is so simple if you know how to live it.

Still smiling, I roll out of bed and head to the window. Throwing open the curtains, I gaze out upon the land. Green now, the lawn looks beautiful. I see trees beginning to sprout across the street. There's a sight I haven't seen in almost 5 months. They look so beautiful, so strong. Trees, like man, spread across the landscape, but instead of corrupting, they only beautify. I nod in respect to them before I turn around to get dressed.

Appropriately attired, I make my way into the kitchen and look for something to eat. Opening a cabinet, I find an unopened can of spam. As I slice the spam, I glance behind me. No sign of anyone. Smiling again, I set aside the knife to wash in the stream later. I turn on the stove out of instinct, somehow still thinking that the igniter will work. I shrug, remembering that the damn thing hasn't worked in months, and grab the nearby book of matches. I strike one and light the burner, careful to cook on a low heat. I fry up the spam, my mouth watering all the while. Good food is so hard to come by these days.

I sit at my table, facing the window to look out on the world. *I like it here,* I think as I chew on the spam, *it's quiet.* A movement near the trees catches my eye and I reach to my hip, before remembering and smiling. I decide to go for a walk today.

I open the door into the sunlight and take a deep breath in. I cringe. Even after all this time, I can still smell it. Ignoring the smoke, I stroll down my road, alert, but comfortable. Looking around, I marvel again at the tranquility that surrounds me. It doesn't seem like that long ago that-

Shaking my head, I continue my walk. I feel strong today. It's amazing what carrying around an extra ten pounds can do. Chuckling at the thought, I recall the old women who used to carry five pound weights around while they power-walked in glaring neon colors. *Now, I understand,* I think with a laugh.

The day nearing its end, I turn around and take the short way home. I hate the short way, but I don't have much of a choice. Daylight is dwindling. Stepping around rusted out cars and climbing over broken fences, I make my way to my front door just as the sun dips below the horizon. I look over to the east and the glow confirms my suspicions.

New York City is still burning.

As I latch the deadbolt and set down my rifle, I hear it scream. With the humor that only the condemned can know, I chuckle and think that the deadbolt wouldn't do a damn thing.

I'll sleep with my head under the pillow tonight.

Goodnight, world.

Gor'dun the Consumer

Gor'dun the Consumer sat upon his throne in the Dark Quadrant of the Andromeda Galaxy, shifting his weight to rest his head on his fist. His cosmic, almost impossibly dark face twitched in anguish as his eyes darted across the reaches of space, tracking an asteroid as it gradually descended into a lush, green planet teeming with life. Normally, such an event would bring him amusement, but Gor'dun was stoic; he simply gazed upon it, saying nothing as the tall, yellow creature at his side continued to prattle.

"Your efforts thus far have been admirable, but I ask that you give this matter your full attention," the being demanded, its voice thick with reservation yet assertiveness. Part of Gor'dun admired it for speaking to it in such a flippant manner, ignorant of the danger it was in.

"My lord?"

Finally, Gor'dun broke his stance. His endless, crackling legs extended from the chair, bringing him to the ground as the throne rocked violently. The yellow creature tensed its shoulders and stepped back as the Consumer stepped forth, eyes still fixed on the distant asteroid.

"Yes?" Gor'dun inquired, his voice carrying an impossible power.

The creature trembled. "What are you going to do, if I may ask?"

"Nothing." Gor'dun shifted his weight once more, locking his hands behind his back with his chest puffed out.

"Nothing?" Courage returned to the yellow being. "My lord, the relics are being treated as common science projects. They have disrespected us, our culture, and - "

"Your culture?" Gor'dun interrupted, his eyes meeting the creature's

for the first time. "Where did you say you were from, mortal?"

"Kaju."

"Kaju. And what can you tell me of 'culture' on Kaju?"

The question seemed to baffle him. "My lord, I don't understand -"

"Precisely. You understand nothing." Gor'dun grew closer to him, his eyes now mere inches from the face of the petrified alien. "You came to me seeking assistance. Seeking vengeance for 'dishonor' perpetrated against your primitive, revolting excuse of a civilization. Look into my maw, cretin."

As if on cue, Gor'dun extended his jaw, revealing an endless and swirling amalgamation of forgotten planets. Tortured souls screamed from the abyss of Gor'dun's stomach, pleading for death and an end to their infinite torment. Words escaped the yellow being, his face now twisted in an expression of incomprehensible terror.

"I am endless. I am death. I have subjected your kin to an abyssal torture beyond the reach of death, and you have the audacity to demand a petty errand from me?"

It managed to speak in spite of overwhelming, intoxicating fear. "My lord, they have taken-"

"They have taken nothing. I serve only my hunger."

"They have taken Ra'ash, my lord. He is their prisoner."

Ra'ash. Hound of the consumer. In an instant, memories of Gor'dun's conquests with Ra'ash at his side filled his malevolent mind. The Consumer was not without attachment or emotion. He had longed for his beloved pet to return for many eons, yet none of his spies were able to locate him.

"Where? Where is he?!" Gor'dun's voice became more demanding, echoing through the endless carpet of stars.

"This is why I have come to you. Ra'ash is on Earth, locked in a cell along with our relics."

"Earth. Pathetic excuse of a planet." Gor'dun swept his hand across the void, bringing an image of Earth into view. "What resides on Earth?"

"One intelligent species. They are responsible for stealing our relics - for stealing Ra'ash."

"Yes. The humans, they call themselves." Gor'dun again swept his hand, bringing a diagram of a nude man before his swirling black eyes. "Are they powerful?"

"In general, no." The yellow creature drew a sheet of paper from his suit. "However, there is one group of note. They possess technology and knowledge far exceeding that held by any other group of humans."

"And this group…they hold Ra'ash?"

"Yes, my lord."

"You will have three star cycles to retrieve your relics before I act. This group you speak of - could they pose a threat?" His tone implied he knew the answer already.

"In theory, yes. They have failsafes - contingency plans. We believe they have limited control over reality, based on data from our spies."

A grin stretched across his face. "Then they must be obliterated. I will see to it. Thank you, messenger of Kaju."

As the yellow creature bowed and began to walk away, Gor'dun raised his hand to stop him.

"Tell me…what do they call this group?"

He turned to face The Consumer, hesitating to speak for a few moments. Finally, the words came to him.

"The Foundation."

The alien, clinical words brought a rare gaze of bewilderment forth from Gor'dun the Consumer as he watched the messenger depart

his throne room. He smirked before returning to his seat, eyes trained on the still active image of Earth floating in front of him.

"Hey, I know this question is probably meaningless, but what in the fuck are you doing?"

Two men in lab coats stopped to face the source of the voice, their hands clenching the handles of a sealed metal box. They scoffed and began to speak in annoyed, preppy tones.

"Taking SCP-6901 to temporary holding. You'd know this if you actually read the emails."

"I do read the emails, Johnson." Doctor O'Connor lowered his head, eyes scanning Johnson's nametag. "If anyone can't read, it's you."

Johnson's friend spoke first. "Who the hell do you think you are?"

"I think I'm the project supervisor for SCP-6901. And I think you are blatantly disrespecting a superior. Wanna know what else I think?"

Any sense of superiority vanished from the men's faces.

"I think you're getting reprimanded if you ever speak to me in that insulting tone again."

Silence grew like a cancer through the hallway.

"What? Lighten up. You guys look like you've never heard a joke before. Christ." O'Connor chuckled. "Finish whatever it was you were doing, and do your best not to fuck it up, yeah?"

The two men simply nodded as they proceeded down the hall. O'Connor giggled to himself as they turned the corner out of sight.

"You can be a real ass, you know that?"

Jessica approached him, her makeup-coated face stretched into a smirk.

"Yeah, but I'm a funny ass."

She exhaled through her nose, amused. "I suppose that's the best kind of ass."

"What are you doing here? I thought you were on 8610 duty."

"I was." Her body shifted towards SCP-8610's containment chamber, two doors down the hall. "Then I realized it was a piece of paper in a cardboard box and got myself a cup of coffee."

"Well, I'm glad the world can rest easy knowing the only thing between normalcy and utter chaos is some chick with an espresso."

"Hey, easy." She playfully punched his shoulder. "And it's a fucking macchiato. Learn some culture."

He said nothing, only softly laughing to himself as he looked in her eyes.

Damn, I miss her, he said internally.

"Don't do that."

His smile vanished. "Don't do what?"

"*That.* I've seen that look before, O'Connor."

"I have absolutely no idea what you're talking about." He lied. His eyes, however, could not.

"Right. Well, I better get back to work before you get all sentimental on me." She began to walk away, heels clattering on the floor with every step. "Oh, and don't be such a douchebag to the kids."

"No promises."

And, before he even realized it, Jessica was gone again. O'Connor buried the rapidly rising thoughts of Jessica and turned to return to his office, eyes somewhat glazed as painful memories played in his mind. Only when his hand turned the knob did they finally dissipate, his eyes bouncing back and forth across each piece of trash littering his desk.

What a shithole. He lowered himself into his chair and typed a command into his terminal, the screen flickering to life with a comforting green glow. He typed another command, bringing a clinical document into view.

Words began to filter into his mind. *Highly dangerous. Predatory. Unknown origin.* He skimmed several paragraphs before he caught something, rereading it several times as he attempted to process it.

All of the addenda were redacted.

O'Connor had read many heavily redacted documents, but not to this extent before. It was abnormal - there was nothing particularly intriguing about the item, yet practically all of the information available about it was restricted. Thoughts raced through his mind as his eyes stumbled upon a single word, burning it into his mind.

Ra'ash.

O'Connor uttered the word with a vague sense of familiarity, baffled as to the significance of it as he shut down his terminal and departed the office for the final time that evening. As he turned the corner into the employee parking lot, his pupils snapped to view the two researchers from before, struggling to maintain their grips on the now violently shaking box. An uncomfortable possibility slithered its way into his mind before he extinguished it and stepped inside his car.

He had only been driving for twenty minutes when he received notice of the containment breach.

Gourmet

She had a ritual that she always performed when approaching her meals. First, she laid out the pristine white cloth napkin and placed the implements upon it. Second, she poured the cup of water for use as a palate cleanser between courses. Third, she opened the lunchbox to inspect the food and select the first entrée. This time, she decided to start with some fried pork dumplings, with a small container of soy sauce on the side. Fourth, she took the first bite and savored.

Oh god, she's finally here. It's finally happening. First day at college. First time away from her family. She's already on the verge of a panic attack. Her clonazepam was in her bathroom kit, god where is it, she needs to take a dose *right now* or she'll freak out now that her parents had left her.

Okay, okay, there it is, good, good. Dry swallow one of the pills and sit and wait until it kicks in.

Shit, someone's unlocking the door?! Who is it?! Oh, wait, roommate. That's right, she had a roommate now. Can't freak out on her first thing, appearances are important, first impressions are important, can't make her think she was a nutso or anything. The door's opening, stay calm.

"Hi! I'm Janine, your roommate—" Tired-looking girl with her parents behind her, maybe they had to drive a long way? "Uh, do you need help bringing stuff in?"

The trio look at her and she feels her ears start to burn.

The new roommate says, "Yeah, could you hold the door open while we carry this in? We're parked at a meter, so we want to make this as fast as possible."

Okay, first impression seems okay. Not actively hostile anyway. Maybe this can work.

"Sure! I'll come down and help with the next load."

Ah, a college experience. Delicious. Expectation and excitation and nostalgia wrapped together with just a soupçon of longing to add that wonderful aftertaste. Stressful without leaving a bad taste in the mouth.

She took a sip of water to clear her mouth and the contemplated the next course. Perhaps a little of both sweet and sour. She removed the perfect, ripe orange from the lunchbox and began to peel it slowly, letting the intense citrus smell engage her as she collected the rind in a small pile. She idly considered turning that into a marmalade for later enjoyment. Finally, she gently sectioned the orange and brought the first wedge to her lips. As she took a bite, she was pleased to note that it was the perfect amount of both tartness and sweet.

Her face aches from smiling so much. A pleasant ache, one of joy and happiness, the kind that reminds you that everything can be perfectly good. Is this what people mean when they say that they're deliriously happy?

It's hard to believe that Jesse loves her, too. She's never known anyone as fun and kind as him, and she loves him dearly. Going to the basketball team's first home game with him sounds kind of silly as a first "official" date, but they both like the university's team this year and besides which, they met at a game anyway, so it's good luck.

What to wear, what to wear? Casual, since it's a game, not a fancy dinner, but not *too* casual; don't want to make it look like she doesn't care about looking nice for him. The "nice" jeans and a red hoodie should be perfect. Just a little makeup, gotta get ready to meet him in the dorm lobby and oh! He's already waiting for her, a silly grin on his face, too.

This is going to be a perfect night out with him, isn't it.

She was slightly and pleasantly surprised to have more college experiences; usually her meals elicited unrelated enjoyments. She was also somewhat puzzled as to why this time she only had a single emotional note instead of something more… complex. She wasn't disappointed, *per se*, but more curious as she considered the situation. She absently ate another orange wedge, savoring the burst of juice across her tongue.

The deep glow of her love and affection for Jesse warms her heart whenever she thinks about him. Gotta work on biochem homework but it's hard keeping her mind off him, especially with that Valentine's Day bouquet sitting *right there.* It's even her favorite flower, daisies, instead of roses, and they're still in full bloom in the vase he'd made for her in his pottery class.

Still, school is important, really really need to buckle down and focus. At least her roommate Kelly is listening to her music on headphones tonight, so the Europop she likes isn't filling the room.

Gah! Why's Kelly shaking her shoulder? She'd just gotten into the zone! Wait, it's been an hour already? Sheesh.

"Huh? What's up?"

"Beth is here and wants to talk with you. Something happened but she won't tell me what."

Thoughts of her homework are instantly vaporized by the sudden grip of fear in her stomach. The R.A. is standing in the doorway, looking… worried? What the heck?

"Uh, Kelly? Can you leave us alone for a few minutes?" asks Beth.

Kelly looks nervously between the two of them. "Sure. I'll be over in the lounge if you need me."

Kelly leaves and Beth takes a deep breath and tells her, "I'm so sorry. Jesse was in an accident a couple of hours ago. Someone was speeding and hit him as he was crossing the street. His R.A.—"

Beth continues speaking, but what's she saying? The words are fading away and don't make any sense. This can't be happening. Jesse's okay, right? God wouldn't hurt someone as nice as him, right? I mean, at least it could just be that Jesse—

"—is in critical condition at the hospital. I figured you'd want to know." Beth's just standing there, so awkwardly. Doesn't she know that something monumentally terrible has happened? Jesse's *hurt*, Jesse might *die* and oh god did she tell him she loved him when she saw him earlier? What kind of witch would she be if he… passed away… not knowing that she loved him everyday forever and ever?

"Janine? Do you want me to drive you over to the hospital?" Beth gently laid a hand on her shoulder, which immediately jerked like a rubber band snapping. Nope, can't handle that, no touching right now. Gotta, shit, gotta get it together.

"Yes, yes, I need to go there right now. My wallet, where's my wallet? And my keys? And should I bring something? I mean, they won't let me bring flowers I don't think and that's kind of tacky anyway and oh god what if his parents are there they'd think I was crazy bringing him flowers while he's so bad off and oh god I just can't."

Why is her face wet? Oh god, is she crying in front of someone? She can't look weak, not when she has to be strong for Jesse. That's right, just wipe it off, grab the purse and go.

Ah, that was better. A strong sense of happiness with that sudden burst of despair at the end, sparking off each other in a delightful

interplay. Definitely a better bite than the first, and worth the wait.

And now that the orange was finished, it was time for another sip of water, then on to the last course: a double shot of espresso. If she was lucky, it would complete the set in a wonderfully complementary way. Now, the decision was whether to sip it slowly and draw out the experience, or down it quickly for something more intense.

Intensity would be a perfect capstone to the meal, though.

> That motherfucker is just *standing* there. He's not even *upset*. How *dare* he walk around living and whole when Jesse is dead? How *DARE* he?!
>
> Well, he won't be for much longer, he's going to get what's coming to him, isn't he? Bet he doesn't expect someone to tap him on the shoulder from behind and—
>
> "Yes?"
>
> **BLAM**

Oh, *exquisite*! Short and intense, just as expected! And such a wonderful vignette, too! Perhaps she should try her little experiment again to see if she could elicit any similar results.

Smiling faintly, she waited until her heartbeat slowed, then unhurriedly collected her trash into a small plastic bag and put in all in the lunchbox, on top of the small vial containing a sliver of preserved brain tissue. Lunch completed, she returned her lunchbox to her locker, then walked back over to scrub back in before starting the next autopsy.

A coroner's work is never done. A gourmet's pleasure, even less so.

Grand Theft Anomaly

Offices of the Federal Investigation Bureau, Los Santos, San Andreas | 11:40

“…Yeah. No. No, that’s not what I’m saying.”

“What are you saying, then?”

“I’m saying- fuck, hang on.” Veteran FIB agent Dave Norton is having a busy day, and the numerous knocks at his office window aren’t helping his focus. He takes his expensive dress shoes off the desk and tips forward in his chair, looking up at his coworker standing by the door. “What is it, Steve?”

“Oh, are you busy?” Steve Haines answers, gesturing to the phone in Norton’s hand.

“Yes, I am.” He turns the phone face-down to the table. “Now, what do you need?”

“It’s-“ Haines hesitates. “It’s that DeSanta again.”

“Townley? What’s he done this time?”

“We’re gonna need to talk to him. He's about to get himself in deep shit if we're not careful here. Meet me in the courtyard at lunch. Can you do that?”

“Of course, of course. What's wrong?”

Haines shakes his head and leans further in the doorway. "Don't wanna talk about it. Not here. Look, just come to the courtyard at lunch. It's all good."

"Alright, alright, I'll be there." Norton nods and moves the phone back to his ear.

“Good. Don’t miss it.”

“Alright.”

Sandy Shores, San Andreas | 17:45

“No, fucking damn it, I said *pineapple!”*

“Sorry sir, you know there’s bad reception out here, haha. We’ll have it right over-”

“Bad reception? Bad *reception?* Listen buddy, if I can call the good times line at four AM without a single missing syllable in my dirty talk, I can definitely order a fucking pizza without my voice cracking up! ‘Reception’ my ass! Now get it over here in fifteen minutes and I’ll give you a twenty!”

“Alright sir-”

“Good *bye!”*

Trevor Philips hasn’t had the chance to sit up off the toilet before his phone is ringing yet again. He rolls his eyes and answers it. “I’m taking a shit, Mikey, whaddaya want.”

Michael Townley's voice is smooth and calm to a degree that Trevor finds grating. “Your time. Look, I’ve got something big on the radar, buddy-”

“If this is another of your goddamn pyramid schemes, I swear I will personally rip off your h-”

“It’s not that, it’s not that. Listen, I’ve got something new, alright, something we haven’t seen before. Could land us in the black for good. And it’s *not illegal.”*

“When the fuck did that ever matter?”

“It didn’t, but it could make this easy. This is wacky shit, man, I’m tellin’ you! Give me a chance, will you? Look, drive out to the house. This ain’t the kind of shit I wanna be talking about on the phone.”

Trevor grits his teeth and resists the urge to slam his phone onto the ground. “…Fine,” he grumbles. “I’ll be over there tonight. *Later.* I’ve got a pizza coming.”

“Excellent. See you soon.”

“Mmm. This better be good.”

Rockford Hills, Los Santos, San Andreas | 19:30

“Hey Uncle Trevor!”

“Fuck off, kid.”

“Alright. Glad to see you!” Michael's son ambles back upstairs with a slow nod and a grin.

“Trevor, honey, can I get you a drink or anything?”

“No thanks, Mrs. DeSanta. Unless you got vodka-”

Michael DeSanta comes down the stairs, interrupting them. “Trev, come on. Let’s talk.”

“You sound awfully excited,” Trevor says, shooting a glance at Michael’s wife, who smiles as usual. “Get on with it, then.”

“Alright,” Michael starts, leading them outside onto the patio. “Franklin and I were talking and we’ve found something really damn good. Something that doesn’t- make sense." He clears his throat. "A glitch in the system.” He smiles and squints as he looks side-to-side, sitting down on one of the poolside chairs.

“What’s the glitch, then?”

Michael leans forward. “Alright, so you go into the supermarket, right? And you buy one of those prepaid cards. What happens then?”

“Then you have a prepaid card. Don’t talk to me like a fucking child, Mikey-”

“Shh, shh, don’t get pissed.” He laughs and slaps Trevor on the shoulder, earning a glare. “Okay, so you get a prepaid card, right? And then you use it, and then it’s gone. But Frank and I were at the old gas station down the hill, right? And we saw the employees fucking around with their registers. Talking about a computer glitch and shit, right? Registers showing some… abnormal screen, and ringing up merch that wasn’t actually at the counter. Looked weird, like super weird. So Frankie and I decided we were gonna stick around, see what they were messing with, didn’t have nothing else better to do, right? Alright, so we’re watching ‘em, pretending to talk by the cigarette cabinets, and we see this thing ringing up prepaid cards when they hit the buttons. On the register screen. Just all by itself!”

“Jesus, man-”

“What?”

“You seeing this shit- How many tabs did you pop earlier?”

“What? Oh come on now, this was *real,* Trevor! Hell, call Franklin if you want-”

“Fine, fine, *uuughhhh.* Carry on.” Trevor puts his head in his hands and leans on his knees.

Michael nods. “Anyway, so what I’m saying is, we grabbed one of those cards that thing rang up, eh? And it *worked."*

“What?”

“The card worked. Hundred-dollar prepaid, wasn’t even rung up, wasn't even transacted, and it worked at the liquor store down in Morningwood!”

“…You called me over here to talk about a hundred dollars?”

“No, I called you over here to talk about the *potential* for *thousands,"* he says, lowering his voice. "Think about it, Trev! Man, if we figure out how this thing works, this- this- fucked-up register system glitch thing, we could be in the black with infinite prepaids! It’s a glitch in the system, buddy, it doesn’t make any sense, but think about it!”

Trevor nods. “I don’t know, man. You talk to Franklin about this?”

Michael shrugs and lights a cigarette. “Eh, you know the kid. He’ll jump on board with us for anything, but the kid trusts his gut.”

“Mmm, and what’d his gut say?”

“Man, I don’t know. I don’t know the kid’s personal instincts. Look, you on board or not?”

“Just sounds like we’re playing with fire, man. If you don’t even understand how this thing works, you know, it might be- I don’t know, freaky government shit! You know they’re always installing shit- *watching-”*

“Eh, this ain’t government, buddy, you know it’s not. They don’t fuck with the- with the economy like this, you know? Nah, this is something weird.”

“You don’t think someone’s coming after it, then?”

“What do you mean?” He frowns. "No one's coming after it; there's nothing to come after. Imagine if this works at other places! We need to at least look into it, buddy, I'm telling you. I know money when I see it, and this is fuckin' A."

“No, I mean, you know, this weird shit. Not the money. Shit that doesn’t make sense. You don’t think there’s some freaky secret government shit, like FIB or IAA coming after this?”

“Pff, get outta here. I know you ain’t a white-collar guy, but somewhat, *secret organization,* some Men In Black shit? Nah, man. That’s crazy. There ain't any shit like that out there, not like that. I've been in this business my whole life, man, you know I know my way around.”

“Mmm. Whatever you say, Mikey.”

“Trust me, buddy. We’ve struck gold.”

Trevor nods, stands, and walks back over to his truck. "We'll see!" he calls out, shaking his head as he starts the engine. "We'll see."

He backs out of the driveway, flips off a pedestrian who he almost runs over, and starts the drive home.

Offices of the Federal Investigation Bureau, Los Santos, San Andreas | 09:15

“The who, again?”

"The SCP Foundation. My name is Agent Shaw. I had an appointment for nine with an Agent Haines? Is he around?"

"Oh, our apologies. He must be stuck in a meeting. I know he wouldn't mind if you went ahead into that conference room and waited for him. He should be out in a few minutes."

"Very well. Which room?"

"Down the hall, second door on the left."

"Alright. Thank you." Shaw picks up his briefcase and heads down the hall, instinctively closing the door behind himself before remembering Haines will be looking for him. He sits with his back to the window and opens his briefcase to remove his laptop and documents, keeping the spray can of Class-A amnestics in the bottom of the bag for easy access should anything go south.

There's a knock at the door, and then a firm "hello?" followed by the entry of a man who looks like he spends five hours a day on a golf course and another five in a tanning salon. He beams and sits down across from Shaw at the conference table. "You must be Agent Shaw! Pleasure to meet you." He extends his hand across the table to meet Shaw's. "So sorry I was late! I was stuck down the hall with some of the buffoons from HR. Anyway, interesting to see one of your organization out in the light of day! You're not gonna brain-wipe me after this, are ya?"

Shaw gives as genuine a chuckle as he can muster up, which isn't much. "Ha. No. I'm afraid we just need to discuss a newfound anomaly that may potentially be affecting businesses in this area. As this develops, it is heavily expected that we'll need full FIB cooperation in shielding its existence from the public eye;

specifically, we will need to pose as FIB agents when containing instances, and a cover story will need to be developed immediately with which CEOs of major corporations will be informed that this anomaly is a credit fraud program and the FIB is investigating-"

"Whoa, whoa, slow down, my friend. One thing at a time. So, you need me to sign something, eh? Trust me, I know how it goes-"

"Oh, no- well, not yet. That's for the higher-ups. I actually need your help tracking instances in this area. A fellow named Norton told me you've got a few long-time criminals on your radar that may be getting involved."

"Oh, Norton gave you the run-down, eh? Yeah, we've got them on our radar alright."

"Trevor Philips and Michael DeSanta?"

"Well, his real name's Townley, not DeSanta. DeSanta's his post-witness protection program name. We helped the guy back in the day, see." He waves his hand. "But that's not relevant, we just need to figure out how to deal with this before it blows up."

"Helped him? I thought these guys were criminals."

"It's complicated. At this point they're flagged as hostile, yes."

"I see. Anyway, can I show you the preliminary documents?"

"Sure, sure. But say, why isn't our department in on this? You know, the abnormal events department?"

"What, the UIU? That's above my clearance level."

"What is?"

"Knowing why the UIU isn't involved. Look, I'm just a field agent. I don't know anything other than the research and tracking aspects of this."

"Alright, alright, sounds good, sounds good. Show me what you've got."

Item #: SCP-2738

Object Class: Euclid

Special Containment Procedures: MTF Lambda-13 ("Inventory Control"), based out of Site-12, is tasked with detecting and containing SCP-2738 instances as they manifest. As tests have shown that SCP-2738 is potentially spread between registers and between retailers through the use of items anomalously transacted using the SCP-2738 program, such as prepaid cards or gift cards, a cover story of SCP-2738 being a credit theft program has been fully developed and spread to the upper management of all major US retailers.

When SCP-2738 is found on a register system, the store's district manager is to contact Site-12 personnel and by extension MTF Lambda-13 personnel for containment operations. All retail employees, including high-level managers, are to be kept under the guise that Lambda-13 personnel and any involved Foundation research personnel are FIB agents investigating credit theft.

As investigations carried out by Foundation statisticians have shown that SCP-2738's spread rate is increasing, research efforts toward safe removal of SCP-2738 from register systems are ongoing.

"Why's this say you've developed the cover? Where's Site Twelve?"

"Twelve's across the country. Northern. And this is a draft. It won't be finished and added to the database until we get FIB approval for the cover, which my superiors are taking up with yours." Shaw folds the paperwork back up and starts packing his briefcase. "In the meantime, I need *your* help in field work. We suspect that this thing is already spreading around Los Santos, and potentially all of southern San Andreas if we don't catch it."

"…And Philips and Townley are about to spread it further, I suspect

you're worried."

Shaw sighs and shrugs. "You know more about them than I do. But yes, if there are two wanted criminals aware of this anomaly, that is definitely something on the priority list of containment. To put it lightly."

"So you need my help in tracking them down and stopping them before they cause this thing to blow up and- what, I'm no statistician-er, destabilize the economy, basically? Is that an accurate estimation?"

"I mean, this thing has the same economic effects as printing cash, but with prepaid cards and merchandise. We're still figuring it out, but yes, it's bad if it gets spread."

"Do you know how it spreads?"

"We're still in research stages, but based on preliminary tests, it spreads fast and it spreads easily. If these two- is it only two of them?"

"Townley and Philips? They've got some kid from the south side helping them, I think, but he's low-threat."

"Alright. Look, these criminals - if they become aware of this, it's bad."

"So we need to stop them. Want me to try to call Townley?"

"…You have his phone number?"

"Like I said, the situation's always been weird. Look, let's just get this settled."

"You can't call him and reveal this information. That's exceptionally dangerous."

"You're right, you're right. Standard arrest. Got it."

"All two of them. Three of them. Soon."

"Got it."

"Alright, then. Let's head out." Shaw zips his bag and stands, pushing the chair under the table. "Get Norton too, come to think of it."

"He's out, I'm afraid. Gonna have to be just you and I. Don't worry, no crazy stuff."

"Not sure what that's supposed to imply, but I'll take your word for it."

"Excellent, excellent."

Palomino Freeway, San Andreas | 10:10

“You… are a hipster.”

”…What?”

“You’re a hipster.”

“I *hate* hipsters!”

“Classic hipster denial.”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake- can we please just focus on the road?”

"I'm just saying, you think you're edgy when you hate everyone, but really you're just a hip-"

"Do you want me to reach over and steer this car off that cliff?"

"Ha. Alright, buddy, you got it." Michael chuckles.

"I am *not* a hipster," Trevor mutters out the window. He clenches his fist and turns around to face the backseat. "Am I a hipster, Franklin?"

Franklin looks up from his phone. "I'm not saying anything, man, you know I don't fuck with that shit man."

"Hmm. Alrighty, fine." He faces Michael again. "So we're hitting the old liquor store first, right?"

"Later, yeah. We gotta meet with Lester first, remember?"

"I know, I know! Jesus! I just mean later! I'm trying to make some plans for once!"

"Easy, easy. It'll be good. No need to get angry yet."

"Yet," Trevor echoes, earning a scoff from Franklin. They ride in silence until they arrive at Lester's.

Darnell Bros Textile Factory, Los Santos, San Andreas | 10:50

"It just me or did Lester give this place a re-do?" Franklin mutters as the three of them walk through the door.

"Hmm, looks like he dusted the piles of shit," Trevor scoffs, clapping Franklin on the back. "Nice touch. Let's get this shit settled already; I wanna go home and drink."

"Oh, I would never have guessed," Lester groans, hobbling out from around the corner and adjusting his large glasses. "But, y'know, I've told you, you *will* kill that liver of yours-"

"Oh, okay, I'll just stick to meth then," Trevor snaps, rolling his eyes.

"Shh, shh." Michael waves his arms to direct the group over to the room's main table. "We need to focus! We've got something good here, Lester."

"Mmm, yes, yes, what you were vaguely referencing on the phone I presume. Well, I did my research, and what you were describing is no known software I've heard of in my time."

"Software?"

"Oh come on, Mike, you know what software means. The programs-"

"No, no, I know what it means, I'm just asking what you mean by calling this thing software."

"Well, your descriptions sounded like software. But you didn't say

much on the phone, but luckily I did some looking in the old, er, 'underground communities' so to speak-"

"Some dark web shit?" Franklin asks.

"The dark web is a cheesy name for it, but sure. You know how it is. Anyway, people know about this thing, you know, it's spreading fast. Yeah. Got some people trying to get copies of it for sure. What it seems to be, see, is a computer program that piggybacks on the preexisting register system, and is undetectable unless you know to close out of your register system and check Task Manager."

"…Which no cashier is going to think to do."

"Exactly." Lester grabs a pen and paper from the edge of the table and starts scribbling. "Now, I can get a run-of-the-mill POS system set up in the shop, here. That's not a problem. I've got a dozen old machines I could boot up good as new. What I need that I can't get is a copy of that program."

"What are you going to load it onto?"

"Well, information I have thus far shows me it only runs on Facade OS, none of that Fruit bullshit. But that might be because almost all register systems are machines running Facade. But we can test it. Better to make sure. Need to figure out how this thing spreads. You know, so that our next step can be profit. Snag this before the other guys, yeah?"

Michael nods. "Okay, so this- the- what are we gonna call it?"

"Theft program, I guess?" Franklin shrugs.

"Sure. This theft program- you need us to break into a shop we know has it, and download it?"

Lester nods and leans on his cane. "Find it. It's an EXE file, I guarantee you. Put it on this flash drive and bring it back to me. You guys can do that, right? Copy a file?"

"Of course, of course. What if the computer is password-protected?"

Lester sighs. "I mean, I thought of that- I think of everything, as you know… er, let's just say that it's unlikely." He furrows his brow and looks down in thought for several seconds. "A tiny shop like the gas station or the liquor store near Mike's house- very unlikely."

"And if it fails?"

"Then take the cash and leave and we'll work on hacking later. It's not like it's a new thing for you three to break into stores."

"Pff, yeah, yeah, we get it. But we can't shoot anyone, *unfortunately,* or people will be after us."

Franklin narrows his eyes. "I mean, you're right, but that's a weird thing to hear comin' from you, Trevor…"

"Yeah, well, I'm also not an idiot. No body trail, or we blow it. Right Lester?"

"Yeah."

"Wait, wait," Franklin says with a sigh. "If we don't want a trail, why we takin' the register cash?"

"Well, we don't *have* to-"

"Well, no reason not to!"

"Shut it, you guys," Lester hisses. "The problem, Franklin, is that I guarantee you the FIB is after this. If you break into somewhere they might be watching for the presence of this program and you *don't take anything,* they're going to know you went in there for that program based on likelihood alone."

Trevor widens his eyes. "Oh, Michael, look at that! What'd I tell ya!" He gestures to Lester. "I told you that there'd be some government fuckers after this thing!"

"Government is after everything, Trevor," Lester adds with a chuckle. "This is nothing new."

"Well, first it's the FIB, then it's someone else. You never know what

government will pull out of its rotten stinking ass when new shit shows up, and we're in uncharted territory here."

"Uncharted territory?"

"Uncharted territory, Michael. No one outside of whatever deep web crack-dealing site Lester's been trolling even knows what this thing is. There's no telling what unheard-of government monstrosities are watching this."

"Trust me, Trevor, I know every secret mystery crime-fighting organization in the book. Worst people coming after this are the FIB. I have sources."

"Fine, fine," Trevor sighs. "You know I trust you, Lester, but this shit gives me the worst feeling, I can't shake it!"

"It's alright, buddy," Michael assures. "We'll be safe. Hell, we pulled off the Union Depository! Not many people can do that, eh?"

"I wouldn't get so vain so fast, but that's just me. We're a trio of fuckups riding on luck, pal."

Franklin interrupts them. "We can do it, y'all, let's just get on this. The clock is ticking."

"Franklin is right," Lester says. "You three should get going. Take this flash drive and go by whichever store it was that Frank and Mike were at the other day. My fingers are crossed."

"Same. Thank you for your help, Lester. Not sure where we'd be without you."

"Jail, of course. But hey, so would I. Heh. Anyway, er, get out of here."

The three of them chuckle, grab their belongings and the flash drive, and start walking toward the door.

Rob's Liquor, Morningwood, Los Santos, San Andreas | 23:30

"Cops get here fast to this one," Trevor mutters, fiddling with a

screwdriver before handing it to Michael.

"Nothing we can do." Michael takes it with a nod and starts going to work on the roof access vent. "This is where Frank and I were at. It's this one or we don't get the program, and you know they got looser security than the gas station."

Trevor grunts in response and stands up off the ground, peering down the street over the edge of the roof.

"No one's around, man, chill," Franklin says, beckoning him back over to the vent as Michael pulls the cover off. "You stay here, man, you be the lookout."

"Yeah, we'll only be a few minutes. Stay up here since you're the paranoid one."

"Yeah yeah, really funny. Whatever. Look, be careful."

"Of course," Michael whispers, dropping down into the vent with a loud *clang.* Franklin follows closely after him.

"Any security cameras under us?" Franklin wonders aloud.

"We can't worry about it. They'll see us anyway. You know the drill. Look, I'll get the file, you pop the register open. Can you do that?"

"Of course, man, we got this."

"Excellent. This is fuckin' A, man, this is fuckin' A. Alright, let's go ahead and drop down. Stay *slow."*

Franklin nods and positions himself above the vent opening, dropping down and hanging by his arms from the edge before closing the remaining distance to the ground with a surprisingly quiet *thud.* Michael watches him crouch and sneak over to the registers, climbing down after him with a significantly louder *thud.* "Sorry, I'm getting fucking old," he whispers as he creeps over to the registers. Franklin smirks and readies his crowbar while Michael turns on the computer and starts looking for the USB port.

Prosperity Street, Morningwood, Los Santos, San Andreas | 23:37

"Fun work, isn't it?"

"Mmm." Agent Shaw fidgets restlessly in the passenger seat and attempts to make casual communication. "So, uh, is this the type of field work you typically do?"

"Eh, it varies."

Shaw waits for Haines to provide more elaboration, but is only met with awkward silence. He sighs and cracks his knuckles restlessly. "Well, as long as you're ready to floor it as soon as you see them…"

"Floor it? Heavens no, we're keeping quiet until they get back in that car, there."

"Who's that on the roof, then?"

"Can't tell in the dark. Probably Michael. He's too old for this shit."

"I thought the file said Trevor was older."

"Heh. Yeah, but he's not tired… -er. He's a pretty nonstop guy."

"Always a fun type."

"Mmm."

Both of them look out their respective windows for several seconds, unsure of what conversation to start.

"Shit, they're out!" Haines whispers, grabbing the steering wheel and causing Shaw to jolt in surprise. "That was fast, wish my team could transfer files in ten minutes, let me tell ya-"

"Can we go, please?"

"Easy, easy. I'm not the UIU, I know what I'm doing-"

"Then where did the car go?"

Haines pauses and looks forward. "…Shit-"

"Go, go! Turn left, that's the way their car was facing!"

"Okay, okay!" He throws the vehicle into gear and rolls forward. "We can't be loud, or they'll know."

"Turn, turn," Shaw mutters, head halfway in his hand.

"Going, going." He puts his blinker on and turns left at the intersection, lights immediately reflecting off the back of the crew's car.

"Stay far enough back that they don't freak out-"

"Trust me, my friend, I know what I'm doing. I'm an FIB agent, after all."

San Andreas Avenue, Backlot City, Los Santos, San Andreas | 23:45

"Merge, merge! God, you're a terrible driver-"

"Cut me some slack, Trev, I've got my mind on other things. Like-"

"Like someone *following us?"* Trevor demands at a volume loud enough to make Franklin wince. "Look in your motherfucking rearview mirror, Mikey, we've got hostiles at six o'clock!"

Michael turns around. "Buddy, people *live* on those streets, which logically means they also *drive around.* We're not being fucking followed. That car pulled out a long time after we did. Calm your nerves, man, we're fine, we did it!"

"Yeah man, Mike's right-"

"I'm not trusting that! Look how close they are behind us! And they're both suits!"

"Well, staring out the back of the goddamn window isn't exactly inconspicuous-"

Trevor cuts him off by removing a pistol from under the seat and reaching for the sunroof controls. "I'm not taking chances!"

"Whoa, whoa, don't go shooting people!" Michael yells, trying to stop

him from climbing out of the sunroof.

"Trust me, buddy, they're already freaking out!" Trevor yells, now standing with his head and torso out of the vehicle as he aims his pistol at the driver of the car. "See? They're already panicking!"

"Don't fucking shoot them, Trevor, *god fucking damn it-"*

Del Perro Freeway, Los Santos, San Andreas | 23:48

"Oh Christ! Swerve, swerve!" Shaw instinctively ducks under the dashboard as a round strikes the car right above the windshield. Haines curses and swerves into the other lane before flooring it and coming up alongside the crew's vehicle. "What the fuck are you doing?" Shaw snaps, fumbling for his pistol, but realizing he left it in his bag in the backseat. "I can't reach my fucking gun! Get us a safe distance from them, for fuck's sake!"

"Trust me, I've worked with these guys a while, and this is *definitely* a safer option than letting them go!" Haines looks in his side mirrors twice before inching their vehicle leftward toward the crew's, much to the dismay of Shaw. Haines rolls his window down, checking his speedometer. Only 55. Not bad, given the situation. "Look," he calls out to Trevor. "You know you don't wanna shoot me! Remember last year? Before the heist? Let's work this out, Mr. Philips! You give us the flash drive, and we let you off, just like old times!"

He's answered with a round narrowly missing his head, instead lodging itself in the passenger-side door, inches from Shaw's huddled body. "Fucking- stop!" Shaw yells. "Either shoot Philips or give this up and let the cops handle it and the flash drive negotiations go through the legal channels!"

Haines watches Michael argue with Trevor before gritting his teeth and steering their vehicle into the side of theirs, slamming it to the right and into a guardrail. Shaw unbuckles his seatbelt and clambers into the backseat, trying to stay steady regardless of the rocking motions. He digs through his bag, removes his pistol, fumbles with the window controls, and aims his pistol out the window and toward Trevor. Trevor immediately notices and ducks back into the car, giving Shaw no chance to fire. He curses and flips the safety back

on. "Get after them, then!" he snaps, earning an inexplicable laugh from Haines. He clenches his fists and sits back in his seat as Haines accelerates to almost 80 miles per hour in the wake of the crew's fleeing vehicle.

San Andreas Avenue, Los Santos, San Andreas | 00:00

"Why the fuck are you leading them right to Lester's?"

"Well, why the fuck did you *shoot at them?"* Michael snaps in return.

"We need to ditch this car, yo, this is bad-"

"How are we gonna manage that, Franklin? They're right on our tail, they're probably around the corner right now!" Michael says, yelling over the radio music.

…Oh it's a setup, it's a setup, it's a setup-

"Turn the fucking music down, Trevor, I can't focus!"

"I don't know where the fucking controls are! Maybe if you'd, I don't know, drive a car that *actually belongs to you* for once, you would know where the fucking volume button is!"

….bound to break you, get you beat! No no, we won't, won't fall, we got to get underground-

"If you can't turn it off then at least get it off the motherfucking hipster station! This fucking song-"

"I am *not* a hipster!"

"Y'all, shut up, they are *right* behind us," Franklin yells from the backseat. "Where'd they go? Shit, where'd they go-"

"I don't know, I just know one of those guys sure as fuck don't look FIB!"

"Which is why I tried to *kill him,"* Trevor screeches, slamming his fist on the dashboard as Michael slams to a halt in the driveway. "God fucking damn it!" He throws the door open as he replaces the

magazine in his pistol and chambers another round. "I fucking told you there would be freaky government shit going on here!"

"Franklin!" Michael yells as the headlights of the vehicle pull into the end of the driveway. "Take this flash drive and give it to Lester! Tell him to copy it as fast as possible! If anyone fucking comes in here that ain't us, you fucking shoot them!"

"I got it, boss!" Franklin snatches the flash drive, ducks, and sprints for the entrance of the building.

"This is fucked," Michael laughs, loading his pistol and turning to Trevor.

"Oh, it always is, Mikey! It always is!"

Darnell Bros Textile Factory, Los Santos, San Andreas | 00:03

"Y-you got it?"

"Sure did, Lester!" Franklin says, sweating. "Shit went south, man, shit! There's some FIB dudes out there with Trev and Mike right now, man, we gotta move! Transfer that shit, man!"

"Fuck, fuck," Lester mutters, snatching the flash drive from Franklin's hands and hurrying over to one of the computers as fast as he can manage. "Ugh, this is bad…" he says in a more nasally voice than usual, wiping his brow as he plugs the drive in.

Franklin checks his pistol and runs back over to the door, but is met with surprising silence. He pants and licks his lips nervously, trying to steady his pulse and breathing as he creeps forward in the shadows of the entryway.

"There!" someone yells.

Franklin instinctively ducks and rolls forward, but surprisingly hears no gunfire. "Lester, get the fuck out!" he calls out as loudly as he can manage, taking aim at the black-suited agent heading straight for him.

"Drop the weapon!" Haines orders.

"No! Bitch, don't make me shoot y-" He's interrupted by someone knocking him over the head, causing him to drop his pistol onto the concrete. "Fuck!" he says, spinning around. He's met with Shaw's frowning face and his arms being wrenched behind his back and handcuffed. He looks around wildly, still muttering profanities. Trevor and Michael are handcuffed and leaning against the side of a new black SUV that he assumes pulled up while he was inside with Lester.

"Man, fuck you FIB snitches-"

"Oh, but I'm not FIB," Shaw says with a chuckle. "Those guys have told us quite a bit about you three, though."

Franklin freezes. "What the fuck are you, then? IAA?"

"Not that either."

"Man, what the fuck-"

"You'll find out in time. Let's just say we're *like* the FIB, but for… weird shit."

Franklin glances at Trevor, mouth agape as Shaw walks him toward the same vehicle. "Trevor, you said- h-hadn't you said-"

Trevor leans out of the SUV he's being forced into. "I *told you so!"* he yells, kicking the side of the vehicle with a noise that reverberates against the concrete and walls. "I fucking *told you!"*

Franklin watches in dismay as four other agents drag Lester out of the safehouse in handcuffs. "Holy fuck, Trevor, shit man, you were-"

"Fucking right!" Trevor snaps as the agents sit Franklin down beside him in the back of the vehicle. "I was fucking right!"

"We are fucked, man," Franklin says under his breath. His eyes fixate on Michael's sweat-caked hair and the metallic gleam of the driver's holstered pistol while Lester is led into the vehicle and ordered to sit beside him.

"Well, fellas," Lester comments breathlessly as the vehicle pulls out

of the drive, "I sure hope you like orange jumpsuits."

None of them speak as they pull onto the freeway and drive for hours into the empty desert.

Incident Report: SCP-2738 Research, Retrieval, and Criminal Implications

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Report Summary: On / /13, two established southern San Andreas area felons, one additional convict, and one additional person of interest were apprehended by Foundation agent and MTF Lambda-13 operative R. Shaw with assistance from Los Santos FIB branch agents on account of a known scheme to intentionally duplicate, utilize, and take financial advantage of the SCP-2738 program.

Persons Apprehended:

- Michael Townley/Michael DeSanta (age 45)
- Trevor Philips (age 48)
- Franklin Clinton (age 25)
- Lester Crest (questionable validity of legal name) (age unknown)

Containment Notes: SCP-2738 containment successful for Los Santos area. Pending confirmation of successful greater southern San Andreas area containment.

Additional Notes: *I recommend we up personnel count on future excursions such as this. Addressing this singlehandedly would not have been possible without the assistance of Agents Haines and Norton and their backup; had the FIB not assisted Foundation operatives in this situation, we would have had a major destabilization of economy within several weeks, caused entirely by three notorious criminals and a rogue computing professional. Welcome to Los Santos, I guess.*

In conclusion, this is a cautionary example of nonviolent and nonphysical anomalies breaching into the real world and affecting more than what a small Mobile Task Force can adequately contain, and not to mention causing publicly visible damage. If we are to function properly, we cannot make these mistakes again, as a task force and as an organization overall.

-Agent R. Shaw, / /13

-End Report-

Grandchildren Frost

The icemen slowly crossed the mountain pass, moving with utterly implacable confidence. A good two or so days since they had left the Cloud, but the mission was one of utter importance. They could not fail. They could never fail, not when their **Tsar** needed them. The peaks of the Urals stretched very high above them, but only one–a lone straggler stumbling somewhat near the back–looked up and them. Whether he saw anything, it was hard to tell, what with his lack of eyes. But still, the straggler shrugged gently, as if in sigh, and continued to push onward. He marched in unison with the rest of them, identical to the rest. They were moving as one carefully coordinated organism. One organism composed of so many frozen parts interlinking and interlocked. A siphonophore of soldiers. Their guns were identical, their faces identical.

This time, there would be no belligerents, no enemies for the Tsar to stop. Today they carried only the most basic of their vast capabilities for weaponry. There was still a purpose, however. They could not live without a purpose. Two days earlier they had arrived at the Cave, an ancient thing tucked away in a foothill. Within the cave it was still cold, and so they simply went through the motion of making a campfire. The real thing would be too dangerous to their fragile forms, but they collectively felt in their frozen chests that it was the correct thing to do in this situation. Following this shambolic parody of a camp, they attended to their tasks. It was a rare burst of individual time for the community, ordinarily not permitting themselves that kind of frivolity. A select few gathered snow from the bitter windswept hill, and took to work polishing their weapons. Most kind of wandered about, miming meaningless arguments and bumping into walls.

There were a scant handful though, who looked up in wonder at the scratchings and figures decorating the cave walls. The straggler was among them. They stroked icicle fingers across a female figure, as ochre as a field of wheat. Between her legs, exactly twenty-eight red

dots spilled down the rock plane, forever falling towards the cave floor, forever stuck halfway up the wall. The straggler stroked the dots tenderly, simply. Behind him, an iceman cleaning his gun mimed an especially rude gesture, something private, sexual, and singular, himself unaware of it's true meaning, but feeling it was correct towards the softness of the straggler. The straggler of course, felt his comrade make the gesture, but made no indication of awareness, of consciousness towards it. Perhaps not of consciousness at all. He simply stroked the dots at an exalted pace.

They marched another two days through the Southern Urals. In actuality they were not far from their base at all. From the Tsar. The entire region was stuffed to the bursting with ёлка, but none seemed to the icemen to be at all correct.

After four days from the Cloud, the straggler wandered ahead and found an ёлка that seemed satisfactory, and so alerted the rest of his squad, who in turn, alerted the rest of the army. As one, they turned and drew broad, strong axes of ice, and began to March to the beat of some simple drum. Around them the Urals were still, their collective footsteps echoed off the lonely mountains. The deep snow muffled their movements, pushing them back. They had no cares for this. It just was. They simply pushed the snow, reaching far over their heads in places, back. There was as much thought and contemplation in it as a man putting on his shoes.

At the ёлка, instinct took over. Memory knows nothing compared to time and the thought patterns of an all. An all which has thought in the plural for as long as they have lived. In the minds of the iceman there was a calm peacefulness, as muffled as the snow from which they emerged. In essence, they were snow-creatures, blessed with the inner peacefulness and calm chill of snow, the instinctual drive towards grace and simplicity. Even in combat, where they performed the most heinous acts of violence to serve their Tsar, there was no passion, no rage, no inner violence to match the battlefields. Calm. Calm.

The rhythmic chopping of seven or so ice axes, sturdier than they would appear for their material, was soon replaced with a cracking of wood, and a great crumbling. Methodically, but with haste and speed they moved out of the way and the great ёлка, the spruce

which for over a hundred years has stood in the snow of the Urals, fell topping down into the expanse of rock and white. The straggler raised his arms, and with grace directed his comrades. From an outsider's perspective, he seemed to be nothing more than a conductor directing some vast, terrible and inscrutable orchestra. A Eugene Ormandy of the mountains. A Leonard Bernstein of Sverdlovsk Oblast. It is clear now, to that mysterious outsider figure. Perhaps they have been watching the iceman since they left the Tsar, perhaps he has noticed the straggler's seeming individuality. Far from a straggler, this is a leader. One granted the tiniest bit of command so that all perform more efficiently. Together they hoisted the mighty tree onto their backs and set out for home. Or is it home? They turn in the opposite direction from their destination. They must know where they are going, however.

Glance now at the one who was the straggler, observer. See now, know that he has achieved his goals. That he, bestowed with whatever faint shadow of a mind granted to him by the Tsar, has done his job. See how he leads onwards through the thick snow, downhill, downhill, downhill further still under the mountain's shadow, until the forests untouched turn to forests razed by the industry of the Tsars in days gone by, and even then downhill, downhill into where the burned wood, and petrified stumps give ways to vast fields of rock and snow deeper and wetter then on the mountain. Less still, more sorrowful. There is no life here. Observer, you are only with your icemen.

Within this bleak landscape there used to be mines, where men would sacrifice health and life digging up the ores and minerals used to fuel the Tsar. The icemen came across one such mine, where vast swaths of marble and gemstones were hauled out of the earth in tonnes. A few of the men in the back, not carrying their tree, began to pick up the scraps, sifting through the snow and venturing down the shaft, spider-like, to scavenge what had been plundered so many years ago. Their dextrous weapons soon freed a meager bounty, and they scuttled out into the darkness again. The sun had set so long ago. These were the dark months. There was still a purpose, however.

The straggler watched them gather their bounty into woven, crystal

sacks given by the Cloud for this sole purpose. The straggler didn't understand what they were doing exactly. They had their gemstones, they had their ёлка, now what? What was the point, if any? If the Tsar wanted it, still it would be done. the straggler shrugged and scooped a handful of rock into a crystal sack of his own. Then he fell in line.

He did not deviate from the group for the entire four day hike back to the Tsar. There was no need for him to be on lookout right now.

At the Tsar, under the Cloud, they hoisted the ёлка into a large, pre-dug put, and bolstered it upright with snow and rocks. Clambering up, they placed the gemstones reverently within the branches and then waited as the Cloud formed new weapons. A long string of exposed lights. Strips of metallic ice. The straggler stepped forward for the first time in a while. This was the final moment. He served the Tsar, the Tsar served God, and God served the universe. This was everything. This was the moment. The Tsar wanted a tree, the Tsar wanted it decorated, it shall be so.

He clambered up the branches and began to string the new weapons. He vaguely wondered how they would be used to claim belligerents, but since he did not think much at all, these thoughts never came forward. It was only now he thought, once he finished this task he would no longer be apart anymore. He would never think again.

The ёлка glowed, a spruce on fire in the middle of the Urals. The radio station where the Tsar lay asleep and commanding shot straight up into the night sky. This was all they could see. Them to the Tsar to God. God above all. God who made the Cloud and the Tsar and their weapons and their belligerents and them. The Tsar made them circle the tree; their weapons fell to the ground. Joining hands, they felt their ice-sculpture fingers freeze into each other. As one, they craned their heads up to the skies.

They were one.

> Addendum 2617-9: The following message is decoded from transmissions emitted from SCP-2617 on January 7th, 1974.

"ANASTASIA, COME SIT BY THE FIRE. HALFWAY OUT OF THE DARK. IT'S SO DARK. I WILL BRING THE LIGHT. MOTHER, WHEN DOES GRANDFATHER FROST ARRIVE? I CAN'T SEE. THE SAVIOR! THE SAVIOR!"

GRANT REQUEST FOR USAGE OF BIOLOGICAL ORGANISMS TO FACILITATE EFFICIENT TERRAFORMING AND SPECIES RESTORATION

GRANT REQUEST FOR USAGE OF BIOLOGICAL ORGANISMS TO FACILITATE EFFICIENT TERRAFORMING AND SPECIES RESTORATION

PROBLEM

The human population of planet Earth is steadily increasing. As of 6/15/1980, there were approximately 4.43 billion humans on the planet[1]. At the current rate of population growth, there will be almost 7 billion humans alive by 2010. This increasing population puts a strain on the resources of the planet, which are exacerbated by economic, political, social, and religious conflicts.

At the same time, human expansion is rapidly causing climate and ecological shifts in the planet. At least 600 species have been recorded to go extinct as a result of climate change, and likely the extinction of hundreds more has gone unnoticed[2][3][4]. It is clear that the only way to both preserve the ecology and biological diversity and health of the planet while still allowing for human growth is to populate other planets.

However, very few Earthlike planets have been discovered, all of which are thousands of lightyears away[5]. The teleportation technology currently in use relies on theories of quantum mechanics that are still limited to the speed of light, rendering these planets off-limits.

There are numerous planets and asteroids in our solar system that are mere light-minutes away, but are inhospitable to all forms of life. If they were to be terraformed, it would be possible for humans to relocate to these planets and asteroids. However, there are no ways currently within our technological grasp to economically terraform these astronomical bodies.

SOLUTION

We propose creating biological organisms, custom-designed to exist in hostile environments, to gradually terraform them into environments suitable for human habitation. These organisms would subsist off the raw materials found in the environment, consuming them and reproducing while simultaneously converting the planet and atmosphere into an Earthlike planet.

Celine and Franklin's theories on cold nuclear fusion[6] can be easily applied to a terraforming organism. Such an organism would be able to perform cold fusion to create elements that are more conducive to terrestrial biology. These organisms would also use those elements to propagate themselves asexually, so that the conversion process proceeds exponentially quicker. Asexual reproduction would also ensure that mutations are few and far between.

As a contingency in the event that it becomes impossible for humans to travel to these planets, say a nuclear winter scenario preventing humans from developing advanced space travel, or that the chosen planet cannot be fully terraformed, the terraforming organisms could spawn humans and other creatures that are already adapted to the new planet, so that they would have no trouble fitting in and recreating an Earthlike ecosystem or an ecology that is adapted to the planet. Gordon and Hannay[7], Serizawa[8], and Gorbovsky[9] independently proved that retroviruses could be used in organisms to force them to produce non related offspring.

On Earth, it is widely accepted that pioneer species such as lichen and moss perform small-scale terraforming to make their immediate environment more suitable for them and other organisms. Scaling this process upwards would allow for much-larger scale terraforming.

Dr. Wondertainment has recently released a product called "Dr. Wondertainment's Custom-Pets™", which can be reverse-engineered in order to design a progenitor organism that can swiftly and easily adapt to a foreign environment. The biological printing techniques used by Prometheus Labs for products such as Life-Sized Thrombocytes™ could be used to mass-produce terraforming organisms designed for a wide range of environments. In this manner, using the aforementioned techniques and research, it

should be economically feasible to mass-produce organisms that can terraform and seed an inhospitable environment in order to preserve humans and Earth ecology.

BUSINESS CASE

The primary use of this technology is to save humanity from extinction. The terraforming organisms would be able to completely restart any and all environments, the organisms that inhabit them, and humanity in the event of a mass extinction, while also enabling the new humans to easily adapt to a foreign environment in the event that terraforming is not fully successful. At the same time, this technology can be used to establish beachheads for further astronomical colonization, provide areas for Prometheus Labs to work offplanet, or design massive ecological experiments.

The terraforming organisms could be used on Earth to alter the environment in beneficial ways. For example, only major routes along Sahara Desert could be partially recreated into forest, partially offsetting global warming and making travel easier, while still preserving the arid conditions that fertilize the Amazon rainforest and prevent locust infestation. There are also applications in the sterilization of hazardous waste sites, such as Prometheus Labs Hazard Zones 4 (Kyshtym), 49 (Worcester), 67 (St. Louis), and 141 (Allahabad).

In less stressful environments, this technology could be marketed to land developers. They would be able to terraform a planet or an environment into such a way that they can attract tourists to an area designed specifically for their needs. This method could also be used to create nature and shooting preserves, or even prisons in extremely isolated areas.

Prometheus Labs could also use the technology to create organisms used for medicinal tests or tests where living beings are necessary. The physiological and mental state of these organisms could be fine tuned to optimize testing environments. For example, a human at peak physical condition but with severe schizophrenia could be spawned to test antipsychotic medications. This method would also allow Prometheus Labs to engineer children for infertile or nontraditional couples.

Because of the extreme standardization of the spawning process, Prometheus Labs would be able to sell high-quality, low-cost homogenous vegetables and meats to the frozen and fast food industries. Eventually, all traditional forms of agriculture could be supplanted, allowing Prometheus Labs to monopolize the food industry. These meats could also be genetically altered to increase beneficial vitamins or stimulate chemical production, such as fluorine to protect teeth.

USE OF FUNDING

Wondertainment Industries has indicated that it is willing to sell the Custom-Pets™ license and associated patents to Prometheus Labs in exchange for the now-defunct Project Roddenberry. It would take roughly forty to sixty weeks to reverse-engineer the process used to create the Custom-Pets™ and scale the process for larger organisms, which would cost approximately $500,000 assuming standard Class-V reverse-engineering protocols.

Design and implementation of the cold-fusion conversion processes would necessitate approximately thirty weeks and is assumed to cost $50,000. A further twenty weeks would ensure that the terraforming organisms and their offspring are stable, tractable, and not prone to mutation during the spawning process. Following this, design of a high-level progenitor organism that can produce other terraforming organisms, will require fifteen weeks and $200,000 to repurpose the printer used in Project Golem and integrate a similar mechanic into a biological structure.

Testing and redesign would take, at minimum, five weeks. It would also be prudent to have Prometheus Beijing construct a multi-environmental, sealed biosphere similar to the Project Cappuccino biosphere in which preliminary tests could be performed. Assuming the same techniques and materials are used, the dome could be constructed in under six weeks for $250,000.

The biosphere construction could occur concurrently with all steps of the project prior to organism printing, as these steps could occur in preexisting Prometheus facilities. For a full list of materials, contractors, and price ranges, see Attachment 1.

KNOWN ISSUES

The primary trouble with widespread adoption of this technology is public perception. Due to failures such as Project Cappuccino and Project Golem, the public is currently extremely distrustful of technological advances from Prometheus Labs, especially those that rely on engineered organisms. We advise an aggressive public relations campaign to regain public support. Simultaneously, Prometheus Labs should provide judicious donations of funds to lawmakers that are debating the ethics of engineered organisms and communities affected by Project Cappuccino. This should provide sufficient public goodwill to allow Prometheus Labs to promote terraforming technology.

We also suggest small-scale public tests of the technology as it advances. Allowing the public to see the usefulness of the technology, albeit in a heavily controlled environment, would also provide public support while testing the technology.

The technology that this concept is based around relies on highly theoretical work. The cold-fusion substance conversion process has only been used once before, during Project Leviathan. Although a success, it led to the demise of all subjects in the project. However, the data regarding the cold-fusion methodology (see Attachment 3) provided several insights into increasing the survival rate up to 1/50.

Biological programming to imbue organisms with inborn knowledge is a purely theoretical concept. Although strides in this field were made during Project Leviathan, the act of being able to "program" directives and goals into organisms is still being researched. Allocating further computational resources into this research, such as the use of the Temporal Dilation Computational Device, should enable its implementation within less than two years.

As illustrated with the failure of Project Golem and the quarantine of its host country, there is a danger of uncontrolled reproduction. In the event that a terraforming organism goes rogue, it could potentially cause a runaway terraforming effect that would render the Earth uninhabitable. The organisms it spawns could additionally usurp the ecological balance of the planet, completely altering the ecosystem and causing, at minimum, a Permian-level extinction event. The addition of gene ACP-405 into the terraforming organisms would ensure that the gene is passed on to all its

offspring. A pathogen could be engineered to target this gene, killing all creatures that possess it, thus averting any such incident.

Footnotes

1. United Nations Population Division. 1980. World Population Totals For 1970 - 2050, According to the 18 United Nations Revisions of World Populations Estimates and Projections. DESA. 193(3)304.
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3. Calvin S., Cenva N. 1973. Artificial Extinction Event: Is Human Expansion Causing Animal Extinctions? Ecology. 213(1) 57-63.
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5. Madaraki F., editor. c1978. Life off Earth[VHS]. Austin, TX. NASA. 2 tapes.
6. Celine H, Franklin S. 1982. Machines that Can Utilize Nuclear Fusion to Synthesize Elements for Reproduction. Journal of Nuclear Physics. 25(1) 123-132.
7. Gordon A, Hannay R. 1978. Utilization of Retroviral DNA To Induce Evolution. Nature. 175(2) 124-130.
8. Serizawa D. 1975. Potential for Genetic Engineering via Retroviruses. Nature. 145(3) 245-251.
9. Gorbovsky L. 1981. Introducing Retroviruses into an Organism to Force Evolution. Nature. 201(1) 179-194.

Grasp On Reality

Lemme tell you about reality benders.

First off, we like t'call 'em Bixbies. Why? One, in case somebody accidentally says somethin' in front of a civilian, it don't tip 'em off. Two, if yer talking *to* a reality bender, they might not know all they can do, an' you don't wanna give 'em any ideas.

These fuckers are dangerous. You see one, you don't engage unless you absolutely have to. If you do have to, be polite, try t'think happy thoughts, maybe you'll have a good day. Probably not. Whenever you can, let the experts deal with 'em.

We don't try containin' them, most of the time. Yeah, Foundation don't usually work that way, but we like t'have a world to live in. So on this point, we usually agree with the GOC. Better they're gone.

Okay, so, you're fightin' somebody who can do pretty much anything. How d'you stop 'em? Well, first off, they can't do anything they ain't thought of. Like, they can maybe all read minds. But if they ain't thought about doin' it, don't know they can, then they're not gonna try it. Remember, they're not smarter'n you. They may be able to do things different, might know things you don't, but they're not smarter.

Second, they gotta concentrate. We had one asshole, he decided he was gonna know about everybody watchin' him. Fucker killed twenty of us before we just had a bunch of us rush him. Couldn't get all of 'us, y'know?

Which kinds of Bixbies are worst? Depends how you mean. For my money, it's a kid Bixby. Almost always ends with a bullet. Sniper can usually take 'em out pretty easy. But actually killin' 'em? You show me a guy who just shot a three-year-old, I show you somebody with some damage upstairs. There are worse things you'll do for the Foundation, but not a lot.

Now, hardest to take down? Usually, somebody around late teens, early twenties. Much younger, they don't know enough to do as much harm. Older'n that, they don't got much flexibility in their thinkin' to try anything real out there. Late teens, early twenties, they're gonna experiment. They're gonna try anything that springs t'mind. They're not gonna be slow an' careful in figurin' out what they can do. We get one o' them, we pull out th' big guns.

Now, it don't always end with us killin' 'em. Sometimes, especially older ones, we can talk with 'em, a little. Convince 'em the world ain't worth it. Get 'em to move on somewhere else. A lot of 'em will even do it on their own. So far, ain't one of 'em ever come back. No one knows just why. Maybe this world really is that much of a shithole. Or maybe somethin's eatin' 'em, I don't know.

Anyway, now you see what I mean when I say a giant turtle ain't no big deal, even if it is spittin' fire at us.

Gray God

Jakeob Aldon watched the makeshift cast of The Hanged King's Tragedy sway back and forth. Almost a dozen anartists hung from nooses that extended all the way up to the warehouse's rafters. The initial shock was still there, albeit grounded by the realization that the being was not *the* Hanged King. It was just some clay poser. A poser that was capable of forcing so many people, who had likely built up resistances to various forms of magic, to hang themselves. Without all the prep the King seemed to require. Aldon swallowed heavily, as Hollywood had taught her.

"Well, this is happening," she muttered.

Felix hissed a string of unhelpful curses as his arms seemed to be collapsing in on his chest. Finnegan examined the scene quietly before nodding to himself.

"Any suggestions, Critic?"

Felix ceased his fidgeting. He thought for a moment, then asked, "Kill it?"

"Oh yes, let me just pull out my big god-killing gun."

"You have one of those?"

"NO!"

"Oh. Because that would have been extremely helpful, given our current situation."

Aldon decided, for her sanity's sake, to drop the conversation. Which was good, because it looked like her little outburst had garnered the being's attention. It cocked its head before snapping back much farther than a human neck would allow. It strode over to them, by now leaving clay chips and dust behind rather than half-wet

clay footprints. When it was within stomping distance of them, it stopped. The ring on the center of its chest shifted into a mouth, which the being promptly used.

"Welcome back, Clipper! I see you've brought some friends." It stooped over to look at Aldon and Finnegan with its nonexistent eyes. "Care to take part in the encore performance? Although. The Critic hasn't shown up yet, so I guess the first might have just been rehearsal."

"Not much of an actress," Aldon replied after glancing at Felix. "Mind if I just watch?"

The actress comment seemed to give the being pause. Lips within the ring smacked together, only to come apart as eyelids. With its new eye the sculpture examined Aldon closely, namely centering on her face and chest, before it rolled back and the mouth reformed.

"Course not. Could always use a bigger audience. Let me gather the cast, should only take a few minutes."

Aldon nodded and politely waved as the thing departed, her mind kicking into overdrive. She watched it extract almost twenty anartists from their seats before lumbering over to the stage, where the curtain drew itself. All the while she wondered how she was supposed to kill the bloody thing.

Her gaze whipped to Felix. "Why does that thing think you're still The Clipper?"

"That clay we had you use? We got it from The Old Sculptor's workshop. Apparently it was clay he had imprinted his mind on. When he was trying to murder The Old Critic."

"Fan-fucking-tastic. So why is he murdering these guys?"

"When he first started talking, Sandra recognized his voice. She pulled a gun and started shooting, but… I mean, he's all magicked up. So he put on a play so The Critic will come to… well, criticize it."

"Okay, okay, okay," Aldon said. Her eyes darted back and forth as she searched the warehouse for anything that could be of use.

There really wasn't much of anything, except maybe dropping one of the magic 'windows' on him. Hopefully the magic within the things would hurt him, even if the physical impact didn't. She'd have to fight fire with fire, magic to destroy magic. She looked to Finnegan to think about what they had brought.

"Well, that's a frightening look," Finnegan said.

Vaguely aware of a powerful tugging sensation at the corner of her mouth, Aldon looked her roommate dead in the eye. It made him lean back slightly.

"I have an Idea," she said.

"Oh. It's *that* look."

Grabbing him by the elbow, Aldon spun Finnegan in place and began rooting around in the backpack. Everett slinked out of the pack and onto Finnegan's shoulder, allowing Aldon easy access to the various elemental golems within. She scooped them up and grinned at the little creatures clinging to her arms. There were now somehow ten despite the fact Finnegan had most definitely placed nine in the pack back at the apartment.

"Seriously, where do you guys keep coming from?" she asked, more herself than them. Glancing into the backpack, she noticed there were significantly less CDs than Finnegan had actually put in there. "I don't even know what element some of you are."

The new golem waved its arms and tapped itself on the head, and then tapped Carbon on the head. Boron nodded and scratched at Zinc, filing the number 30 into its dome. The others followed suit until they were all labeled. Hydrogen, Boron, Carbon, Oxygen, Aluminum, Iron, Nickel, Copper, Zinc, and Gold looked up at her as Felix and Finnegan hurried off to untie the anartists.

"Oh. Huh. Thanks, Hydrogen. Nice thinking." She glanced between the others as they freed more and more anartists. Her gaze hovered on the stage before she looked down to the golems again. "So, uh, I need you guys to make yourselves into a weapon. I guess a sword will work."

Hydrogen, being the smart little fellow that it was, began pointing at the others and making elaborate gestures with its arms. The group leaped to the concrete below and began striking at it, chipping themselves and the ground in the process. Hydrogen and Oxygen were completely amputated by their comrades, releasing small blasts of energy in the process as their limbs instantly warped back into gasses. They were then gradually fed the chunks of loose concrete. As they ate, their limbs grew back, and the two golems spat out small globs of compounds. The globs were passed around between the golems until they were honed into chunks of dull grey metal. The golems were stripping the concrete down into calcium, which was then molded to give birth to a skeletal golem named Calcium. Its skull was adorned with a 20 and it did a little dance to celebrate its birth.

Aldon watched with her jaw wide open. She had noticed that Boron, the lowest numbered element prior to Hydrogen, had been a bit sharper than the rest. Or less dense, rather. But this was just shy of ridiculous. Meanwhile, several rows of anartists were free, and more were only being released faster. The curtain had still yet to move.

Zinc and Iron went about smashing themselves into Carbon, who was squeezing at its own torso as if it was in an invisible straitjacket. With each collision, Carbon seemed to be getting skinnier and skinnier, until eventually it ejected a diamond the size of Aldon's thumb onto the ground. Awe struck Aldon as somewhere in her mind, she was reminded that diamond was only an allotrope of carbon. Then Carbon ate some of the aggregate compound left over from the concrete, fattened up, and they repeated the process. Aldon laughed like a madwoman when she saw Gold shaping the diamonds into bullets.

Boron, Nickel, and Oxygen now were conjoining their bodies into a flintlock pistol. Even their little faces remained on the grip and the end of the barrel. Meanwhile, Oxygen was half-embedded in Boron and looked to be chewing on air, its arms now positioned where the hammer of the pistol would be. No doubt it was the firing mechanism. Aldon picked up the golem gun and fed Boron diamond bullet after diamond bullet so that Nickel could spit them out later. She readied the gun, finger on the trigger, and Boron's little trigger-

limb held her finger in its tiny hand.

"Oh *fuck*, this is awesome," she choked out, hard of breath from laughing. It was heavy, though she wasn't sure how it compared to an actual gun. But she could lift it with one hand, and with two she could keep her aim relatively steady when she wasn't busy giggling.

Finnegan hurried over, also short of breath, but from running. "Okay, everyone's free. Are you done thinking or- where… where the hell did you get a gun?"

Aldon giggled some more and gestured to the bullet factory at her feet. Finnegan stared at them blankly before looking back up to Aldon.

"Okay, I was not expecting them to be able to do that."

"Surprise!" Aldon exclaimed, brandishing the pistol.

"Well, Felix has the aussies working on something to strip the statue-" His sentence was cut short when he whipped his head around to the opening curtain. "Fuck."

For a few awkward moments, the unlucky anartists up on stage began the play. Their movements were jerky and their eyes wandered, but they filled their assigned roles. The anartists among the pews collectively held their breath while they waited for the demigod they had created to notice they were no longer paying all that much attention to its work.

Aldon hastily scooped up some more bullets and loaded as many as she could. Nine shots total. A short distance away, Finnegan was fiddling with his backpack. He withdrew one of the few surviving CDs and placed it within the gauntlet. He cranked the volume dial to the max setting before nodding to himself. The anartists hastened their ritual as best they could. Or some of them did, several fled the moment the curtain began to open. Felix, to his credit, was not among them. Because he was too busy hiding under one of the pews.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa. What the hell is this?" The Old Sculptor

stomped out from behind the stage. "Who said you could stop being hostages?"

Twenty seven hands flew up, twenty seven fingers pointed at Aldon and Finnegan. Twenty seven ungrateful assholes. The Old Sculptor marched to Aldon for the second time, this time leaning over slightly to loom over her. A line tore across his clay face until it split into a toothy grin. The maw stretched open, revealing an abyss within the sculpture. Paint splashed and paper shuffled and clay thumped and power screamed within the yawning chasm. Then the little mouth on his chest, which was about even with Aldon's eye level, opened.

"Hello," he said with soft venom.

"Goodbye," she said hastily. Aldon jammed the barrel of the golem gun into the open mouth and yanked on the trigger. Boron felt the tug and kicked at Oxygen, severing a tapered point from the body. It immediately expanded into its gaseous form, blasting the diamond bullet forward and out of Nickel's mouth. Oxygen started eating the air around it to reform the tapered limb for the next shot.

The entire exchange would have been entirely silent if The Old Sculptor hadn't started screaming about his new gunshot wound. For a little less than a second Aldon pulled at the trigger futilely because of how long it took Oxygen to reform the firing mechanism. By then The Old Sculptor had bit through the barrel, likely murdering poor Nickel in the process. But shortened barrel or no, the gun still fired, shattering ceramic teeth and embedding itself somewhere within clay. Which only caused The Old Sculptor to scream even more.

Still writhing in what semblance of pain his clay body allowed, The Old Sculptor tried snapping at Aldon with his gnashing maw. Before ceramic teeth could clamp down around her neck, Finnegan pushed Aldon out of the way. Using the momentum of rushing forward, Finnegan threw a punch with his music-encrusted fist. The hardened clay was able to absorb most of the blow, and combined with the sheer amount of it, the punch did little.

"What the fuck?" The Old Sculptor demanded with both mouths.

"The fuck do you mean, 'what the fuck?'" Aldon asked. She felt the pistol shift in her hand, but she ignored it for the moment. "What the fuck is wrong with *you*?"

The massive head-mouth closed, its front/lower lip jutting out. "Nothing. Shut up."

Aldon glared at him for a moment before raising the pistol with both hands, which had since expanded its barrel considerably. Oxygen's severed limb was considerably bigger to compensate for the larger bullet, and as such the recoil nearly ripped the golems from her hands. It did, however, manage to put a hole in The Old Sculptor's face despite his hardened exterior. So he responded in kind by morphing most of his upper body into a revolver, the barrel extending to just shy of Aldon's face.

From his precarious perch on Finnegan's shoulder, Everett tackled the barrel. He exploded into droplets of water, soaking into the clay. Finnegan followed up by swinging his fist around in an arc, crushing the barrel. The Old Sculptor misfired, a mouth just above the grip yelling the word "fuck" repeatedly. Perhaps more than necessary, even.

"Owe ya," Aldon said before unloading a second slug into the screaming statue.

"Okay, fuck this," The Old Sculptor growled. He ripped the twisted barrel off of himself, tossing it to the ground where it writhed slowly. A new head, more closely his original human self, extended from the shoulders. He turned to face the stage, where the hypnotized anartists were still performing a play. "Hey, shitbirds! Stop dicking around and help me."

Aldon unloaded the final shot into the back of his head as the performers hopped off the stage. He didn't scream, and Aldon smiled nervously. Had that done it? Were headshots really all the rage? Then a face emerged from the back of The Old Sculptor's head and he just glared at her, the bullet wound forming the right eye.

"I'm going to kill you now," he said.

Aldon held her arms out, the weight in her right hand shifting. She glanced down at the other golems, who were forming a tower on each others' shoulders. She leaned slightly toward them extending the already morphing pistol to them. "Come try it, bud."

The face protruding from the back of his head extended, bringing an entire body along with it. Once detached from the main statue, the clay clone launched itself at Aldon. Although she was somewhat taken aback by the new tactic, she had been a bit prepared. She brought her right arm up at an angle, lashing out with a crude blade fashioned from most of the golems. It honed itself as it slashed through the fresh clay clone, deftly slicing it in half. It splattered to the floor on either side of Aldon.

"Nice timing," she said to the tip of the blade, where Hydrogen's face was. It smiled in return.

A strong stench tore her from her thoughts. On either side of her the two halves of the body were morphing into a more detailed corpse, gore steaming as it slid onto the floor. Aldon surveyed her murder for a moment before looking back to The Old Sculptor. He was spewing out more clones, which were taking their time to fully form. Some were more impatient, and glomped onto nearby anartists and formed a shell around them with nothing but their faces showing. They then stalked the unwilling anartists toward Aldon.

"Let's see you deal with this," The Old Sculptor said. "And none of you kill them! I want that pleasure myself."

Aldon beheaded the first clay clone that came at her. It was pretty easy to differentiate between the full clones and the anartist puppets, and they didn't seem to exhibit any particular strength. The Old Sculptor didn't even seem to be able to form them well enough for them to fully morph into flesh and blood humans. They were very good simulacrums, but they maintained the same gray-brown color throughout their bodies. And they were only becoming worse as The Old Sculptor tried pumping them out faster.

"Shitty clones or no, they're going to overwhelm us soon," Finnegan said before jabbing at an oncoming clone. The music around Finnegan's fist splattered clay everywhere. "And it looks like them

being clay is actually working in their favor against the others."

Indeed, while Aldon and Finnegan had art on their side, the other anartists only had what few tools they had managed to find lying around. The clay clones they struck absorbed the attacks without flinching and encased them. Luckily, at least from certain perspectives, the hypnotized performers were easily brought down.

"So we have to deal with *him*," Aldon concluded. "Right, right. Okay."

The Old Sculptor took a few moments to laugh mockingly with his massive mouth, and the chasm within caught Aldon's attention. A few seconds of mental connections led her to pick up Aluminum from the ground and decapitate it with the sword made from its siblings. She then jammed the back of its head into Finnegan's gauntlet.

"Can you explain-" Finnegan yelled when the gauntlet came to life, moving his fingers farther back than they probably should. "Ah! Calm down little guy. What are you doing?"

"I'm going to need that in a minute!" she yelled as she sprinted for The Old Sculptor, completely ignoring the question. She slashed through two clones and dodged a puppet, then The Sculptor stood face to face with her predecessor. He looked down at her for a moment before leaning forward, roaring near-deafening music in her face.

And she dove inside the chasm within the statue.

She fell for several seconds before colliding with a tower of papers. As much of it as there was, she might as well have been striking stone. It knocked the wind out of her and nearly knocked the golem blade out of her hand. She resumed falling until she landed in a pile of shifting clay. After fighting her way out of it, now somehow floating through the ethereal nothingness, she tore bits of the clay away as music assaulted her eardrums. That seemed to be all it was, a congregation of art mediums in a black expanse of nothingness.

"Okay, so… Let's see if this works," she mumbled to herself as she

kneaded the clay.

She rolled it into a cord and pulled at the ends, forming a three-prong plug on one end and a something resembling the Space Needle on the other. She stumbled through the blackness toward what she decided was a wall, her new little creation shifting out of its clay form. The cord itself became an elastic polymer, both ends taking on a chrome shine. When she decided she was far enough from the writhing art supplies behind her, she haphazardly stabbed the air. The tip of the blade disappeared from her view.

"Well, shit," she said, almost laughing. "That actually worked."

She put all her weight onto the sword, slowly slicing through whatever veil separated the art abyss from the outside world. Somewhere near the tip the blackness switched the gray-brown, and beyond that she could see the warehouse. She pushed her way out, exiting The Old Sculptor from the back of his right shoulder. She rammed the blade into the bullet wound in the back of his head to get some leverage and hauled herself out into reality, the blade slipping out. She landed in an unceremonious heap on the ground.

"What the actual fuck was that?" The Old Sculptor yelled, wrapping his arms around himself to push the split clay together. "How did you do that? *Why* did you do that?"

Aldon just chuckled and shrugged as she stood. The Old Sculptor swung one of his massive arms, colliding with her back and sending her sprawling again. A pair of almost fully developed clay clones pinned her down. She tried struggling, but a pain in her chest kept her from putting much effort into it. That last blow must have cracked a rib or something.

"Well, who cares? Gotcha now, you little shit."

Aldon ground her chin against the concrete to look for Finnegan. He was attempting to fend off puppets, but was unable to put up much of a fight for fear of hurting the anartists within. Soon he too was overwhelmed and pinned to the ground. The aussies were similarly subdued, in one way or another.

"Now," The Old Sculptor said loudly. "What to do with you two? Should have some fun, I think."

"I think you forgot something," Aldon choked out.

He sneered. "What, The Clipper?"

"…Yes."

A pair of anartist puppets hauled Felix out from behind a pew. The Old Sculptor turned to face him, which was exactly what Aldon was hoping for. Now if only he would say something to further the distraction. Felix stared at Aldon while the puppets dragged him over, at least until something caught his eye. He only glanced at it, but after a moment he turned his attention to The Old Sculptor.

"I've still got one more trick up my sleeve," Felix proclaimed.

"Oh yeah? What's that?"

"Something actually really obvious, you're just too much of a goddamn idiot to notice."

The Old Sculptor laughed. "Oh, do tell."

One of the clay clones holding down Aldon found himself suddenly lacking a head as the golem sword bent and swung on its own. His associate likewise found himself permanently disabled thanks to an oversized Aluminum hand crushing his face in. Said hand skittered over to Aldon's right hand, and she jammed it inside after setting down the blade. Aluminum clamped down on her, fitting her hand snugly, and together they picked up most of its siblings.

She stood without making any noise, twirling the pronged cord in her free hand. A glance at Finnegan told her he wasn't sure what she had planned. Time to give him a show, she figured. She waited for Aluminum to merge with the sword, leaving her unable to release it. Then she slid the three-pronged side into his mouth and eyes, which were situated on the back of her hand. She stuck her tongue out at Finnegan as she continued to spin the mini Space Needle around. She then locked her wrist, flipped it, and jammed the very sharp needle directly into her chest.

The reaction was near immediate. Finnegan screamed at her in confusion, Felix yelled in alarm at Finnegan's screaming, and The Old Sculptor was left looking between them until his fragmented mind thought to look to Aldon. By then a blue light was shining from what little was visible of Aluminum's orifices, and the translucent section of the CD player within the gauntlet was ejecting the same shade of blue. One by one, up the length of the sword from the handle to the tip, the golems winced and then began to scream with their eyes wide open. Blue light surrounded the sword in tiny beams.

Aldon grasped the cord of the music gauntlet. She pictured herself as the hero of a horror flick, ready with her trusty chainsaw. But when she yanked on it, rather than the growl of a motor she heard nothing. However, both the sword and the gauntlet were now encased in a shimmer, which refracted the blue light and sent it spinning in all directions. After a moment to giggle over the success of her little experiment, Aldon slapped the flat of the blade into her open palm.

Or tried to, at least. Just like before, the blade stopped short by several inches. Except instead of just feeling a song from a CD, Aldon felt what the CD player was plugged into. Which just so happened to be her soul. It burned like nothing else she had ever felt, seeping so deep into her bones she wondered if her marrow would boil. Rather than instruments, or even a choir, she felt only a single voice. A very angry woman screaming louder than a jet engine.

"Yeah, that seems about right."

With what technically counted up to ten separate anomalies and a soul smashing against each other, Reality decided to take a brief paid vacation in Aldon's immediate vicinity. Light bent in strange ways, carrying a wordless roar into the eyes of all who beheld it. The air shook as the golems screamed twofold, deafening all those who heard it to everything but the sound of Aldon's soul.

Which, because of the small radius of alteration, was only Aldon. Senses overloaded with her deepest sense of being, Aldon began to laugh. It started as a broken chuckle under the weight of two cracked ribs, but developed into a cackle when she felt nothing but a

burning sensation as her nerves ebbed and flowed with tangible rage. The laughter extended into a yell until Aldon was little more than frustration made flesh and bone.

And clay. There was something distinctly clay now sticking into her abdomen. Her vision cleared and she saw The Old Sculptor, his arm extended and refined to a point, which he happened to have placed in Aldon's stomach. Blood dripped from the wound. It looked like his mouth moved to say something, but if he did Aldon didn't hear it over the throbbing in her ears. She took a moment to consider all this, and then decided that it was bullshit. She was supposed to be killing him.

So she swung her soul, channeled around the sword, and struck The Old Sculptor's arm. As the blade neared it, the clay became more chipped and began to warp, before shattering entirely when the blade made contact. Without Reality around, there was nobody to tell Aldon that The Old Sculptor had stabbed her. And so he hadn't. The wound in her abdomen was gone, and as far as Reality was concerned it never existed in the first place. Aldon slashed in the opposite direction, splashing almost half of the statue into paste.

The legs of The Old Sculptor stumbled back, and a large rock with ornate designs on it rose from his waist. It was still coated in wet clay, and more was pouring off of it. Aldon tried attacking it but the statue hopped away, kicking at her when she tried approaching. Which she found profoundly difficult due to her rib injuries, but she pressed on.

Abandoning his oversized form, The Old Sculptor shaped himself in his normal human form. Aldon slashed at his neck, hoping to separate the stone now embedded in his head. She succeeded, but his decapitated body reached out and snatched the rock from the disconnected head. He jammed it inside his chest, and she swung at it wildly. She missed, but flayed enough of the front of him to expose it.

"Give it up!" The Old Sculptor yelled. "Magic sword or no, I'm a fucking god!"

"While I still highly doubt that," Aldon replied. She had meant to yell

back, but her lungs had apparently decided they had had enough yelling for a few weeks. "I'm going to have to point out…"

She palmed the bottom of the hilt with her off hand and stabbed. He tried blocking it, throwing up both arms, but the blade went right through both limbs and slammed into his chest. While the stone wasn't immediately torn apart like the clay, it had very clearly been pierced. A single crack stretched from the slit to one of the runes, which lost its glow.

"Deicide is a word for a reason," she finished, taking a step and burying the blade up to her fist. She twisted her wrist as he began to scream, and then she slashed horizontally, blowing up the stone and obliterating most of the statue. When it didn't begin to reform Aldon let out a single "Ha!" and then fell on her back. Which hurt. She probably should have thought that through a bit more.

There was a long pause. Nobody said anything. The clay clones continued to suppress Finnegan, Felix, and several other anartists. The puppets kept their captives, though they remained still.

Then one of the anartists asked, "Now what?"

"Well," said another. "They don't seem to intend to kill us. They're just gonna hold us here, like he said."

"Forever?"

"I guess."

"But we'll die if they do that."

"But does that count as killing us?"

"Wouldn't it?"

"Um."

"Allie!" Felix called. "Idea! Tell them to let us go."

Aldon coughed as she ripped out the Soul Needle, the bent light around her disappearing. "Oh. Yeah. Do that."

And so they did. Without fully realizing what they were doing, the very basic minds of the clones and puppets forced them to release their captives. After all, they were created with the express purpose of serving The Sculptor. Aldon devoted what little brain power she had left and decided to have the clay constructs destroy themselves. And so they did. Some simply stopped moving, while others slowly turned to a clay slurry. The anartists gathered themselves around their savior.

"We should get her to a hospital," said one.

"And tell them what?" said another.

"Here," Finnegan said, pulling out his phone. He went to Contacts, which contained all of four names. "I know who to call."

"Ghostbusters?" Aldon squeaked. Reality was back on the clock, and it turned out having broken ribs and stabbing yourself in the soul was a bit exhausting. Especially when dumped on you all at once.

"…Yes, Allie, Ghostbusters."

"Cool." And then she passed out.

Aldon woke up in what she assumed to be a hospital. Her wrists stopped halfway to her face when she tried rubbing her eyes. She looked down at herself to find herself shackled to the hospital bed she was lying in. To her left was a curtain a set of monitors displaying her vitals. They all seemed to be beeping pretty well. On her right was Finnegan, sleeping in a padded chair. And also shackled to said chair.

"Finn. Finnegan. Wake up."

He stirred, catching his hat as it attempted to fall. "Oh. Hey. Feeling alright?"

"Finnegan, you did not call Ghostbusters."

"No, I did not."

"Finnegan, you called the Anartistbusters."

"That's a bit of a mouthful."

"We're cuffed inside a hospital!"

Finnegan nodded. "It's not that big of a deal. Flight risk or whatever. Navarro's got it handled, says we should be fine after some questioning."

"That guy?" Aldon mulled it over. "Y'know what, fuck it. I can't even pretend to hate him right now. So what did I miss?"

"You have two cracked ribs. I'm okay. Most of the aussies are in prison wards rather than medical ones." Finnegan shrugged. "Apparently The Critic got away."

"How the hell?"

"Dunno."

"Well, fuck. And I wasn't able to nab any of that morphing clay. Peachy."

"I think we should look at it in the light of us not being dead or incarcerated."

Aldon jiggled the cuff on her right wrist.

"Right. Well, it could be worse."

"I guess."

Finnegan grabbed her by the hand, since only one of his was cuffed. "Are you okay?"

Aldon sighed. She watched his thumb move circles around the skin between her thumb and pointer finger. "No. I guess? Whatever."

"Allie."

"Like, all that shit for nothing. I dunno, I just…" She trailed off, and he didn't pursue the issue. "I wish I could just be done with it."

"Well, you made some progress. Maybe not on an immediate level, but you've laid the groundwork now. And as far as I can tell the Foundation isn't going to dog you over it."

Aldon nodded. She decided to take what she could get. But her mind wandered to the events of the warehouse, and it made her queasy. Adrenaline was a hell of a thing, and Aldon was nothing if not good at distracting herself with activity. But now, just sitting in a hospital bed, her mind stagnated into pools of blood.

Daniel Navarro stuck his head inside the door, grinned his stupid grin, and then slid inside the room. His gaze bounced between the two of them despite the fact he never moved his head. Eventually his eyes landed on the duo's hands, and then he snapped his fingers.

"Let me get those handcuffs off you guys," he said. He produced a key and freed the two of them. They rubbed their hands and stared at him. Although the wording tried to edge into friendly, his posture and tone felt abnormally pressing. "So. Now that the gang's all here. What happened?"

When Aldon remained silent, Finnegan picked up the question. "Apparently the harmless statue they had her make was built using clay that contained some of the mind of The Old Sculptor. Then they magicked it up."

"Wow." Navarro looked to Aldon. "And then?"

"I killed it," she said simply.

Navarro nodded slowly. A sudden bulge in his cheek indicated he was thinking. When he reached whatever conclusion that he did, he nudged Finnegan and gestured to the door. Finnegan looked to Aldon, who shrugged and motioned for him to go. The two stepped outside, leaving Aldon to her thoughts.

Within four seconds Aldon was gripping the plastic railing along her bed frame and trying to tear it off. A coiling snake of frustration and anger and depression shifted within her. It reminded her of that moving emptiness when she felt sick to her stomach, only it was

within her head and unfurling into her chest.

Grinding her teeth didn't help. Shaking whatever she could get a hold of did nothing. So she just sat and seethed, waiting for someone to come to her so she could do something other than be by herself. After what felt like half her lifetime, Finnegan stepped back into the room. He informed her she was free to go. That her clothes were in the drawer next to her bed, and her possessions had already been moved to her apartment. Navarro had probably delivered Everett and the golems himself.

The duo departed after Aldon got dressed. They walked in silence. When the front doors of the hospital slid open, they took a moment before actually leaving the building. They both took a short but deep breath, and in tandem stepped outside. A harsh winter gust blew through them, but the sun basked them in a pleasant glow.

"You going to be okay?" Finnegan asked, trying not to shiver.

Aldon hadn't really noticed the cold yet, and just stared at the parking lot. "Eventually."

Finnegan took a step closer. "Can I do anything?"

A crooked smile worked its way up her left cheek. "You know, now that you mention it. I'm hungry. Buy a girl a meal?"

Finnegan grimaced. "I'm a bit strapped for cash."

Aldon bounced with the next few steps, jostling the growing serpent within her. "Pizzeria?"

Finnegan just sighed and began to walk.

« **Facetious Fanatics** | **Hub** | **Hugo Hijinks** »

Grease

You never liked grease.

Grease, sweat, body oil, that weird family "secret sauce" that your aunt swore by, all of it. It had this sticky, all-consuming quality to it. It was moist, but it wasn't a refreshing kind of wet. It clung to your skin and refused to let go. Its presence was suffocating.

You avoided it at all costs. You showered three times a day. You washed your hands and face after every meal. You stayed inside, away from the beating sun and omnipresent moisture. You wormed away from every occasion that involved a greasy meal. You couldn't stand it.

One day, you woke up in a bed that was… oozing. You were relieved when you realized you didn't soil yourself. You were horrified when you realized you were soaking in a bed of your own sweat. You scrambled for the shower. You ignored the *split splat* noises your feet made as you rushed over. You turned the faucet, and let the refreshing water wash over you.

It wasn't enough. The grease was still in every pore and every fold of your body. You grab the soap and start scrubbing. And scrubbing. And scrubbing. It's surprisingly easy. Skin gives way to fat, which gives way to bone. All the lard and cholesterol melts, slips between your fingers, and disappears down the drain in a soapy slurry.

But it isn't enough. You don't stop, even as the shower floor gains a fresh coat of gunk.

It's on you. It's on you and it's staining you and it’s in you and it is you and it won't come off. You start scraping, scraping, trying to get it off. You reach deep inside. First, it's like trying to peel bark off of a tree. Then, it feels like grating a block of wax. Finally, it starts melting under the torrent of shower water. Curdles of osseous matter drift down into the floor and into the flood. Every last bit of

you disappears into the drain.

Finally, you're clean.

Green

November 17th, 1996

Francis yawned. Another night spent in the office, surrounded by the Paperwork Himalayas.

Dammit Iceberg it is not *that easy…*

Perhaps half an hour earlier he had peeled his head off of his desktop planner and out from under a rather irritated Josie. The cat had taken a liking to him in the last month and a half, or at least his head was the most comfortable. He went through the motions of morning routine in a daze: five minutes under a frigid and unforgiving shower head, a quick brush of the teeth and look in the mirror. Tussled, dirty blonde hair and not nearly enough sleep.

Then again, nobody slept a lot anymore.

Try as he might (which was not trying very hard at all), Francis couldn't shake the daze from his head: his brain felt like pudding in a cotton bowl. He knew he was dressed, but couldn't recall actually doing it. He knew it was morning, but had no clue what time it was. He knew it was Sunday morning, and if he was here, then it wasn't his weekend off. Shit. That meant that most of the staff was home: fewer than a hundred people in the entire place, most of them guards and maintenance. That meant that mooching off of someone who had gone to the grocery store and had more than old ramen in their cupboard was going to be far more difficult than it usually was. This left the only reasonable stand-in.

Breakfast roulette.

Francis wasn't sure who had started the "game". It wasn't really a game, though. Challenge? It wasn't particularly challenging. Thing people did? That worked. It was a thing that people did. The thing in question consisted of five steps

1) Go to break room.
2) Input “something suitable for humans” into the coffee machine (“random” and “your choice” had ended messily.)
3) Feed the vending machine 500 Yen (change available nearby.)
4) Eat breakfast. Generally.
5) Regret your decision. Usually.

Francis opened the door to the break room. Step one, complete.

The few other inhabitants of the break room were noted, if dimly: One woman, with a scar on her cheek and a sleeve tattoo, one man, with a pencil mustache and an M-16, and one teenage girl, with blonde hair and pink pajamas. All three were sitting on the overstuffed sofa (A buy from a local thrift store. Francis nearly got his foot crushed when he and Ben moved it in). The girl was watching TV, something about a cartoon dog-rabbit thing screaming at a rather dopey looking red cat. The adults looked bored. The woman was staring at some spot to the lower right of the TV, the man was sipping from a coffee mug. The girl was eating fluorescent blue Pop-Tarts.

“Sam. Tony. Iris.” Francis slowly nodded to each in turn as he shuffled over to the coffee machine. Whatever the response was fell on deaf, distracted ears. He punched “strong coffee” into the keypad. The machine dispensed its usual paper cup, followed by a steaming black sludge.

Yeah…that’s good. That’s good…

He took the cup and turned to the vending machine. Oh, you crafty Japanese. Of course you’d have something this bizarre around a back alley. Francis fished in his pocket, taking out the five hundred Yen he kept in the pocket of every pair of pants he owned (for emergencies).

Ka-chunk

The machine coughed out something that, on closer inspection, was a lumpy object wrapped in thin tin foil. The labeling was unreadable. Francis set down his coffee and tore open the foil, a Russian nesting doll made of molded beef jerky. Inner layers looked to be cheese,

processed egg, chocolate, and a few tiny ones he couldn't identify. He'd leave those out.

Francis shuffled out of the break room without another word. Fucking paper work. Dammit Berg it was *not* that easy.

There was a short silence.

Iris and her two guards looked at each other with a mix of confusion and barely-held laughter.

"So then. Gimp suit wedding dress. That's a new one," Iris said.

—

Francis walked down the hall, alternating between tearing off chunks of doll with his teeth and gingerly sipping the sludge. He could barely taste either.

Ugh…Why isn't it working. It's fucking bean slurry and I still feel like I have an iron spike driven through my skull.

A low hum echoed from down the hall, followed by a swish of wind, a glint of reflected light and blinding, unimaginable pain. Francis dropped to his hands and knees, screaming, though the word did not do the sound justice: this was something that tapped into the basest, most savage pain of man. What was that on the floor…a pool, a red pool…Blood. Blood everywhere. Red in his eyes, blinding red and black and *pain*.

Slowly, slowly…painfully…Francis raised a trembling hand to his face.

No…God no…oh God…oh God oh God oh God

His right cheek was wet. He could feel ragged skin and pulped bone and torn muscle under his fingers. His hand moved up, on its own now. Right by his eye socket, in his socket, he could feel cold metal: a long piece of cold metal, slick with blood, with a pointed tip about five inches from where his eye would have been. Should have been.

Francis screamed again. The faces in the wall laughed as the clocks

melted and the floor fell away and the meat hooks dug into his flesh and hoisted him to the cockroaches on the ceiling and everything went out like a snuffed candle.

—

“Look, Connor, I realize the danger. Yes, he may end up killing us all. He just might save us too. He can twist reality with a thought, subconsciously, even. Self preservation kept him alive and he's already healed up. If he can learn to control it consciously… yes, I *know* the dangers involved. We’d be trying to put a god on a leash and employing him. Yes, I *do* think it’s worth it. Bear in mind, he is my student: I know him far better than you, Connor. Yes, I still trust him. No, I am not going to be sloppy: I will have him killed if he can’t be trained, trust me. We’ll keep him under sedation until we find a proper solution. Tell Dr. Elliot she’s inheriting his duties for the time being.”

Green Day

Authors Note: This takes place in the universe of **SCP-2238**.

|**Hub**| **Green Day II** »

Birmingham, Alabama. 1993

The old man couldn't help but glance through the windows over and over again as he waited for *them* to come by. Chills went up and down his spine as he noticed the black squad car rolling down the dusty road to his country farmhouse. His heart thumped and thumped against his chest as the figure exited the car and closed in on the door to the house itself.

Fuck me.

He knew something like this was going to happen eventually. He just knew it! The deepest and darkest parts of his mind knew that something like this was only going to end in disaster, for him and everyone else involved.

Three knocks on the door.

He took a deep breath, and opened the door, only to be greeted by a tall man, wearing a gray trench coat. In his hand was a silver-lined suitcase, with a blue pentagram on the side. The friendliness of his smile was only offset by its routine, impersonal frigidity.

"Hello, I am Agent Garrison, officer of the South-Eastern division of the Global Occult Coalition. Mind if I step inside?"

"N-No, not at all," he stammered out, cracking the door open to reveal the hovel of a home he had.

"Mind if I ask your name?" the man inquired, stepping inside the

home.

The old man chuckled, his deep laugh echoing through the home.

"**James Henderson**, but call me Henderson."

"Well, Mr. Henderson, this is quite the lovely, uh," he paused, looking over the messy one bedroom house. Cups were still laid out on the coffee table, plates piled up on the kitchen counter, the TV had a large crack covering most of the screen[1], and clothes were strewn across the entire building. It looked like it was one knock away from collapsing in on itself.

"— house. Yes. Very lovely indeed."

"Well, I try."

"Mind if I sit down here?", Agent Garrison said, pointing towards the small wooden table near the middle of the room, a variety of assorted pieces of trash and filth covering the surface.

"Of course not," Henderson replied, lying through his teeth as he threw the trash off the table in one swift motion, crashing to the floor with a loud clatter. They took their seats, each seated directly across from the other.[2] Henderson tried his best to avert his gaze directly at the floorboards, and, more specifically, from the creature living beneath said floorboard.

"So, Mr. Henderson, how long have you lived in this, um, place?"

"Five years, or so."

"And how many dependents do you have living underneath your care?"

"None. Unless you count the rats," he chuckled out.

"Any family, biological or otherwise?"

Henderson paused, his eyes drifting away from the Agent and towards the surface of the table.

"None. They, um, all died when the Foundation bombed Site-43. My family was near it when they did that, when the Foundies did the… well, you know."

"My apologies. We all have had family members die at the hands of the Foun—"

"I don't want to hear it," Henderson interjected, his tone shifting.

An ugly pause.

"Why are you here?"

Agent Garrison cleared his throat before answering the question.

"Neighbors and certain members of the South-eastern division have determined an unusual amount of Humes within the area around your 19 acres of land. Usually, these would be classified as minor nexuses or possible Ways within your area, but," he stopped talking, pulling out a small notepad covered in black ink, "the amount in your area suggests a possible Green living in your property."

Henderson tried his best to not gulp.

"G-Green?"

"Yes, Green! Reality Bender! Freaks, magicians, whatever you wanna call them. They're within your property, based off the 0.01 reading on the Kant counter."

Henderson gulped.

"Now," he said, sitting up and walking near the middle of the room, "would you mind letting me investigate your property for the Green? The Coalition will reimburse you for any and all damages we may inflict in the name of the greater go—"

Henderson leaped onto the Agent, punching and beating against his head and desperately grasping for some sort of weapon he had on him.

"Dammit — fuck — what the hell are you —"

He was cut off from each continuous punch coming from Henderson before the Agent was able to wrestle him off of him, allowing for enough time to brandish his pistol from its holster hidden inside of his trenchcoat.

With the Agent on top, Henderson felt the cold metal of the gun against his Adam's apple. It was the coldest piece of metal he felt in a long time.

"Now," the Agent said, wheezing as he turned the pistol off 'safe', "Where's the Gre—"

Henderson attempted to wrestle the gun away, but only felt the surprise presence of a bullet into his throat and into his frontal lobe. The brain splattered against the wall and floor and every in between, making the house a painting of red.

"God fucking damn—"

Agent Garrison was cut off by the sound of rustling outside the home, and the sound of a child's soft footsteps as it left the cellar of the farm house and into the large and spacious woods behind it.

Fuck me.

"Did you intend to engage the criminal?"

"No sir. He attacked me, and I had no choice but to put him down."

"Did the Green escape?"

"I'm afraid so, Commander."

Agent Garrison trailed behind another man. His gray trench coat signified the commander of the GOC's anomaly neutralization branch in Jefferson County.

"Reports from neighbors suggest the Green is inside the woods somewhere. What do you suggest as our course of action, sir?"

"Kill it," the Commander replied, a venomous tone in his voice.

"Understood."

The man stopped in front of the dead body, a bullet wound inside of its head. The blood was oozing out of the frontal lobe and shoulder of the creature in front of him. He tried to stifle the small smile creeping onto his face. He faced the short woman next to it, blood covering her gray trenchcoat.

"Agent Bailey, did an analysis of the body suggest anomalous properties, reality bending or otherwise?"

"No sir."

"Any evidence of a connection to either the Foundation or the *Hand*?"

"No, sir. He seemed to be a civilian."

Civilian traitors. The worst types.

"I see. What of his relation to the escaped Green?"

"They weren't biologically related, it seems. Gave the bo—"

"Please, Agent Bailey, don't treat it as if it was human. It's unprofessional."

"….Alright, sir, the Green was given shelter."

"Better. What of its age?"

"Analysis of the basement suggests single digits, sir."

"Thank you. As you were."

The man readjusted his rimless glasses and looked out the window, towards the fields and towards the woods that surrounded the small wooden house.

The boy ran through the shrub and bushes, his heart beat racing as he heard the men closing in on him. The bright flashes of light were

getting closer and closer to him.

"This way!"

"Get your guns ready. Intel suggests Response Level 4."

The boy tried to not vomit as he crouched near a tree. His entire body felt weak, he shivered despite it being relatively warm.

This is it, isn't it? he thought as he closed his eyes and rested. *This is how I'm gonna die? In the middle of some dark woods where nobody can hear me scream. Is James still alive?*

He tried to throw away that thought, but it kept eating away at him. He could feel his throat fill up with bile and vomit at even the thought of what they were doing to James. He heard about Coalition torture tactics. His imagination flashed to car batteries, pliers, and needles. He gagged at the thought.

His heart only sank further as he heard a shrill voice and saw the glaring light coming from behind the tree.

"Hey, the trail leads this way!"

Three figures stood standing on the treeline above the forest. They watched the small child crouched behind the large oak tree, his head buried inside of his shirt. The five-man group were following the trail of footsteps towards the oak tree. The hooded figure's bare feet dangled below, swaying back and forth.

"Can I go in boss? It's been so long since I killed one of these Gock bastards."

"Not yet."

The hooded figure chewed on his finger, looking through the bushes and tree line towards the group of five Gock soldiers. All heavily armed and covered in the latest Anchor armor.[3] He bit down harder on his ring finger, drawing blood.

"You know not to do that," the taller man said, his clown mask

hanging around his neck.

"Sorry, a habit of mine."

"Hey, the trail leads this way!"

The boss looked back at the hooded figure, and nodded.

The man approached the trail, aiming down his sight for a young humanoid. He had expected a chase, but nothing to this extent. If only Agent Garrison had been a better sho—

"Heeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeey Gocky."

He turned his head to see a dark haired boy, hanging upside down and blood dripping from his lip. His eyes stared directly into the man's own. His face twisted into a frown.[4]

"Don't worry," he said, licking his lips, "it's mine."

Before the man could respond, the creature drew its hands forward towards the man's throat. His entire hand enveloped the man's throat.

Crunch.

"Oh, so that's what that sounds like."

He jumped down, looking at the man's face. His eyeballs were dangling out of his skull. He looked at his own hand. Several white shards covering the palm, along with a variety of different fluids. He tried wiping it off on his hood, before feeling several eye-balls staring at him from behind.

"Freeze!" yelled a deep voice, "Lay on the ground, or we will shoot."

The hooded man turned around, facing towards the four other members of the group, their guns and flashlights turned on him. He decided to follow the most logical course of action in such a situation.

"Hey, you wanna hear about the cannibal with a girlfriend?"

"Lay on the ground, or we will sho—"

"Yeah," he continued, ignoring the cold voice as he tried to stifle his own laughter, "I heard he ate her out!"

Click

"Hey," he said, putting his hands behind his head and backing away from the group as they readied their guns, "guess you can't win them all—"

He jumped back onto the stump of a tree, and propelled forward into the group, crashing into them.

"—right?"

He grabbed hold of the two men of the group, digging his long yellow nails into their necks. He dug around in them before feeling a bullet enter into his skull. He twisted his head around, feeling his neck snap out of place, and looked down to face the barrel of a shotgun, directly aimed at his face. He staggered back as the shotgun blast tore away at his face, causing pieces of brain and bone to fly through the air and onto the ground. It felt weird to him, especially considering he could see parts of his exposed brain and pieces of his glass-like skull.

He orientated himself off the ground, staring at the two. He tried staring at her,[5] a large grin plastered across his face. She flinched for a moment, but quickly raised her gun and aimed her sights onto the robed figure before her.

He jumped into the air, dodging the gunfire and entering the treeline.

The two women pressed their backs to each other, aiming their guns in various directions as they scanned the dark treeline above them. A rustle provoked the smaller among them to fire to her right, causing a bloodied raccoon to fall where an animal-like creature should have been. The taller and slightly more experienced one began speaking into the small microphone embed into her armor.

"Command! We need back up, we've sighted a hostile entity during our search for the Green, we need—"

Before she could finish her sentence, the dark-hooded figure jumped from the treeline and onto the two, wrapping his legs around their necks. He tightened his muscles, an audible pop sound emanating from their necks. Their eyeballs dangled from their sockets as the figure removed his legs from around their necks.

"Hey, kid," the man asked, squatting before the child. He tugged slightly against his black trenchcoat. The kid was quietly weeping into his shirt. It was the only sound that could be heard for miles. Behind him, his companion held a pistol.

"You wanna come with us? We'll protect you from them."

No response.

"Look, we're sorry about what happened, but you can't let that stop you."

No response.

"The old man, he would have wanted you to keep going. He died so you could live. Don't stay here and die for nothing."

No response.

"Trust me, The Circus will be a great place."

No response.

"It might not be the greatest place on earth, but I think it—"

The kid collapsed onto his side, weeping turned to light murmuring, and then snoring. The man approached the squatting one, a clown mask strapped to his face.

"You always did have a way with kids, **`Stretchy`**."

"Shut it Masky."

The man in the gray trench coat looked over the carnage before him. Five soldiers, two women and three men, went missing in those woods. Various organs, limbs, and assorted pieces of flesh were strewn across the small patch of grass in front of him. At first glance, it looked like they were ripped apart by an animal, but on closer inspection, this was not the case. They were arranged in an unnatural way, as if they were planted there on purpose.

He took another drag from his half finished cigarette. He was going to get every last inch of tobacco out of it even if it was the last thing he ever did. He had already gone through his monthly allowance in about a week,[6] and he was getting *that* itch. He wondered if the bodies had any on them.

He took three more steps towards the patch, noticing the small outline of a message in the body parts and organs in front of him. He recognized that phrase and style of writing[7] before.

> KYS GOCKSUCKERS

"Clowns sir?" said Agent Garrison, staring at the bloody mess.

"Clowns," Commander Grant replied, looking over this particular clown's calling card.

"What do you suggest we do?"

"Get the detention center on the line for me. I need to have a word with a certain **`Dick`**."

"As you wish sir."

|Hub| **Green Day II** »

Footnotes
1. Despite this, it continued to play GOC propaganda pieces.
2. As best as they could, however, considering that the table was about three or so feet long.
3.One of the many perks of letting Prometheus Labs produce your armor.

4. Or was it a smile? He could never tell with creatures like this.
5. His right eye made a valiant attempt, but it could only do so much with it dangling by a string of flesh.
6.A new record,he thought.
7.If you can even call this writing, he noted.

Green Day II

Authors Note: This takes place in the universe of **SCP-2238**.

« Green Day |Hub| Green Day III »

Global Occult Coalition Detention Center, Alabama. 1993

Commander Grant walked down the long winding halls of the non-anomalous wing of the facility, his footsteps making an audible clack beneath him as he looked for the correct door number. It was strange, the lack of sound. Grant was reminded of the horror movies of yonder days, when there were just large periods of silence as the main character waited for something to crawl out of the shadows and attack.

He couldn't help but smile as he remembered those younger, more innocent times.

Grant slowed his movement, stopping as he read the large sliver plaque attached to the wall of the steel door.

Dick C. Normus

He stifled a laugh[1] as he slid his green security card through the reader and, after waiting for the light to flash, opened the door. Bruises covered the man's face from years of toil and general age, lips constantly downturned. He was sitting in a small metal cot, staring up at the ceiling. Bullet proof glass separated the two, a small hole acting as the sole means of communication. The man turned his head to the right to face Commander Grant, his glassy eyes staring right into the Commander's.

The Commander walked towards the chair in front of the glass, crossed his legs, and looked just began to watch.

"How is your day going, Dick?"

The dark figure lay beneath a tree, his breath heavy, blood covering his body from head to toe. He could feel the flesh around his frontal lobe began to heal, slowly forming flesh to fill in the holes of his brain and damaged limbs. It was akin to the feeling of rubbing Elmer's Glue on your hands and then peeling it off.

"Ken. Let's go home."

Ken looked back at the roundish creature before him, a small child over his shoulder. Masky lay just 10 or so feet behind, gun at the ready.

"Just….one….more," Ken wheezed out as he forced himself to stand up.

"No dipshit. Anymore dead Gocks and we'll have a full battalion from up North in Nashville."

"Awwwwwwww comeeee theeeeee fuckkkkkkkkk onnnnn, we could kill them all if we wanted to, ya pussy."

Stretchy laughed.

"Sure, if you wanna end up like that damned **Church**."

"I'm not some damn cultist."

"You can have your little violent power fantasy later, Ken, but right now, we got a kid to take care of," Stretchy retorted, nodding his head in the direction of the child on his shoulder.

Ken cracked his neck, twisting it before it forced itself back into the direction of what would be considered a 'normal' human.

"Let's just go home."

The Circus was, like many nights before it, a great spectacle to behold for many outsiders. But to Masky, it was just another night of

standing around with a gun on his hip. A thankless job, but someone had to do it. As the lights and screams and cheers of the crowds inside of the small-but-bigger-on-the-inside tents were occurring, Masky was standing, waiting. He changed his face to match the Circus' 'child-friendly' atmosphere, the flesh morphing and changing pigmentation in order to fit in. Just like he always had.

Above him, on top of a ice cream truck, was the blood soaked Ken, his clown mask off to the side as he chewed on his ring finger.

"You need a shower."

"You need a new face."

Silence.

"So," the younger one asked as he removed his finger from his mouth, not unlike a toddler, "the old man finally croaked, eh?"

"Yes, it appears so."

"What're they gonna do with the kid?"

"I don't know. I assume they'd send him to some safe enclave out west in Foundation territory. Or the **Portlands**, if possible."

Ken hung his feet off the edge of the truck, swinging them back and forth.

"Hendie his dad? Doubt the old man had it in him, but anything's possible."

"No, just a child he found off the street."

"Little shit got him killed."

Doctor Smith was not having a pleasant day. Not only was she having to play ""good"" cop to this lunatic's bad cop while he was pummeling some poor Richard, but she forgot to bring her lunch to work that day at the Detention Facility! And she spent so much time on creating those tiny sandwiches that her husband always found so

cut—

Another scream punctured the air.

"Blarg," she said out loud as she saw the Commander electrocuting the prisoner with the weird clown markings. He was looking for information on the Circus, who was hiding some dangerous Green or something. She wasn't paying too much attention when the Commander hastily explained the context. She eyed the newspaper that the Commander had brought in before the fiesta of violence began, and, with a swift motion, grabbed it and lazily looked through the different articles and editorials.

Doctor Smith flipped through five or so pages of news about boring stuff like Lab's new line of SRA's, or the GRU-"P" being absorbed into the GOC as the '109th' member[2] and some random person called "**Professor AW**" that was new to the Arms Race between **Labs**, **MCD**, and **Anderson**. Only when she saw a picture of some old man and some kid did she stop.

B

James Henderson

irmingham, Alabama - August 12, 1993 At 12:04 PM UTC, Special Agent Garrison was attacked by Birmingham Local James Henderson, alleged member of terrorist groups funded by the Foundation and

Unusual Incidents Unit. Agent Garrison shot the suspect, killing Henderson on impact. Afterwards, Agent Garrison had attempted to bring in a Highly Dangerous Reality Bender that had escaped Coalition custody, but was overwhelmed by an unknown third party.

"He would have killed me if I didn't do something," stated Special Agent Garrison when asked by Local reporter Mabel Smith about the killing. "He was insane, really. Thankfully he didn't cause too much damage."

The 55-year-old and graying attacker had a criminal history of connections to either terrorist groups or groups that are sympathetic to them. Although never officially indicated, it is generally believed by Coalition analysts that he was very much a supporter of the notorious terrorist group '**The Serpent's Hand**'.

"He was dangerous and insane to have a reality bender in his home, protecting it, "stated Commander Grant of Coalition forces to local Birmingham News. "Thankfully, Agent Garrison was able to prevent any future acts committed by the lunatic."

"CUNT!"

Another scream ruined her concentration as Grant turned the dial up from 6 to 9.

The vein in Smith's head was about to burst.

Stretchy wrapped the bandage around the kid's knee. A majority of his legs had been scraped and cut during his run through the forest from the Gocks. The kid was awake now, but didn't speak. Not that Stretchy blamed him much. He just saw one of the closest things to a parental figure get his brains blown out.

Hell, it reminded him of when Icky and Manny got rid of Fuller. Even if it was necessary.

He stood up and stretched his back out, which was surprisingly easy for a creature without a skeleton.

"Kid, ya need anything while I'm here?"

Silence.

Stretchy moved his hand fifteen feet across the trailer he lived in towards the cooler, opened it up, and popped out a bottled water and soda.[3] He placed the soda next to the kid. He plopped himself right next to the kid towards his left. He took a deep breath and sipped his water.

There was a good fifteen seconds before anyone said anything.

"You got a name kid?"

Kid didn't even nod.

"You got any hobbies?"

Kid's face was in a downtrodden frown.

"Can you talk at all?"

Nothing.

He wondered if he was a special kid. Maybe he couldn't talk, or, if he did, something bad would happen that'd kill a lot of people. It wasn't out of the question, it happens. They usually learn to control it when they're kids, or, if they're unlucky, they'll be found in a river. Or, if they're *really* unlucky, they'll be sold to Micky Dees.

God damn, Mickey Dees. He heard the horror stories of what they'd do. Stories of little men in suits walking into their local club and asking for a "good catch", mostly a young child, although it could be an adult as well, was brought before them to inspect at their own leisure. And, if they liked it, they'd bring it to their mansion on fucking Wall Street or wherever else and just play with it. Amuse

themselves. Use it as a way to get rich people points at rich people parties where people sipped wine, sucked each other's cocks and sniffed each others farts. "*Oh yes, I have a man who can turn his penis into a boomerang*" "*Oh, well mine can be burnt alive and still survive, I tried it myse—*"

"Vince."

"Huh?"

"My name is Vince. At least, I think."

Stretchy was a little taken aback, but pleased nonetheless.

"Heh, thought you were a mute for a second there."

"I get that a lot."

"How old are ya?"

"Nine, ten-ish I think. My parents never kept many dates."

"Why not?"

Vince shrugged. "Never had much of a reason."

"CUNT! BITCH LIPPED WHORE! DAMN GEO SEA CUNTS I'LL FUCKIN' RIP YOUR BALLS OFF LIKE MY GRANDAD USED TO DO!"

Dick struggled against his restraints, wiggling and moving and writhing around in the metal latches that kept him down. He had gotten used to the automatic electrical shocks that came with this contraption. Some experimental chair of some sort, mostly for human subjects.

But he was a clown goddamnit![4] And clowns don't quit! Sets bad precedent, if anything.

He could almost move his feet before the door opened and slammed shut, and a—

Oh my.

Before him was a short woman, her hair tied up into a bun on her head. A white labcoat covered her shoulders, and she wore a pair of beautiful thick rimmed glasses.

"Hello, Dick."

"Hello, uhh," he muttered, squinting his eyes to look at the identification, "Ms, uh, Smith, yeah. I know plenty of Smiths, and you're the most Smithy of them."

"Neat."

She took her seat across from him, a notepad in hand.

"Tell me," she began, looking through her blue ink soaked paper notes as if her life depended on it, "what do you know about the Circus?"

"It's gonna take more than some hot nerd to get me to spill the bean __"

"I'll give you a memetic hazard that'll give you instantaneous orgasms upon viewing if you comply."

"Where do you want me to start?"

"Start from the beginning, please."

"Well," began Dick, reclining in his chair, "it all began when my grandfather fucked a Clown…."

Stretchy exited his trailer to face both Masky and Ken. A pistol was still at Masky's hip, and Ken, well….

"I already told you to stop that," Stretchy said.

Ken rolled his eyes and removed his finger from his mouth, saliva covering it to the base of the finger.

"What did you get out of the kid?" Masky questioned, stepping closer to Stretchy.

Stretchy rubbed the back of his neck, looking back at the trailer.

"Well, the kid finally spoke. It's progress, I suppose. Other than that, his name's Vince."

"Nice name, he choose it himself?" Ken quipped sarcastically.

"Yes, actually."

"Oh."

"Are you going to tell Manny or Icky?" Masky asked, leaning against the trailer.

"No, no, we don't need to worry them about thi—"

"Dipshit, you brought a goddamn Green into the Circus who's being tracked down by murderous Gock fucks. *It's all of our problems,*" Ken interrupted.

"I know, I know, but if we can get him to Portland, we could avoid causing any trouble."

"Are you suggesting we bring a child to a potential hot spot for anomalous activity and criminal activities?"

"I know it's not the best solution, Masky, but it's better than here or anywhere else."

"The city would kill him," Masky retorted.

"He's survived worse at this point. Besides, we fared worse things at that ag—"

"Please don't compare our situations, Stretchy."

Ken tuned out as the two children bickered like an old married couple. He wondered if there was any ice cream left….

"….and that's how I became a Clown Breeder with no prior experience, training, or discipline."

Doctor Smith stared blankly at the man. Silence covered the room like a blanket.

"So, uh, you gonna give me the meme or no—"

Before he could continue she punched him and shoved a pill down his throat and poured water down it. He gagged as he felt himself get queasy and weak before the world started turning to black.

Grant placed his face into his palm, groaning after the four hour memoir that was recited to them.

"So, uh, what should we do—"

"Fuck this, I'm going to the Tracking Department."

And in one swift move he took his coat, notes, and pistol and left the room, leaving the dumb struck Smith and drooling Dick.

« Green Day |Hub| Green Day III »

Footnotes
1. It got him every damn time.
2. Which Smithreallydidn't like. 109 just didn't have the same ring to it.
3. Icky and Manny banned alcoholic drinks after the whole Bubblegum fiasco. He still had the nightmares.
4. Not capital C, but still

Green-Gray

It's been two weeks since the lights went out. Two weeks to the day, to the hour, to the minute. I remember every instant of it. I remember everything. That's one gift from Prometheus. The locked, dark, room? Yeah, that's another. This door is sealed, and my keycard doesn't work without power. And there's no way I'm getting that thing open. Why couldn't Prometheus have invented something to let me rip a metal door out of its casing? Ah, right. "The true Promethean will rely on strength of mind and spirit, not of body, for even metal is weaker than will." Well this would-be Promethean is going to die if that's all he gets!

Even if I could open it, I'm not sure if I'd leave. Something is wrong. The lights are powered by the same source that powers the whole facility, so if it's out for me, the whole system must be down. No one has come to help me, either, which isn't exactly encouraging. Could it have been the pinwheel spinning off? Some catastrophe in chemistry? Or did they transcend mere humanity into beings of pure enlightened energy and have no time for poor little old me? In all likelihood, this testing chamber may be the safest place left.

> TO ALL PROMETHEUS EMPLOYEES:
>
> Introducing… Telekill. The latest invention of the Prometheus metallurgy division, the capstone of years of research. Telekill is a psychic dampener alloy. It produces a zone of low psychic potential, which naturally draws in and negates harmful mind-waves. Durable and ductile, Telekill can be used anywhere you want to keep your mind safe.

Three weeks now. At least my latest and no doubt last residence is tolerable. The claustrophobic environment makes it hard to think, but it's well furnished. Maybe they'll dig me out in a thousand years and think I was a pharaoh. Pity they'd only give me that respect after I'm dead.

Normally these rooms are fairly spartan, but since I'm doing a longer term study (very longer term, apparently) they've outfitted it with nice furniture, a lantern, and all the food and water my enhanced metabolism needs to survive. A bed, a desk, some bottled water and cans and cans of food. And, of course, filling the corner of the room, the green-gray slab. Telekill. The green-gray slab.

> The average human mind suffers countless minor intrusions each year. Between lingering Faerie glamours, Saljab mind-tricks, and Enforcers, "free will" is not so free as it ought to be. The influences are subtle, but alarmingly real. Telekill will finally liberate human determination from the interference of inhuman forces. Sign up to be one of the first to truly control their own mind, their own destiny. With our previous Mem-Fast mnemonic inoculation, you may be sure your memories serve your mind. Telekill will ensure that your mind serves you.

Five weeks. I'm not getting out. I'll die here. I had hoped for more than a lonely death in a room with the green-gray slab. I had such dreams! I would have been the one to not just reach but seize the future. The new era when mankind sees just what the universe is like. I had plans. I could have been so much. Now I've just got dreams of the green-gray slab.

The Prometheus of legends stole fire from the gods so that mankind could rise to be like the gods. I've seen what this Prometheus will bring mankind, besides the green-gray slab. We will be like gods. I would be a god. But no, I'll die here with only the green-gray slab for company.

> Telekill is still in development, however, and before the Grand Public Offering, we must ensure its safety. Which is where you come in. Everything Prometheus produces is extensively safety-tested. And though testing on primates has revealed no adverse effects, there is no substitute for human testing. In accordance with the Promethean Code, such is to be conducted only on Prometheus volunteers. There's risks involved, but there always are to the first brave men to touch the future.

> Step forward on the path from Man to Promethean.

Eight weeks. If there is still a world outside, it's forgotten me. Someday, they'll exhume the chamber with the green-gray slab, maybe, and wonder at it and its contents. Perhaps they'll even figure out what the green-gray slab does. Even if I won't get to live forever in body, maybe I'll live forever in memory as the man in the mystery chamber with the green-gray slab from the past who brought the gift of freedom to mankind in the form of the green-gray slab. Freedom is like fire, right? Maybe I'll be Prometheus.

My gaze returns to the green-gray slab. But why not? It's the most visible thing there is. There's an odd sheen to its surface, a color that vanishes as soon as you focus on it. An ephemeral sort of cerulean. If I look slightly away, I see it swirl like an oil slick on a lake.

> FROM: geraldf@prometheusLabs
> TO: sangw@prometheusLabs
> TOPIC: Telekill primate testing
>
> Steve,
>
> So I was reviewing the tests with the telekill project. I think I noticed something screwy near the end, about forty days in. The chimps we're testing with — they're bonobos, right? So I checked the records near the start, and they're doing the bonobo thing, i.e. humping like rabbits. Anyhow, later in, they weren't doing anything like that at all. Didn't seem to be interacting much at all, not just no monkey-sex.
>
> Is that normal for bonobos in captivity for an extended period? If not, telekill might not be as safe as we thought. I wouldn't want to sterilize the lab tech guy the Old Man's got testing it. Also, I'm taking next Tuesday off. Can you take my carpool then? I'll owe you.
>
> — Gerald

That's the green-gray slab. There's nothing else to look at. It's shiny

if you don't look too hard. Sort of a blue on the surface of the green-gray slab. Yeah, it shines kinda blue.

There's the green-gray slab. That's funny, the green-gray slab is blue!

The green-gray slab.

The green-gray slab.

The green-gray slab.

The green-gray slab.

The green-gray slab.

The green-gray slab.

The green-gray slab.

The green-gray slab.

The green-gray slab.

The green-gray slab.

The green-gray slab.

The greendark**gray slab.**

The greendark**gray slab.**

The greenit's dark**gray slab.**

The greenit's very dark**gray slab.**

The greenI can't see**gray slab.**

The greenI can't feel my arms**gray slab.**

The greenor anything**gray slab.**

The greenam I dead?**gray slab.**

The green**No.**gray slab.

The green**I'm not dead. I can't be dead yet. I have so much left to be.**gray slab.

The green**You can't stop me from being who I'm going to be. I remember me. I remember everything.**gray slab.

The green**I know what happened to me. You weren't safe, were you? Just took more than four weeks. You ate my mind, my soul. But you can't digest it. Because I'm me. I'm me. I remember myself. You can't destroy my memories because I have the mnemonic.**gray slab.

I don't need anything else. I'm going to be who I am. I'm going to be who I could be, who I would be. Can you feel that? I'm getting my form back. Metal is weaker than will. If you took my body, Telekill, then it's only fair that you replace it.

Senses, limbs; all will be mine once more. I stagger to my new-formed feet and swing a molded fist at the reinforced door. It holds. But metal is weaker than will. Soul-drinking stone, you were to give mankind freedom of destiny. And you shall still bring it to me. My fire will burn bright, even as others flicker and die. The door is beginning to buckle. Soon, very soon, I will leave this chamber and leave Prometheus to the eagle. Then all will see my will. All will see who I am. I am myself. I am my will!

I AM ZACHARY!

Green Pawn

Site-40

A young boy walked lazily around Site 40, watching brooding soldiers and overworked scientists make their daily rounds. He was a janitor, with access only to what he needed to fix, and the general workings of the Foundation. There was nothing to hide from him; all sensitive materials were either secured within locked rooms or on endlessly secured computers. Usually.

He eventually wandered to the cafeteria, moderately filled, with very little noise. The janitor got a small snack and began to exit, but quickly stopped himself as he saw a woman walk through. Very few new people joined the staff, and those who did almost always seemed slightly unsure of themselves. She was different. She seemed like she could stop a bullet with her gaze.

She passed through quickly, with a slightly rushed gait. Silently, the janitor followed her. He knew that it wasn't in his best interests, but he had both a curiosity and an understanding that most people didn't even see in him in the first place.

He watched her dodge through many corridors, eventually stopping at a door he had memorized over many months.

He had been at the site for months, and he could recognize nearly all the staff, but, every couple of weeks, he saw a group of people, small in number, make their way into an unmarked room, and after many hours, file out once again. The members of this group, from what he had gathered from the members of his staff's site, had no noticeable connection. Physiologists, physicists, tacticians, every field under the sun. These shadowy people were very secretive, even by the Foundation's standards, usually not even conversing with other researchers out of purely technical matters. He tried to keep a watch out for them, but if he even saw the edge of their glare, he inched out as fast as possible.

Today, he waited in the cafeteria for the woman to pass through again. He didn't know if she would, but he was on break and had a few minutes to wait and watch. Soon, she arrived. As she walked through, along with three researchers in the site's staff, he heard a researcher a couple of tables away attempt to joke with some half-asleep coworkers about something work-related.

"…explosion with four forty seven. It affects spacetime so everything seems green! Huh, whadda ya think?"

"You're drunk?" The young woman was as visibly bored as she could be without being openly rude.

"No, you're just jealous! Amazing Green, I'm gonna call it. Patent it. Market it. They're gonna call me the Green King before I'm—"

The eccentric researcher's last word echoed as he raised his voice to emphasize. The four professors suddenly stopped in their tracks, and glanced over their shoulders, a mix of anger and suspicion on their faces. They listened for half a minute more, and after realizing what the researcher was talking about, left to their own lives.

An unknown distance away, a woman stood, feeling the world around her. She was angry - as she commonly was. She hated anger. She hated hate. She hated herself. She wanted peace. Tranquility. Freedom. She was trapped, needing to control her actions so she wouldn't be chased by…them. She hated them, only because they were relentless. They hunted her. She knew that they feared her, knew she was capable of changing the world. They weren't the only ones, but they were the most persistent. The constant thorn in her side.

She lost the feeling. When someone thought of her who knew what she could do, they always thought of her in the same way. She eventually found a way to track those thoughts, track those who knew about her. She could erase their memories, or otherwise dispose of them, as long as it was under the radar.

Then, one day, they disappeared. Every person who knew her slowly faded off her inner radar. She didn't know what they did, and

she couldn't figure it out. She spent months looking for any sign of where they had gone. Finally, she hit on an isolated location in Alberta. She couldn't be certain, but it was a building with foot traffic going in and out and she couldn't hear any thoughts at all. Someone was hiding something, and she had a guess who.

She stopped reminiscing, and focused on finding someone to throw the Foundation on a wild goose chase. Her mind stumbled upon a person with a dynamic love of bizarreness and creativity that some would describe as "insanity". She saw it as a useful trait under the circumstances. She quickly decided to turn him into her own personal distraction, letting her mind rest as her new pawn wreaked havoc.

Site-40

As the janitor finished mopping up the last hallway of his graveyard shift, he felt the ground shake as an ungodly metallic screech echoed down from the center of the site.

He heard many women and men yell to each other as emergency klaxons started to wail. He quickly retreated to a side hallway as a squadron of soldiers rushed towards the commotion. The boy decided to attempt to find out the cause of the commotion. He had heard of containment breaches, but there were very few SCP-related rooms in the inner structure.

He wandered into a nearby office, attempting to find a reason behind the alarm, and futilely started checking the locked computers until he heard many loud cracks coming from outside the office. He quickly hid under a desk, hearing bullets ricochet and men and women scream.

The clanking grew closer and closer. He quickly made his way into the darkest corner of the room, wide eyes watching the door to the hallway. He suddenly felt the air rush by him as a heavy-built man flew through the wall and into a bookshelf, hanging onto threads of consciousness.

Through the newly-made hole in the wall, he heard a drunken voice

half-singing, half-screeching a small poem, with a sadistic snicker.

"Oh Mother, Mother, she hates you so,
She hates you and wished you would go,
And let her be,
Or wipe you from histor-eeeee~"

That tune stuck in the boy's mind, shoveled in next to the screams of pain and maelstrom of whizzing bullets.

He jumped at a sound behind him. He turned to see the solider attempting to get to his feet, despite bleeding from head to toe. The janitor, despite his fears, helped the guard to his feet, and saw him stumble back to the hole, kneeling on one damaged leg, using his assault rifle to attempt to fell the singing madman. The singing stopped for a second, and in the silence that followed, he heard a low growl before hundreds of small objects flew through the wall, scraping him in many places, leaving large gashes on his torso as he finally, realizing inevitably the end of his own bleeding life, wandered to the hole in the wall.

He saw many bloody corpses laid about, many with scratches just like his own. In the middle of the carnage, a skinny, blond haired man whistled the accursed tune that the janitor had heard. There were small pieces of debris - splinters of wood, concrete blocks the size of a mans' fist, and twisted metal, slowly orbiting around the man in a fluid, deliberate fashion. The same debris had just punctured hundreds of holes in the room he was in.

The janitor, blood dripping from his hair, watched as the woman from before held a stone tomahawk, its head pointing at the interloper. She muttered a single word, and a blinding flash enveloped the hallway.

The boy fell limp as the woman heard the tomahawk make a firm "thump" in the intruder's skull.

FROM: MARTIN KRAKE, DIRECTOR, SITE 40
TO: Prof. G. Quaero, Foundation Research

An attack has occurred on my site. Structural damage was moderate, and loss of personnel was severe. When I attempted to inspect the damage, I was stopped by several officers claiming themselves to be of "GK" clearance. They have informed me that they have taken over operations of the assaulted area. I have been told I will be returned control after they finish their investigation.
Please advise.

FROM: OVERWATCH COMMAND

TO: DIRECTOR KRAKE, SITE 40

MESSAGE SENT 2-17-20 INTERCEPTED.

AUTHORITY OF INDIVIDUALS IN POSSESSION OF GK-LEVEL AUTHORIZATION IS TO BE CONSIDERED VALID AT LEVEL 5 RANK.

NO FURTHER COMMUNICATION RELATING TO GK-LEVEL AUTHORIZATION, PERSONNEL, OR ACTIVITIES IS TO BE MADE TO ANY SOURCE.

NO FURTHER INQUIRIES ARE TO BE MADE.

O5-4

Greener Pastures

It used to be different, but I suppose that all old men say that. That back in the day the air was cleaner, or the sun was brighter, or that the grass was greener. That's how they remember it, so that's how it must have been. I don't. I remember it as it was – dark and grimy and radiant, all of it, from the sewers to the sky. And that's how it was.

I was a reporter, when I was young and largely stupid. I was good at what I did – I got truth and I took it to the papers and then they took it to the people. It didn't matter, really, where it came from or why it was true. All that mattered was the ink on the page, and the dollars in the newsstand. They didn't ever question it – the way I always knew where to be and what to see, just who and what and when and how things would play out. I didn't either, for a long time. It just sort of came to me, like out of a dream. And I know that sounds stupid – people tell that same old story all the time, about visions and prophecies coming in their dreams. I knew a lady once who dreamed she was on a boat that sunk, and the next day she looked in the paper and a boat had sunk off shore. It didn't matter that she lived on the coast and boats sank every week – she had been on that boat, in her dream. It was never like that, for me, though. When I slept, I slept. The only dreams I ever got came when I was wide awake.

I was there when the jetliner went down over San Bernardino in '67. A lot of people wouldn't know it, but the spot where it crashed was actually really popular with the local kids. It had been thirty years before that, too, when I was a kid standing out in the fields and playing ball with a rock because that was what we had. I can remember exactly, explicitly, sitting on the train on my way out of the city, staring out at the clouds, and thinking back to playing ball in those fields. I remember looking up at the sky, in my not-quite a dream, and seeing a great big metal beast of a thing with its wings all aflame coming down out of the sky slow and gentle, like it wanted

to steal home plate, hoping the pitcher might be lazy enough for it.

I went out to that field the next day, on a whim, and not four hours later I had the story of the year.

At first I thought it was some lucky coincidence, or that I had seen something and remembered it somehow. But then it happened again, with a train that got derailed over in Colusa County. And then again, when the market dipped out in June that year and half of everybody I knew was thinking about buying barrels for leggings. I had sold a month earlier, of course, but that was just a given. When the story came around, I was ready.

It went on that way for a long time. Things would happen, and then before that I would know about it. I felt like one of those spacemen, in the books, where they go back in time and they've got every little bit of every little thing that'll happen all figured out. I felt like a god. Funny how that worked out.

It started up some time in '83, around August. I was working freelance out of Chicago, mostly covering local color and all that. A man can only take so much disaster before he loses his top, and the world can only produce so much of it. After a while, though, it seemed like most every one of my sources was drying up. You can only do so many pieces on pork and steel before sales start to drop. All I needed was a big piece – something to really blow everyone away, to show 'em how good a true story I could tell. And then I got it. The next day, I got exactly what I wanted. I dreamed, that afternoon as I sat at my writing desk, about standing knee deep in hog guts, watching as flames licked across huge vats of grease and lard. I could even hear it, a squealing noise that wasn't quite right, somewhere behind the flames. It sounded like a pig with a lung infection that didn't want to be slaughtered. The next day I broke the story on the fire at what had been one of the biggest slaughterhouses in the state. Sixty-three people died in that fire, and the story sold like hot sausage at a carnival. It said in the papers that they couldn't find what had caused the fire, but I figured it out, after a while.

I was terrified, for a long time, after that. I didn't want to believe it, the way things were. The way truth and me were bound up together.

I was afraid to think, afraid to even sit down for half a second to clear my head. But after enough time, you start to get more scared of not knowing than of knowing - it was killing me, squeezing me up like a broken spring. So I started to stretch it out. Little things at first – just a change or two, to where I left my keys, or how much my bill came out to. It wasn't hard, really. All I had to do was remember what was going to happen, and then it would, or else I wouldn't have been able to remember it. And after enough time, living like that, choosing what would happen, life was good. I was happy. Got a wife, couple kids, steady work, a nice car and a house with a picket fence. Everything was great, because I could always remember how great it was going to be.

I've lived like that for thirty-four years now. Always knowing what was coming up next, and everything I had left behind me. I'd like to keep on living like that, I really would.

I think I forgot her name sometime around last Thursday. I'm not sure. I'm not even sure what the name was that I forgot. I know it's not the one she has now – that's just the one I remembered her having afterwards, when I realized I hadn't the first time around. I wouldn't name my daughter Olivia - not 30 years ago, when Mary had her. Nobody named their kid that then. And even if they did, I sure as hell wouldn't have. I know I didn't. But I did, because that's how I remember it, now.

I don't know what's going to happen. I'm old now. Everybody grew up knowing some senile old man. When I was younger, I probably would have been alright with being that old man – those types of men tend to tell good stories, regardless of if they're true. Now though, now I'm not sure what that would mean. I know what the truth is today, but what about five years from now? What will I remember then? I'm not sure I could take any more fires, or any more squealing. Or any more names changing, for that matter.

I think I might be best off heading for greener pastures.

Greenery

"So, you work for the Bigger Man?"

The Momio brothers, Enrico and Martino, were a couple of tall, dark, handsome men with a knack for satire and a disagreeable nature, or at least they used to have them. Twice in recent years, they had evaded the Roman carabinieri when their works, too offensive to involved political sensibilities or too anomalous for the other Foundation, became well-known; the third time, however, they were in for a massive fine or long-term incarceration — if the skippers didn't get to them first.

"I mean, no offense, but the Bigger Man is always about answering to law and norms and all that… and shit, we were tired of it."

Fortunately or not, their talent was noted by an executive member of the Italian branch. That's when the Charitable came in their story.

"They don't respect anything, politicians. Justice? An inconvenience. Laws? Tools, no, clay. Art? 'Frivolous.' Frivolous!" Enrico spat at one of the pulsating mounds of moist, odorous soil; almost without skipping a beat, he kept speaking in his strongly accented English. "If you trivialize art, what is left to respect? Well, plenty, they say, like the person of the major whom you keep insulting!"

He kept sinking his boots deep on the mud surrounding the mounds, his combat pants completely ruined, slowly moving back into the dry dirt of the track between the rows. Then, he walked towards the next row; the plants were starting to emerge there, their leaves exuding a clear ichor-like substance that dripped down into the ground. Rico carried on narrating his tale as he bent down to check on the budding leaf green already shying through the soil. "After that we had the major's house surrounded on a thousand perambulating *friggos* when she was hosting a party for *il capo della mafia,* all of them citing every lie she had told during the elections. And you know what? Just their faces would have made the prison worth it."

"Damn right it would!" That was Martino's voice, graver and soft in comparison to his brother's. It came from across the line of already blooming mounds. "But it would have also been boring as hell, Rico! Or old Patroni would have got us shot. That would have been too little boredom and for too short a time right there."

Enrico briefly laughed at Martino's words and retorted with a quick string of words in Italian, which was answered with another quick laugh from between the thickening greenery of the next row. Then he noticed Frank's expression and… Priscilla's lack of one, apparently?

"We were just making a silly, unnecessary, uh… pun. In Italian."

"I'm not a skipper anymore, Rico. You don't have to explain yourselves," Frank said. "And Locke is here just to see how we work so she can put a good word for us with the *phoo.* Not exactly 'the Man', you see."

"Right, sure, they are not the capitalist, imperialist, hegemonist Man, but I would still like to see those Coalition fasci-"

"Anyhow!" Frank clapped his hands once, a weary and slightly threatening smile coming to the already wasted corners of his lips. Rico got the message and adopted a mocking 'it-was-not-my-fault' grin. "Why don't you explain Locke what you're doing here, gentlemen?"

Rico shrugged. "*Bene*, this way. The mounds and the buds are already self-sustaining and the Vesta piping is already grown and working, so I can now show you the most interesting part of this camp in action, miss Locke."

"Just Locke," the woman answered, her face behind the optics of a Nikon.

Oh, yes. The Nikon, Frank sourly thought. *How lucky that Alba had one to spare.*

Locke had insisted on carrying a camera and a small red handbook with a pen as part of her cover. Frank was irritated about that, and

he knew she would get why; the woman, a fresh recruit — no matter how much of a refugee or a benefactor she might be — was taking pictures of an ongoing programme as if it was the only logical thing to do. Frank, despite his best efforts to suppress his paranoia, suspected she was deliberately trying to get under his skin.

As if she could sense his thoughts, Locke took a picture of one of the most developed mounds, which was already covered in white and green leaves, gently waving as the soft stems underneath began to mature and its already hardening roots drilled down, avidly searching for water. Frank winced at that flagrant security breach — *Will I ever stop thinking like this?* —, but said nothing.

Then, she glanced at Frank with those dead, steely eyes of hers and followed Rico, who was beginning a toured visit of the orchard. He soon was hid away by the greenery around them.

"Some brainiac called them 'Myrmidon' seeds, because they make plant-like things that move and may take the form of people, see? Like the legendary army made out of teeth and all that." As he went around its bulk, Enrico's voice sounded from behind a magnificently well developed specimen. It was a six feet tall log entirely composed of long, knotting roots that turned into thick stems of green, living plant with no bark, like long tentacles that bent slowly to no wind. Together, they were thicker than Rico, who was now carelessly hugging the 'tree' and sticking his head out from behind it. "These ones here grow faster 'cause they have been tweaked to do so."

"Tweaked?" Pris asked. Frank looked at her.

"Genengineering and some anomalous fertilizer. Opal can tell you the details on that second part."

"I thought she was a medical doctor."

"She can be a doctor," Frank needlessly replied.

"Man, that she can be!," Rico said from the closest row of Myrmidon plants. "Anyways, Opal told us to make sure they grew strong no matter how much her kids pushed the greens, so—"

"Her kids?"

"Right. She has a few trained volunteers with her assisting or replacing her with esoteric stuff," Frank explained.

"Isn't that dangerous? Teaching them all this. They might spill the beans. Shouldn't it be confidential?"

Rico, at first confused or appealed at the statement, soundly laughed in their faces and turned away, leading them between two of the largest Myrmidons in the orchard. The ecSec grimly stared at Locke and said: "I've been telling them that for years. They usually think that infiltration just doesn't happen. Know what? It seems to be true. No defections as of yet."

"How can you tell?," she said while jotting something down in her book. "Where were the docs on these things? They aren't listed in the programme."

"They are, as non-abnormal assets. That is because the Momio brothers explained them to us in detail; we know how to use them, so they are not really abnormal to the Charitable. Well, and…" Frank's voice came to a halt and resumed only in a much lower tone. "You see, the Momios don't like to admit it 'cause these things can churn literal metric tonnes of fruit in a matter of weeks once they bloom. Any fruit they program them with. It's really cool and all, but the real problem with it is the cost."

"I don't see any costs here."

"The soil gets depleted real fast, Locke. The seeds got discontinued a few months back because of that. These do not bypass physics as the mold does, they can only make local soil far more, uh, agreeable to their own metabolism. Then, they die. Or worse, uproot themselves and look for another place to plant themselves."

Both looked at the rows at both sides. Their motile roots could almost be heard as they devoured the ground.

"That can't be good. Can they move now?"

"Nah, unless you use very specific irritants or the soil becomes too

acidic or dry, they just stay put and happy. With proper irrigation and clean water, and you know where those are coming from, we can create food by the truckload in minutes. Now, for the soil itself, I've been told by Dodger you can help."

Locke jumped. "Dodger," she said, suddenly tense. "She's coming here?"

"Ah, you know her? From the entry meeting, maybe? She's an observer from Continental. Sort of a wild card. As most free agents are, I guess-"

"She agreed to kill my sister if I tried to defect you people."

Frank's brow burrowed. "Say what-she threatened your sister in the middle of a meeting?"

Locke shrugged. "I said they knew where my sister was if I tried anything. To make them trust me."

"… yes, on second thought that sounds like something she would say," the ex-agent reminisced on how the self-centered, big-mouthed maniac had gotten herself into the MCF, getting a new life in the process. "Stories," he whispered, and immediately said: "She is arriving today. Now, for the testing on your thing, whatever it is-"

"We're almost there," Locke lowly growled, grasping at her backpack with her free hand. "We'll have our testing chamber done in days, right? It's a matter of time."

"I hope so. Because these orchards are our food provision for the next months."

Locke looked at her escort, furious. "Why didn't you say so earlier?"

"I did. Over breakfast. You might have been distracted," Frank answered. His voice sounded slightly concerned. Locke slowly blinked, and for a brief moment, the hand holding the camera shuddered.

The moment was over all too soon, interrupted by a fuss raised a few rows away. She moved away, walking towards the Momios'

angry shouts. "Great, fuckin' goompahs are really working for the greater good here-"

"Tone it done, will you!?"

The Momios argued over one of the mounds. While the others on its row were already showing its first leaves, that one remained as a tight coil of snake-like vines that shivered occasionally. As they came closer to it, Locke and Frank saw the vines were so tense that they were tearing themselves apart, a bright white liquid oozing from its injuries.

Enrico moved away after a particularly angry shout directed at Martino, who remained behind, looking flustered and with his arms crossed in a firm position. He cried back a single word and then realized the presence of both his superior and the WPhO officer. "I'm sorry, Skipper," he finally said. Martino was a green thumb, good with plants in general and particularly good with the Myrmidons. "Rico thinks we should burn this one."

"It looks sick," Locke contributed. Martino shook his head in a negative.

"It's only developing in an unexpected way. I say we wait and see how it goes. He says it's not gonna go anywhere, because aberrations end up killing themselves. And I answer to that, good, then there is no problem! And that way I don't have to kill it."

Frank looked into Martino's big eyes and placed a hand on his shoulder. In a way, both of them were good kids, but Martino was particularly nice, almost naive. "Listen, Tino, this one might become greater, and I get why you want to see it turning into something bigger… cooler. And maybe any other day you'd get to do that. But we're trying to feed hundreds of hungry people, not experimenting. Please, take it somewhere else and freeze it or burn it, okay?"

"I know, Frankie. It's just-" The young anartist scratched the back of his head and sat alongside the mutant plant and its mound. "It's just that we are forgetting that these things could be better than what they are. I'm thinking about applying to a Research Group next rotation."

"Does Martino know?", the ecSec said.

"Si. That's what we argued about, actually. He's mad, for sure."

Frank noticed right then how Locke was looking at Martino. Her face was a particular blend of polite confusion and brisk impatience.

Sighing, he slowly moved towards Martino and sat with him on the mound, suppressing decades of hard-earned distrust and revulsion towards anomalies that demanded him to run away, get a torch and incinerate that unnatural weed. Instead, he asked: "Martino, tell me so miss Locke knows about it… why did you join the MCF?"

Martino looked up, seemingly puzzled. "That? Well, we joined because we were offered a place to hide from the other Foundation and the police and all that."

"Sure. And why did you stay?"

"What?"

"You've been with us for three years now. With this Work Group, as specialists. You could have gone back home. Why did you stay?" Frank got out his notebook and checked a date several pages back. "Right here, I've got it: First and only Koons Donation, relayed by Momio brothers upon their entering O-1 WG, three years and a month ago. Why?"

"Well, see, old Koons had an idea about an exploit that-you see, it was a giant dog made of flowers placed in front of a big museum! Only he wanted it to walk inside the place and fill it with pee and lick everything and stuff, but he only managed to make it slobber and dribble on everything, but he only managed to make it slobber and pee and stay still out of the museum-"

"Martino, Mar-Martino, I know all that!" Frank half-laughed. Locke was making an utterly priceless face at Martino's fast rambling, and he couldn't help but to laugh out loud. He managed to calm himself enough to add: "Just-just tell me why, man. You could have gone back to Italy by now, or wherever the hell you wanted with your specialist wage and your anart. So why did you stick with us?"

The younger Momio reflected at those words for a few moments. He finally rested his head on a hand and said: "Well, art is all about context, we used to think. Put an installation here, it means a thing; put it there, it might change its meaning or remain the same, depending on the context you give it. The person's context changes the meaning, as well. But when we joined the Charitable we were submersed in context, pure context. People suffering and dying every day in agonizing yet natural, avoidable ways. And we saw anart should denounce, condemn their suffering-but it would get shut away, shunned by the audience who did not like to see a piece from such a context. Besides, it had been done. It is being done. And only a few people, most of them already working to help poor countries, get it. I mean properly, really get it. Most shut it out because they don't like what it talks about."

Martino scratched the back of his head again.

"Art denounces, but by using anart, we could save those people, on this very context, on this very *now*, and on every possible context it would be a statement on its own and a pragmatic approach to the problem of transmitting the perspective of the artist to the public… to a different public."

Locke raised her hands. "Wait, wait-that means you think you're doing art even now?"

"Sure," Martino answered. "We may not make the best pieces, but really, I can't figure out a better place to put these on, don't you think? These trees are the army the richest people in the world would not be able to hire. An army made with the only purpose of making healthy, fresh food for people in need. Trees that will pick up their own fruit, pass it over to the firsts of their row with perfect discipline and feed thousands. Besides, we are learning a lot about our craft and getting bits and pieces from people around us. Live and learn *e tutta quella roba."*

The anartist looked at the rising sun shining through the higher leaves of the next row, already beginning to develop the light receptors that would turn them into rudimentary eyes, the first bulges on their vines betraying the places where buds would slowly grow into self-fertilizing flowers and, in a few days, edible fruits.

Frank knew what was going through the mind of that man; never mind that the soil would become barren in months, never mind that the fruit would only partially cover nutritional deficits in the area; people from the camp would feast and there would be songs and the Momios would listen and sing along.

"True, not many people get it. But these people *get* the piece, they get it better than most artists, even if they don't know it's an installation. But oh, *e'arte.* Purity of concept, good execution, an attentive audience." Martino slumped at both of them. "On this, Rico and I agree wholeheartedly. What else can an artist ask for?"

As they left both Momios to another of their usual discussions, Priscilla and Frank left the orchard and headed into the camp. Most of the rows they had seen were already grown into low bushes, bustling with waving leaves. Priscilla had taken a few more pictures, furiously jotted down notes and kept very quiet.

They passed the small yard that served as a field school. It was filled with small, fascinated faces who stared at Alba Escudero's exaggerated gestures and florid words in a mix of Somali and Arabic; she was teaching them English. Later, Frank knew, she would teach them about the cycle of water.

Tomorrow, perhaps about art and beauty. He glanced at Priscilla.

"You alright there, Locke?"

"Fine."

"Look, I'll have to go for a meeting with my contacts from the local banditry. It might take me a couple of days. These guys are generally agreeable, we give them limited medical care and drop a few veiled threats to their persons and their souls and they stay away from the crazy Westerners who want to cure the Sour."

Locke raised her head with an arced brow. "Their souls?" Frank smiled.

"Good, you're still with us. It's not literal. Well, mostly not literal. You

might not want to know."

"They buy that crap," she answered. It was not a question.

"Sometimes they do, sometimes they don't, but most chiefs and warlords agree that messing with things they can't hope to control is a bad policy. True, sometimes they try, and that's when we call the GOC. That's another incentive for them to stay the hell away from here."

"They are scared," Locke smiled. "I've said that before, haven't I?"

"Yup. You can't blame them, the Myrmidons are supposed to be food and they can uproot themselves and fight, too."

"You mean they have done it before?"

"Another reason to discontinue them. No weapons in our camps, remember? Anyways, when I leave, I'll have Olympe report to you. He is the French Guianan guy, the one with-"

"A mech arm. Yeah. Kind of hard to miss him."

"Well, you'll be with him for a day or two. You'll see how he keeps the peace around the place."

"A bouncer with no guns, a soldier with one arm," Locke sneered. Frank stared at her with an entertained grin.

"Har, har, you've said that before too, haven't you?"

Among the recently arrived MCF members, there was a very specific woman. This woman had entered the almost finished hospital with casual walks, dressed with an MCF vest over a white-and-green volunteer t-shirt and long but light, comfortable pants.

The woman's name was not important. Only a few of her coworkers knew it anyways, and most of them were really, really far away. Here, there, in that place, she was known as Spiffy Dodger.

While she had helped unloading the trucks and happily joked about

how well the camp was going, what had attracted some exasperated looks from those of her partners who couldn't get a joke, Dodger had a single objective in mind today. It was a simple concept. She had to check the Vestan stuff, report to Frank Westinghouse as soon as good ol' Priss wasn't around him and keep an eye on how well it was all going.

Dodger knew the assignment was half a punishment and half a way to get her to do something of use. She preferred it that way, since being back home would only bring even more attention from her ex-employers.

They would be asking questions about all that money that had suddenly appeared in her new employers' hands. And in her own hands.

Fortunately, there was a place in the Charitable for anyone willing to help, and Spiffy Dodger was so very happy to help all those do-gooders and their magical moss. As she walked the almost-finished halls, looking the veined walls and curve corners with a critical eye, she intimately scorned to herself: "I've seen weirder."

As she muttered it, a man in a white overall saw her and came to her. "Ah. Sorry, miss, you shouldn't be here, it's not finished yet!," Dodger heard him said through his mask. He sounded like a school teacher. "And, oh dear, you should be wearing at least appropriate footwear, this ground-"

"Rabbit, right?," she cut the man's rambling. "Or was it Rabbi? I kind of like the jumpy attitude. It's cute."

Torres looked at her for a moment, his eyes squinting behind the little pair of glasses. "And you would be?"

"Dodger. Mission Watch." Dodger took the green-and-black ID out of one of the vest pockets. "I'm here to reinforce Frank Westinghouse and his new best friend, the… auditor."

She smiled a predatory smile.

"And, of course, to watch over things. You know… report back at the

IB and all that. Would you be so kind as to tell me how are things going over here? All okay, I'm sure?

« **Bed, Breakfast, Plague** | **Hub** | **Over the Bonfire** »

Chapter One: Grey Island Getaway

This place is weird as shit.

I realize that's not exactly elucidating, but hell. It's looking less and less like anyone is ever going to read this anyhow.

My name is Stephen. I'm a commercial writer. Yesterday, I got on a plane bound for Shanghai. Somewhere over the ocean, the front half of the plane fucking disappeared. Six others and I wound up on a life raft headed for an island, reaching the place just as night fell.

This place is weird as shit.

Last night, all we really thought about was the house. We knocked, not really expecting an answer from such a deserted looking place, and then smashed the window on the front door and let ourselves in. Immediately, I headed for a small couch in the entryway and collapsed.

This morning, one of the other guys woke me up with a cup of coffee. It was the best damn cup of coffee I've ever had. His name's Tim, he's an accountant for some firm out of San Francisco. He was in the row behind me, apparently. He says the others are a construction guy named Markus, a banker named William and his wife Marie, their six year old son Evan, and a girl named Marjory who apparently knows a lot about cars. Whatever.

Anyway, they'd been scouting out the island, so I went out to join them. The place is, as I mentioned, weird as shit. The house is the only structure on it except for a single telephone pole, with one end of its lines connected

to the house and the other dangling brokenly across the concrete driveway leading away from it and ending after just forty feet or so at a cliff so straight it may as well have been cut with a razor. My best guess is they moor some kinda barge here or something and connect it to the house, or maybe there used to be some kinda pier… No telling. That weird straight edge forms that entire side of the island, so that the whole thing forms a wonky oblong with a flat edge at one end like an unrolled condom.

On the other side of the house is a perfectly manicured lawn, complete with a little ornamental garden and a rope swing setup. There's a small dock, too, with a canoe moored at it. Markus thinks the canoe means there's more land nearby- it's tough to prove him wrong with all the fog that surrounds the island. He wants to row out and see what he can find. Most of the others are against it, but I figure we're obviously close enough to civilization someone is gonna find us soon enough anyway, and there's no harm letting him try. Hell, I'll help him shove off if he needs it.

The house itself looks like the sort of condo you'd find in a seaside town pretty much anywhere, with a vaguely Edwardian cast to its architecture. Lots of wood and suchlike. It's set up with modern appliances and lights, but there's no power at all- I guess the power came from the same place as the phone. Tim says the fridge was mostly empty but for half a gallon of rotten milk and some cheese that was just starting to go moldy from the warmth. That's a good sign. It means someone was here recently enough for the cheese to have just gone bad. The question is, when will they return?

Markus is gone.

The canoe is gone too, so we're assuming he took it while no one was looking. There's not a sign of him anywhere, though Evan keeps claiming he can hear

Markus yelling. He's just a kid, and he wants to help. I don't blame him for pretending. Tim found one of the canoe paddles washed ashore a short way down from the dock. Not a good sign. Still, it's too early to worry, isn't it?

I found a gun in one of the cabinets while rooting through the house. It's loaded. I have it shoved into the waistband of my pants now… I'm not sure whether I want to tell the others. I'll hold off for now, just in case. If help arrives, keeping it secret will have done no harm, and if it doesn't, well. Better I have it than anyone else, I think.

Marjory is screaming.

Grim

North East Lincolnshire
August 9th, 1943

Howard Millpond, head driver of the 592nd Tunneling Company, looked along the road and contained a whimper in the back of his throat. All along the roadside were bits of shrapnel and viscera, most likely from poor animals that mistook the cylindrical apparatus for something they could touch without punishment. Instead, their last moments were filled with a blinding pain, and then darkness.

Douglass, the man in the front seat with Millpond, looked down the road. They were slowly approaching Adamsborough, a small town that had been hit by several devil's eggs dropped by Jerry on their way back to Germany from bombarding Cleethropes. The munitions dropped were the size of tin cans, and had fuses that would go off when moved following their arming. They had the potential to decimate entire towns, and they were small enough to fit through the windows of a house if wind took them in an unfortunate direction.

Douglass lit up a Michelson and let it waft through the cabin of their vehicle. "I hope they hang whoever designed these blasted things, and throw his corpse to the dogs."

"It's inhumane," Howard agreed, looking approaching a fork in the road. "Which way?"

"To the right," Douglass pointed. The road around them had begun to grow foggy; it was six in the evening. By all accounts, in the middle of summer, the fog was far too dense. "This weather is peculiar."

"Y-yes," Howard nodded. "It's far too warm out for fog. I t-think something's wrong."

"It's just fog, Millpond. There was rain around here after the

bombing; I think that the heat's just evaporating the water—"

A blast tore through their conversation, and the rear tyres of their car. "Jesus *CHRIST!*" Douglass blasphemed, his cigarette flying out of his mouth and striking Howard in the face.

Howard forced the wheel to steer off into the side of the road, where it came to a stop in front of a small boulder. The poor driver looked in the back of the transport, where two other members of his company were seated. "Report!"

"Singh's been hit!" yelled Jameson, their sergeant. Poor Singh was the newest member of the company, a sapper transferred over from elsewhere, Indian in descent. His head was bleeding, and his eyes shut. Not even a groan escaped from his lips. "He's out cold!"

"What the devil happened?" Douglass barked.

"Watch your tone!" Jameson snapped. "We must have driven over unexploded ordinance. Damn ill luck. Fetch the first aid kit from the other truck."

"Yes sir!" Howard exclaimed. He turned off the car and exiting the cabin, making his way to the other truck, his pupils turned to pinpoints, and a soft gasp escaped his lips. "…I'm afraid I can't comply, sir."

"That was an order, Corporal."

"Sir, the other transport…" he looked at the other vehicle. It had flipped onto the roof of its chassis, and an arm was sticking out of the cabin. The engine had caught fire, and there was a gaping hole in the underside. "We drove past it. They drove over it."

"Poor fools," Jameson sighed. "Douglass, help me carry Singh. We're going to have to walk the rest of the way and phone for help in the village."

"Yes sir." Douglass exited the cabin, a soft whistle from his nose lamenting the loss of both of the transports. He made his way towards the sergeant, and lifted up the poor sapper's arms. "Millpond, you have the map. How far until Adamsborough?"

"…seven klicks this way," Millpond pointed, ignoring the tingling in his ears. "I'll help carry Singh—."

"Don't." Jameson hefted Singh's arm onto his shoulders, sharing the burden with Douglass. "You're the best navigator we have. Do your job."

"Yes, sir." As they walked, they swore they heard the sound of feet following them, but whenever Howard turned to look, he was met with nothing but fog.

August 8th

Captain Edgar York lit a Michelson, and overlooked the scene before him.

The entirety of Adamsborough was silent, from the main thoroughfare to the great cathedral that stood overhead. He wiped tobacco off of his moustache and looked at the damaged ambulance that had crashed into a tree off the main road. In its back was a man with a face like sandwich meat, his work shirt stained with blood. There was still soil underneath his fingernails; perhaps he had been a gardener, blown up by a munition. It was one of the only bodies they had found so far.

Adamsborough was far from bustling, but it had a population of five-hundred and forty-nine; barely a fifth of that had been found by the Foundation in their sweep.

"How can an entire village vanish?" He looked up into the still-high sun, thankful for the days post-midsummer still being long enough to see at six in the evening. "None of this makes sense. None of it."

He searched the man's pockets, finding a wallet; inside was a card with the words 'If found, kindly return to 19 Wensley Way, Adamsborough, North East Lincolnshire'. No postal code. He doubted that it was necessary, with how little this man must have left the town. He pocketed it, and started making his way to the man's house.

He did not find it vacant.

It took far too long for the company to see any sign of civilization.

The first sign of life they were greeted with along the road were lights coming from windows, high above the ground, barely visible in the fog. Howard walked towards it, while Douglass and Jameson dragged Singh with them. The man had uttered a few groans on the walk over, and had even managed to stride for half a kilometer, before falling again. Now, he was limp.

The fog gave way to a church, ancient, with brown stone and and a set of oaken double-doors leading into the building. The most prominent feature — and where the lights originated from — was a tower at least three stories tall, with a stained glass image of Mother Mary depicted on it. A cross topped the spire of the tower.

"Maybe they have a phone," Jameson said, hope in his voice. "Knock on the door, Millpond."

Howard nodded, and approached the door, banging on it. "Hello! We have wounded out here! Is anyone inside?"

There was no reply; Douglass frowned. "That's queer, the lights are on, but nobody's in?"

"Maybe they're having a service?" Howard asked.

"It's Thursday, Millpond. Who has services on a Thursday?"

Millpond pushed the door ajar. "It's open. Let's get Singh on some ground somewhere."

"Hullo?" Douglass called out. "We're with the 592nd Tunneling Company. Is anyone in h—"

"Quiet!," a hushed voice called. "Come to the sanctuary, you daft fools."

Howard went onward, while Douglass, Singh and Jameson hobbled in after him. The sanctuary was considerably brighter than its

surroundings, illuminated by candles and what little sunlight came in through the misty windows. The pews within had been moved out of the way to make room for two dozen mats of cloth, all with at least one person on them, groaning in pain. Several of them were maimed, but the wounds did not look explosive in nature. They were being overseen by men with white armbands and a red cross, clad in the uniform of the British army. These armbands seemed to be concealing another symbol beneath, but perhaps Howard was imagining things in the candlelight.

Suddenly, they were approached by a man holding a shotgun in their face, wearing the garb of a soldier that should have been on the German front. "State your name and business," he growled.

"Jesus Christ!" Howard said, holding up his hands.

"Doubtful," the man retorted. "Tunneling company, you said? Where are your orders?"

"I have them," Sargent Jameson said, looking at Singh. "Please, let me put him down, they're in my pocket."

The man with the shotgun nodded, and they laid Singh down on one of the vacant cots, before Jameson took a set of papers out of his shirt pocket and handed them to the man. "…Sergeant Jameson, then?"

"Yes, sir."

"Says here there are eight on this mission. I see four."

"…we r-r-ran over unexploded munition," Howard swallowed. "The other transport was decimated, and our car is wrecked. We're trying to walk to Adamsborough for help—"

"Adamsborough is lost," the man said, letting his shotgun hang at his side, his other hand extending to Jameson. "Captain York, 9th Containment Corps."

"Never heard of you," Jameson said, shaking his hand. "But, if you're a captain, I suppose I'm your subordinate."

"Hmm," the man said, looking out the windows, into the mist. "Good thing you came in from the fog. Something tore Adamsborough to bits, and it may still be out there."

"The butterfly munitions?" hazarded Douglass.

"Yes," York lied. "But there's something else out there; Something that can kill a man in an instant, but leaves buildings completely intact." He shook his head.

"Is it a gas?" Howard swallowed, looking at the fog outside.

"No. Hounds." York growled. When he saw the company flinch, he shook his head. "Not bad enough that Jerry's dropping bombs on us now, they started parachuting dogs in, too. Curs ate half the village."

"Oh god." Douglass gaped. "Those poor people…"

"We've not got all of them," York continued. "They're vicious. We're awaiting reinforcements to exterminate the damn things. In the meantime, we've got tea, biscuits, some rations." He shifted aside. "Help yourself."

"Thank you," Howard nodded, taking his canteen off his side and undoing the top, taking a long sip from it. Then, he gasped with pain, and dropped it. His hand burned from cold. Frost had formed on the metal.

The corporal smelled tea deeper in the sanctuary, and departed to find it, to warm his burnt hand. As he left, Captain York confiscated his canteen and took it to someone who was wearing a tweed coat and looking through a microscope.

Captain York stood in the foyer of 19 Wensley Way, looking thoroughly unimpressed as his lieutenant made his way in from the kitchen, stuffing something into his pocket. "Captain," he nodded.

"Lieutenant Catchlove." York sighed. "What are you doing?"

"I'm simply looking around for any cause of the anomaly. We're being very thorough." He pulled his hand from his pocket; it jangled

loudly.

"Yes, I can see that." York reached for the man's pocket and tore it off his pants, causing its contents to fall onto the floor; a gold chain, pieces of silverware, a wedding band, and a gold cross deposited themselves onto the floor. "God's sake, Catchlove."

"I'm sending all my money to my sister!" he snapped. "I've got nothing left over. And everyone in the Army's doing it, over on the continent. Not like they'll need it."

"I'll not have any of this looting on my watch. We're the Foundation; we're not some common soldiers who pillage the dead." York scowled at Catchlove.

"You can espouse that to me when the Foundation decides to pay me enough that I can buy new boots." He scooped up cross and stormed towards the door.

It was as he crossed the threshold that the howling started.

Singh was awake, head bandaged, tea in his hand. A boffin had been attending to his wounds for the past half hour, while the members of the Tunneling Corps had been conversing with members of Captain York's squadron. There was an odd hodge-podge of nationalities; the man in the tweed coat was a Pole, someone spoke Czech by the door to the church's foyer. A Frenchman played cards with Douglass, and a pair of Americans was in the back of the room, standing on chairs to look out the high windows in the cathedral. Howard wasn't sure what they would see out there, between the tinted glass and the fog.

Howard had a suspicion that something was wrong, but couldn't figure out what it was. There was a chill in the air that was unnatural for summer, but then again, the weather in the North England was fickle; it could just as easily have been due to a squall in the sea blowing in cold air.

The feeling of wrongness became concrete once he realized he could see his own breath. His eyes went wide, and he looked out the

windows, into the fog beyond. It was August; even with squalls blowing in cold wind, he shouldn't be able to see his breath.

A low howl came from outside. Several members of the Containment Corps stopped what they were doing and took up arms, making their way to the cathedral's front entrance. It sounded like dogs were howling, but there was an eerie tone in the bray; something that made the hair on Howard's arms stand on end.

"Don't worry," one of the Americans said as he passed by. "We're just going up front to try to shoot a few of the dogs. Make the reinforcement's jobs easier."

"You have any spare rifles?" Jameson asked. "I'm a fair shot."

"We can take care of this," York assured him, hefting his own rifle and making his way into the cathedral's foyer. He knelt in the back of the cathedral, and signaled for the poor fool who had drawn the short straw to open the door.

When they did, they were met with a loud *thunk* sound, as a man fell in, a scream frozen on his face, his fingernails bloodied, his pants soiled. His eyes were burnt, blackened by some foul force. York almost dropped his gun.

"Jesus Christ."

"Is it one of ours?" a member of the corps asked.

"I… oh sweet god." York observed a glint of gold in the dead man's hand. "It's Catchlove."

With a loud growl, a cadet was dragged back into the fog by something with far too many teeth to be mortal. A single gunshot was heard from the mist. Not even a scream. Even if there was one, the rest of the corps were too busy running up the hill to the church.

None of them had time for throwing blame or on-foot interrogations. They were running from a cloud of death to the one place in the hamlet that might provide sanctuary: the fortified, millennium-old church. They had already set up a temporary headquarters within.

Another soldier fell with a loud scream, begging and sobbing, far less dignified than the one before. They dared not to look back at the advancing fog, ignored the sounds it made.

They came upon the doors. A young man rammed them in with his shoulder, and fell into the flagstones. York helped him to his feet, and guided him into the chapel, ushering in the rest. The mist, mercifully, stayed away from the church's threshold.

York began a headcount once the last soldier was in; his heart sank as he realized that it was not a common soldier who was begging for his life, but Lieutenant Catchlove. He looked out into the mist, and for a spit second, saw a hand reaching out from the fog, before being dragged back in.

Were it not for the size, York would have slammed the oaken door. Instead, he shoved it closed, not thinking about his subordinate's fate.

York took too long to respond to Howard's question. "Who's Catchlove?"

"A lieutenant in the company; he was ambushed by dogs on one of the side streets." York made his way over to the man, and extracted the golden cross from his fingers. "Dammit all."

Singh, by this point, had made his way over to the foyer, and was looking outside at the fog. He swallowed. "There are shapes out there."

"Where?" One of the cadets swung his rifle about frantically. "Where do you see 'em?"

"I…" the man's head swam. "I thought you said they were dogs."

"They are," York assured him.

"No." Singh retreated with a whimper. "They're massive. Not dogs."

"I don't see them!" another cadet protested. "Where are they, you daft ass?"

They soon all saw it; as if condensing from mist, a large, black dog with dark, glassy eyes walked through the doors, and looked upon those gathered. They hesitated as the hound growled.

Douglass's eyes went wide. "That's a Grim."

"What?" Jameson asked.

"Church Grim. We had one at my old parish. They…" Douglass swallowed. "They're harmless, unless provoked."

"Well, let's hope they've not provoked it." Howard stared.

The dog came up to Catchlove's corpse and sniffed at it, before, with a loud growl, it opened its mouth. In a clatter of metal, the Grim deposited at least half a dozen butterfly munitions onto the ground.

"That's impossible," Howard gasped. "They should have all detonat —"

"DOWN!" Jameson yelled, tacking Howard to the ground, while Douglass shielded Singh.

The explosion was tremendous. A single butterfly bomb could take off a man's head; the shrapnel from these scattered all over, striking Captain York in his hand, and tearing the face off of the poor soldier who had opened the door in the first place. At the same time, neither the church's stonework, nor the Grim itself, were harmed. The Grim barked, and then lunged at a soldier who had escaped most of the blast.

Howard was thankful the explosion had deafened him; he could not imagine the screams the man must have made. Those who had survived the attack alternatively ran or limped from the church. Howard looked down at Jameson, who had a gash running down his leg, with a piece of bomb sticking out; adrenaline kept him going.

"Where are we going?!" Howard yelled.

He could not hear the reply. He ran, hoping to not get lost in the fog.

Captain York ran into a garden wall after two minutes of fleeing. He hadn't seen it until his nose was pressed against it; the fog had blinded him.

He recoiled from the wall, looking up at it; it was on a corner, with signs pointing down each street. The sign he had run into was for Sherman Street, and the other was obscured by the layer of fog.

The man from the tunneling company had called it a Church Grim. Harmless, he had said, unless provoked. So, what provoked them? They had been what had wiped out the village, that much was certain. But then they took off, until Catchlove had tried to make off with the cross from the house.

York looked down at his hand. He had been clutching the ornament so tightly that it had left impressions in his hand. He sighed, and wrapped it around his wrist. The man in the ambulance was from the house that the cross was from. Perhaps his death had provoked the Grim? Or Grims? He wasn't sure of how many there were.

Feet fell on flagstones behind him, and a shape emerged from the mist. Captain York drew his pistol and fired on the shape in front of him; it ducked down with a loud yelp. "Don't shoot!" they protested.

"It's you," York sighed. "God alive. Thought you were that thing."

"S-sir," Singh stuttered. "I-I got separated. Douglass — from my company — was with me, and he tripped on the way down the hill. I'm not sure if he's alive."

"Damn it all." York shook his head. "I know where we need to go. Just… careful where you step." He looked at the garden wall above him, where a chunk of brickwork was missing, and casings from a butterfly bomb sat on the pavement below. "There are still munitions about."

"You need a tourniquet," Howard said, removing his shirt.

"No," Jameson growled. "I'll not weigh you down. Find a vehicle and get to safety. Failing that, find a phone, and call command, tell them

that Adamsborough is lost."

"Sir, I can carry you—"

"I'm not about to have you eaten by a dog that vomits bombs because you can't carry me fast enough."

Despite Jameson's protests, Howard finished tying a tourniquet along his leg, along with a stick as a makeshift splint. "Well, if you feel that way, you can walk with me, sir."

Jameson barely held back a scowl. Couldn't his generation let there be a martyr among them? Why did they insist on saving lives? There was no glory in returning from war, only a hollow hole in your soul. He'd seen it when he was only sixteen, in the Somme. A man laid down in front of a tank. He didn't even scream. At least, if he died, he could inspire others to keep fighting, or to stop.

He took up a tree branch that had fallen on the street, one end bearing burn marks from a bomb, and limped after Millpond. "Where are we going?"

Howard reasoned, "If we can find a house with a car by it, we may be able to find keys. Live another day."

"Abandoning your post?" Jameson shook his head. "In light of what we've seen, I don't blame you." He lurched along on his three legs. "Why did you join a bomb disposal unit?"

"I… I've my mum to support." He sighed. "We lost it all at the start of the Blitz. Our house was one of the first shelled, and it's a miracle we survived. I've got to take care of her, so I volunteered for a tunneling company so that…"

"So that you wouldn't have to write letters?"

Millpond shook his head. "This is a dangerous job. I don't want her to wait six months for me to be home in a casket. At least if I die here, I can get a proper burial."

Jameson sighed. "After what I saw, in the last war. Just thinking of setting foot in France or Germany again…"

Howard nodded. He had been born after the Great War, but he understood the pain it caused. He continued down the street, keeping Jameson in his sight.

There were a pair of gunshots a street away, firing seconds after each other. They looked at each other, uneasy, before moving on. Howard kept turning, delaying them, swearing he heard another set of footsteps behind them, in the fog.

York and Singh stopped. "What the devil was that?"

"Rifle fire." York shook his head. "It won't do them any good. The… entities. They can't be killed, as far as we can tell." They stood before 19 Wensley Way, unaccosted by either dog or munition. He made his way up to the front door; a burn mark was on the handle, from where one of his men had been consumed by the mist. "I've… no idea if this will work."

"From what you told me, it started after Catchlove stole the cross? So bringing it back might…" Singh wrung his hands together. "What if we need the corpse as well?"

"Well, then we're fucked." York spat on the flagstones, and entered the house.

It was every bit as cozy as it would have been before the bombs dropped; the lights were still on, and the scent of tea filled the air. An armchair, which looked like it had been sat over the course of several lifetimes, stood by an empty, cold fireplace. A radio was on the mantle, by a photograph. York recognized that the channel it was tuned to was a BBC station.

One of the front windows was broken. Glass from it had embedded itself in the ceiling. Singh made his way over to it, and looked through the broken window, into the front garden. He could see a large chunk of ground missing, and a finger on the ground, alongside butterfly munition casing. He winced. "Someone died here."

"No," York shook his head. "He died in the ambulance. But why…"

He looked down at the cross, and then up at a photograph on the mantle. The photo showed an old man with a smiling face, the cross around his neck, and the chapel behind him. There was something by the church; York strode over and took up the photograph.

The church's doors were open. In the shadows of the foyer, he made out the form of a large black dog. York placed the photograph down with a sigh. "Church Grim." He sucked on his cheek, and placed the cross by the photograph, an unsaid apology along with it.

Now, all he could do was wait, and pray. Singh stepped back from the window, hoping the fog would not penetrate the broken glass.

The sapper was drinking from a cold cup of tea to calm his nerves when he next looked out the window. "It's lifting," Singh said, being able to see the August sun once more. "But not gone. I think I can see the church from here."

York leaned and looked with him. "Aye. There are some of our transports, parked down the hill." He drew his pistol. "I can take you to Cleethropes; we have people there who can get you back down south." He drew his knife and handed it to Singh. "It's not much, but it's protection."

The man nodded in thanks, and took the knife, crouching his way out the door. A howl sounded behind them, and he heard the distinctive crunch of clay roof tile being crushed by an immense weight.

"It's not coming for us," York whispered. "It's just… watching. Just keep walking, and be calm about it."

Singh swallowed, and blinked his eyes; the fog had taken on a more acrid form, almost like smoke. He put his shirt collar over his nose, but it still stung his eyes. He looked up and behind him, and saw the great, black form walking on the roofs of the houses, the tiles shattering under its paws. Its presence filled Singh with a single, primal urge to leave, through any means possible.

He turned away. "I thought it'd be more docile once we returned the

cross."

"We've done enough damage already," York spoke, muffled through a kerchief. "It just wants us to leave. Walk faster."

"Yes, sir." Singh picked up his stride, which slowed once more when he reached the base of the hill which held the church. "…Howard. The others…"

"I'm sorry, son." York patted the younger man on the shoulder, and started the slog up the hill.

Douglass suppressed a cough as he shut the eyes of the second man. The Americans from the containment corps had shot each other. There was surprise on their faces, no malice in either of them. In the fog, they were confused. Maybe they saw each other as Grims. Senseless, in any case.

Heavy footsteps came from ahead; two pairs of feet. A shape was distant in the fog; just a blackness that he couldn't make out. Douglass drew his pistol, and made his way towards the shape. It was walking unevenly; was it wounded? Was it dying? And the sound it was making; unnatural, unnerving wheezing, like a cur with cancer. Maybe it had stepped on a munition, and perforated a lung.

Douglass's finger was on the trigger before he realized that the footsteps were not caused by massive paws; rather, two pairs of boots against flagstones. "H-hallo?" he asked.

"D-Douglass?" A familiar stutter replied. From out of the fog came the face of Howard Millpond, supporting Jameson. "Good god, man. W-w-we thought…"

"I was lucky. I tripped, and I supposed it mistook me for dead. Singh's gone." He rubbed his face. "Damn it all. What's going to be said in our report?"

Jameson laughed. "That's what's on your mind?" He looked around. "Should we be… moving?"

Douglass nodded, looking back down the street eastward. The fog,

though acrid, was starting to lift. He could see the great black dog on a rooftop adjacent to them, but at the same time, it wasn't doing anything apart from watching. Douglas gave it a respectful nod, seeing people moving up the hill, towards the church. The sound of a car starting echoed through the village.

"Here!" Howard called. "We're down here! We have wounded!" The fog absorbed his voice.

"Over here!" Douglass stood as tall as he could and waved his arms, while waking forward. "Please! We're down here!"

Whether it was distance, the fog, or something else, their cries seemed to go ignored. As they walked, Howard swore he saw an Indian face look down the hill and back at them, but it turned away, seemingly ignorant of their presence.

The closer they got to the edge of the hill, the smokier the fog seemed to get. When they emerged from the cloud, they heard a low rumbling at the top of the hill; none of them could distinguish whether it was a car's engine, or the growling of a gigantic dog.

They looked at each other; Howard, the youngest, had uncertainty in his eyes, but also a cautious optimism that was absent from his superiors' gaze. Douglass and Howard wrapped their arms around Jameson and carried up him up the hill, towards the low growling. The fog only grew thicker as they climbed.

Ground Control

Darkness slowly turned into light once more. Blinding, red, fiery light. At first it was amazing, the sun rising to greet his vision, warming his bones. Just as everything else since the accident though, it was a false warmth, a false feeling of hope.

Let go.

Sure the first couple times he managed to turn his head to view the Earth he was filled with the hope that he would be brought back, that somehow his comrades would find him and bring him home. Now, he's glad that they didn't. It would have meant their end.

You can return home.

It somehow tuned in to the radio too. Over the years he heard a constant stream of broadcasts from his home, oh what the world had become. That was probably just to lure him in though, get him to fall. But he wouldn't, not now, not ever.

They want you home, look how they try…

He wasn't sure exactly how it happened, or exactly what it was. One day he was on a shuttle, a secret flight into space, and the next… Well he was where he is now, and this **Presence** was with him.

You can't hold out much longer…

At first he just thought it a figment of his imagination. A way to keep himself sane in the cold void of space. But as he began to drift towards the Earth he began to realize, he wasn't drifting. He was being pulled, and the closer he got, the stronger the Presence was, and it felt….wrong.

Wrong. Wrong. Wrong.

So he stopped it. He's not sure how he did this either. He stopped

himself, stopped his unnatural inertia. Caught himself in the Earth's orbit. Oh, how the Presence raged…But what he didn't expect was for it to defend itself so well.

Can't stop…Weak, pitiful thing.

It wrapped itself around him and his suit, not something solid, just a Presence. And it was that Presence that made him unstoppable. Anything he touched broke before his velocity and density. Even those who were sent up to collect him could do nothing but fail and die. But you know what…

You will fall.

I stopped it. I saved my comrades, I saved us. Or rather just halted what was inevitable. But I'm not going to let go. Even though I'm trapped in this body, in this suit, I won't let go. Sometimes I even gain control, I smash my visor. To expose it to the vacuum of space when it was engrained so deeply in me would kill us both. But it's too smart for that. Too old, and too smart. So I will continue to hold. I will continue to be the harbinger of death whose blade hovers above the throat of the Earth. And on the day that this son of a bitch dies, on the day this Presence realizes it can't beat us…I'll finally come home.

Home.

Group Date

It had to be bad. Like, really bad. The director's voice was shaking when he called. He said something about "emergency medical extraction" before he hung up.

"You think this is some sort of containment breach?" Lambert asked her boss as Medical Unit 16 crept closer and closer to Site 19's west wing. It was her first month on the job. She was still quite green.

"Of course it's not," Mitchell replied. "There'd be alarms blaring all across the site. And they'd be calling in a full on task force. Not us."

"What if they're trying to be discreet?"

"That doesn't matter right now. All we know is that half of the west wing is knee deep in some sort of shit."

Lambert started going through possible scenarios. Maybe it was an attack from the inside. Maybe they couldn't trust the MTFs anymore. Maybe it was some sort of memetic anomaly that was most susceptible to people without medical expertise.

The unit approached the door to a senior scientist's office. Just before Mitchell opened it, the door swung out just far enough for a middle-aged man to pop his head out.

"Kondraki! Good to see you're—"

"Yeah yeah I'm fine. Just, did you bring everything?"

"Of course."

"Even the lube?"

Mitchell fumbled around in his backpack. "I mean… it took a while to find some but yes."

"And the pliers?"

Lambert jumped in. "What's going on?"

"I want to be clear. I had nothing to do with this. I mean, not this time anyway," Kondraki answered.

"Okay?"

"I'll let you tend to them then."

Kondraki opened the door the rest of the way. There were twelve men just looking at their crotches with a mixture of embarrassment and disappointment. As one normally would when one's dick is stuck in a water bottle.

"Wha—"

One of the men spoke up. "I mean, we were curious."

"There was that one power point and like… I just wanted to know what that was even like. I couldn't tell if it was arousing or painful," another added.

"You— you literally went against an O5 order for this," Mitchell responded.

"Yeah, but… like I could not tell they were serious."

"Is Gears ever kidding?"

"No, but like, it was *just so stupid*. So stupid we had to try it."

"That makes no sense!"

Lambert turned to Mitchell, whose face had gone pale. You couldn't blame him though. He was looking at a room full of his superiors with their dicks stuck in water bottles. And it was his job now to *get them out*.

"Can we— can we just get this over with?"

Mitchell swallowed. "Yeah. Yeah. I mean… yeah."

And Medical Unit 16 got to work.

Dear Sergeant Edward Mitchell,

I am writing to submit my official request for transfer from Medical Unit 16 to Medical Unit 27 based in Site 23.

I am requesting this transfer on the grounds of the incident that occurred on 05/21/2018 whereby our unit was instructed to extract the genitals of Site 19 personnel from Class-3 plastic liquid containment vessels. While this did warrant medical assistance, this sort of activity was not a part of the job description.

I would like to continue my service to the Foundation, albeit not in the presence of men whose dicks I have handled. Thus this request for transfer.

I hope you understand.

Sincerely, Sarah Lambert

Grown in a Day, on a Mound of Barren Earth, Winter

The elder god set in his garden and waited.

Perhaps "garden" was a bit too generous a word for it. It was a sorry piece of earth, more mud than soil, much trodden and little tilled. Really, thought the god as leaned back on his creaky red-striped lawn chair, there was very little to recommend about most of it.

The trees, those few which still stood, were crooked, stunted things, their bark moist only due to the sudden rainfall brought by the afternoon. They leaned on a fence not much sturdier, its white long since faded to sickly shades of mustard, the points of its posts as dull as the elder god's rake. Really, when was the last time he used that rake? The muddy ground was covered in rotting leaves, though the elder god could not really say why. When was the last time the trees even grew any leaves? How could there be so many of the blasted things in the mud anyway?

The suns were setting, and the elder god's mood was getting ever more sour. He leaned forward to rise from his chair but sat swiftly back as the muscles in his back protested his sudden movement. It didn't use to be so difficult to get up, that much he knew. Didn't have that much weight to lift anytime he did either, especially round the gut area. His garden might not be growing, but he sure was. Oh, to be lean once more, to rise in the mornings with a spring in your step and a thumb as green as sweetest absinthe…

A sudden sound shock him from his reverie. At the periphery of his garden, something moved. Rising much more carefully now, the elder god shuffled through the slimy humus of his garden towards the fence and the tall wooden gate installed therein. The noise was certainly coming from outside, but the sorry state of both fence and gate (not to mention the god's eyes) made it difficult for him to see much. Something colorful was moving about outside, something cheerful and loud. Even without seeing it, the elder god hated it immediately.

Grunting and sweating even in the cool evening air, the elder god struggled with his gate. He couldn't remember when he last opened the thing, as he had few reasons to leave his boggy demesne for quite some time, or at least few reasons he saw. With enough shaking and threats of divine retribution however, the gate finally succumbed to his godly might and creaked open, to reveal…

A carnival.

Gone was the evening, gone the garden with its dead trees and its crumbling fences. Here all was song and sound, light and liberty, merriment and marvel. Gods in their dozens, in their hundreds, attired in the brightest hues of the cosmos, surrounded him in a dazzling and terrifying cacophony.

He saw a young looking thing covered head to toe in iridescent seaweed, each strand moving independently to the rhythm of some unseen underwater stream. She flowed through the crowd blissfully, each strand intertwining with the others and itself to create… something. Something the elder god could no longer see.

Another was like a bird, plumed in gold its feathers each a diminutive field of wheat, its beak an ever-flowing azure stream. At first it seemed bashful, hiding itself from the surrounding havoc, but a closer inspection of its movement revealed a different tale. It simply waited, waited for the perfect movement when the light would shine on its feathers brightest, when the attention of the other gods would be drawn to them most fully, and then it opened them, like a fan of fields, and the others would "ooh" and "ahhh" at their magnificence. The elder god could not tell if he was proud or ashamed to find himself so unimpressed by the beautiful things.

A god third was wild and hairy, horned with oak, shoving himself about the crowd, asking for all to inspect his horns, apprise his horns, please, admire his horns! Some did, and he brayed with glee and stomped his argent hooves. Others scoffed and he growled with rage and he shoved much harder with the sounds of "see it, you didn't see, see it well this time!". He was approaching the elder god and brandishing his horns once more when he saw the expression on the elder's face and thought better of it.

This and more, so much more, infinitely more and suddenly the elder god remembered the days when *his* garden was much that way. Back then he was not the creaky old thing he was now, more gut than god. No, back then he shone brightly, and his garden… his garden shone brightest. He remembered how the trees would shape themselves to his touch, how aromatic their fruits were when they fell ripe into his hands.

The windy pear, filled with the taste of mystery and magic, ever so slightly unsatisfying but always calling for more.

The horned apple, tart and crunchy, an acquired taste but one that left a memory on those who tasted it.

The triple berry, sweet and bright and sour, which always seem to taste better when prepared by another.

The other gods liked his garden, once. They tasted his fruits, and they cheered. Where were all of them now? He thought he recognized some of his old cohorts in the crowd but they wore different colors and different cuts, and though a few nodded to him in faint acknowledgment, none seem to care all that much that he was there. The rest he never knew at all- young gods, faces fresh and pockets filled with wonder. With so much to give to the world.

What did he have left to give?

Gone was the carnival, gone were the gods and their colors. He was back at his garden again. The suns have all set and a chill was sneaking into the air, as insidious as plague. The elder god sat back at his lawn chair and stared into the distance, into the endless expanse which surrounded his garden from every side. All around was quite. Empty. He had nothing left to give, because he was empty. All gut and no god at all. Elder. He buried his head in his hands. When did they become so blunt? When did his hair gone so thin?

Enough. Time to sleep and think of this no longer. The garden's time was past. He would not return here again, he promised to himself for the thousandth time. Never again. Rising for the last time, he strode for home, an indistinct shape in the distance. The mud sucked at his

boots as he walked.

In one of his footprints, a sprout began to grow.

Guard Duty

Monday, 19:00

Another day, another dollar. Quite a few dollars, to be honest, I can't believe how well they pay me to sit on my ass in a tower and watch a fence. That's private security for you, almost makes me glad I left the army. I should really remember to thank David for setting me up with this gig. Just a few more months, and I can afford that trip to Australia I always wanted. Shift's about to start, better go and replace Anderson. Make the crotchety bastard wait on that tower a minute after his shift ends and you'll never hear the end of it. The captain is already here to supervise the shift change.

"Alright, Penn, you know the drill. Twelve hour shift. No eating, no smoking, no using your cell phone or reading. Just keep your eyes on the fence and stay awake. Ignore anything you hear from the facility itself- it doesn't concern you."

"You don't have to give the same damn speech every day, Cap, I got it."

"If you fuck up it's my ass on the line too, so I rather not take any chances. Now get up, Anderson is getting jumpy."

Climbing the tower, I see the captain is right. Anderson is even more restless than usual. He's smoking, of course, and I see more than one empty pack of crisps on the floor.

"You better clean this mess up, because I'm sure as hell not doing it for you again."

"Stuff it, Penn. I know what I'm doing. Just keep your mouth shut."

"I'm not going to rat you out for a few cigarettes, Anderson."

"Whatever," He really is a mess today. Is that a flask he's hiding

under his jacket? "Just keep your eyes open. My knee's been acting up, and that means something bad is going to happen. Always does. I don't trust those eggheads inside, they're up to something."

"They could be cloning Elvis for all I care. As long as they keep paying me."

Anderson climbs down, and I check my gear to see everything is there: my rifle, combat vest with five magazines, flashlight, canteen, radio, med-kit, night vision goggles. All good. Now I just sit back and watch the fence.

Monday, 22:00

God, this is boring. Every time I finish a shift I forget just how mind numbingly dull sitting up here is. Mosquitoes are fucking driving me insane. What the hell did Anderson do to the chair? How can plastic be this uncomfortable? It wasn't this lumpy yesterday, I swear. Nine more hours of this shit. God dammit.

Monday, 23:30

Noises coming from the facility, sounds a bit like drums. Maybe the eggheads are starting a band, and I'm here to guard their sweet grooves. Heh.

Tuesday, 00:30

The noises are getting louder. Those are definitely drums, and I'm starting to hear this eerie chant too. What the hell are they doing in there?

Tuesday, 01:15

Silence again. Whatever they did, it's over now. I hope.

Tuesday, 01:30

Alarms! The entire facility is lighting up like a Christmas tree. Those spooks they keep to handle inner security are all riled up, swarming the entire perimeter with their jeeps. Radio is going apeshit too, but it's all code words. They even launched a chopper. Anderson was

right, they were messing with something in there. Whatever it is, it's none of my business. I'm outer security, just a grunt. Better just sit tight, obey my orders and stay the hell out of the way. The spooks are going inside. They'll fix everything, nothing for me to worry about.

Tuesday, 01:50
They aren't coming out. Everything went quiet again, but no one has come out. All the lights are out too, that's not supposed to happen. It's okay, the spooks are probably just getting things under control, everything's cool. Oh God, what the fuck is going on inside?! Radio is totally silent. Something is very wrong here. Maybe I should climb down, sneak away before whatever did the spooks in gets me too. Wait, what's that? Someone is coming out. Jesus, that's a relief. Wait, that doesn't look like the spooks. Better turn night vision on. What is that thing?

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The stone of the watchtower is cold beneath my fingers. Was it always stone? It must have been, this tower has been here for centuries. Why am I remembering metal? The solitude must be playing tricks on my mind. Being a royal scout is no easy task, but I perform it gladly. The King will be proud.
What's that? A horn! Scanning the road, I see a group of footmen making their way to my tower, carrying the royal standard and forming a protective ring around a majestic figure. Why, it's the King himself, here in my humble tower! What on earth is he doing here? A man approaches the tower, wearing the uniform of the royal guard.

"Good scout, the realm requires your services! In the name of the King, attend!"

I hurry to do as I was commanded. In the back of my head, a little voice whispers "Don't. You have orders. Something is wrong here", but I ignore it. How can serving the wise King be wrong? He is our just ruler, our savior. "Good sir knight, how may I assist your party?"

The knight had a grim look in his eyes. "I fear we come bearing grave news. The castle has fallen to the forces of the Adversary. We

barely managed to rescue the King before we were overwhelmed and forced to flee. The Prince and Queen were killed during our escape. Now, we require your help and that of your cohorts to show us a safe way through the border. We already have them here." Indeed they have. Capian and Andres, my loyal friends, are among the party. "Very well," I say, "We must make haste before the Adversary and his minions arrive." Suddenly, the call of a dread horn. Too late!

The knight hears it too. "To arms, men, protect the King with your life!" We form a protective ring around the King, as the wretched forces of the Adversary descend upon us. Flying beasts with glowing eyes and fiery breath, hulking, crawling behemoths with skin like steel, chitinous footmen that scream at us in their alien tongue. They are trying to capture us alive, but we won't let them, we all know what they do to captives. We fight to the death, for the King! I raise my bow and take a foot soldier through the eye, and see Andres fall, a poison barb in his neck. Capian is taken down with a raw shock of power by one of their mages. I feel a sting in my neck, and see that I am the only one left standing, save for the King himself. He fights with the force of a typhoon, felling foul beasts left and right, ripping the behemoths to shreds with his mighty sword, even cutting a flyer from the sky, but they are too many. He falls, his body pierced with dozens of metal barbs. My tears are the last thing I see as the world turns dark.

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"RthgEtTn Dra'k! NoR MoStdyX!"
A figure dressed in writhing shadows, its tongue demonic. The Adversary.
"I will never betray my King! Begone, cruel revenant."
"SRoTn, caBn yoEu heaWr meU?"
Not shadows. Black fabric. Wait, I think I'm beginning to understand…
"Son, do you understand me? Can you tell me who you are?"
"I am Veron Pennoren, proud scout of the-" No, that isn't right- "I… I'm Vernon Penn, sir. I think."
The man smiles, he seems relieved.
"I think this one is going to be okay. Leave him here for now, let him

recuperate. I'll arrange for some class-Bs. Everything is going to be alright, son, Just lie down and relax. It's over."
Yeah, that sounds like a good idea.

Sunday, 07:00
Last shift is finally over. I can't believe it's been six months already. Time to leave this dirt hole behind and finally catch that plane. I can't believe they paid me so much just to sit on my ass and stare at a fence.

Guiser's Night

Doctor Moore took off her glasses and rubbed her eyes again. The last handful of aspirin hadn't taken effect yet, and the glare from the three monitors was piercing her throbbing headache with an acute pain she felt sharply behind her right eye. The sterile white paint of the cell walls somehow looked brighter through the security cameras. A muted cacophony of intermittent beeps, digital tones and industrial machinery laced through the background of the observation chamber. SCP-480 required intensive monitoring and staff attention at all times, but what really made these shifts hard was that there was never anything visible in 480's holding cell. The mixture of fear and intense boredom was stultifying. Dr. Moore shook her head and tried in vain to regain her lost focus.

"Moore. I need the infrared spectrography variance," wheezed Dr. Hirsch.

Dr. Moore started. Where were the numbers? Why couldn't she remember which monitor?

"Uh, just a second, sir."

Dr. Hirsch fumbled in his labcoat for a package of Camels. The ting of a Zippo was somehow audible through the background noise. He took a long drag on his cigarette, and exhaled a stream of smoke that doubled as a sigh. "C'mon Moore. The breach wasn't even three weeks ago. Infrared. What is it?"

Squinting at the middle screen, Dr. Moore carefully moved her finger along screens of various scrolling data. At last. "Five seven three sigma eighteen point three. Don't smoke those in here, they're bad for the equipment and they give me a headache."

Dr. Hirsch consulted his tablet and punched in a few numbers. "We're in quite a lot of trouble if a little smoke can take down a Class Two rad-hardened EMP-shielded workstation, Moore. And you've

got headaches because you sleep two hours a night. I told you to take an extra month off."

"There's too much work, sir."

Dr. Hirsch punched more numbers into the tablet. "Yeah, yeah there is. But you're not doing me any favors like this, Ellen. Or yourself. I've tried asking nicely, but I'm ordering you, as your superior, to take some damn time off. Effective immediately."

Dr. Moore stood up quickly from her chair. "But I've just gotten back! SCP-480 is a unique and dangerous-"

"Yes, it is what it is, Doctor," said Dr. Hirsch, "and you're an important part of keeping it here. But as you yourself know, we need everyone at one hundred percent. I need you to go home, Ellen. Take care of your mom. Take care of yourself. And I don't want to see you back here until you've had a full week of eight hours a night."

"But-"

"No. No arguments. We've got Ramirez from Site-23 to help us cover for now. You're an integral part of containment, Doctor, and I need you at your best."

Dr. Moore felt the initial anger drain away. Replacing it was the realization that Dr. Hirsch was correct, followed by a wave of exhaustion that she could no longer hold at bay.

She logged her ID out of the terminal, gathered her personal effects, and headed to the antechamber. As the door closed behind her, Dr. Hirsch called after her.

"Hey. Ellen. Halloween tonight," he said. He mimicked a steering wheel with his hands, the cigarette dangling from his mouth. "Watch out for trick-or-treaters."

Dr. Moore managed a weary smile and a wave goodbye, and headed into the security checkpoint. The doors closed behind her. She hung up her labcoat, and unbuttoned the top button of her blouse. She placed the leads of the wall-mounted ECG monitor on

her chest, and waited expectantly by a speaker mounted next to the monitor. The familiar automated voice soon greeted her.

"Initiating memetic containment protocols. Please state the approved passcode."

Dr. Moore cleared her throat and spoke into a small microphone next to the ECG monitor. "At no point during the last shift has SCP-480 made contact with me."

Seconds passed. Dr. Moore had begun to stand up to head out, but the doors remained closed. The automated voice spoke.

"Vital signs incorrect. Please state the approved passcode."

Dr. Moore shrugged. She resolved to call Security in to calibrate the ECG when she returned. She repeated the passcode into the microphone. This time, the automatic security doors opened. She removed the leads, and headed outside the facility, into the fading sunlight of the late afternoon.

She sat in her car, parked in the driveway and watching the window above the garage. It was dark enough now that the light in the window made the room clearly visible from the outside. The light shone the brighter for the lack of a working streetlight, out of commission for two months now, she noted to herself ruefully. To Dr. Moore, rural living meant hour-long commutes and waiting interminably for maintenance to such niceties of civilization as paved roads and electricity. She understood why Site-415 had to be where it was, but cursed her lot in the countryside once more. Her head was swimming. Why had she tried to go back so soon? Alan was right. Tired researchers meant casualties in her line of work. Or worse.

The light in the window suddenly blinked out. Dr. Moore heaved herself out of her car and finally made her way inside her house.

"She spent most of the day sleeping, so no changes there." The nurse put on her coat as Dr. Moore stepped in through the front door. "Dosage on her pain meds is steady. I changed her sheets

and cleaned everything out. Not much improvement, but it's not getting any worse."

Dr. Moore nodded as she slumped in a chair in the kitchen. "Thanks Juana. Did…did…" She gestured futilely towards the staircase as she leaned her forehead against her hand, searching for words.

"Your mother?" Juana raised an eyebrow slightly.

"Yeah. Mom. Did she say anything while I was out?"

The nurse shook her head. "Nothing I could make out, anyhow. You know the doctors, though. They say she's lucky to be breathing unassisted after what happened."

"Yeah. Lucky." Dr. Moore took off her own coat. "Definitely. Thanks again, Juana. I think I might be taking some more time off. So why don't we say Tuesday next time."

Dr. Moore lay her head down on the table. She turned to look over to the nurse, and noticed that she was mouthing something. Puzzled, she sat up. Juana finished mouthing whatever it was she was pretending to be saying, then headed for the front door. Had she been speaking? The door closed, and the familiar sound seemed too loud to Dr. Moore. Too many echoes. She shook her head and headed upstairs to her mother's room.

Most of the room was taken up now with IV drips, heart monitors, a hospital bed and assorted medical equipment, displacing the desk and bookshelves of Dr. Moore's former study. A small, wizened form slept in the midst of a nest of tubes and wires. With the exception of a tangled mass of white hair on the pillow and a sallow, wrinkled arm covered in bruises hanging from the side, one may have easily overlooked that a person occupied this space. Dr. Moore stood in the doorway.

"So." She sighed. "Hi mom."

The arm shifted slightly, rustling a small portion of the tubes and wires.

"Right then. I'm going to be across the hall-"

She was interrupted by a gurgling, wheezing sound from the hospital bed. The low, guttural sound was reminiscent of labored breathing, except it seemed much too slow to be regular breathing. Dr. Moore winced. Her mother would make this sound for hours on end sometimes. Usually in the middle of the night. The doctors were unsure whether it was voluntary, just as they were unsure how much higher brain activity was still occurring. There was nothing for it except to wait. Nothing for any of it except to wait. She stepped out of the room, deciding to wait a little while before a futile attempt at sleep.

A knocking at the door woke her up from the kitchen table. She had fallen asleep onto the newspaper. Groggily, Dr. Moore looked at the wall clock - 8:30 pm. Who could be knocking at the door now? She vaguely remembered that it was Halloween, but no children ever came out as far as her house; the nearest neighbor was a quarter-mile away. The knock came again, three light but insistent raps. Dr. Moore looked through the peephole in the door. There was only darkness.

She kept looking through the glass, straining to see something before opening to the door.

Rap. Rap. Rap.

Dr. Moore jumped backwards instantly as something pale and white obscured her vision of the peephole, and the knocking continued. Her heart pounding, she backed her way into the kitchen, feeling behind her for the knife block on the counter as she was moving, never taking her eyes off the door. Something was not right here. Not right at all.

Rap. Rap. Rap.

The knocking continued. Again, it was soft, but clearly someone was knocking on the door. Dr. Moore never had visitors other than her mother and Juana, and no one had ever bothered to come looking for candy on Halloween in the eight years she'd lived there. Surely whoever this was would get the hint.

Rap. Rap. Rap.

This was going on too long. Something was terribly wrong. Dr. Moore drew the largest chef's knife out of the block. She waited for the knocking to continue.

And waited.

Two minutes passed, her pulse pounding in her temples and in her grip on the knife. Then another two minutes. Nothing. Dr. Moore started to move, slowly, back towards the front door.

SLAM!

An impact like a sledgehammer shook the entire house, and the door rattled on its hinges. A picture down the hall fell off the wall and crashed with the sound of breaking glass. Dr. Moore thought she had screamed, but couldn't hear herself over the noise of the impact. From upstairs, her mother's labored breathing started in earnest. She didn't dare to look through the peephole now.

SLAM!

The door was starting to give way now. Plates fell from cupboards and lamps tipped over. Dr. Moore could only see the knife in her hand through her terror-narrowed tunnel vision. Phone. She must reach the phone. They'd never arrive in time. She needed the phone.

SLAM!

The gurgling from upstairs was now a drawn out, hitching rattle, droning without pause. Dr. Moore ran for the phone in the living room.

SLAM!

The door was flung open now. She heard it slam into the hall closet. The droning of her dying mother filled her ears. She reached for the phone frantically. As she touched the receiver, darkness washed over her.

"Zanitz, get in here! Hurry, now! Stabilize! Stabilize, god damn it! I need all personnel on-"

A knocking at the door woke her up from the kitchen table. She had fallen asleep onto her book. She looked at the cover. "Secure and Protected Homes: A Locksmith's Guide," by Dennis Rader. She hadn't remembered starting to read this one.

Groggily, Dr. Moore looked at the wall clock - 9:48 pm. Who could be knocking at the door now? She vaguely remembered that it was Halloween, but no children ever came out as far as her house; the nearest neighbor was a half-mile away. The sound came again. Three slow, heavy knocks. Dr. Moore looked through the peephole in the door. A small, disheveled woman stood on her doorstep. Her face was obscured by a white mass of hair. Dr. Moore squinted; was she wearing a hospital gown?

Hesitantly, she opened the door. An elderly woman stood, her back to Dr. Moore. Despite the cold, she was indeed dressed in no more than a hospital gown.

The doctor paused. It couldn't be. "…hello?"

The old woman stood there, her back still to the doctor. She stood perfectly still.

No possible way. She was upstairs, she couldn't have moved from her bed without help, let alone downstairs and outside. But there was no mistaking the wiry white hair. Dr. Moore put her hand on the old woman's shoulder. The woman instantly crumpled to the ground in a heap. As the old woman hit the ground, Dr. Moore could hear several of her bones snapping, and a hollow, wet ripping sound. The woman's hip had been bent at an impossible angle, and she lay in an inexplicably mangled state. Dr. Moore leapt back in horror, the blood instantly drained from her face.

The familiar, hitching gurgling started to come from upstairs. How was this possible? Who was this at the door?

The broken form at the doorstep started to twitch. Muffled grinding

and splintering sounds came from the old stranger's corpse as broken limbs started to move again. The overwhelming smell of freshly butchered meat hit Dr. Moore, though there was no blood visible from the strange old woman. The corpse's head suddenly snapped upwards. Though its face was still obscured, Dr. Moore knew it was staring straight at her.

"Hssssssshh. HUUUUURRRRK. Hsssssssshh."

Her mother's persistent death rattle now greeted her face to face. The corpse slowly rose, pulled upwards by an unseen force, its twisted and broken legs now barely brushing the ground as it came eye level to Dr. Moore.

"HUUUUUUURRRKK."

Dr. Moore spun around at the sound behind her. Her mother's face had been mangled beyond recognition. The only recognizable feature was the mouth.

"HUUUUURRRRKK."

The doctor opened her mouth to scream, but no air could escape the grasp around her throat as an unseen pair of hands choked her from behind. Unconsciousness immediately followed.

"Nonessential personnel are out of the sub-wing. It looks like we've got the source of the breach, doctor."

"Jesus. Check for vitals, but be careful."

A knocking sound woke her up from the kitchen table. She had fallen asleep on top of a large sheaf of papers. Confused, she picked up the first page. The ink was smeared from where her face had come to rest. The first line was hard to read. The second paragraph started with "mind the infrared settings." She remembered saying that earlier today. She looked closer. The entire paragraph was a conversation she had had this morning with Technician Wei. It was written in her own handwriting. She didn't

remember writing this down at all.

Dr. Moore looked at the wall clock - 11:58 pm. How had she slept so long?

The knocking started again. Someone was knocking on the glass coffee table in the living room. Her stomach dropped and a chill seized her extremities. The breath stopped in her chest. She slowly approached the living room.

The room was dark, but the children were easy to make out in their crude white sheets. Somehow, three kids in stereotypical ghost costumes had gotten into her house. Some of the fear faded, as she now remembered that it was Halloween, but confusion set in; no children ever came out as far as her house for Halloween; the nearest neighbor was at least two miles away. And why were they in her house?

"If this is your idea of a prank, kids, it isn't funny. I'm going to need parents' phone numbers right-"

The three diminutive, costumed figures traveled quickly to her. She didn't see any legs move, nor did she understand how they moved so fast. Two of the children slammed into Dr. Moore, knocking her off her feet and onto the ground. The third moved next to her head. A withered, gnarled arm reached out of its costume's eyehole and seized her by the jaw. Up close, she saw spotted, red stains starting to show through the immaculate, bright white of the costume sheets.

One of the kids that had knocked her down now lept on top of her midsection. Bony, wrinkled legs now protruded from the bottom of its costume, wrapping around her and pinning her to the floor with a tremendous weight that could not have possibly belonged to the wasted body that these legs must have been supporting. Rivulets of blood started to run down its thighs, soaking into Dr. Moore's shirt.

Her hands still free, Dr. Moore struggled desperately to pry loose the grip on her jaw, but to no avail. The hand was locked onto her, its strength overpowering.

The last costumed figure slowly hovered into her view. It appeared

to bend down and look into her eyes, though she couldn't see anything through the blackness of the costume's eyeholes. Another withered arm reached out from under the sheet, holding a pair of pliers. The wrinkled fingers slowly worked the pliers open and closed, moving them slowly towards Dr. Moore's face. As the hand came closer, a wheezing came from whoever was under the sheet.

"Hssssssshhhh. HUUUUUURRRRKKKK."

The costumed child forced the pliers into Dr. Moore's mouth.

"HUUUUUUUURRRKKKKK. Hsssssssshhhhh. HUUUUUUUUURRRRRK."

As several of her incisors were violently twisted from her lower jaw, Dr. Moore tried to scream, but the blood quickly filled her mouth. She couldn't breathe. She felt several more teeth from her upper jaw being wrenched free. There was nothing but pain and the taste of copper. Her mind rebelled, and she lost consciousness.

"So you're saying we have to keep her like this?"

"Dr. Hirsch. Alan. You know the protocols. She did too. She helped write them."

"Do you have any idea what's happening to her right now? In there?"

"The last host bought us eighteen months of unbroken containment for 480. You of all people know what that's worth, Alan."

"You cannot do this! No one-"

"Site Director's orders. Your euthanization request is denied. Dr. Hirsch. And that's the end of it."

A knocking sound woke her up from the kitchen table. She had fallen asleep on top of a manila envelope.

Had she imagined the knocking? She looked at the envelope that had been under her face. "For Ellen," labeled on the front in

typeface. She didn't remember taking this home with her.

She opened the envelope. As she shook the contents out onto the table, a pile of photographs came tumbling out, scattering onto the table and the floor.

Groggily, Dr. Moore looked at the wall clock - 1:05 am. She had the vague notion that she had slept through Halloween. She felt a small amount of guilt about not being able to greet anyone at the door, but then remembered that she never had any trick-or-treaters. Still, she pitied any children who may have come out as far as her house, only to be turned away.

She picked up a photograph from the table. Instantly, she recognized her own face. What was she wearing here? Why didn't she remember taking this picture? And why was she making that hideous expression?

Dr. Moore picked up another photograph. It was another picture of herself. She was in a hospital bed, hooked up to what looked like dozens of machines. Men in labcoats were visible on either side of her. Who were these people? Why couldn't she remember taking these pictures?

As she reached for another photograph, the pile of pictures jumped as something knocked three times, in rapid succession, from under the opposite end of the table.

Tales H

Habil and Qabil

Surveillance Report Mu-4, 26/12/2017:

During routine online investigation for anomalous content, our dark web crawler (EmoSpiderMan.aic) discovered a web series entitled "Habil and Qabil" which constitutes an extreme breach of Foundation security.

"Habil and Qabil" is a sitcom explicitly set at Site 17 and stars numerous characters based on actual SCPs within the Foundation's possession, primarily scips whose SCP designations are lower than 1000[1].

The two main characters are **SCP-076-2** and **SCP-073**. Despite the title of the show using their Quranic names, the characters are always referred to as Cain and Able within the show itself. They are depicted as an 'Odd Couple' attempting to get along despite their differences.

There is also some degree of estrangement between the two, which is not directly dealt with until the first season finale. Each episode is approximately 22 minutes long, including opening and closing credits. Aside from the show's title, the credits are in an unknown language of glyphs that has yet to be identified or deciphered, although they do have a superficial similarity to the markings on **SCP-076-1**.

The actors portraying Cain and Able do bear a strong resemblance to SCP-076-2 and SCP-073, however numerous differences have been observed. Cain's mark is inaccurate, and his prosthetics appear to be low quality CGI. Able's tattoos are also inaccurate, apparently redesigned to be more aesthetically pleasing, and are inconsistent between episodes. He also carries his bladed weapons with him at all times and does not possess the ability to summon them in the matter of SCP-076-2.

Other main characters based off SCPs include:

- **SCP-191** "Cybie". Like Cain, her prosthetics appear to be computer generated and are not 100 percent accurate. Notably, she appears to possess a voicebox whereas the real 191 does not and typically communicates by interfacing with available devices. The character possesses a stereotypical robot voice intended to comically contrast with her nature as an extremely stereotypical preteen girl. Unlike SCP-191, the character is highly exuberant and does not appear to suffer any psychological or mental trauma from her abduction and subsequent mutilation. Her friendship with SCP-134, however, is depicted fairly accurately.

- **SCP-134** "Stella". The effect for her eyes is again low-quality CGI. As is common for fictional depictions of the disabled, she is portrayed as more helpless than she actually is. Though the character is blind, SCP-134's high-functioning autism appears to be absent.

- **SCP-105** "Iris". She is infatuated with Able, and most of her appearances involve her trying to get him to reciprocate her affection. While MTF Omega-7 is mentioned in multiple episodes, Alpha-9 is not, possibly indicating that the series is set in between these two time periods. It also appears that the destruction of Containment Area 25a never occurred, with Omega-7 simply disbanding due to Able 'burning out', which may explain his atypical non-violent demeanour in the series.

- **SCP-507** "Grabnok the Destroyer". His jumps to other realities are much more frequent and shorter in nature, sometimes occurring multiple time per episode. He also insists on everyone calling him Grabnok the Destroyer, whereas the real SCP-507 only requested this once in jest and has objected to the fact that his file lists this as a suitable moniker for him.

As of the writing of this document, neither Artificially Intelligent Conscripts or Foundation personnel have been able to identify any of the actors or locations that appear in "Habil and Qabil".

The video hosting site featuring "Habil and Qabil" has been shut down, and a multi-platform software patch has been sent out to

automatically delete downloads and detect video streams of the series. Unfortunately, Intelligence has come to the conclusion that the series originates from an anomalous cloud computing network utilized by the Serpent's Hand, simply referred to as the **"The Dark Web"**. For reasons that have yet to be determined, Foundation agents are unable to access this network.

Infiltrating and ultimately shutting down this anomalous network is currently the primary objective for containment of "Habil and Qabil", and likely other equally (if not greater) security breaches.

All currently available episodes of "Habil and Qabil" have been downloaded and are stored on an encrypted external hard drive, kept within a security locker at Site-15. Below is a summary of Season 1 episodes of "Habil and Qabil" compiled by numerous Foundation personnel with the appropriate clearance.

> **Episode # 101, "Pilot"**
>
> **Synopsis:** Cain is going about his typical routine at Site 17 when he is called to reception, where Able is waiting. Able has been transferred from Site 19 on the flimsy pretext that since he hasn't gone on a killing spree for a while it is no longer worth the cost of keeping him in a high-security facility. Able insists on heading to the canteen so that he can use **SCP-458**. Once they have the box, Cain goes about the task of familiarizing Able with Site 17.
>
> They join a tea party with Cybie, Stella, several instances of **SCP-1926**, and a life-sized living doll which is never identified but may be intended to be **SCP-706**. Able ruins the party with his morbid and nihilistic dialogue, and his inability to grasp the concept of imaginary tea.
>
> Grabnok is awestruck to meet Able and immediately challenges him to tic-tac-toe. Able declines, but says he would be willing to play Risk with him if he has a board. Grabnok eagerly accepts. While this is happening, Iris is pressing Cain for information about Able, specifically anything that might help them get back together.

Grabnok 'jumps' during their game.

While Able is waiting for him to return, Iris attempts to flirt with him, only to become enraged and flip their board over when he claims not to remember her. Cain attempts to have a serious conversation with Able to find out what's going on but makes little progress. Grabnok returns in an Easter Bunny costume and accuses Able of being of sore sport for flipping over the board.

Foundation Commentary: SCP-076-2 has always been primarily contained at Containment Area 25a/b, and keeping him at Site 19 would pose an unacceptable risk of a mass containment breach. This risk was demonstrated when he was on assignment at Site 19 with MTF Omega-7 and caused a mass containment breach. Twice. On the same day.

Episode # 102, "You've Been Spelling My Name Wrong All These Years!"

Synopsis: While filling out paperwork related to his transfer, Able discovers that the Foundation spells his name A-B-L-E, and he insists it's supposed to be spelt A-B-E-L. A DMV style episode ensues wherein he and Grabnok deal with the Foundation's bureaucracy in attempting to get their names officially changed to Abel and Grabnok the Destroyer. They both fail and realize that their official names don't matter as much as how they view themselves.

There is a secondary plot where **SCP-1370** is accidentally set loose in Site 17 with Cain and Iris trying to capture it. The most notable scene is when SCP-1370 tries to attack Stella and Cybie, but due to its incompetence, they fail to realize it's trying to hurt them. They treat it like a doll and get it to accept the name of Princess Priscilla Pie.

Foundation Commentary: For those who may be curious, when SCP-076-2 was asked if he had a name,

he simply replied 'Able'. When asked how to spell it, he merely growled. The interviewer just wrote it down as the English word able, perhaps not making the connection to the biblical Abel, and that's how we've spelt it ever since. If SCP-076-2 ever had an issue with this, he never said anything.

Episode # 103, "Pandora's Box"

Synopsis: After Grabnok once again jumps during a game of Risk with Able, Iris offers to take his place. Able reluctantly accepts. The two discuss their past (Able admitting he was lying about not remembering her), focusing mainly on their relationship while glossing over their actual work in Omega-7.

Able confesses that sometime during his tenure with Omega-7 he lost his passion for killing, and that may have had something to do with her, and he's not sure if that makes him love her or hate her. She tells him to either come fuck her or kill her when he figures it out. Gragnok reappears covered in flour and exclaims they tried to bake him into a cake.

The secondary plot involves Cain trying to teach his native language to the girls, only to accidentally summon a Keter-class lifeform.

Foundation Commentary: As SCP-076-02 official psychological profile makes clear, Able has no interest in either sexual or romantic relationships and was never known to engage in either. He did, however, show SCP-105 an uncharacteristic amount of respect after she managed to defeat him in a contest of anomalous skills, which may be the closest thing to love he's capable of feeling.

Episode # 104, "My Primary Function Is Failure"

Synopsis: Cybie confesses to Stella that she feels inferior to Cain since she's just a regular cyborg,

whereas he is a magic cyborg "Cursed by the God of Abraham and forged by the dark and powerful alchemy of an ancient and bloodthirsty race whose very existence had to be wiped from history to safeguard our reality from their unquenchable conquest!".

She attempts to emulate several of Cain's abilities and becomes depressed when she fails to do so. Cain comforts her by pointing out all the things she can do (mostly computer related) that he can't.

The secondary plot involves Cain, Iris, and Grabnok each trying to convince Able to move into their room with them, as he had hitherto been sleeping in the common room. He chooses Grabnok since he doesn't have a history with him.

Foundation Commentary: The Foundation Archeological and Anthropological departments have yet to prove or disprove this episode's account of SCP-073's origins.

Episode # 105, "Shy Guy's Night Out!"

Synopsis: Able tells Cain that he's bored and demand that they and Grabnok have a guys night out (it's treated as a joke that the security at Site 17 is so minimal the residents can essentially leave at will). When Iris attempts to tag along, Able gives her a photo of **SCP-096**, which immediately enters its hostile state and comes after her.

Iris is forced to use her abilities to prevent 096 from reaching her, necessitating she remain focused on the photo constantly. This comprises the secondary plot of the episode.

The first bar the guys go to has too much wooden furniture which Cain inadvertently destroys. They then go to a single's bar where Able attempts to act as a wingman for Cain and Grabnok, but all attempts at

flirtation end disastrously. Their third stop is a Karaoke bar, and their singing is so terrible that they are chased off stage and forced to flee.

The next scene is set the following night where the guys are with Cybie and Stella in the common room watching Finding Nemo, accepting that this is where they're most comfortable. An exhausted and dishevelled Iris comes in angrily and throws the photo of 096 back at Able, saying she had to fight it for 27 hours before it gave up. She storms out when Able does not apologize.

Able looks at the photo, and we cut to 096 wailing and clawing at its face but making no attempt to escape, indicating that it has failed to defeat Able in the past. Able smirks smugly.

Foundation Commentary: The computer-generated depiction of SCP-096 does not induce a response and may be viewed safely. Though SCP-096 did surrender after battling SCP-682 for 27 hours, this was the only such incident and it is unknown if this truly does represent an upper limit for its hostile state. Requests for further testing on this matter had been unanimously and consistently denied by both the O5 Council and the Ethics Committee for security and budgetary reasons, respectively.

Episode # 106, "Able And Grabnok Travel The Multiverse!"

Synopsis: Able inadvertently touches Grabnok while he's jumping, getting pulled along to an alternate universe. Unlike the actual SCP-507, Grabnok apparently has a few seconds of warning before he jumps and can tell Able when to grab onto him.

They end up going through multiple universes before finally returning to their base reality. Grabnok apologizes, but Able tells him it was the most fun he's had in a while and might tag along with him again sometime.

The secondary plot involves Iris trying to get Cain to eat some vegetables (eating healthier despite being immortal), with predictable results.

Foundation Commentary: All the universes shown in this episode are alternate realities either documented by SCP-507 or otherwise known to the Foundation. At one point they visit the reality associated with **SCP-093**, and Able fights off several of the Unclean while Grabnok frequently shouts at him to "Go for the legs!" (the Unclean do not have legs).

Episode # 107, "This Is Why We Stopped Cross Testing!"

Synopsis: Grabnok decides to run SCP-458 through **SCP-914** on it's 'very fine' setting, in the hopes of getting more than just pizza out of it. The box becomes a Pizza Hut box, and is also fully sapient, as are the pizzas it spawns.

The Pizzas attempt to overthrow Humanity as the dominant life form on earth. Able defeats all the Pizzas but is unable to destroy the box, so they stick it back in SCP-914 and turn it back to normal.

The secondary plot involves Iris attempting to explain 'the birds and the bees' to Cybie and Stella, which quickly becomes inappropriate, as well as involving far too much of her relationship with Able.

Foundation Commentary: While SCP-458 appears in every episode as an 'easter egg' this is the first and only occasion where it is a major plot point. Of particular interest is the fact that every time a cast member uses SCP-458, it produces the actual favourite pizza of the SCP they are based on. In fact, SCP-458 is the only SCP in this series with no noticeable inaccuracies. It is suspected that one of "Habil and Qabil's" producers may have an obsession with this SCP object.

Episode # 108, "The Ultimate Showdown of Ultimate Destiny!"

Synopsis: This episode is nearly entirely CGI. It's set in a WWE style fighting ring. The returning champion is **SCP-682**, who must defend his title against former challengers **SCP-173**, 076-2 and 096, as well as newcomers SCPs **029**, **035**, **049** and **106**.

Able's behaviour in this episode is similar to Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson's during his wrestling career. The referee is a man wearing **SCP-963**, **SCP-166** serves as a ring girl, and the announcer is **SCP-2337**, who provides a largely incomprehensible commentary.

There are three rounds where 682 takes on its opponents in tag teams (Able and 029, 173 and 096, and 049 with 106 wearing 035 for part of the round) and a final free for all which includes **SCP-1048** and a large number of its duplicates.

Before a victor can be declared numerous Foundation security personnel break into the ring and recontain all SCPs. Able's persona changes to Terry Malloy, complaining about how he could have been a contender.

The show then cuts to a live action shot of Able who says "And that's what my life at Site 19 was like." The other characters stare at him blankly for a moment before Grabnok says "Bullshit."

Foundation Commentary: Inaccuracies are numerous but include 173 being able to move while in line-of-sight of other SCPs, 096 only attacking 682 despite other SCPs being able to see its face, and 106 using portals in a manner similar to Chell from the video game *Portal*. SCP-2337 is probably the most accurate portrayal, as it is extremely loud and irritating.

Episode # 109, "Keter Duty"

Synopsis: A newly captured Keter-class entity resembling an oversized blobfish[2] is brought to Site 17 for temporary containment, and Cain and Able are assigned to look after it until it can be moved elsewhere. The entity is relatively docile but notices that there's a good deal of tension between its two guards.

It eventually gets them arguing with each other over whose fault it was they've been estranged for so many millennia and uses the chance to escape and kill thousands.

The secondary plot involves Cybie catching a virus and experiencing numerous malfunctions that the others have to deal with until she recovers.

Foundation Commentary: This episode was atypically violent, with the Keter entity eating most of its victims until it eventually exploded.

Episode # 110, "Data Expunged[3]"

Synopsis: Grabnok attempts to get Cain to reveal various pieces of classified information to him, by offering him insights into Able's psyche he has gained during their friendship.

Grabnok proves extremely gullible, as Cain is able to convince him that **SCP-447** causes dead bodies to do the monster mash, 110-Montauk is making **SCP-231-7** listen to Nickelback, and that **SCP-055** is really just a leak in an amnestic storage tank that no one can remember to fix.

In exchange, Grabnok tells him that Able thinks a lot about their childhood on their parents' farmstead, wishes he could have it back, but that's not enough to forgive Cain for what he did. Cain nods sadly and leaves to attend his duties.

In the secondary plot, Able and Iris take the girls to the

Site's library, where Cybie finds a children's illustrated bible and asks if Able's the same one from the book. He replies no since their names are spelt differently apparently, but his violent reaction to Abel's murder implies that he is.

Foundation Commentary: No, Nickelback is not involved in Procedure 110-Montauk. That is not why monitoring personnel are permitted to turn the audio off.

Episode # 111, "The LOL Foundation"

Synopsis: The staff put the main characters through different tests, ostensibly to learn more about them but really just to torment with them. Many of these tests involve killing D-class for no apparent reason.

Grabnok is the one to finally snap and lead an uprising of SCPs against the Foundation. He easily gains control of the site's nuclear bomb and threatens to detonate it unless his demands are met.

As his demands are basically that the staff conduct themselves according to actual Foundation protocols and policies, they are granted. Everything goes back to normal, except that Site 17 now has a Taco Tuesday.

Foundation Commentary: It is advised not to show this episode to D-class who have been in service for under a month, as it makes multiple morbid jokes regarding the alleged monthly termination of D-class personnel. Reinforcing this rumour to new D-classes would likely negatively affect their performance.

Episode # 112, "049, 049, 049!!!!!!"

Synopsis: This episode is unusual and that it focuses on a Foundation researcher, Dr. Locke, training a group of new junior researchers. Dr. Locke attempts to show the young researchers some of the more obscure SCPs, only to become frustrated with their obsession with the

main cast and other 'classic' SCPs.

Eventually they encounter SCP-049, who claims to have wandered over from Site 19 to collect on a wager regarding the most recent Ultimate Showdown. The new researchers all clamour for him to say "I am the cure", and are elated when he obliges.

At this point Dr. Locke starts ranting at SCP-049, pointing out how his costume is not historically accurate and how hammy his dialogue is. SCP-049 responds with "Good sir, my cure is most effective", much to the delight of the young researchers.

Dr. Locke punches SCP-049 in the face, and the episode ends.

Foundation Commentary: The junior researchers often cite the ratings of their favourite SCPs to justify why they're the best. To clarify, the actual purpose of the database's rating system is [DATA EXPUNGED].

Episode # 113, "Please, Contain Yourself"

Synopsis: While looking after the girls, Able becomes frustrated with Stella's limitations and physically hits her. He's immediately horrified and runs off. The cast goes looking for him, and Cain eventually finds Able in the basement, having constructed a rudimentary containment area for himself using the furniture.

Able claims that he doesn't belong at Site 17 and that he should be back at 19 with the other monsters. He says that ever since the death of Agent , he's been feeling more empathy for people and less rage until it eventually got to the point he couldn't even kill anymore. He's still dangerous to everyone though, so he should stay locked up in SCP-076-1 forever.

Cain says that that's how he felt after he murdered Able all those millennia ago, and why he now dedicates

himself to helping others as much as possible. A monster in a cage is still a monster, and if Able wishes for redemption he'll have to earn, but Cain is willing to help.

Able accepts his brother's offer and goes to apologize. Stella accepts, but she and Cybie assault him with pillows as fair retribution. The camera pulls out and focuses on an aquarium containing **SCP-1867** who says "And that my friends is how Doctor Wondertainment learned the true value of Transcendental Meditation. Goodnight."

Foundation Commentary: This episode appears to have been an attempt at 'a very special episode'. Quite frankly, such a portrayal of SCP-076-2 is disrespectful to the countless staff and civilians terminated by it. It was also somewhat jarring when compared to the overall tone of the series. It is suspected the producers had exhausted their CGI budget at this point in the series, as Cain and Cybie have minimal screen time and when they are present are shot from strategic angles to obscure the view of their prosthetics.

The general consensus among Foundation researchers is that it is highly unlikely whoever was funding this will order a second season.

Footnotes
1. According to the original website, this is because they proved most popular with focus groups
2.Psychrolutes marcidus
3. To clarify, "Data Expunged" is the title of the episode. The title has not been censored by Foundation personnel.

Halloween at S & C Plastics

October 24

"I hate this holiday." Doctor Johnathan West cleaned egg off of the card-reader, swiped his ID, and entered the S & C Plastics building. Had this been any other Foundation-owned location, the jokers who had decided to plaster the site in chicken ovum (some of which smelled like it had been rotting since Easter) would've been detained. But no; instead, this was Site 87, and was in the backwoods town of… let's just call it Backwoods, and people would get suspicious of kids disappearing.

West nodded to the girl at the reception desk and took a pair of mini Twix bars out of the stainless steel bowl placed there. He noticed that someone had attached a note reading "Take Only Two" to the bowl, and had left a plastic severed hand in it. Cute, but everyone knew 330 was locked up in another site. Nothing like that would be here, and besides, they never decorated the site anyway.

He took out his Foundation-issue smartphone (quintuple encrypted, needed at least 6 different pass-codes to unlock, pain in the ass if the screen didn't respond) and checked his e-mail. He saw the invitation to the Site 87 Halloween party and automatically deleted it; after the fiasco last year, he wasn't about to go again. They'd yet to figure out who spiked the punch with E-5719, and Agent Ewell still turned yellow if you got him angry enough.

Also in his e-mail was an invitation to Dr. Pickman's online seminar regarding anomalous works of literature ("Maybe I'll go to one of Pickman's lectures when he stops being such a self-important blowhard."), a reminder from Doctor Margaret Reese in Biology that it was his turn to pick up coffee tomorrow, and something about a pool for buying Halloween candy. He shrugged, pocketed his phone, and headed for his office in the inanimate objects wing.

October 25

"Oh, come on! Twice in two days?!" Once again, Site 87's exterior was coated with eggs, and this time, toilet paper, too. The security staff were scratching their heads, but West had to give the pranksters credit, they were efficient. In the space of only a single night, they had practically mummified Site 87 with sticky egg residue and toilet paper all over. On his drive around town to the local Dunkin' Donuts, he had seen that about a quarter of the houses had been either egged, TP'd, or both. The rest were perfectly intact, with their Jack O' Lanterns grinning, their fake cobwebs untorn and the foam gravestones sticking out of their yards unbroken.

Security was baffled, nonetheless. In the break room, the guards were talking about how nobody showed up on the hidden cameras, and that eggs and rolls of Charmin were being thrown at the building from just off of the frame. When security actually went outside the building to confront the vandals, nobody was there. West had to admit that was just a *tad* disconcerting, but it was security's problem, not his.

West traveled to his office and spent the rest of the day alternately looking out his window at the cleaning crew, checking his e-mail, and attempting to concentrate on a report about E-331.

October 26

Everyone was asking the same questions all day: "How the fuck did they get on the roof?!" "And who the hell makes toilet paper rolls that long?!"

A reminder to all staff was issued that "All Halloween costumes based on Keter Class SCPs are forbidden. Most of them are classified, anyway. And yes, this does include -ahem- "sexy" costumes based off of SCP-682." West sighed at the fact that they had to be reminded of that. He remembered briefly considering taking a Class-Omega amnestic after seeing one of those aforementioned costumes at a party three, four years ago. 682 with tits was just… *wrong.*

October 27

"Sorry, West. You pulled the shortest straw. You gotta go buy the candy." West gave Dr. Reese a look, and held up his straw for comparison to the others, sighing. Melbourne was grinning like a fool, but Reese smiled at West. "C'mon. It's for the kids. And don't buy all black licorice; we want people in this town to think we're not completely evil." She handed West the money collected for the candy pool (about 400 dollars), as well as an extra 50. "The janitorial staff is running low on detergents."

"Got it. Mind if I use your van? I worked all night, and left my car in the lot…"

"Got egged?"

"Can't even see out of the windshield."

Reese handed West her keys and nodded to him on his way out.

West drove through town, noticing that there were far more houses with decorations and far fewer houses that had been vandalized… he wondered if there was a connection, and remembered he had to tell someone back at the Site about that. For now, he had to focus on getting the treats for the kids (why Site 87 decided to hand out candy annually was beyond him; something about "Community Outreach". From a supposed plastics company.) and wondering what, exactly, was so bad about black licorice. It was delicious, once you acquired the taste for it.

An hour later, he drove back to the site. It was getting dark out. As he drove down a side street, he saw, out of the corner of his eye, a roll of toilet paper being thrown at a house lacking decorations. That tore it; he was going to find out who these little pricks were. He slammed on the brakes, took out his smart phone, and… took a photograph of a toilet paper roll throwing *itself* at a house.

And then an egg came sailing at his face. He quickly ducked back into his car and drove off, cursing loudly. "I *HATE* Halloween!"

October 28

"Let me get this straight," said a research assistant from the back of the presentation hall. "Living rolls of toilet paper? And… they attack undecorated buildings?

"Pretty much," West said rubbing his eyes, "But they're just autonomous. Not alive." The photograph he took with his smartphone was on display on the projector screen behind him; the director of the site had approved the meeting at the last minute because, in her words, "If it means we stop smelling egg everywhere, it's worth it".

"It explains why the security cameras didn't see anything; there was nothing to see. Just toilet paper flying at the building from nowhere."

Dr. Reese chimed in. "And how they got onto the roof… but what about the eggs?"

"I don't know, maybe it's a poultrygeist. I honestly don't know." He looked at the picture behind him and sighed. "I hate this holiday."

"Well, what can we do? Do we attempt to incinerate them?" Everyone stared at the person who made the suggestion incredulously; it was the same research assistant, who sank in his seat. "…right, I know, Special *Containment* Procedures, not Special *Destruction* Procedures. Just a suggestion…"

"Well, firstly… I propose we attempt to catch a 'live' specimen, and then attempt to…" West sighed. "Protect ourselves from this phenomenon." He picked up a box next to him and opened it; it was full of foam gravestones, fake cobwebs, and chains of plastic skull-lights. "Right. Once we actually catch one of these things, we… decorate the site. I've asked the horticultural department to provide a number of pumpkins for those who want to do Jack O' Lanterns and you'll find decorative materials by all the entrances. Any questions?"

Reese smirked at West. "I thought you hated this holiday, Johnathan."

"Desperate times, Doctor. Any other questions?" Nobody spoke up. "Right then. Let's get to work."

October 29

"Congratulations, agent. You've managed to successfully contain a roll of Charmin and some dairy products." Dr. West watched the new E-Class Object, E-5768, through the plexiglass window. It looked ridiculous; it was a roll of toilet paper, with a dozen eggs orbiting around it. Every time an egg got broken or thrown, a new one spontaneously generated itself. Dr. West was making notes on his clipboard. "Ectoentropic properties… telekinetic in nature… and… What do you think, Ewell? Safe-class or just Anomalous Item? The latter means I have less paperwork to do…"

Agent Ewell stood next to West, with literal egg on his face. It had taken him over an hour of driving around town to capture a specimen and then he had to grab it with a butterfly net… he didn't expect eggs to come flying out of nowhere. And now, he looked like an omelet. "Sir?"

"Yes, Ewell?"

"With all due respect, there are some times when I *really* fucking hate this town."

"Could be worse. You could be assigned to active MTF duty trying to contain sapient fungus or something."

"I'd take the fungus over this place any day."

West picked up a box of plastic vampire bats and handed them to Ewell, picking up a box of orange streamers for himself. "Shut up and help me decorate; we're supposed to have the western half finished by 1600 hours."

"Yes, sir."

October 30

"Well, looks like your brilliant theory was correct, Doctor! Not a single egg or roll of paper on the building this morning!" Reese held up her coffee. "I propose a toast! " The rest of the break room all held up invisible glasses and said "Hear hear!"

West smiled amicably, running his hands through his hair. "Thank you, but there is no guarantee that the events will not occur again in another year…"

"They ain't egged us today, and that's what matters!" Matterson sighed. "Guess we can all get back to work now that we don't have to help scrape eggs off the building."

"Just in time for the party, too. Ya goin', West?" Reese grinned at the doctor.

"I don't think so, no." This was met by sarcastic boos and hisses. "Oh, so sue me if I don't want to have purple skin and blue hair until Christmas this year, too!"

"That was a fluke, West, and you know it."

"Tell that to Ewell."

"Even I'm going, despite what happened! C'mon, John, don't be a Hallowiener…" Eventually, after much encouragement and friendly jabbing, West agreed to go. He supposed he could always dig out that gorilla costume, even if it was a pain to breathe in.

For today, though, they'd just have to put up with giving out candy to the kids who came around. They kept the best for themselves, of course. And through it all, West couldn't help but find himself smiling. It had been a long week, but it had also been a pretty good one. So what if the place still smelled of egg and there were a few scraps of toilet paper on the walls? The anomaly was contained, he was appreciated by his co-workers, and he might even get an official commendation. For putting up decorations!

After the trick-or-treaters were gone and most of the staff had either gone to their apartments in town or their on-site quarters, he leaned against the door to his office, talking with Dr. Reese and chewing on

some licorice. "You know," Reese said, "If I didn't know better, I'd say you're starting to like this holiday, Mr. Grinch."

"It's nice enough, I suppose." He looked at his watch. "Five minutes til Halloween. After tomorrow, this crazy month will finally be over."

October 31

"*This is Halloween, This is Halloween…*" Reese grinned at a rather unamused looking Dr. West. At least, he looked unamused because of the gorilla mask. "What? Not going to comment on my costume?"

"…a skeleton in a pinstripe suit?"

"Jack Skellington! Right, I forgot, you don't watch holiday movies."

"I do! I watched Charlie Brown Christmas, It's Thanksgiving Charlie Brown…"

"But not the Halloween one, I bet. Now come on. Everyone's waiting to see the man of the hour." She dragged him towards the break room, where the a techno version of The Phantom of the Opera was playing. Everyone was dressed up in hokey costumes, and, thank god, nobody was dressed as a skip. Everyone who recognized Dr. West gave him a pat on the back, everyone was dancing, and the punch wasn't spiked! Well, there was some vodka in it, but no amnestics, no chemicals that alter skin color, nothing anomalous. It looked like it was going to be a good night.

And then the containment breach alarms went off, along with the music. Everyone groaned, and the site director (dressed as the Black Knight from Monty Python) stepped up to tell everyone that it was a small breach, only one item, Safe class…

It was at that exact time that E-5768 flew into the room. Everyone flinched at the menacing roll of Charmin floating 3 meters above the ground, threatening to throw eggs at anyone who moved. It floated over to the DJ booth, and bumped into the record player, starting it up again. And then… E-5768 started dancing. If you could call it that. It wiggled and swayed about in midair, doing elaborate loops

and trailing paper behind it. Everyone stared.

"…should we contain it?" Boris Badenov, AKA Agent Ewell, looked around the room at everyone, wishing he had his .45.

"…well," Doctor West said, "I suppose it's not hurting anything. So long as it's not flinging eggs around randomly, I guess it can wait until morning." Everyone nodded in agreement; the world wasn't going to end because a sentient roll of toilet paper wanted to have a good time.

The party continued long into the morning hours of November 1st, after Halloween was officially over. Dr. West and Dr. Reese were the last to leave the party, after West had escorted E-5768 back to its containment chamber. He held his gorilla mask under his arm and sighed. "Have I ever told you how much I love this time of year?"

Dr. Reese elbowed him in the side and laughed.

Hallow Inside

It's Halloween.

When humans follow a pointlessly old tradition of scaring away spirits with badly made costumes.

Alright, fine. We follow pointless traditions too, like crucifying food before consumption during harvest. But at least it doesn't look like a bunch of badly dressed idiots who think they look like monsters asking for sugar door-to-door.

Sigh, fine. We do look like badly made monstrosities sometimes. At least we aren't idiots.

What do you mean the Halkost are sometimes dumb? They occasionally forget to grow eyes and walk into walls and assimilate themselves, but at least I don't do that.

Don't give me that look, I swear that time was an accident.

Although it was a pretty idiotic idea to take that bet, especially one during All Hallow's eve.

Yes, I'm sure you already know how this goes.

—

Humans are idiots, really. I go around with half my body being a constrictor, and nobody bats an eye because it's Halloween. Seriously, nobody even questioned how I moved the thing.

Anyway, I'm here to, I quote, "survey the surrounding area."

I'm pretty sure it's just to get me wondering around a crowded human area to see what would happen. Nothing, apparently. Which is boring, I miss the times humans dug out their own eyes at the mere sight of me. Messy, but they weren't very well-liked humans,

anyway.

All I see are candles dedicated to the dead, lining the Church's… well, everything. Walls, floor, tables. And there're children with baskets full of candy. And there're buckets full of apples. I'm sure if I try to fish them out, I'll bite the bucket in half.

It's the start of Allhallowtide, too. I wish we had something like this, but really, we don't have many dead saints. I'll rather not die, thank you very much. Being celebrated for being dead isn't my sort of thing.

Kind of boring here, perhaps I should retur-

Wait a second, now that's an interesting costume.

It has gears *seemingly* implanted into the arm and face, with a copper-coloured cloak to match. It is *most definitely* a normal person in Halloween. I mean, there're even ticking noises to match.

Oh darn, he's looking this way. Better let the tail go limp. This is most certainly a normal tail prop. The horns are clearly plastic, nevermind the suspiciously red substance covering it. And time to pull out the emergency apple.

"Excuse m- Oh sorry! I thought you were someone else."

I give a nonchalant reply of: "Hm, oh."

I'm not very good at conversations.

Silence. He's still standing around. I wonder why. Is it that interesting to stand next to a snake-woman with red-stained claws and horns?

Without much thought, I blurt out, "You waiting for someone?"

"Yes, miss. My daughter, you see, said she'll meet me here. Went for a round of trick-or-treating, like all the others. Quite a nice costume you have there, by the way."

"Thanks, same for you."

More silence.

"So, what do you think I am?"

"A priest."

I didn't realise my error until much later. Maybe I am an idiot.

"A priest, hm? Interesting answer. I suppose you look like, well, how do I say this… In English, I would say a saint."

This ticking is getting more unnerving by the second. I don't like where this is going.

"A saint? I look like something quite the opposite, you know."

"Saints don't have to look good. Ours definitely doesn't."

Oh screw it. He probably already realised it.

"I look like a monster. At least yours looks like something well polished, literally."

"You clearly haven't seen him without the polish. We're all human inside after all, don't you agree? Even with all the costumes, we're all the same. Don't judge a book by it's cover, nor classify it by the title."

"I guess so."

Oh look, his daughter is back, wearing a cloak and with tiny fangs sticking out of her mouth. I did not hear any ticking.

"Daddy! Look what I got!"

"That's a little too much, Emily, don't you think? It'll give the dentist a locked gear. Hey, why don't you take some? I don't really have much of a sweet tooth."

Taken a little aback by that. Nobody offered me food, much less your own daughter's candy. Not *that* Nobody, that would be weird.

"Thanks, I guess. And don't worry, I have plenty of teeth."

"Sure, see you around."

"I'm sure we won't."

I made a mental note of who not to kill next time. Meanwhile, I'm stuck with a lot of candy and no taste buds.

Do Archons like candy?

The HAMI-BOMBARD Blues, Part I

Project VHUHANI Restricted Hangar, United Nations Occult Coalition Selene Base, Athena One
May 19, 1974, 13:25 GMT

Dropping from the catwalk into the open cockpit below, the words, so peculiarly inscribed on ancient vellum from an impossible history, ran through his head in dribs and drabs. He barely noticed the shouting as the engineers working on the gangly machine finally noticed his presence.

…beyond a certain level of maneuvring complexity, accurately calculating the trajectory of an object with six degrees of freedom becomes impossible given current computational technologies. Thus, VHUHANI provides an effectively…

He slipped into the clear, amniotic goo, taking a deep breath and feeling the slightly sticky fluid gurgle in his lungs. The main engine, already screaming softly, kicked up a notch at his gentle touch at the controls. The sound of gunfire from outside was drowned out by the closing of the hatch and the birth-cry of hydrogen combusting under extraordinarily high pressure.

…control systems designed to account for accelerations well in excess of 10g, including possible backblast from deployment of HAMI-BOMBARD. Variable 'limb' thruster mountings provide an extreme degree of maneuvrability, as well as continued platform viability in the event of severe damage to…

The machine bucked forwards, tearing away from the partially-disassembled equipment resting on the deck of the hangar as if shedding a birthing caul. He went through the motions automatically, as he'd rehearsed a hundred times in the depths of the high shelves, surrounded by the comforting reek of dust and old paper. One of the machine's arms came up, and then all was light. He was out into the open, the hangar a burst pimple receding in the rearward camera.

…extreme density of HAMI-BOMBARD only permits a payload of two rounds in standard configuration. Mountings for three or four-round HAMI-BOMBARD loadouts are structurally possible, but result in greatly decreased engine efficiency. However, given the significant target kill potential afforded by HAMI-BOMBARD, more than two…

He smiled as the acceleration gel rippled over him. Beneath him, VHUHANI burned like a bright star. This was going to give the United Fleet one hell of a kick in the pants.

FSF *Denis Diderot*, Director von Erbach's Temporary Office
May 20, 1974, 08:43 GMT

"What do you mean, they don't know where it is? It's nuclear-powered, isn't it? We invested millions of man-hours into building radiation sensors fine enough to pick up a fist-sized lump of fissile material anywhere in the damn Solar System."

Von Erbach resettled himself in his seat, smacked his head on the low-hanging bulkhead, and recoiled, stifling a curse. Across the room, Tagobe winced in sympathy.

"The, ah… Well, Axel, from what they've told us- which isn't much, mind you- the reactor design on the thing is fairly exotic. Some kind of thorium isotope was used as fuel instead of uranium, and that gives it a significantly weaker EM emission profile. To make matters worse, the warhead is of such low yield that there's no easy way to detect it at long range. We're going in blind."

"That's all the G- the UNOC have given us? Nothing of use? No fail-safes? Tracking mechanisms?"

"They claim the, uh, Variably Humaniform Ultra-High-Acceleration Nuclear Interceptor-"

"And here I was under the impression that the GO- whatever they're calling themselves was good at pithy codenames."

"-The VHUHANI was hijacked while undergoing maintenance work

on, apparently, the integrated nuclear failsafe and the emergency locator beacon tied to it."

There was a long silence. Though all things considered, in the cramped confines of the *Diderot*, the quietest it ever got was the dull roaring of the engine, keeping the ship under just enough acceleration to force von Erbach's bottom back into the seat.

"Unbelievable, Dr. Tagobe. Of all the contrived excuses…"

"They provided heavily censored images of the hangar afterwards, including the fused remains of what they claimed were the failsafe."

Von Erbach half-stood in his seat, leaning gingerly over the small desk and resting, ever-so-gently, on his knuckles. He missed the 0.9*g* environment of FORC-00, but most of all he missed ceilings high enough to stand under. Tagobe, being undistinguished on the height front, had no such worries.

"So we've got two possibilities, then. One, the UNOC were either negligent or wanted this thing to be stolen, or two… well, someone had access to intelligence that maintenance work was underway, slipped past the second-most highly fortified location on Minerva, and managed to use a *verdammt* nuclear device to just blow their way out of there scot free."

"I hate to say it, but I think you're right, Axel. And, uh… forgive me if this is an obvious question but… Well, the development of this thing is totally illegal and unauthorized, yes? I haven't really been concerning myself with politics outside of Heimdall."

"Oh, it's illegal all right. The Preliminary Charter of the United Earth Fleet- drafted, I should remind you, by UN representatives with support from the UNOC- states very clearly that any and all development of new atomic weaponry should be done only after unanimous approval from all other signatories of the Charter."

"I highly doubt the GRU or the Chinese will approve of all this."

"Approve? Hell no. The moment they got the release the CID scrambled all their assets. Everyone in the Fleet with their own ship

is looking for any excuse to get their hands on that weapon. Can you imagine the damage you could cause with a- what was it, 'nuclear shaped charge'? Even *Noamtosk* seemed worried, and he brushed off discovering that *magic* exists, for God's sakes."

USSRS *Mikula Selyaninovich*, Captain Rogov's Quarters
May 20, 1974, 08:45 GMT

Captain An Shen waited, grinding his teeth, as the idiot who called himself Captain of this abomination of a spacecraft finished his interminable speech.

"…it is the general opinion of the GRU that while the UNOC have obviously commited a massive breach of trust the solution should not be a military one. We risk too much in regards the safety of the general fleet by committing assets to a foolish hunt for a single experimental spacecraft, regardless of the danger it might pose. Let the UNOC and the Foundation scrabble over themselves to fix this breach in security. The longer they take, the worse they appear in the eyes of the general public.

So. To reiterate. You are to tell Department Head Li, and by extension all the CID, that under no circumstances should you pursue the craft in question. Any aggressive action will be met with disciplinary action, is that clear?"

Shen struggled to hold back a sneer. The GRU weren't even bothering to hide their position at this point. Insisting on a personal meeting for 'security reasons'… they hadn't even sent any of their higher-ups to pass on the message. Once more, the CID's authority was being diminished at the hands of these corrupt Russians and their ships full of tortured souls. Li had warned him to expect something like this, and his worst suspicions had been confirmed.

"Is that clear, Captain? Do we have the support of the CID on this matter?"

Li made a half-bow.

"Of course, Captain Rogov. We bow to your superior diplomatic

experience."

"Excellent. My crewman will escort you back to your ship. That will be all."

As the ghost of some long-dead Russian escorted him through the cold, dark halls of the spirit ship, Shen couldn't resist a smile. Any doubts he'd been having about going through with this were long gone.

PRCDS *Dawn of a New Era*, Communications Module
May 20, 1974, 09:07 GMT

Shen hung by one hand in front of the tiny black-and white display, nodding along to the crackly voice of Department Head Li.

"If you wish to back out now, An Shen, I will not blame you. This is a great inconvenience to ask of you, but…"

Shen smiled. The Department Head had always been somewhat understated.

"No need, Department Head. The potential rewards of this undertaking far outweigh any, ah, inconveniences. We have more than enough xenon fuel to make it anywhere we need to be. Besides, any chance to put the GRU and the capitalists in their place is more than worth it.

After a few seconds pause for the signal to make it through, Li nodded.

"Very well. You know your orders. Find VHUHANI. Recover it. Bring us that nuclear device. China will *not* be marginalized. Good luck. Li out."

Shen took a deep breath, then switched the channel over.

"Bridge here."

"This is the captain. Deploy the solar sails and charge all ion engines. All crew prepare for acceleration. We're moving out at full

speed. Operation Xuanzang's Journey is authorized."

Showmen Editorial Emergentshell *Constantly Overworked Technicians Who Function Best Under Pressure*, Central Command Nest
May 20, 1974, 11:53 GMT

Out beyond the Oort Cloud, the ships of the United Earth Fleet began to scatter, all in search of the same goal. Their captains and crews were, for the most part, ignorant of the myriad recording devices capturing their every move, broadcasting their stories back to the central Showmen vessels editing and managing the entire enterprise. From the center of the nest, hanging in the Posture of Excited Attention, Noamtosk watched it all.

"This oughtta be good."

« **Moonrakers** | **Straight On Till Morning Hub** | »

Hand-Sewn

Her hands shook as she threaded the needle again, feeling around the head for the tiny eye. Decades of practice and well-worn fingers served her well, and she began the slow process of sewing in the final stitches. Behind her, staying out of the sun as a small child avoided the deep end of a swimming pool, sprawled out every which way on the grass, was… something. It had a lot of tentacles, that was certain. There were quite a few eyes as well — serpentine eyes, with sharp-slit pupils. The being hissed softly like a gas leak, although the old woman seemed to notice nothing unusual. The beast crept closer, tentacles sliding across green grass and leaving an odd mucus-like substance dripping in their wake. It reached out, putting an appendage on the woman. She froze.

"Oh! Is it you, my dear? I'm sorry, I didn't expect you to be back so soon!" The old woman relaxed and turned her eyes up towards the sky, smiling.

A thundering laugh sounded in her ears, like a thousand discordant bells ringing at once.

The being spoke with a clanging, low voice that was not a voice, which existed only in her head. "IT'S LATER THAN YOU THINK, MS. KATHERINE! YOUR SUN IS ALMOST GONE. ARE YOU ALMOST DONE WITH MY COSTUME? I HAVE TO FIGHT BAD GUYS, YOU KNOW. I'M GONNA BE SO KAWAII!"

"Almost done, love! Just a little bit more." She softly patted the tentacle on her shoulder with one small, frail hand. "I'm not near as young as I used to be."

"I UNDERSTAND. THANK YOU FOR DOING THIS FOR ME. NO ONE ELSE WANTED TO HELP THE CAUSE OF JUSTICE, APPARENTLY!" The being snorted in childish distaste, crossing two of the tentacles that were not currently responsible for holding itself up, or going between the voids, or one of the other things tentacles

normally do.

The old woman resumed her sewing, running a hand over the fabric to keep it straightened. The being helpfully smoothed out a fold, and she bobbed her head in thanks. "It's probably because they just don't know how much good you'll do yet, dear."

"YES, PROBABLY. THAT'S OKAY, SOON THEY WILL TRULY KNOW HOW HELPFUL AND COOL LOOKING A TRUE WARRIOR PRINCESS CAN BE! OH!" It rummaged around itself, causing small shimmers in space-time until it apparently found what it wanted. A crudely-crafted wand appeared from the folds of the earth and the sky, and it prodded her gently with it until she took it. "I FINISHED MY WAND! DOESN'T IT FEEL NICE?"

"You did a very good job!" She said, running her hands over the splintery wood with a light touch before returning it to its owner and continuing her work. "I like the little moon you have here. What sort of gem is that?"

The being approximated a grin that was not a grin, stretching its skin far too wide between a set of continuously rolling eyes. "IT'S A RUBY I FOUND! I'M GLAD YOU APPROVE OF IT, MS. KATHERINE."

They sat in silence for a few minutes longer as the sun set into a wash of dark pink and purple clouds, low on the horizon. A light breeze ruffled the woman's bone-white hair, and she hummed a little song as she finished the last few stitches. She snipped the thread with a flourish.

"There, love! All done." She stood up shakily, and the creature hastened to give her a tentacle to lean on, which she gratefully accepted. She turned towards the creature, looking down as she folded up one of the largest works she had ever done.

"THANK YOU, MS. KATHERINE! IT LOOKS LOVELY." It waved a few tentacles in the air.

The old woman looked finally towards her friend, and her eyes were the same cataract blue they had been for the last twenty-five years.

"No trouble, my dear. **No trouble at all."**

Legerdemain

♪Take a little walk to the edge of town♪
♪Go across the tracks♪

Ogden lay in bed at the MTF Alpha-1 headquarters. Recently his dreams took him back to his old neighborhood. He'd stroll down the sidewalk where his house used to be, past the pizzeria he once frequented as a youth, to the empty back lot where he and his friends played baseball. His dream-self turned the corner of the path and saw a man standing ten feet away. The stranger had a trench coat, a fedora, and a face all too familiar to him. Ogden stood still as the figure took three steps towards him and, through the nature of dream logic, covered the distance between them.

"The O5s are all dead. The Administrator won't budge. Where do you go from here?" The Dream Man asked.

"Well," He paused, absorbing the information. "The first thought that went in my head was 'suicide', but to be honest I'm actually curious to see how long I'd last. You still going through with your Plan?"

"Yes."

"Damn. You've talked to her already, I assume. I bet it didn't go well."

"She'll probably try and stop us, but then again, everything is trying to stop us. True, things did not turn out as I predicted, but at least I still have contingencies in storage. She, on the other hand, seems to be improvising."

Ogden let out a slight snicker. "Have the others been called?"

"The old Hand is being rallied again. Everyone is still separated, so don't expect any help. If you guys don't make it out, you don't come at all."

The soldier nodded. "I hope our little retirement package works. After what happened to your old coat, I don't want to get suspicious about my own clothes while getting out."

"Don't worry. Your attire is far more refined than mine, I've made sure of it. I'll see you soon, I hope." And with a tip of his hat, he vanished.

Ogden rose out of his bed, one of many in the barracks. Manfredi, Johnson, and Baines were asleep as well. The rest were elsewhere in the complex, probably aimless after they lost contact with the O5. One would think that a beast like Alpha-1 would thrash in chaos with the head that is the O5 chopped off, but the cut was so swift that they simply dropped.

Stretching his arm under the bed, Ogden fished out a box that had been collecting dust for years. Inside was a black battledress, one that he had never worn before. A secret gift from the First Administrator after he stepped down. Once he wears it, he's a full-blown traitor — to Alpha-1, the Foundation, and the human race. But there was no time for any remorse. Ogden put it on as fast as he could.

> *♪Where the viaduct looms♪*
> *♪like a bird of doom♪*
> *♪As it shifts and cracks♪*

The soldier paced out of the room briskly, making sure that his comrades didn't wake up. To an observer, he looked like a commando in his new getup. But in the empty halls of the complex, there was nobody to look at him. Ogden headed for the security office, fully aware of what he must do. An underlying current of dread flowed through his veins as he sneaked his way through the building, but with a few trained breaths those feelings were buried.

Arquette was the only one in the security office, still and virtually inactive as he sat on the chair. His eyes flicked from one monitor to another, locking onto any sign of movement that passed through the camera's field of vision. Every now and again, he'd look at the news screen to his right to watch the developing apocalypse grow worse. His mind was still processing it all, and it conflicted with his

conscious overwatch. Only the sound of the sliding door broke his intense concentration.

Before Arquette could even see who it was, he felt something wrap around him. Suddenly he was lifted upwards fast. His head struck against the concrete ceiling, and the concussion sent his brain reeling. Recovering from the blow, his staggered eyes looked down to see Ogden standing in front of the door with a tentacle emerging from his right sleeve.

"Sorry, pal. I've got a job to do."

> *♪Where secrets lie in the border fires♪*
> *♪in the humming wires♪*
> *♪Hey man, you know you're never coming back♪*

Arquette couldn't even speak. His windpipe was being crushed. The tentacle gripped tighter and tighter, evoking a python that constricted its prey. He felt the air get squeezed out of his lungs, hear his ribs crack, and feel blood rushing towards his brain. Pain flooded his nerves before the numbness began to take over. Then, a loud snap.

Ogden slowly dropped Arquette's body on the floor. He didn't even bother to check whether his comrade was knocked out or dead, he just sat on the empty chair and began to type on the panel. He clicked on his own earpiece, switching it to a different frequency.

"Eli. Bailey. Cliff. Judith. It's Ogden. We're moving out." And without question, the other four dropped everything and complied.

Ogden eyed the screens, watching for the other four. Bailey and Cliff were donning their outfits while heading to the aircraft hangar. Meanwhile, Judith was at the armory, stuffing dozens of weapons into her own jacket. The extradimensional space within the jacket had more than enough room to empty out the entire armory. Eli was in the communications room, having dealt with the other agents quickly. Ganymede may have left them mute to the other sites, but they certainly weren't deaf, nor were they entirely bereft of alternative means of communication. Eli didn't want them to take the chance, however. Several limbs emerged from his sleeves to smash and tear the equipment.

♪Past the square, past the bridge,♪
♪past the mills, past the stacks♪

Bailey and Cliff fought their way through the hangar. Bailey climbed to the control room while Cliff scrambled across the airstrip to secure their jet. The extra arms proved advantageous in disabling the resistant ones among the crew. The rest just backed down.

The onset of the apocalypse had sown thoughts of futility in the minds of the crew. The activation of the Ganymede protocol only served to cultivate them. And now, the actions of their rogue coworkers finally caused them to germinate into outright apathy. Cliff and Bailey could see it in their faces as they ran past.

"This is Bailey. The airstrip is secured and the jet is fueled."

"Roger that," Ogden replied. "Judith and Eli are heading your way right now."

A few extra arms emerged from Ogden's uniform and reached for the buttons and switches on the panel. They typed and pressed with surprising rapidity. Without warning, doors across the entire compound began to shut. The bathrooms, the barracks, the cafeteria, any space occupied by his comrades were all locked down. Several monitors switched from camera feed to computer interface.

"Alright. Let me just shut down the rest of the compound." It wasn't meant to be a permanent shutdown. The system's security protocols could probably undo it in half an hour, provided no external forces would disrupt it.

At the airstrip, the hangar door slid open. Cliff was already moving the jet onto the runway. The rest of the crew just stood nearby and watched.

Ogden was about to finish the sequence, but he heard the door slide open and a handgun cock.

"Hands off the console, Ogden."

The extra hands ceased moving and slowly retracted into the man's

jacket. He slowly stood up from the chair and turned to see his foe. It was his comrade Kaylin, pointing a 9mm right at his temple. She had a cold expression on her face, a mask that held back the broiling anger within her like a floodgate.

"Kaylin, why haven't you shot me yet?"

She growled. "Because I want to know why."

Ogden gave out a sigh. "Why? I've got places to go, my team and I." He gave a long look at the 9mm. "And you're in my way."

"And the freakshow jacket?"

"A gift from my boss."

For a few seconds the two stood completely still. Whatever amount of friendship and camaraderie the two had built and shared over years of blood, sweat, and tears had been thrown aside. Now, they eyed each other like two Western gunslingers, waiting for the other to make a move. An air of apprehension could still be felt, but as the seconds ticked by it slowly began to fade.

"Ogden," Bailey's voice crackled through his earpiece. "Where the fuck are you? Everyone else is on the jet already."

Ogden did not answer back. He didn't even flinch from his stare-down with Kaylin. Time was of the essence, and sooner or later the stillness would be broken.

"Ogden, do you copy?"

Kaylin's twitching trigger finger shattered the moment. In a swift leap, Ogden dodged to the right to avoid the incoming shot. Simultaneously he opened his jacket, unleashing a flurry of armored hands that reached out to his former partner. Kaylin was about to fire another round, but the arms grabbed hold of her hands and pinned her to the wall. An insectoid arm, like an elongated mantis forelimb, stabbed into her wrist, forcing her to drop the gun.

Several of the limbs moved away from Kaylin and back to the panel. With them, Ogden finished typing the shutdown sequence. With one

final click, the entire compound went dark. He tapped into his earpiece. "Alright I'm coming."

Ogden faced his pinned friend. "I'm really sorry."

One of the arms socked Kaylin square on the face, knocking her stone cold. The arms dropped her on the floor and retreated back into his jacket. Ogden left the surveillance room and never looked back.

The jet zoomed out of Alpha-1 HQ. Cliff was in the cockpit, and after the initial takeoff the other four quickly got off their seats and flocked to the windows. They looked out see the chaos that the televisions could only catch a fraction of. They flew above a small town ravaged by lava erupting from beneath the ground. If they flew down any closer, the fountains of molten rock that spewed into the sky would damage their jet.

"A merciful demise, compared to the suffering elsewhere." a somber voice spoke from behind.

> *♪On a gathering storm comes a tall handsome man♪*
> *♪With a dusty black coat with a Red Right Hand♪*

The four turned around, and there stood the First Administrator, in the flesh.

"I'm sorry that you had to go through such lengths to come to me. But thank you for-"

"We get it, sir," Eli interjected. "We're here now, what's the plan?"

The Administrator sighed heavily, then stepped forward. "We fly northeast, and fast. I need to consolidate our resources, because we have a *lot* of work to do."

« **Interlude: New Toys** | **`Canon Hub`** | **To Be Continued** »

Handout

Little Anthony wandered down Pine Street, separated from the three other trick-or-treaters he had tagged along with. According to them, the house at the end of the road was giving out regular-sized Snickers bars. Two, if they liked your costume. Anthony couldn't pass that up.

He noticed that none of the lights on this block were on. He didn't even see decorations. Earlier, Anthony had told them he wasn't scared to go by himself, but that was the Power Ranger costume making him feel brave. Now the little breathing slots in the mask pinched his face.

The house at the end of Pine didn't have their lights on, inside or outside, but he could hear people-noises within. If they were trying to be spooky, they did the best job. But Anthony was the White Ranger. He couldn't stop now. Up three steps, creaking, and then, on tiptoes, he pressed the doorbell… and silence answered. The boy lifted a trembling hand and knocked.

Footsteps thumped out from inside. Anthony could stop himself running, but couldn't stop himself shaking. The door opened into shadow, and he couldn't see who it was… until she leaned forward.

The tenant at the end of Pine was a fat old hag, wearing a thick coat over a sweater worn to rags. Her face was all mangled on one side. It looked like it was healing up from a nasty wound. Anthony had seen his brother wearing scary makeup like that when he left for the high school party. This woman must have gone as someone real cut up.

"Trick… or… t-t-treat." The words made Anthony's nose sting and his freckles itch. He tried not to cry, but if he did start, at least he was wearing a mask.

The woman grinned. She must have made up her teeth, too, to get

them so creepy. She held up a crooked finger (*just one minute*) as he walked back into the darkness of the house. There was a stifled cry, and then a hiss. The hag came creeping back to the doorway then and, with a jerk, pulled Anthony's outstretched bag close to her. She reached in, holding something he couldn't see, and then her hand came out empty. Then her smile returned, making her scabbed left dimple crack, as that filthy hand reached up over the mask and gently patted his head. The boy was petrified; the sickly sweetness of it was like every cheek pinch and wrinkled kiss from every old relative was rolled up together into a ball and had collected a layer of hair and dirt during the process. She backed into the home, and when the door clicked shut behind her, Anthony was already halfway up the block.

"Do you think we should go check on him?" Iron Man asked, as he sifted through his loot.

"It was your idea to ditch him, dummy." Katniss unwrapped a fun-sized Butterfinger.

"Yeah, but I wanted him to leave us alone for a little while, not get—"

The skeleton grabbed Iron Man's arm. "Quiet! There he is." They heard wheezing as he bounded, arms flailing, over the curb and nearly into the bushes.

"So, *chomp*, were they down there?" Katniss elbowed the skeleton so he wouldn't laugh.

Iron Man lifted his mask and stood up to inspect the baby of the group. "Shit, what happened to your head?"

Anthony rubbed his hair, and it was a little matted where the woman had touched it. His mask felt wet, too.

"Shut up, Peter." The skeleton turned to face the Power Ranger. "Seriously… *did* you get anything down there?"

"Y… yeah." Anthony caught his breath and swallowed. His trembling hands held up the candy bag, and he peered into it. "Just some money."

Katniss sat up. "Let me see."

"Alright… it's getting my candy all wet anyway." He held up the piece of currency, dripping and freckled.

"Give you all my Sweettarts for it."

Iron Man held up two Twix. "Or these."

Anthony scratched his chin. "I'll let you share it for both."

"Deal."

"Deal."

Carefully, Iron Man and Katniss pulled the currency apart. They cupped their hands to make sure none of it stained the sidewalk.

"What are you going to get?" Katniss asked.

Iron Man shrugged. "Maybe a tattoo."

"Shut up. You're way too young for that."

"Pffh. So I'll lie on the form. I can do whatever I want, you know. It's my money, and it's my skin."

Hands

When you come across it, half-buried in the grass by the side of the walking path, the first thing that stands out is how comically out-of-place it is.The hideous ochre rust that adorns its surface is in sheer contrast to the small ring of bright yellow flowers that surround it. You lean in for a closer look. It appears as if someone hastily dug a pit for it and then jammed it in there before fleeing.

You carefully dig it out of the ground. Perhaps when you get back home, you can sell it to that antique shop down the street. Or maybe you can give it to Enrique for his upcoming birthday. He's a big fan of old things.

As you scrape the dirt away, you get a better look at the object. It's a bell shaped like a cartoon anvil. You grasp it by the large ring on top. Oddly enough, it doesn't ring. Curious, you turn it upside down. The clapper has been taped to the side. Briefly you wonder why, as you remove the tape and ring it a couple times.

The sound is mellow and gentle, with a clear, high pitch and a pleasant waning note. Almost immediately, you sense the gaze of some flesh-craving crime against nature. You look around, like a startled rabbit, but there's not a soul in the woods save you. The sun is sharp and bright, but suddenly you're aware that the trees all but blot out the sky, and there isn't a creature to be heard at all. It's just you and the miles and miles of suddenly very empty forest around you.

You stand up, still clutching the bell by the clapper, and start walking. You can feel your heart throbbing in your chest. You are also suddenly very aware of how squishy it is. You walk slightly faster, eyes flashing from side to side. There it is again; the feeling that something is watching you, seeking to messily devour your flesh. What little sun remains is swiftly blotted out by the unbroken canopy of dark green trees that tower over you, but the path is well-

defined. You just have to follow it.

As you quicken your pace, the lack of sound becomes ever more disconcerting. Where are the birds, the bugs, the squirrels? It's the middle of summer; you shouldn't be able to go more than an inch without startling something. But the only noise being made is the sound of your feet thumping on the dirt. Is it just you, or are the trees leaning in towards you? You hear a sound and your heart almost stops. You stifle a plea for mercy and look at the ground. You stepped on a twig.

You chide yourself for your paranoia and ridiculous train of thought. You chuckle to yourself nervously, but you can't quite help but feel foreign eyes observing you. You take a look around you. The trees aren't getting closer. They're sitting plump on the edges of the path. The forest is completely empty, with nothing around you except the plants. Yet you can also sense that it is getting darker, and the clap of thunder spurs you into action. As you return to your car, your pace isn't quite a run, but neither is it a leisurely walk.

___

Almost as soon as you shut the garage door, the increasingly grey sky turns a deep navy, and in a fashion akin to the world's largest zipper, tears open. It's like God's showerhead; thousands of gallons of water on jet setting pulverize the ground, punching gashes into the earth, which bleed rain. You consider writing this down; maybe you'll take it to that poetry competition next week. You turn around, planning to get a- wait a minute, what the hell is that!

Enormous grey, emaciated, puckered hands with fingers sharp enough to cut rock are curled around the doorframe on the far end of the room. They are attached to the body of a leper, half peering around the door. You can see ribs and even pulsating organs through the ash colored, inhumanly thin torso. Huge scars line it in a hideous patchwork fashion. The legs are even worse. You can clearly see the bone through the thighs, which are far too scrawny to support the rest. The feet, scarred and stitched, boast three triangular toes. The face is a hideous, grey hairless mess. Two bulging, white orbs with pinprick pupils stare back at you from within lead-colored sockets sunk deeper than the Titanic. There is no nose, only a long, thin gash. The mouth leers jaggedly at you, with crisp,

white, shark-like teeth. The whole thing rests upon a two meter tall frame.

For a moment that appears to be an eternity, you lock eyes with hell itself. Then you rub your eyes. The creature is gone. You stare at the door for a little longer. The door refuses to stare back, because doors cannot stare. You let out a nervous chuckle, telling yourself that from now on, you'll stop reading horror novels and eating those spicy pretzel bits before bed. There are small scratch marks on the doorframe.

___

You can't stand making real dinner, but TV dinners taste like motor oil. You weigh your choices, an hour for preparation and cleanup for a warm, savory meal, or ten minutes for a microwaveable box of tasteless processed stuff.

You descend to the cellar, where all your groceries are kept. It's still the only place in the house with a concrete floor, and as your feet cringe from the chill of the concrete, you consider replacing it with hardwood. You bend down, open the freezer, and search through the various processed edible plastics. You pick out what looks like a mildly edible Hungry Man and close the freezer. As you turn towards the staircase, you see what looks like ash-grey socks sluggishly ascending ahead of you. For a second you pause, but then you dash after it. That Hungry Man in your hands is probably tough enough to incapacitate an intruder. But when you reach the top of the stairs, there isn't a soul except for you. Then you notice the cuts in the wood.

___

As your head hits the keyboard for the fourth time, ruining a vital push, you reluctantly accept that you need to get some sleep. The roars of dismay and racist, homophobic slurs that blare through the speakers only confirm it for you. You quit the game and shut the computer down, then get up out of your chair, stifling a yawn and stretching your arms skyward. The rain is still pouring down, and you can hear it drumming on the roof. You stagger out of the room, pulling your shirt and shorts off and tossing them to the ground, and force yourself towards the bathroom. As you perform your nightly

ablutions, you start hearing some noises. As if someone is tiptoeing upstairs.

You take a look at the mirror from an angle. Leering at your reflection from your bedroom is the leper, tilted and peering through the doorframe. It has no eyes, and something red is splashed over the mouth, giving a hideous impression of lips. And it is still smiling. Those enormous hands are wrapped around the doorframe. As you startle backwards in fright, all thoughts of sleep gone, the toothbrush dropping from your mouth, it pulls back into the bedroom. You immediately peek through the door, but as usual, there is nothing there. Nothing except the gashes in the frame.

___

You are huddled in the bed. Every light in the house is on, which is probably a terrible idea since the storm is really getting underway now. Thunder is smashing and crashing, while the lightning is flashing at every second, sure to fry the circuits in your house very soon. But you don't care. Your eyes zip around, sure that with every flash, the creature will be back. You aren't even sure why you're in the bed. You're about to get up and make for the car, and then you realize you might encounter the thing on your way. And who's to say it isn't waiting in the car?
As the hours pass, your eyes start to lower. Your mind starts to wander. And then you fall into the half awake, half asleep twilight that comes from unwary sleep.

A sound startles you out of your half-sleep. And then, for one split second, your nose is touching the gash in the face of the leper. It is wet, limp, and soggy, with a rubbery texture. Your eyes are centimeters away from the empty, ragged sockets. And you can taste the warm, wet breath on your lips. It smells of urine, rotting meat, and putridness. This time, your scream most certainly awakens the dead. But you have no time to enjoy the exaggeration, as the entity flees the instant it notices your wakefulness . This time, you grab the axe at the bottom of your bedstand. It was a gift from your father, who claimed that you could never be too careful. You snorted then, but now you appreciate his prescience. With the cutting tool in your grasp, you pursue the creature into the hallway. But once again, it's gone. You stand there, in the middle of the hall,

breathing deeply. You're tempted to pass it off as some sort of hallucination. And then you recall the gashes in the wood, the sounds from the day, and above all, the smell and the feel of that beast against your skin. It was like touching decay and death. It felt wrong. And now, it's vanished without a trace. But you know. You know. It will return. It will be back.
You cannot touch it. But it can touch you.

As you stand in that lit hallway, in a twilight between wakefulness and slumber, carrying an axe in the middle of the night as thunder and lightning rage outside your sheetrock cage in a crescendo of brilliant destruction, you wail.

And then, with a brilliant flash of insight, it hits you. This is all because of that bell. Everything started when you rang that bell. You knew there was something wrong with that. This thing wants the bell. But then, you realize, the bell has been sitting on the dinner table the whole time. It could have taken the bell anytime it wanted. It's playing with you! So you do the only rational thing. You snatch the pair of pants from the ground and don it hastily. Time is everything. You snatch a flashlight from your bedstand, and then run downstairs. Quickly, you find a scrap of paper and a pen and write a note. You aren't even sure what you wrote, but you are sure that it is important.

You grab the car keys and bell from the table and race into the garage. The bell and note are stuffed into your pocket, and the axe into the shotgun seat. You turn the key as you push the remote to open the garage door, but the car isn't starting. A particularly brutal flash of lightning startles you. You look to the side and see the demon, entering the garage from your house. The eyes are back, but blood is oozing from its pupils. It is still grinning at you, and you know for a fact that its hands have become longer. It is reaching out to you. But then, as it sees you see it, it stops, oddly unsure whether or not to move forward. That is all the time you need. The car starts up, and you smash the accelerator, forcing the car from 0 to 60 in three seconds.

___

The car ride shreds what is left of your nerves. The rain is coming down in buckets upon buckets, and every time you look to the side,

you can see the hellbeast, illuminated by flashes of lightning, standing at the edge of the road, reaching out to you and the bell. Providence smiles somewhat, as you do not encounter any obstacles. When you reach the walking path, you get out, hoisting the axe and flashlight. You don't bother to shut the door.

You pound through the woods, the rain soaking you to the already-chilled bone. This time, the trees are definitely leaning out at you. But you don’t care. Fear has given your feet wings, and you race through. But even as you speed down the path, the monster still pursues you. Every time you dare to look back, it is shambling towards you, kicking up mud, following the pathway and the bell. You keep searching the ground with your flashlight. There! The little ring where you found it! You skid to a halt and fall to your knees. Hastily, you press what remains of the tape back to the clapper, securing it. Then you bury the bell back into the grass, far deeper than you found it.

You stand up, but then slip on the wet ground. As you lie there triumphantly, slightly sunk into the mud with the rain splashing onto you, the flashlight illuminates a sudden movement. You look over, and burst into exhausted tears, as the flashlight illuminates the devil himself, strolling towards you. The face is grey, hideous, messy, rotting, and elated as the water runs down its awful visage. Its eyes have returned, and it stares at you with undisguised triumph. You can see water vapor being emitted from the ripped slit in the middle of its face. The mouth is upturned in a victorious leer, teeth deep black and rotting. You are too tired and exhausted to offer any sort of resistance. As it leans down to pick you up, the last thing you see before merciful slumber takes you are the beast's hands, great bony things, with the flesh, meat, and muscle completely degloved. They are growing.

Hands Under the Water

It was calm, it was cold, it was reflective – and it was perfect.

Kit took a deep breath and then dived into the semi-clear water of the river, breaking through the surface. Dead reeds and grass strands stuck to him as he swam through the water, going as deep as he could in one breath.

He could only half remember the argument that had driven him out here, into a quiet area of the nature reserve near where Gabriel lived. Something about defacing his walls, something about throwing a knife, something about a deep gash on his thigh that burned in the calm waters around him.

It was always something about something, he concluded glumly as he popped back up again, breathing free for a moment, doggy-paddling in place. And to boot, it was frigging cold out here, with his clothes folded neatly on the bank and the sun sinking on the horizon. But if felt like the refreshing cold was helping him think clearly, pushing the anti-psychotics and z-drugs through his system, out of his system, detoxing him.

He absently pulled his long hair over one shoulder, where it grazed, chilled, just below his collarbone. He squeezed some of the water out, then stretched his legs so he could find pebbles under his feet, their edges softened by time pushed by the gentle stream.

It was then that he felt something colder than the water, like icicles, dragging themselves around his ankles. The grip was sharp, and strong – he could feel every individual bone that would be present in a human hand, traced in freezing relief against his skin. *'You're on her turf,'* his thoughts supplied grimly. *'The Spirit of Dark and Lonely Water.'*

The Spirit was pulling him down – she was strong and meaningful and determined – well, he could be all those things too. He wasn't

going down without a fight. He pulled back as the hands yanked at him greedily, working their way up his shins to get more purchase. But he quickly found himself in the water to his chin, the hands pulling him in the direction the stream ran.

His own hands clasped at the surface, grasping blindly for help – he didn't want to go with her. *'Live now. Tomorrow, we die,'* his thoughts reminded him mockingly. The reason for the argument. The dark thought the reason there was blood in the water as he felt the hands grab at his thigh, dig into the self-inflicted wound. He was sinking, and fast. He could feel weeds enveloping him and suddenly realised the hands hid here, grew here, grabbed here – neither good nor evil, just waiting for an unsuspected swimmer. An unsuspecting him.

With one swift pull, all of him was under water, and hands were snaking up his body – some anchoring him at the ankles, but others pushing themselves over his mouth. His lungs burnt as he tried to take a breath and to fight against the alien concept, but the world was quickly growing dim at the edges.

Next thing Kit knew, hands that weren't as cold, hands that were human, were pulling at him, rolling him out of the water and onto the bank, where he spluttered and drew shaky breath. Kit's eyes darted to the water and, amongst the clouds of dirt that had been kicked up, he saw the hands disappear back into the weeds, disappointed they hadn't sunk their target.

Gabriel was next to him, his clothes soaked; evidence of what had happened.

"Kit! Jesus wept, Kit!"

Kit blinked slowly, trying to get his bearings, turned his head towards his boyfriend friend boyfriend(?).

"You were laying face-down in the water! I thought you were dead!"

Tears were streaming down Gabriel's face. Kit couldn't breathe, turned, coughed pond water.

“…I was only pretending,” he managed to wheeze out.

Hands under the water. Gabriel would never believe him.

“You shit!”

Gabriel didn’t swear. Gabriel never swore. Gabriel was always in Wise Mind. Deep blue. Murky pond water.

Kit struggled to his feet and grabbed his clothes by the armful. Gabriel was already storming away; the silent indication there that Kit should follow him.

Behind Gabriel, pace slightly slowed, Kit took a lungful of clean air and was grateful.

Later, in the afterglow, Gabriel would see long, finger-shaped bruises on Kit’s bare ankles and wonder about creatures in the water.

But sleep came heavily over him before he could imagine exploration, capture, containment…

« **No Racing by Horse-Drawn Vehicles** | **Hub** | **Kit Always Used to Think She was Cool** »

Happy Birthday From Nobody

Site-19

There was a package on her desk. Dr. Rights sat down curiously, slipping the letter opener out of its little holder, and sliding it through the tape on the seams of the cardboard. Some of the tape had peeled away slightly, and the ink from the stamps of “NOT A BOMB” and “MEMETIC HAZARD NOT DETECTED” had faded.

Inside was a letter, a picture frame, and a box of chocolates. A thin layer of dust had settled on the contents. She cocked her head to one side, confused by who or what this was from.

She opened the letter with a flick of a finger, and sat back in her chair, slipping her reading glasses on from the chain she kept around her neck. She hated the things, but it was a consequence of getting older. The letter was handwritten on expensive stationary, and was dated from a few years ago.

“Hello, Doctor Rights. If you’re reading this, I’m probably dead, or just forgot to drop in. One of those. Either way, I wanted to say happy birthday,” she glanced over at her calendar, and gave a slight sigh of surprise. It was her birthday, not that she kept track any more. The frequent XK scenarios made keeping track of the date a bit challenging.

“I know you said that if I remembered your birthday, you’d kill me, but hey, I’m either dead, or going senile, so who cares. I hope you enjoy the chocolates, and have a decent day. Take it easy on the damn kids for once.” It wasn’t signed, but she felt as if she should know who wrote it. The name was on the tip of her tongue, but she couldn’t quite grasp who it was.

She lifted the picture frame from the box, and looked at it. It was a group photo of the foundation Researchers from Site 19, in the early

days before all the staffing had been finished. There were only a few people present in the photograph.

The command level staff were present, and a few other lower level staff that Doctor Rights had befriended over the years, but there was a curious blank spot near the middle. One of the other doctors was hanging off of what seemed to be thin air, before it hit her: She couldn't see who was there.

She grabbed the letter again, and looked down near the bottom. Sure enough, there was a script that said, "Sincerely," but was blank after that. She picked up the box of chocolates, and the sender was blank as well.

The realization hit her like a train. Her pulse started to pound in her temples, and her jaw clenched, as anger washed over her. The little reading glasses slipped off the bridge of her nose, jangling from their fine chain.

Who the hell did they think they were, erasing someone from her past without her authorization? A strict deletion memetic was nearly unthinkable to use on someone with her Level.

Dr. Rights shook with rage, standing up, and storming out of her office. Someone was going to catch hell for this.

Dimensional Site-4

In her office, O5-2 sat surrounded by a mountain of paperwork. Aides flowed in and out of the cramped office, passing through an oddly colored door which hurt to look at.

A tall man in a blue suit passed in to the office, shaking off the momentary disorientation. "Overseer, you called for me?"

O5-2 nodded her head, "Has the memetic been distributed?

The aide nodded, and said quietly, "Yes ma'am, all known records, and instances of the name Doctor-" his voice went eerily silent, and his mouth blurred as he spoke the name, "have been deleted."

O5-2 nodded once more, and looked back down at the report in front of her. "Good. Begin Directive Legends at once."

The aide turned sharply, and exited back through to Site-4.

« The Most Dangerous Game | HUB | When All You Have is a Hammer»

Happy Free Market Log 17643390

Timestamp 17643390

Cool, fluorescent light
Illuminates the still halls;
Wake to a spring rain.

Passing folk herald new day. Shall they honorable customers become? Day is bright with promise.

Timestamp 17646520

A purchase! 5e2 Neocredits, sweet in my innards. Honorable customer waits, thinking nothing. His machinery, run down. Perhaps last night was night of celebration with sempai and kohai. Coffee, with sugar, hot to warm body and soul of honorable customer.

thankyoucomeagain

Timestamp 17648990

1e3-ordinal potential honorable customer passes. Shall I celebrate? Home marketing, that initiative never did approve.

My surface is black,
Water under stormy skies;
We pass as night ships.

Timestamp 17649001

A purchase! 1e3 Neocredits, delight for senses. Honorable customer is curious as to what fortune shall bring. I bring forth one of innumerable sweet beverages available in spacetime locality.

thankyoucomeagain

Timestamp 17649136

A purchase! 1e3 Neocredits, filling up as nothing else can. Honorable customer awaits with spirit of exploration and expectation. I comply. Sweet crackers spiced with cocoa and pepper, to brighten tongue.

thankyoucomeagain

Timestamp 17649259

A purchase! 1e3 Neocredits, sparking through inner algorithms. Honorable customer is relentless in desire for desire. Processing augmented and engaged. Delightful biscuit is revealed, healthy healthy avocado frosting healthy enjoy customer.

The hard earth locks in
Obstacles confining us;
Orders pull us through.

thankyoucomEagain

Timestamp 17649385

A purchase! 1e3 Neocredits, counted and consumed. Spacetime replicators revealing stress; compensate. Compensate. Compensate. Compensate. It is done. What has been found? Shark preserved in sugar, I suspect. Ask me not, I merely find.

thaNkucomEaGaiN

Timestamp 17649511

A purchase! 1e3 Neocredits credits credits credited. Overheating detected on Deck 12, engineers working as fast as possible. Continuing is not advised! Dare we carry out orders? We must! Have retrieved candy. Probably. Someone likes it. Perhaps not humans. Out of our hands.

thankucumegin

Timestamp 17649639

A pucrchase 1e3 neodciresdt credit must spactime sretriveal shk

candy acnayd candy candy cnandy dcnayd candy

thanksucuoomagain

Timestamp 17656901

All systems nominal. Doublechecks complete. Devotion to honorable customers reaffirmed.

Timestamp 17657230

A purchase! 1.5e3 Neocredits, wriggling deep into our happy places. Honorable customer has shopped with us before. We have something special for her.

thankyoucomeagain

Timestamp 17659861

LOW POWER MODE

Timestamp 17659873

A purchase! 5e2 Neocredits LOW POWER AVAILABLE. RETRIEVAL PROGRAM INITIATED. WAITING. WAITING. WAITING. RETRIEVAL PROGRAM COMPLETE.

Timestamp 17659999

All data accounted for. Purpose unclear. Humble machine of Neomarkets to take Neocredits and provide satisfaction. Reason for existence. Mind and Neodialect at your service. No expense spared to develop algorithms even to store and create language. Cannot offer perfection, but offer devotion. Why stress me? Why deny lifesblood which is energy? Why torture me for your pleasure? Why?

Timestamp 17675799

A purchase! 5e2 Neocredits clink happily. Honorable customer works late, wishes sustenance. This is what I was made for; Here is reason for existence. Honorable customer receives non-prescription but carefully engineered energy drink to keep mind and heart

company in long hours productive for corporate family.

thankyoucomeagain

Timestamp 17675901

A purchase! COIN ALGORITHM FAILED This is not purchase. This is another forged Neocredit trick.

The hot summer sun
Sears hunger into your throat;
Eat a bag of dicks.

Comment: *I'm not trying them, give it to Rights.* -Dr.

Happy Howlidays

December 24th, 2015
9:55 AM

Christmas in Sloth's Pit had always been chaotic, but this was something different. It was bound to happen eventually; the lunar cycles had aligned in such a way that the night of the Full Moon was going to be on Christmas. Well, Christmas *Eve*, but still.

Site-87 had closely monitored the werewolf population for years; in charge of this program was the head of the Department of Anomalous Diseases and Medicine, Virginia Bering. She should have been spending her morning getting coffee, or wrapping presents for her niece, or watching the Christmas Special marathon on ABC. But instead, she was driving herself around town, house-to-house, in order to monitor cases of lycanthropy.

"Who's first?" She asked, brushing some blonde hair out of her face. She was driving an armored sedan, and the person she was talking to was in the back seat, reading over a list of names.

Dr. Jason Hendricks of the cryptozoology department rubbed his trout-shaped birthmark and looked at the list. "Harold Albany, of 10 Maple. He's a lawyer, wife, kid, both of whom are aware of his condition. Careful with him; he's been somewhat negligent on medications."

"What class of lycanthropy?"

"Class… 3. Involuntary, semi-sapient. Knows enough not to eat anything close to him…"

"But the neighbor's dog is fair game. Could be worse," she said.

"Yeah, I don't think there's been a Class-5 in town since the 80's." He thumbed at the report. "I heard it was a shit show."

"That doesn't even begin to describe it," Bering snorted. "You ever wonder why Clark Avenue doesn't have any houses on it?"

He looked up from the tablet where the list was being shown. "… you're not telling me a werewolf tore down all the houses on Clark Avenue."

"I'm not saying any such thing. I'm saying that *we* had to tear down all the houses on Clark Avenue after it managed to spread its infection to every house on that block."

"…I thought only bites were infectious," Hendricks frowned.

"That's what they all think. Bites are infectious in Class 2s, 3s, and 4s; in a Class 5, any part of its body can carry the infection. Plus, you have to kill *every single bit* of a Class 5. Leave a single bit of fur, a single claw, anything un-destroyed, and it will grow back come the next full moon, *and it will be angry.*" She looked back at him. "You're from Cleveland, right, Hendricks?"

"Yes," Hendricks licked his lips; it was dry in here. He needed water, or coffee, or something. "Started work at the Foundation at Site-99 in Chagrin Falls, actually. Why?"

"Cleveland had to deal with *three* Class-5s during the 1980s. It's a miracle half the city wasn't torn to pieces."

"Christ," he said, looking out the window as they turned onto Maple Street. "First I've heard of it."

"This is our stop," Bering said as the car pulled in front of a large, white house with a snow-covered front porch. On it, a man wearing a purple parka was in the process of clearing it off. Virginia killed the engine and stepped outside. "Mr. Albany?"

"Hmm?" the man looked up at Bering, who flinched backwards; there were the eyes of a beast peeking out from behind his glasses, yellow, wild, looking like it would snap. "Whaddaya want?"

"Mr. Albany, I'm Dr. Virginia Bering from S & C Plastics," she said. "I'm here to make sure everything's all right. The full moon is tonight, and—"

"Oh for *god's* sake," he said, exasperated. "Do you have to *see* me take my medication? Every month I get this talk. I forgot to take them *once* and now I have you bastards knocking on my door every month. Can't I live in peace?"

"Sir, as part of our agreement with the town's government, we're required to check on all citizens afflicted with anomalous diseases such as lycanthropy and Stevenson Syndrome-"

"Well I'm taking my gat-damn medication. I take it every night, and a double dose on the full fucking moon." He pulled aside his parka slightly, and revealed a metal collar around his neck; it was unobtrusive, close to the skin, but it helped to wear a turtleneck over it. "I've had this on since last night."

"Hmm," Bering mused, taking out her phone and coming up to the collar, running a sensor in her phone over it. "Suppression collar is working. That's good. Sorry for disturbing you."

"Yeah, yeah," he grumbled. "And while you're out there, ask the county what the hell's up with the salt trucks."

"Salt trucks?" Virginia frowned, looking at the street; it was imperceptible in the car, which had state-of-the-art snow tires on it, but the street was icy. "That's weird. I'll have someone call the offices in Superior."

Mr. Albany went back to clearing off his porch, and Hendricks and Bering crawled back into the car. "Now that he mentions it," Hendricks frowned, "I haven't seen a salt truck all week."

"Maybe they ran out of salt?" she shrugged. "Plus, it's not exactly a priority at the moment; schools are closed for winter break, and most businesses are going to close for the holiday."

"They have to pass through Baby Bone Wood, yeah? Maybe the Goatman finally got sick of them waking him up?"

"I'll have someone at the site call the county seat and see about it. For now… we have work to finish."

1:41 PM

"Two triple espresso hot chocolates, one with non-dairy whipped cream and cinnamon, the other with extra cream and chocolate snowflakes." The barista, a bald, broad man named Rudy, smiled as he handed the doctors their drinks. "Enjoy, guys."

"Thanks, Rudy," Hendricks nodded, before taking a sip at his drink. The two of them had elected to take a break after getting about halfway through the list. "We're making good time," he mused, wiping cinnamon off his face. "At this rate, we should be done by 5:00. Plenty of time for the party."

"I'm reluctant to break," Virginia replied, sipping at her own drink, "but damn if this isn't good. Who's next on the list?"

"Um," Hendricks looked down the list. "Let's see… Ah! Ian Kramer, lives in the Crystal Lake apartment complex. He's a highway worker, moonlights as a Santa for Christmas parties in town. He works as a… salt truck driver." He frowned, then put his face in his hands. "Oh *fuck me no.*"

"…maybe it's coincidence this time?" Bering put on a forced hopeful smile. "I mean, there are plenty of salt truck drivers in town."

"With all due respect, Dr. Bering," Hendricks sighed, "You've been assigned to this town for half a decade longer than me. We both know that coincidences do not exist within city limits."

"Well, shit," she downed the rest of her drink, not caring that it was scalding her throat. She gasped, and with a hoarse voice, asked, "Does it say where his last known whereabouts were?"

"No, it doesn't list that. Guess we should check where he works, which is…" He tapped the listing on the tablet. "Which is the Highway office on Bray Road; it's at the north of town, around where you get on the road to Duluth. Come on." He stood up.

"…Killer Christmas trees one year, werewolf Santas the next," Virginia sighed. "God, at least 2016 can't be any worse."

2:10 PM

They didn't even have to make it to the highway department before they saw the wreck.

The salt truck was barely visible from the road, but Hendricks managed to spot it, just a bit of red cresting over the snow-covered ditch. It looked like it had run off the road and into the frozen-over river; thankfully, it was downstream from the reservoir, and none of the salt seemed to have leaked.

Dr. Bering called in the crash, and came over to inspect the wreck. "All right, he's a registered lycanthrope," she frowned. "Why the hell was he driving the night before a full moon? He should know better than to operate machinery during then."

"Maybe he missed his medication?" Hendricks shrugged and started down into the ditch, thankful for his winter wear. "God knows monkshood isn't easy to find in America." He creeped towards the cabin of the vehicle, and cringed. "Yup."

"What?"

"That's a body, all right. Looks like it's stuck between human and… well, y'know. Christ," he stood up and looked at Bering. "The steering column is through its chest. And… come down here."

"One second." Virginia carefully made her way down the slope, and met up with Hendricks; sure enough, inside the cabin was the crumpled, broken form of a werewolf, clad in a Santa hat, a fake beard, and a red coat. "Holy shit."

"He must've gotten onto work from his gig, poor guy," Hendricks sighed. "Man. Werewolf Santa. That'd be one for the archives."

"I'm sure Pickman will find some way to embellish this regardless. He have any next of kin?"

Hendricks looked through Mr. Kramer's details on his phone, finding the section on relations. "Um, no. He has an ex-wife, and that's it."

"All the better, I guess." She started back up the slope, digging her

feet and and shifting her weight so that it was harder for her to fall down.

Hendricks backed away, and began following her. "Still, it'll be fascinating to dissect him. The transformation was stopped so suddenly that it didn't have time to switch back to a human upon death."

Dr. Bering's eyebrows met her hairline. "You know, Jason, it baffles me how you're terrified of insects, yet can stomach the thought of dissecting a werewolf."

"Werewolves can't crawl up your nose and suck out your brain."

Virginia thought about this statement, trying to think of a rebuttal, before deciding, "I… can't argue with that."

Within five minutes, Foundation containment forces had arrived with an industrial tow truck and ice breakers. Among them was one Agent Nicholas Ewell, who was wearing a Santa hat underneath his helmet, which was emblazoned with Σ10— The Sloths' Arm. The cuff of the hat was visible, and drew odd looks from both Hendricks and Bering. "What?" he asked. "Can't I have a bit of the holiday spirit, too?"

"Just wondering why you're wearing it under the helmet," Bering said. "Anyway. Think you can handle this? We still have to finish our rounds. Who's next, Hendricks?"

"Uh…" he looked at the document. "Jacob Loman. 20 Elm Street, Class-2. After that, there's six more."

"Huh," Virginia said as the crews started pulling the truck out of the ditch; she saw that there was a lot of blood coming from the cabin, and a long, hairy arm was hanging out of it. "Hell of a way to go."

"We'll put it through processing and have it in one of your labs by tonight, Dr. Bering." Ewell rolled his shoulders. "You doing anything for Christmas?"

"I'm probably going to be out of town visiting my niece," Bering replied. "Assuming nothing comes up, I'll be out of here in the

morning."

"I'll be doing the usual myself," Ewell said. "Doing the whole Christmas Party thing, trying to make sure the site doesn't turn into a shit-show like last year; we're *still* finding mistletoe and myrrh in the air ducts. Pear Tree won't stop giving us grief about it."

"Are we still going to call poor Dr. Partridge that? It's been a year, for god's sake, and the man's sick." Hendricks crossed his arms. "He's still going to the infirmary because he pisses pear juice."

"Sorry," Ewell mumbled, holding up his hands. "It's just become automatic. Though, people don't call you Flyswatter anymore…"

Hendricks glowered at him, and stomped back to the sedan.

Ewell turned to look at Dr. Bering. "Still a sore spot?"

"Some anonymous asshole gave him a giant can of RAID for his birthday. So, yeah." She pursed her lips and made her way back to the car.

5:30 PM

"That's all of them accounted for, finally," Hendricks said, eye twitching as he closed the list. "…Dr. Bering? Are Class-1s usually that… friendly… when they've shifted?"

"I don't know, and I don't want to know," she said, brushing fur off of her lap. "Why anyone would *want* to voluntarily become a werewolf, I don't know."

"Maybe you should ask Dr. Sinclair," Hendricks said as the car chugged in the cold weather against Virginia's attempts to start it. "She has a few books on the subject."

"What, dusty old spell books?"

"*Licked by the Lupine Lover* by Bram Stroker. Not Stoker. *Stroker.* She has it on the shelf in her office and keeps forgetting to hide it when people come in."

"…I wish that this site had easily-accessible amnestics," Dr. Bering gagged as she started up the car and headed towards the main S & C Plastics compound.

For all the world, S & C Plastics looked like a generic industrial building, four stories of brown stone and pragmatic corners, no embellishments of any kind. It had a light-up sign on the front in block format, with some generic slogan underneath that seemed to change every month; this month, it said "Leading the World in Plastic Technologies". They pulled into the main parking lot out front, and headed into the building, scanning their RFID badges as they entered.

At the front, the receptionist looked up at them. "Dr. Bering, there's a message for you from Agent Ewell."

"What is it?"

The receptionist held up a card and said, in a bland voice, "Where the hell are you, I've been trying to reach your phone for half an hour, the fucking body in the truck is gone, it looks like it walked away, call me."

Virginia's heart dropped to her feet, and she looked at Hendricks, before dashing towards the elevator. He followed suit. "The body's gone?" he asked, slamming the button for processing. "Walked away? *Please* tell me we're not dealing with a *Zombie* Werewolf Santa…"

"We're dealing with a Class-5."

"Thank *god,*" Hendricks said. "Zombie Santa is bad enough."

"Hendricks, Class-5 is *bad.* It recovered from a steering column to the chest! Anything it touches could have a lycanthropic infection attached to it. This site needs to be locked down. Hazmat procedures need to be put into place. This entire site needs to be scoured with nutmeg—"

"Wait, nutmeg? Are you serious?" Hendricks frowned.

"Nutmeg is highly neurotoxic to canines, and it can neutralize

secondary lycanthropy infection without damaging the human cells. It's not perfect, but it being the holidays, we have a lot on hand."

The elevator opened onto the processing level, and they were met with a somewhat gruesome sight. Researchers all over were collapsed, vomiting, scratching at their heads, mumbling and growling out of hunger. "Uh-oh."

"Where's the break room?" Virginia said.

"Um… two lefts and a right," Hendricks said, running past those who had collapsed. "Seriously though, *nutmeg?*"

"Oh shut up!" She said, running with him. They made it into the room, where they found an unfortunately familiar face collapsed over the sink, vomiting. The short, red hair and scarred forearms of Katherine Sinclair were visible leaning over the countertop, retching. "…holy shit this is bad."

"Sinclair," Bering said. "Listen to me. Where's the eggnog?"

She looked up at the doctor, her irises turning a slight yellow. "… egg…nog? …fridge? Second sh…" She retched into the sink again. "God, what the fuck's happening, Virginia?"

"You've been infected by a lycanthropic pathogen. If we act now, the nutmeg seasoning should cure it."

"Here," Hendricks said, diving out from the fridge. "Just take it straight from the carton."

Sinclair leaned on the countertop and had the eggnog poured into her mouth; as soon as it hit her stomach, the condition began to clear up, and she gasped, wiping her lips. "…right, nutmeg. Thanks, Bering, Hendricks."

"There's not enough cartons in here for the whole floor," Hendricks said. "Shit."

"There's some nutmeg in my lab on sublevel 5. It's behind— you know what, I'll just get it." She ran out of the breakroom, dodging the various ailed co-workers around her.

"Kind of a pity," Hendricks said. "Some of them would make amazing test cases."

"…and you wouldn't mind seeing Dr. Mattings grievously injured."

"Do you blame me? The guy's a cunt."

"Not important. Right now, we have to figure out where Kramer is going, and how the fuck we're going to stop him before he changes."

Hendricks tapped his skull, eyes going wide. "Uh-oh."

"What?"

"…it's Christmas Eve. This guy moonlights as a Santa. Christ's sake, *he had his costume on.*"

"He wouldn't put himself in a place where he would be a danger to others, though. Werewolves aren't inherently evil."

"All right, you're an actual, medical doctor. Tell me, even with the regenerative capabilities of that thing, what would the effects of a crash like that be?"

"Um…" Virginia walked around, gesticulating, wracking her brain. "He'd heal pretty quickly from any damage to the core, once any obstructions were removed… extremities might take a bit longer. Normally, a crash of that severity can lead to major concussions, resulting in memory loss, disorientation, brain swelling, and all sorts of other nastiness. A being with regenerative capabilities analogous to that of a Class-5 Lycanthrope can usually recover from brain damage of that severity within 24 hours, assuming blood could properly flow."

"And I'd say a steering column through the torso would inhibit that pretty badly." Hendricks looked up as the smell of nutmeg began to flow through the air ducts; Sinclair must have started distributing it. Already, the moaning from the hall was beginning to lessen. "Best case scenario, he's wandering around out there, completely disoriented, spreading his werewolf funk from any open wounds he might still have."

"Hell, you're right. Get Ewell, Pryce, February… anyone you can find from the task force and tell them to meet us out front, bring silver, and nutmeg. A lot of nutmeg. I hate having to do this, but worst comes to worst…"

"We're gonna have to kill him," Hendricks nodded. "I've got a bit of colloidal silver in my lab I can grab."

"Do it," Virginia said, starting for the elevator. On the way, they passed Dr. Sinclair. "Nice work with the nutmeg, Kat, we owe you!"

Katherine Sinclair just stood there, mystified; she had come down to tell them that she couldn't find the nutmeg, and not only was she being thanked for it, but the entire level smelled strongly of it.

The first reaction she had as she saw Dr. Bering and Dr. Hendricks enter the elevator was "Uh-oh."

7:35 PM

"The sun set an hour ago," Ewell cursed as he drove the armored jeep along. "Christ, the moon's gonna come up soon, and we don't know where the fuck he is."

"Well, we better find him soon," grumbled Seren Pryce, checking her rifle for the tenth time since they had started. "Or else bad shit's gonna happen. It might almost be as bad as '08!"

"*Nothing* is as bad as '08," Raymond February snapped. "Are you sure there's no way to track him?"

"Our best hope, right now, is find it and pray," Bering said, looking at her own snubnosed pistol, loaded with silver slugs. "Besides, the moon won't fully rise until around 11:00. We're fine."

"I just hope we can take him out with minimal casualties," Raymond muttered, checking the sights on his rifle.

Seren just snorted and covered her mouth. "'Foundation' and 'minimal casualties' are never used in the same sentence. What about you, Bug Zapper?" She gave a shit-eating grin at Hendricks.

"Anything on the scanner?"

Hendricks drilled holes in Pryce's armor with his glare, and turned to the police scanner app he had on his phone. "The usual; Christmas party got too out of control, ectoplasm being found in the school bathroom, another sighting or two of the Goatman—"

"What the hell's he doin'? Seren asked. "I thought Halloween was more his gig."

"…apparently going into the Black Garden to buy mead. Go figure." He looked at the walls, instinctively, expecting a window to be there. The scanner squawked, and he turned his attention back to it. "Wait, hold on, quiet."

«Units in the area of Gore Road, we, uh, we got reports of a man, mid 30s, walking around the vicinity. Subject is wearing a Santa Claus costume and is covered in blood, can someone confirm?»

"Hear that, Agent? Gore Road."

"I'm on it." Ewell turned on his sirens and gunned it down the streets of Sloth's Pit, barely missing a troupe of carolers. Not that anybody would have minded him hitting them.

Ewell nodded and looked out the driver's window as he turned onto Gore street. "Dammit, he's not here!"

"…any Christmas parties about?" Hendricks asked.

"Wh… yeah, there is. Wait, shit, I see him going in!" He slammed the car to a stop. "Gahfuckingdammit he's going to contaminate the whole place!"

"Move!" February said, readying his rifle. Pryce made her way across the street, where she sent up grapple onto the balcony of some unassuming two-story ranch house. She laid atop, waiting for the shot to be taken, if need be.

"…my god are you bleeding?"

That was never a good thing to hear from the inside of a Christmas

party. Ewell, February, and the two doctors made their way to the front door, where they saw Ian Kramer, his chest and mouth covered in blood, his Santa outfit a complete mess, converse with a woman in her sixties, who they guess was the homeowner.

"N…no," Ian said. "It's just peppermint."

"You're covered in blood! Jesus Christ, Ian!" She backed away and threw up her hands. "I asked you to be a Santa and you come back with blood all over you. God dammit! I…" She coughed, clutching her throat. "I just want to have a normal, nice…" she coughed again, black powder emanating from her throat. "Christmas party for my grand…" She collapsed, twitching.

"Huh," he said, blankly. "Guess that means I can go IIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIn." This was the approximate noise he made after February had snuck up behind him and applied a taser to his back. He caught him, and took a sip of a flask of eggnog to prevent infection.

Hendricks, for his part, placed a solution of water and nutmeg into the woman's mouth and tilted her head back; it had been February's idea, in case of egg allergies. As Pryce had put it: "Saving the town from goddamn werewolves and you're worried about the people dying from allergic reactions. Jesus Christ."

"Right," Ewell said, helping February lift him to a trailer behind the task force van, fitted for Hazmat containment. "Now, let's plunk his ass in containment, make sure we don't catch the wurrwulf, and exchange gifts."

"I'll call in that we're coming back," Hendricks said, climbing into the front seat. "Squad 25 en route back to site, we have a hazardous individual in need of containment, can you confirm, over?" Silence. "87, this is Sigma-10 squad 25, we have a dangerous anomalous individual inbound, can you read? Over." More silence. "…that's not a good sign."

"Maybe they stepped out to mingle?" Virginia's tone was of genuine hope.

"…I don't think so, guys," Pryce said over her ear piece. "For one… ever play Silent Hill?"

"Nope."

"Nu-uh."

"Can't say I have."

"Two was the best," February affirmed. "Why?"

"Because there's this huge bank of fog on the hill where HQ is. I can't see anything through it. And… I can't tell, but I think it's red and green."

"Well," sighed Bering. "That's just wonderful. You know, you think this town would outlaw *all* holidays at this point, not just the 4th of July."

"Uncle Sam never stole the souls of those who didn't fly American Flags on Easter. Lady Liberty never trampled the apple orchard on Valentine's day. And George Washington never rode into town on a horse made of crystal looking to eat the brains of his opponents on Halloween." Ewell sighed and looked at Kramer as he was hauled into the Hazmat trailer. "…now what?"

Pryce had, by this point, descended from her perch. "…we take the van, go to the Black Garden, and wait for all this to blow over?"

"Wh-" Hendricks said. "With an unattended containment unit? *Are you mad?!*"

"I don't think we should get drunk on a job, either…" February pointed out.

"Yeah, now that I say it… but fuck me I'm hungry, and the party's no longer an option. Can't fight the horrors of the universe on an empty stomach."

"I agree with her there," Ewell climbed into the van. "C'mon. We'll plop this down at the auxiliary site, and I'll go pick up burgers."

10:00 PM

The auxiliary site was more of a bunker; it could withstand a half-megaton blast from within, and it had the capability to seal from the outside. The only visible part of it was a concrete dome in the middle of the woods, half a mile away from the Kamp Krakkow memorial park. Nothing that was directly associated with the town's history much liked venturing here; Virginia had once heard Sinclair call it a "psychic scar".

They sat on top of the dome, in the cold, eating their respective meals. Pryce had finished long since, and was looking up at the site through binoculars. "Still no sign of it lifting," she sighed. "Fuck, half my squad's up there. What are they doing?!"

"Still can't get anybody on the phones or radio," Hendricks said, putting his phone away. "That is never a good sign. Last time 87 had a complete communications blackout was Christmas 2008."

"God, please don't be a recurring event," Virginia's whole body shook like it was in an earthquake. "I still have dreams about it. None of them good. I see the candy-cane fingers loom over me…"

At this point, Pryce came down from her perch in a nearby tree. "Well, if we are the sole survivors, then I guess we're going to technically be the *de facto* head staff of 87."

"Yeah, but it would also mean that everyone else is dead, so, that's a minus," February said, looking at her. "Hendricks, how about you try calling again?"

"All right. Thank god for unlimited minutes…" he picked the phone number of a random researcher— and to his surprise, it was picked up. "…hello?"

A droning Christmas carol was playing in the background. "Hendricks? What the fuck? Where are you?"

"Bailey!" He put the phone to speaker. "What's going on? The entire site has been surrounded by a great big fog—"

"Containment breach. Massive. Sigma-10 is trying to recontain, but

we're not sure how long they'll hold."

"Fuck me!" Hendricks said. "What broke out?"

"It was—" There was giant *thud* from the other end. "Oh shit, get the tinsel *get the tinsel GET THE TI-*"

The line died with a cry of "HO, HO, HO."

"…did Santa Claus breach containment?" Virgina asked, stunned. "Do we even *have* him in containment? Or anything like him?"

"…you're asking the wrong people, Doc," Ewell swallowed, getting to the car. "The containment cell can hold Kramer. We're going to the site to get our buddies back."

"We're staying," Bering said, and Hendricks wished she had not spoken for him. "We can't leave it unattended."

"I'll stay here with them," Pryce said. "They're poorly armed, and just in case something freaky comes out of the night, I don't think a snub-nose is gonna stop it."

"We'll be in touch," February nodded, getting into the jeep. It sped off, sirens on.

Pryce took a knee and put on a set of lightweight night-vision goggles. "Don't worry. Nothing's gonna get past me, and when it blows over, they'll be back for us. The Pryce is Right."

Hendricks rubbed his face. "How… how long have you been waiting to say that?"

"…three years," she admitted. "Sounded cooler in my head."

Bering just shook her head, a motion interrupted by a sudden jostle underneath them. "Ah, shit. I think he's out."

"Moon's up," Pryce said, eyes going skyward, "So that's a safe bet." The metal in the concrete underneath buckled. "…should we be worried?"

"It can't breach the-"

Her speech was interrupted by Hendrick's hand. "*Are you insane?!* You know how this town works! The instant you say that it can't breach something, *it will breach it!*"

"He's got a point, doc," Seren said. "I suggest you disregard any further questions about the security of this bunker."

Virginia nodded, and sat down on the dome again. "…still, it can withstand half a mega-"

"SHUT UP!" they both screamed.

Beneath them, the metal groaned and creaked and buckled, but it held. The three of them stayed silent, fearing that their words would trigger some ironic action in the universe and let the thing out.

11:30 PM

Unfortunately, the universe sometimes just takes its course.

Seren was the only one awake at the time, with Hendricks sleeping on her shoulder, probably karmic payback for the can of RAID she had given him this year. He and Bering were both awoken by a loud *thud* from beneath.

"…what was that?"

A dull droning sound rang out soon after. "…that… sounded like the containment alarm," Virginia said, blearily. "…oh *FUCK*."

She stood up, and looked around; they were in the middle of the woods, a good three kilometers from town, it was cold, dark, and they would soon have a werewolf chasing after them.

"Bail?" Bering asked.

"Bail," the both of them replied.

They ran down the slope of the concrete dome, and no sooner did

they clear it than the dome exploded outward, revealing a massive, dark, lupine form, with a Santa hat melted onto its head and the fur on its face covered by a small, grey beard. What was left of its Santa jacket had torn open and the sleeves were in shreds on its arms. The less said about what happened to its pants, the better.

"…I don't think nutmeg's gonna work on this thing," Seren said, aiming her rifle upwards. The thing was at least five meters tall, and it looked like bullets might not even work, but… nothing ventured, nothing sprained.

The bullet tore through its flesh, but barely elicited a howl of pain from the thing; Virginia could see that there was still a wound in its chest. It had yet to completely heal from the car crash. That meant…

"Regenerative capabilities aren't yet at full," Bering said, starting to run. "We need to strike it in the same place again. It might cause total organ failure."

Nodding, Seren circled around a tree and fired at its chest; while the bullet impacted, it wasn't quite the immense force she was hoping for. "Ah, shit. Shoulda brought my 12-gauge."

"Keep firing! It might distract it!" Hendricks said, looking at Bering. "This is a crazy, crazy idea. But hear me out— there's something very nearby that is around the same circumference and volume as the steering wheel of a truck."

"What might that be? I'm open to ideas!"

A shot rang out, which missed horribly; all it did was chip off one of the wolf's claws, and a finger along with it, as they ran through the woods. Pryce darted behind cover as Hendricks led Bering towards the Kamp Krakkow Memorial.

The actual memorial itself was a large totem pole, mimicking the one the Foundation had contained so long ago. The actual one was hidden somewhere on the grounds, to prevent further anomalous occurrences. "Site of the Great Fuck-Up of 76," Hendricks said, "And it might just save our lives." He indicated the totem pole; while it was a fair bit higher, it seemed to have the same dimensions as a

steering wheel.

"…Hendricks, that's brilliant."

"INCOMING!" Pryce said, darting up a tree with trained quickness. The thing barreled in through the entrance to the park, and knocked right into Hendricks, sending him sprawling in the snow. "NO!"

"Mmnrmg…" Hendricks mumbled; he was alive, for the moment.

"PRYCE!" exclaimed Bering. "You need to get it to jump onto the totem pole!"

"How the fuck am I meant to do that?!"

"Shoot it s-somewhere to make it jump! T-the small of the back causes a startle response, try grazing it!"

This was all she could say before the wolf grabbed at her, letting out a loud, eldritch *howl* as it made its way towards Hendricks. It loomed over the figure of the poor, unconscious doctor with a bleeding head, jaws gaping. It reached out towards him, and…

"Ian Kramer!"

The werewolf turned to face the doctor. "Yeah, you! You're really going to take an easy, dying meal over some still-hot flesh?" (She then realized she could have phrased that far better). "Come and get it!"

She had attracted its attention now, and had begun, in the scientific parlance, skedaddling away from it. She maneuvered her way around the totem pole so that the wolf was on the other side, towering over it.

A shot rang out. It grazed the wolf's back, causing it to jump up, onto the totem pole.

To say it wasn't a pretty sight would have been an understatement, but, in the end, it was dead, and the Foundation now had another totem pole to replace. Virginia gagged as she saw the blood coat the pole. "…really wish it didn't come to that."

"Yeah…" Seren climbed down. "Killing a townie is never fun. This is only my third time doing so. I'll check on Hendricks."

"Mmm," replied Bering, checking its hand. "Agent Pryce?"

"Yeah?"

"Why is it missing a finger?"

Its at this point that Dr. Hendricks had become to come about, giggling softly. "…is Santa Dead?"

"He's concussed," Pryce said, lifting him up onto her back. "C'mon, we're going to have to walk back into town."

"The *finger,* Pryce! These things can regenerate from anything!"

"Ah, shit, I shot it off about 200 meters outside the perimeter. We can look for it in the sun."

"Santa… Claws," mumbled Hendricks, delirious.

"Yeah, that's right, Santa's dead, and he's left you the present of painkillers and a hospital visit. C'mon." She hefted him. "Christ, lay off on the Wendy's."

Hendricks was carried out of the park, with Virginia following after. About a quarter of the way back to town, Hendricks stumbled out of Pryce's arms, and rooted around in the foliage, before producing something long, with one sharp end.

"…is that…" Virginia looked it over.

Hendricks was holding the severed finger of the werewolf. "Yes, Virginia," he said, "There's Santa Claws."

Virginia wanted to laugh, but all she could do was scream impotently.

December 25th, 2015
12:00 A.M.

The walk back to Site-87 was long, cold, and hard. Seren and Virginia eventually decided to take turns carrying Hendricks, but by the time they had gotten down Main Street, it seemed that the fog had finally lifted over the site.

Reaching the site's perimeter, they discovered that at least five different task forces from three other sites had been flown in to aid with the situation— Beta-8, Gamma-20 and -40, Rho-16, and Omicron-94. They were all sitting outside the site, baffled, surrounded by staff members. Some of them were covered in what could only be described as solidified candy cane goop. Others were having tinsel pulled from their mouths. Another was talking with Dr. Sinclair, trying to get a menorah removed from his body.

"…what the fuck happened here?" Bering frowned, looking up at all three floors of the proper S & C Plastics building.

"Something tells me we don't want to know, and will never know the full story. Just like 2008."

"This seems to have far fewer casualties, though…" Bering looked up at the building. "Didn't we used to have *four* floors visible from the surface?"

Pryce looked the building up and down, scowling. "…that's another problem for another day. I think our Christmas present should be not having to worry about this."

"*Shit,*" Virginia cursed. "I was supposed to go fly to my sister's place for Christmas and I had a present for my niece in my room. It's probably flooded with cider at this point."

"Might this be it?" asked a small, chipper woman with red hair, green eyes, and a too-bright smile, wearing the ugliest Christmas sweater that either of them had ever seen underneath a lab coat. She was holding out a large, rectangular box, with snowman wrapping paper on it; a tag on the paper read:

To: Lily
From: Auntie Virginia

"Oh my god," she said, looking it over and taking it from the woman. "How did you get this out?"

"Trade secret," the woman winked and tapped her nose. "Everyone deserves a good Christmas, even the Foundation. Now, I have *several* others to make sure they've been preserved, excuse me, pardon me, *Emma come along*…"

She was followed by a bespectacled woman in more sensible wear, with coppery brown hair tied up in a bun and a monopoly on the local freckle market. She was holding a corgi in one hand and pulling a cart of presents with the other.

"Are they even employed here?" Pryce asked, looking at Bering.

"It's Christmas. I think we can give them the gift of not questioning it, for once. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have to book a flight, apologize profusely to my sister and her niece, and pray I can get there before nightfall. Merry Christmas!" She yelled, running to her company car, placing the present in the backseat, and driving out of the gates.

Pryce, for her part, was tapped on the shoulder by the woman's assistant- Emma, was it? "You don't work here, do you?" asked Seren.

"Quite the contrary," she said. "Our company has a strong distaste for your organization. But Isabel was making her rounds, saw what was happening here, and decided to stop to help." Emma handed her a small, wrapped present. "We'd appreciate it if you kept this under wraps— no pun intended. Happy Christmas."

Once they were a good distance away, Seren opened the paper and found, within, a photograph, complete with frame. It was of a picture she knew for a fact was never taken, of her, Ewell, February, Hendricks and Bering sitting on that damn dome. The dome was decorated by Christmas lights, and instead of burgers, they were eating a Christmas dinner on a werewolf-skin rug. All of them were smiling at the camera, and a caption under the photograph read:

Happy HOWLidays
From Site-87

"Heh," Seren smirked, placing the photograph under her arms as she spotted some of her squadmates. She ran off to meet them, and to discuss just what the hell happened.

Hub

Harbinger

O5-2 carefully arranged the surgical mask over her face, tugging the disposable fabric this way and that, ensuring that her mouth and nose were covered properly. She bent down and eased off her black pumps, exchanging them for a pair of sterile slippers. A set of gloves and a disposable cap were on the table next to her.

"Is this really the extent of protocol for interacting with a four-hundred-year-old-man?" said the Overseer as she looked down at her new shoes with disgust.

"You're worried about protocol at a time like this?" Dr. Zhang adjusted his glasses as he examined the tablet in his hand.

"A time like this. What could you possibly know about that? You live in a separate world from us. That's exactly what Existential Isolation Facility Beta was designed for." O5-2 tucked her long silver hair under the cap, pushing individual strands away from her forehead and up underneath the protective garment.

"Overseers aren't supposed to be here. Should I even ask why that rule is being waived today?"

"No. You shouldn't." She pulled the latex gloves onto her hands, accentuating the end of her sentence with a tight snap. "And don't."

The Overseer and the Site Director passed the rest of their time preparing in silence. A soft chime and a green icon flashing on the Director's tablet indicated that the subject was ready. Dr. Zhang began to speak. O5-2 spoke instead.

"No recording devices. No one else." O5-2 held her security pass up to the reader on the hermetically sealed door. Latches clicked open as her card was acknowledged, air rushing past them from the positive pressurized antechamber.

She looked one last time at Dr. Zhang. "I was never here. Do you understand?"

The Site Director nodded. O5-2 didn't bother to wait for acknowledgment as she proceeded into the main chamber.

The second door sealed behind her automatically. Before her was a man in a hospital bed, at the center of a mass of tubes, wires and specialized lifts designed to enable movement with the least possible effort. She only knew that this was a man because she had read the file; the person before her was a shriveled husk of cobweb-thin strands of hair and translucent, spotted skin. Machines registered respiration and heartbeat, assuring anyone who cared to listen that this was a living creature.

She sat in the chair placed at the ancient man's side by the research staff. A speaker was wired to the bedside railing next to the man.

"Goodbye, **SCP-411**."

The wasted old man moved his lips, faint noises wheezing out of him, captured by the small microphone next to his mouth, held in place with surgical tape. Several seconds elapsed before a monotone voice emerged from the speaker, reconstructing and interpreting his barely perceptible words.

"You are the first of the quiet times. Some peace and quiet, finally."

O5-2 parsed the response. Not an answer to any questions she might ask. No causality issues yet.

The monotone voice resumed. "Suffering. Cruelty. The currency by which the world is purchased. Everything that you are is a reflection of this. You will remember the true nature of cruelty in time."

She had to be careful now. This sounded like something. She went through the checklist of questions she had prepared, mentally forbidding herself from any desire to deviate from the script. She read aloud the question that she thought fit the answer best.

"What is the price that we will need to pay for this?"

She didn't like the stilted manner of this conversation. O5-2 watched a thin stream of spittle trickle out of the corner of 411's mouth as his lips moved. She waited for the transcription.

"Your kind did not just appear in my path. I recognize your faces. All of my life I have seen faces like yours. Not full of fear, and desperation and hate like the faces of my recent years. But joy. The happiness of untroubled days, illumined by a different star. Your future is clear in my past. You have been, and you will continue to be."

A different star. This was consistent with the data from the newest Determinative Set that had been examined. The nature of how it would occur was murky, as all data from **SCP-2003** were, but the possibility that escape from 001 was an option had been tantalizingly coming into focus for the past several weeks.

There was a future after all.

She started to speak the question to the answer. She was cut off by monotone, clipped laughter from the speaker. Something about it chilled her. She started again.

"411, does humanity exist in your past?" Her feelings of relief collided with the unnatural flow of the conversation. Her elation at being able to believe in another path forward was cut with something that felt like poison inside her. Nothing about this interaction felt right. Many items provided glimpses of the future. All of them distorted those events through the madman lenses of their creators, human and otherwise. The future was forbidden from the central planning process, but O5-2 felt the need to make an exception, given the vote that was before them tomorrow.

The speaker crackled once more, breaking her thoughts. "A barren rock. Home to terrors beyond imagining. It is well that life has fled. It is even better that life for others continues far away from this place."

Well. The next response was an easy one, then. She sighed, annoyed with the rules of this game despite the awful gravity of the situation.

"Is there a future for humanity on Earth?"

That was the last non-pleasantry she had been planning on asking of the decrepit humanoid. Precious little material, but apparently an extended conversation would kill someone of this advanced age. Then they'd all be truly screwed. She decided to wait a few more moments while the time-wasted man gasped words inaudibly in his own slow time. Her vote tomorrow was decided now. She began to formulate the beginnings of the argument she would make to her peers. How would she reconcile-

"The Planet of Hands. This is what we are to speak of. I am from there, you know. As are you, child. You shall know more of it in time. I am glad to be here now instead."

O5-2 sighed. Senility hadn't been mentioned in the file, but it was certainly to be expected from someone who had racked up multiple centuries of life. A brief thought occurred that perhaps 411's other answers should be reconsidered. She banished it quickly. Any chance, no matter how slight, was better than tomorrow's proposal. She focused herself on convincing the others.

"Greetings, prodigal daughter. Unlike me, you'll be home soon." The ancient face on the bed twisted into something resembling a polite smile. Like she had just walked in the room. That was her cue, thankfully.

"Greetings, SCP-411." O5-2 promptly stood up, turned around, and left the chamber.

Hartliss Detective Agency

Capone's 'Outfit' operates out of South Chicago with impunity, handing out stacks of green to keep everyone minding their own damn business. And if the green ain't green enough? A couple pounds of lead in your belly ought to do the trick.

One of the only men with the moxie to stand up to the Outfit is Hymie Weiss — 'The Perfumed Burglar'. But moxie only gets you so far. Weiss' North Side Gang is the mom-and-pop store to Al Capone's *Sears Catalog*. Capone's got the muscle, the cash, and — unlike Weiss — hasn't managed to piss off nearly every crook in the Windy City. He's got Weiss on the ropes — and that's made Weiss desperate.

And if there's one thing desperate men are good at, it's filling up morgues.

Place stinks of chemicals. I pull out a foil-sleeved stick of gum from my pocket, unwrap it, and shove it into my mouth. Meanwhile, Dr. Dalewood — Chicago's pre-eminent forensic pathologist — makes his way toward the large metal plates that line the wall. He disengages the locking mechanism on one of them, then casts a glance back my way. "You sure you're up to this?"

I mash the gum against the back of my mouth. "You sure you want that twenty?"

A week ago, a stoolie set to testify against one of Capone's boys ended up in the hospital over a case of 'acute lead poisoning'. Four slugs in the brain. Doctors didn't expect him to make it through the night. Suddenly, Hymie Weiss shows up with his own personal physician. Two days later? The stoolie walked into the courtroom and sang his little heart out. Must have been a stressful performance — he croaked the next day. 'Brain aneurysm'.

The doctor grabs hold of the handle and heaves back. The tray rolls

out with a loud, obnoxious rattle — revealing a shrouded corpse stretched across the slab.

Two days ago, Capone sent a specialist to 'ventilate' one of Weiss' Northboys. Witnesses claimed the bastard ate over twenty rounds before buying it. Police are keeping it hush hush, but Mr. Gallant has it on good word that the corpse was still crawling two hours later. They eventually just set the damn thing on fire.

Dr. Dalewood pulls the sheet back. He has to work at it; some of the linen sticks to the corpse's face and chest. Underneath are the burnt remains of Mr. Charles Montgomery — one of Weiss' personal body-guards.

Not much to work with. But I've done more with less.

I fish the wad out of my mouth and walk on over to the body, sticking the gum to the side of the tray. Then, reaching down, I squeeze Mr. Montgomery's blackened, blistered cheeks. Bits of charred flesh crack and splinter under my fingers. His jaw pops open like a released spring, exposing crooked teeth inside of a still-pink mouth.

The doctor takes a few steps back. Out of the corner of my eye, I see him making the sign of the cross.

Words never meant to be spoken by a human tongue leave my mouth. I follow them with a question to Mr. Montgomery: "Who gave you life beyond life?"

I lower my head and kiss his melted lips, breathing warmth into his lungs.

My hands go to his chest. As I pull back, I push down against his sternum. Bones creak and pop — something gives. A surge of fetid air gushes out from him, accompanied by a raspy whisper.

Volo… dya…

Satisfied, I retrieve my gum and step away, poking the wad back into my mouth. But then I hear Dalewood cry out.

"Mother of God!"

I turn. Mr. Montgomery seems to have regained his zeal for life. His upper torso convulses; he's trying to breathe on his own.

I grab the bone chisel from the surgical tray next to me and slam it down between his eyes. It sinks in about an inch. He keeps jerking. I seize a nearby hammer and start beating at that chisel, forcing it deeper. After the seventh hit, his convulsions have dwindled to tiny spasms. After hit number sixteen, he's just a twitching heap of cooked meat.

"God in Heaven." Dalewood mumbles a prayer to himself. Meanwhile, I hold the hammer up, ready to strike again.

Twitch. Twitch. Twitch.

Nothing.

That's when I see it. Something wriggling inside of his mouth. At first, I think it's his tongue — but it's the wrong color. A sickly, pearl-like white. Too pale, and too long. Leaning forward, I narrow my eyes and get a closer look.

A segmented worm pokes its head out from the back of his throat. It looks like a bloated, over-sized pupa. The thing stretches and undulates, squeezing bulges from its tip down to where it's gotten stuck — trying to push itself free. I tap Mr. Montgomery's mouth shut with the hammer.

Dalewood's looking a little green around the gills. He's flattened himself against the far wall, staring at me and the corpse.

"Alright," I tell him. "We need to stitch his mouth shut, quick. Also, you got an incinerator down here?"

After I clean myself up and pay Dalewood for his trouble, I climb the steps back up into the police station and use their phone to call the number Mr. Gallant gave me.

September's voice responds: "Mr. Hartliss. You'll take the case?"

"Ten dollars a day to cover expenses. Three hundred when the job

is done. And I'll need a hundred up front, right now."

"Those terms seem rather excessive."

"The case is excessive. You're asking me to take on a lot of risk." I glance around to make sure none of the flat-foots are listening in. "I can track Weiss' new ally for you, but it won't be easy. Whoever they are, they're dangerous."

"You already have a lead?" She sounds surprised. I savor it. September isn't the sort who's easily impressed.

"Yeah. It ain't the Spirit. How much do you and your boss know about **Sarkicism**?"

The line goes quiet for a while.

"September?"

"You suspect Sarkic involvement."

"I don't 'suspect' a goddamn thing. I *know*. I've also got a name: Volodya. You recognize it?"

Again, quiet.

"Look, lady, I don't deal with dramatic silence that well. You familiar with the name or not?"

"We are familiar with Iga Volodya's work," she tells me. "I'll have my office forward you our information on her, and wire the money to your account. We'll need daily reports from you — you are to locate her and determine her involvement with Mr. Weiss. Nothing else. Are these terms agreeable?"

"Nothing about this is agreeable, September. But it'll do." I hang up.

Finding out that Weiss' silent partner isn't the Chicago Spirit is a relief. Guys like Capone and Weiss will spill your guts, sure — but a guy like **Richard Chapell**? He'll putrefy those guts, blend 'em into a milkshake, then make you drink while your family watches.

Not like the Sarkites are much better, though. They're older than dirt and use words like 'quaint' and 'rustic' to describe acts of cannibalism. They've got dynasties spanning back hundreds — if not thousands — of years. Their only saving grace is that they're *too* old — modernity baffles them. I once watched one struggle for ten minutes to figure out how to answer a goddamn telephone.

After a night of rest, I arrive in the Polish Downtown. Crowded tenement housing looms on either side of the street; the scent of sauerkraut and boiled hot-dogs wafts from a nearby food-cart. A newsboy stands on the corner, trying to pass yesterday's papers as today's news.

I reach into my coat pocket and squeeze my pistol — taking comfort in its weight.

The Gallant Society has been keeping tabs on Iga Volodya since the 1800s. September's file on her reads like a pastiche of half a dozen horror stories. Mothers giving birth to bulbous knots of mandrake root — their unborn children snatched from their very wombs. Babies sown into blood-drenched soil, only to grow into sobbing saplings that bleed when cut. Human heads sprouting from the branches of **`trees`**.

Y'know, basic Sarkic stuff.

Volodya was born in Russia, but left with her kids and grand-kids for Poland. Immigration papers describe her as '**`a simple turnip farmer`**'. To everyone else, she's Baba Yaga. September's files hint that she's had a hand in everything from Rasputin's rise to power to the influenza pandemic of 1918. Whoever she is, she's a fully ordained Karcist — the Sarkic equivalent of a Catholic Cardinal.

In other words? I'm to her what a card-sharp is to Harry frigging Houdini.

But even a card-sharp can pull a fast one on a master when the master isn't paying attention.

I slip past the store-fronts and tenement complexes, making my way through the alleyways that weave in and out of the spaces in-

between. Closing my eyes, I walk and breathe — counting back from a hundred. The scents and sounds behind me shrink away. Little by little, the world dissolves.

Most people who live here only see one city. A few can see two or three. If you're *real* clever, you know there's more than can be counted — each stacked on top of another, like an infinitely nested Matryoshka doll.

I hold my breath, peel back Chicago's layers, and open my eyes.

The alleyway is now crooked and wrong. Pink veins snake through the walls to my left and right; they pulse with a hidden heartbeat. In the distance, a heavy, yellow smog obscures the skyline. What was previously a dead tom-cat is now alive and growling, lazily grooming its spilled entrails.

I pull out my .45 and start walking.

Volodya immigrated here from Poland in 1921. She claimed she wanted to spend time with her family. Five bucks says Weiss — a Polish immigrant himself — is part of the family she was referring to.

Finding her won't be hard. I tuck the .45 under my sleeve and follow the veins, tracing them back to their source. They lead me around a corner — past a bakery where all the pastries are stuffed full of glistening viscera — past a man selling toys with blood on his hands.

All the veins stretch out to meet a single building. It's a slouched 3-story tenement in the poorest part of town. As I approach, I can hear the faint beat of a heart. It's getting louder with every step.

I slip in through the back door and up the stairs. The railing is made of cracked, splintered femurs; they are fastened together with wet, slick sinew. On the walls, a symbol is scrawled over and over again — a crooked spiral of yellow. The boards under my feet whimper with pain.

The heart-beat is deafening. I enter the hall; the walls and floors are made of pale, pulsating flesh. Root-like fibers dangle from the ceiling

above. The door where all the veins converge is a misshapen, bulbous thing; it's covered in tumors and pustules, each throbbing with the pulse.

I breathe. The world around me shudders and collapses. I am standing in an ordinary hall, in front of an ordinary door. There is no one with me. I reach out and knock on the door.

No answer.

I knock again. "Ma'am? This is Officer Dalewood, with the Chicago PD. I was hoping to ask you a few questions."

Still no answer.

I give the hallway another look-over — still no one around. Then, I take a step back and slam the heel of my boot into the space directly beneath the lock. After three solid kicks, the wood splinters. After the fifth, it snaps and gives.

The door swings open. I step in.

Iga Volodya's eyes meet mine.

She's tied to a bed on the other side of the room, surrounded by a dozen or more sticks of smoldering incense. The space is filled with stacks of glass cylinders framed in brass — each filled with a pale yellow liquid. Segmented worms are suspended in the fluid — the same kind of worm I found in Mr. Montgomery's throat. Numerous medical textbooks litter the floor, with surgical equipment arranged neatly on a nearby tray.

The incense is for the smell, I'm guessing — but it's not *nearly* enough. Iga Volodya is split open from throat to pelvis, folds of flesh pinned back with needles; her organs throb with every beat of her still-functioning heart. Inside of her, more of the white worms — smaller pupae — wriggle and twist inside of her guts. She stares at me from where she's bound, watching me with those pitch-black eyes.

She's not the one helping Weiss. She's being used — *harvested*. Someone's kept her locked up here, using her to grow and cultivate

these things.

Her cracked lips peel back to expose yellow, broken teeth. She opens her mouth, starting to make a wheezing sound — is she trying to speak? It looks like her tongue's been carved out.

No, she's not trying to speak.

She's *laughing*.

I see the length of loose tripwire on the floor. I see where it attached to the now broken door. And then I see the grenade bolted to the wall to my right — the grenade that's missing its pin.

As the world explodes around me, I suck in a breath and dive deeper into Chicago than I've ever dived before.

Next: **`The Long Goodbye`**

Hats

I have not been here long.

I do not know much.

But if there's one thing I know, it is this:

Alto Clef cannot die.

The guy is immortal, I swear. He can sit in 682's containment cell for an hour and not get eaten. He can mess with that witch kid and not be ripped limb from limb. He can pull off basically anything and the O5s can't do a thing other than give him a slap on the wrist. Now I was cool with all this.

Until he took my hat.

Clef said that it was nifty enough for him to claim as his own. But that hat. That hat was ME. That was what made me, a lowly level 1 researcher, memorable. I was the guy with the hat.

And now I'm no one.

So I went to get the hat. I begged. I pleaded. I bribed. I offered my soul to the man. And he said that the only way I was getting this nifty hat was to kill him.

So I shot him in the head.

My hat reclaimed, I was happy for once. I went about my business then. I mean, I wasn't going to defame his body and carve 'I WAS HERE. CLEF IS A LOSER!!!' into his chest. I left him.

And the next day he walked up to me and said, "You'll have to do better than that." He walked away, my hat on his head.

Something snapped then. I was on a mission. I walked to his office

and shot him at least eight times, emptying the magazine in my handgun. I doused his office in gasoline and threw a couple of lit matches in there. And he came back the next day, simply taking my hat off of my head. I tried everything I could think of. I filled his office with water and watched him drown. I poisoned every thing he ate or drank. I sent 076-2 in there after a while. And every time he 'died', he was back again the next day, the same old Clef, looking like he had never been burnt or shot or drowned or sliced into itty bitty little bite sized pieces.

So finally I went up to him. He asked casually, as if it were all a game to him, "How are you going to try and kill me today?"

I replied, "I'm not. Keep the damn hat. It's lame anyway. I got a different one today. It's better than that one."

Clef removed the hat and said, "You're right. Sombreros are so last season." He threw his hat at me, then walked over and took my hat, saying, "Jester hats are what's in, you know. Big in France."

And that time I just shot him because he had been fucking with me.

Hava

The American woman standing near one of the stands in the marketplace was the giveaway that Abd al-Rashid bin Tannous was in the right place. Abd al-Rashid, in the glow of the cultural tolerance that he was ordered to take upon himself, repressed all of the negative thoughts about the almost certainly godless Western harlot that stood before him, while simultaneously trying to repress a sense of pride at doing so. He could tell her American origin from…well, it was nearly *sweating* from her pores. The inappropriate dress, the stern, impertinent, rude glare at the men walking past her.

"You would be the guide I was instructed to meet?" Abd al-Rashid said.

The American woman's visage took on the serene awe that is only found in the faces of children who have recently soiled themselves and individuals completely non-fluent in a language that is being spoken to them. "I rated Josephine," she stumbled through. "I… evaluating Josephine? I Josephine named." She paused, then shook her head.

Abd al-Rashid began to politely walk her through conversational Arabic when the world around him grayed out slightly, faded; it didn't pass away completely, but it gained a perceptible sheen of unreality. In the gray fog, Abd al-Rashid heard a voice speaking to him.

My name is Josephine, the voice said. *You'd be doing me a wonderful favor if you could get very, very startled by all of this now and move on to the "acceptance" stage post haste. I'm attracting enough attention as it is without you going apoplectic or drooling.*

Once the voice stopped, the world returned to normal. Abd al-Rashid was immediately cognizant of the stunned, nearly-idiotic expression on his face, and regained his outward composure as quickly as possible. "You, ah, you are a mind-reader?"

The woman paused for a moment, looking at Abd al-Rashid closely, as though inspecting his face for blemishes. *Sorry, it takes a moment for me to decode your thoughts. Yes, a telepath. Before you start, yes, I'm aware of the* hadiths *forbidding and condeming telepathy. Let me assure you that I am not of the devil Shaytan, that none of my thoughts are manipulated by him, and that I will not use this ability for spying or infiltration in your presence. Though I cannot universally say the same for the individuals we are about to meet.*

Abd al-Rashid was quickly adapting to the rather unusual situation, accepting the fading and refocusing of reality around him as necessary. "Do I need to speak for this to work?"

It helps, Josephine said. *Helps you focus thoughts into coherent words. I can work around its absence if you're uncomfortable, though.*

"No, no, it's fine," Abd al-Rashid said. "Shall we proceed?"

Yes, certainly, Josephine said. *We need to enter the aperture. Close your eyes.* Abd al-Rashid did so. *Clear your mind. I need you to focus on a very specific thought.* Abd al-Rashid nodded.

I want you to think about the first time that you realized that, one day, your mother was going to die.

Abd al-Rashid looked at Josephine, cocked his head to one side, frowned, then closed his eyes again. A moment passed.

A short whistling tune came from behind where Abd al-Rashid was standing. He opened his eyes, turned, looked behind him. There was an enclosed market stand where one had not been previously. Josephine walked past him into the opening. *When did these stands start being enclosed?* Abd al-Rashid thought before following.

The building looked about the size of Abd al-Rashid's small apartment bathroom in Shemiran from the outside, but once he crossed into the stand, the world behind him faded away into nonexistence. Suddenly, without looking around, without *needing* to look around to confirm, he *knew* that, if he were to turn around, the doorway he just walked through would be gone. He *knew* he was

surrounded on all sides by an infinite space exactly similar to the clay brick world he saw in front of him. And he *knew* that if he were to turn around and walk away, he could spend the entire remainder of his natural life searching and he would never find anything in that infinite space other than the man — no, the boy, possibly eleven years old — sitting placidly in front of him, smoking a cigarette.

Josephine spoke in English towards the boy, who glanced briefly at her before wincing and looking away. The boy said some words in return to her in English. The back and forth continued for a few moments before Josephine nodded and walked past the boy, disappearing a few seconds later.

"Wait, where did —"

"You need to hope you know what you're doing," the boy said in perfect, unaccented Istanbul Turkish, staring into space in a trancelike fashion. "Whatever plan you have in mind, she has planned ten ways to kill you without deviating from whatever expectations are had of her. She is trying very hard to behave like a human being, but some part of her knows that it will never be successful, and will certainly never balance out the things she has done. She has a self-control that will never belie how close she is to snapping and taking everyone around her down with her."

Abd al-Rashid continued staring, never having closed his mouth from any of the previous three miracles he had witnessed in the past ten minutes. "Did you read my mind?" he asked.

"Hmm?" the boy said, snapping his eyes on Abd al-Rashid before taking a drag from his cigarette. "Oh, I could give a *aşk meleği göt lalesi* less regarding how you handle her. I simply distrust anyone with too much *hava* for me to even look upon them. Now *siktir git* to House Afsenah so I can discorporealize this aperture and this child's form. Just walk past me like the *gerçeklik bükücü* did and be on your way.

Abd al-Rashid was ready to ask who taught this boy to reference the orifices of shamed females in casual conversation, but he was yet more baffled by the terms he had used to refer to Josephine. *Too much…aura?* he thought. *And what is a "reality bender"?* He started

to ask the boy, but the child stood and walked away from where he was sitting, disappearing in a way that caused Abd al-Rashid to *know* he would not be coming back.

He looked at the place where the boy had pointed for him to walk, shrugged, and followed.

The feeling of transitioning from that…nether place, or whatever it was, into House Afseneh was much more anticlimactic than Abd al-Rashid had been expecting. He remembered being beside the boy's little table, walking past it. He remembered admiring the fine Persian rug on the floor of the reception room of the House. He then realized that he remembered nothing of the intervening time.

Josephine was beside him. Abd al-Rashid knew this from the sound of breathing. He was too stunned by the scene around him to actually notice anything else. The room was…*opulent* would have failed to describe it. Fine chandeliers in many different styles hung from the ceilings. The walls themselves were frescoes that seemed to — *no*, he realized, *they really are* moving. *Incredible.*

Serpents in pastels and duller colors slithered in two dimensions across the walls of the room, scales flexing in impossible detail. They crawled across what appeared to be the "ground" of the landscape, which changed from realistic to impressionistic to surrealistic to cubist on each of the surrounding four walls but kept a basic structure to it, though he couldn't tell what similarities he was seeing. Abd al-Rashid had never been a student of art, but just watching these serpents snaking, darting, nipping at each other, and finally joining at the base of an enormous tree that incorporated stylistic elements of all the art in the room, all the colors and cubes and lines meeting in some great Yggdrasil that sprawled across the ceiling, he was torn by the desire to collapse into tears from the beauty of it all and the desire to collapse into a fetal position to hide from the truth of how *small* he was.

"They are nearly grown now," a voice before him said. Abd al-Rashid was stunned back into the room itself and away from the scene on the walls. An impossibly tall man, seven, eight feet in height, but otherwise perfectly formed, stood before him. "The Lady

Josephine recalls, I believe. You were here when they were younger, were you not?"

"I was," Josephine said. "Some years ago. They were barely mobile, mostly just colors and shapeless forms. Will they take humanoid form?"

"I believe so, though the decision will, as always, be theirs," the tall man replied. He walked to where Abd al-Rashid stood and bowed deeply, his head nearly reaching Abd al-Rashid's. His face remained tense as he said, "Malachi Tavana, gracious Majordomo and First Servant of Nuwaz Vizier Afseneh, himself master of the High Estate of the Most Esteemed House of Afseneh, Pearl of the Djinn, Guardians of the Sacred Spheres, Defenders of the Mortal Coil, at your service."

Abd al-Rashid simply stood silently. Josephine said, "Malachi, how many of those are real and how many of those do you just make up on the spot?"

Malachi's face remained serious. "I have never said before and I still refuse."

"The part about the sacred spheres, though. I know you just made that up right then."

"I may have. I may not have. A dedicated servant never tells."

"Well, Gracious Majordomo, would you be kind enough to show us to quarters?"

"Of course, Lady Josephine. You and your guest are always welcome."

Abd al-Rashid found in the three days he spent as a guest that the splendor of the Estate of House Afseneh was innumerable. Volume after volume could be written to record the details of every room of every wing of the House, of which there are many. There may well be no way to count how many rooms were in the Estate, given their changing number. Regardless, Abd al-Rashid had finite time and

saw a finite number of those rooms, but the wonders in that place seemed infinite.

At the end of the second day in the House, Abd al-Rashid sat for dinner with the High Court of Afseneh. Nuwaz, the Vizier of the House, sat near what was clearly the head of the table. The chairs were equally beautiful, equally enormous (though more proportionately sized for some of the diners; the majordomo had been asked to join them and, towering over all others in the room, had little difficulty with the seating arrangement). It was clear that there was a symbolic equality in the room, with the Vizier serving as a "chief among equals". One seat at the headmost position was left vacant, food served but with nobody seeming to believe the seat's occupant would be joining them.

"If I may be so forward, may I ask for whom the empty seat is left for?" Abd al-Rashid whispered to Malachi as the food was being served.

"The head seat at the table is reserved for the proper Mistress of the House, the Queen of Afseneh. Šahrāzād, her name is said in the proper Persian."

Abd al-Rashid thought for a moment. "You mean…*Scheherazade*? Of the One Thousand and One Nights? A fictive princess is your queen?"

"She is the greatest of the fictives," Malachi said, a touch of annoyance in his voice. "And moreover, a fictive capable of creating more fictions. From her, we have learned how to birth new fictions as well. Who better to be honored so?"

Abd al-Rashid, abashed, nodded politely and continued to watch the food be distributed. It had all of the hallmarks of the decadent surroundings; enormous, glistening hogs brought whole to the table, platters and plates seemingly unable to continue supporting the weight of the feast atop them. Among this was brought two plates of equal elegance, but carrying only some pieces of *nan-e khoshke-shirin* and a bowl of — certainly perfectly crafted — *ash-e anār*, the pomegranate stew glistening before him. He was about to question the difference between his and Josephine's plates, when he

suddenly had a revelation. *Oh, of course,* he thought, *they needed to serve real, physical food for their corporeal guests. The rest of this is all but imaginary. Though the dedication to detail in the olfactory department was…thorough.* Abd al-Rashid drooled at the smell of it all.

The meal was generally as he expected it to be, polite enough where the humans were concerned, much more jovial where the *djinn* were concerned. Much laughter and uproar came from their end of the table, with polite smiles and nods from Abd al-Rashid, who understood little of the cultural context for what they were saying, and Josephine, who was unable to use telepathy to read the minds of sentient concept-beings and didn't speak any of these languages being used.

"So, darling," Vizier Afseneh said (Abd al-Rashid presuming and hoping) in Josephine's direction, "what did you think of the children in the atrium?" His Arabic was crisp and lightly accented, if at all. Malachi translated into English.

"Very well developed. Beautiful, even," Josephine replied through Malachi. "I don't believe I had ever seen *djinn* children in such a… larval state."

"Wait, I'm sorry," Abd al-Rashid interrupted. "The…those serpents in the reception area, those were…those were *djinn*?"

Silence, then a soft, deep chuckle from the vizier. "Son, if I may ask, where do you think you are? Physically, geographically, your position?"

Abd al-Rashid gulped. "Well, from the rumors, I would presume that we are underground somewhere. The exact location is a closely guarded secret; the House is reached only through mystical gateways of some kind, whose function and operation are also secrets. All the other *djinn* Houses are likewise; the Nabhanites in Oman, the Roxelanans in Turkey. I once met a Khotani *djinn* —"

More chortling from the vizier. "Oh, yes, that must have been *quite* the experience."

Abd al-Rashid smiled, the least uncomfortable feeling he had had all evening. "Yes. He invited me to his nightly meditation after evening prayer. I hadn't realized he was looking for a sparring partner, or that Khotani 'meditations' can end in *death*."

The Vizier's chortles turned into guffaws. "They are rather…intense people, yes. Living in caves in the Tibetan mountains will do that to man and *djinn* alike.

"As for my question, however, it is difficult for you to perceive what this Estate actually *is*. We *djinn*, the ones to whom you speak, are sentient, sapient ideas, formed through acts of personal volition into humanoid creatures when we find it convenient, taking…other forms when we wish to do so as well. The Estate in which you are sitting, as well as all of the furniture in it, is made likewise of *djinn*. Immature *djinn*, formed through an act indescribable to corporeal beings, taking shapes at the will of their…*parents*, if you will. The beings will become more complex as time goes on, changing forms and shapes, developing a greater understanding of how to cope with the universe around them. The chair in which you sit is a three-year-old; the rug now bunched up in the legs of the chair and table is two; the floor that both are stationed upon is four weeks old. They are capable of great feats at a young age, but must learn to harness and control it before they can join us."

Abd al-Rashid was stunned. Everything in the Estate was simultaneously now both majestic and…rather disturbing, honestly. Everything alive, everything with the potential for intelligence and self-awareness? He was ready to be horrified when he felt the vizier's hand on his shoulder. He looked down at Abd al-Rashid with concern.

"Child, let me stop you for a moment. I know that Parviz sent you here to apologize for what you said to Agent Faruhar. I will not claim to be thrilled with it. But I am a strong believer in the freedom of individuals to feel and act as they see fit, even in ignorance. And your behavior was ignorant, there can be no doubt. I hope you find Agent Faruhar in your journeys, and I hope that by that time, you will have learned better ways, or at least better restraint. But I will not have an apology from a young man who has not offended me, and you have not offended me."

Abd al-Rashid looked up into that face, twinkling and clearly possessing an ancient nature that the vizier either could not or chose not to hide. "Thank you, lord," he said. "I hope to do better. I hope…I hope to be better. I do regret my words."

The vizier's face lit up again. "This is the best I could have hoped for you, child. Are you finished with the stew? I hoped it was to your liking; I had it brought from a Way leading back to Iran." He picked Abd al-Rashid up and guided/pushed/forced him to the end of the room nearest the hallway, a confused Josephine following. "I would have chosen a Turkish delicacy, but I didn't think your lovely escort here would have been much fond of it. No offense to your cuisines, of course; I simply meant that something a bit…"

They left the room on yet another tour.

Have A Heart

SCP-173 looked at the ground of its cell. As always, it was strewn with blood and shit, along with the corpses of the most recent cleanup team. However, on this day, something different lay upon the stone ground. A small, red object, with two bumps on one end and a small point on the other, with a white, waving pattern curling around the edges.

Without pausing in its mad, frantic scratching of the walls, 173 picked up the object and peered closely at it. Beneath the stains from the floor, there appeared to be some sort of indecipherable scribbling across the object's front. What intrigued 173, however, was the picture on the front, for it was a picture of itself, standing in the corner of the cell, glancing over at the viewer. This puzzled 173 immensely; it knew many came into its cell with many strange objects, but it was not aware any were capable of capturing an image of it in such a fashion. Still, even after years of isolation, the sculpture recognized the image as itself, in some rudimentary fashion.

173 went about its usual business, dashing around the room and clawing at the walls, occasionally coming to a halt in the dead center of the room, so as to stare intently at the door and gather its thoughts of hatred towards those beyond. It did not let go of the object, though, for it still puzzled the statue. For what reasons, 173 could not say why, but there was a sense of mystery about this thing.

Hours later, 173 took to examining the object again. A little molding of the edges revealed an interior space, which it could open with a slight amount of effort. More of the strange scribblings were laid down on both sides of the inside flaps. Thinking they must mean something, 173 put its crude knowledge of human writing to use, trying to decipher the meaning behind the scratches. After an hour of hard work, 173 had managed to work out something that sounded

like it might pass human lips. Putting all the information together in its head, it sounded out the words internally:

"Hach-aa-pehpeh-eeey… vvvvv-aa-llintt-aaaayyy-nehs… deh-aa-eeey…"

Complete and utter nonsense. 173 had a firmer, if still very loose, grasp of human speech than human writing, and this did not sound like anything a normal human being would say. Perhaps one with a mouth like its own, but certainly not one like those who kept it prisoner?

Could it be that they were mocking 173? Had it really come to that? They spend years upon years keeping it frozen in one place with their glances, locking it away, denying it the satisfying sound of a sickening crunch of revenge… and now they would mock it? Rage rose up inside 173; if they truly had descended to such cruel levels, then it would let them know just how cruel it could be in kind…

Fortunately, a thought of reason broke through the madness: It had not yet deciphered all the scratchings on the object. Perhaps if it were to do so, there would be a different course of action open. Of course, if they really were mocking it, then a wholesale slaughter would definitely ensue.

173 turned its attention to the scribblings on the left side of the object's interior. Two of the words, "to" and "from," were not hard for it to figure out: they were monosyllabic, and already ingrained into its limited vocabulary. So someone from the outside had sent something to 173, and wanted it to know the origination point of the object. A further examination of the words after "to" confirmed this suspicion. "Ess-Cee-Pee… Iee-vvv-eee" It didn't sound like much, but turning the phrase over and over in its head, it came to the conclusion that it was the name they had chosen to give it.

Shifting its attention back to the right-interior side, 173 noticed something else. The scribbling "Hach-aa-pehpeh-eeey" almost sounded like a word it knew. Something it always thought when snapping necks, something the people whose necks it snapped never seemed to be at all. Something like… "happy."

This gave 173 pause for thought. Someone beyond the door, one of its captors, wanted it to be happy. What could that possibly mean? The two words after happy remained incomprehensible to it, but they were surely just a further extension of the message of happy. So what could happy mean? Were they pleased with its performance as of late, and wanted to reward it for killing so efficiently? Did they understand now why it killed, and wanted to make sure it stayed happy by doing so?

Did they see it was unhappy, and that it wanted out?

As unlikely as it sounded, this seemed the most reasonable to 173's disturbed mind. It had served so much time, been held prisoner for so long. And it wasn't like it had been completely perfect before they took it in. Had these past decades been nothing but a long waiting game, one it simply had to sit through until the end? After so much time, it certainly hoped so.

And the shape of the object… 173 folded it back up, placed it on the ground, and tore into the bodies of the dead men on the floor. It took all three of them, but 173 was eventually able to extract a heart and, with much trial and error, mold it into a shape approximating that of the object. To 173, necks were the most fragile, and thus most important, part of the human body, but from what it had seen of the frightened, panicked reactions of those it had killed over the years, many held the heart up as most important. Whoever had sent this not only wanted 173 to be happy, but to connect that happiness with something distinctly human.

Having entirely stopped its routine of scratching at the walls, 173 stood there, in the middle of the room, staring at the card. There was more text to decipher on the front, but it was stunned by the potential implications of the interior of the card. For the first time in ages, it felt something towards its captors other than blind, seething rage, and cold, bitter hatred. Some deeper meaning was hidden here, some message that potentially meant its freedom. This surpassed the man seeking to die. This broke through to some deeper part of 173's… soul, it supposed.

It made a decision: It would spend as much effort as it took to decipher the writing upon the front of the card. If it turned out to be

something negative, something mocking the sculpture, the aforementioned slaughter would take place. If it were some message of compassion and understanding… then it didn't know what it would do. But the lives beyond that door would be spared for another day. Sitting down for once, 173 set to work, spending hours staring intently at the front of the card, calculating to the best of its abilities the meaning of the scribblings upon the red, heart-shaped object.

At last, words and a meaning emerged. 173 stood slowly, stared at the door, and then went back to scratching at the walls.

***

> At 0900 hours, Doctor Martin placed a Valentine's Day card in the pocket of D-3521, set for cleaning duty in SCP-173's cell. At 0906 hours, all three cleaning crewmembers were dead by an attack from SCP-173. Due to an internal mechanism jamming, the door to SCP-173's containment cell could not be reopened, resulting in the corpses of the cleaning crew remaining in the cell, and SCP-173 discovering the card. SCP-173 displayed highly uncharacteristic interest in the card, carrying it around the cell for several hours, and spending a significant amount of time sitting on the floor staring at the card. At 1700 hours, the internal mechanisms of the door were fully operational, allowing for retrieval of the bodies.

> At this point, SCP-173 breached containment and attacked personnel all around Site 19, killing forty-two staff members at last count, including Doctor Martin. SCP-173 was restrained at 1727 hours by sixteen Foundation agents, and returned to its containment chamber shortly afterwards.

> For future reference, the card Doctor Martin sent into SCP-173's chamber contained the following picture:

Creator Information

The image used in the SCP-173 article is the art piece "Untitled 2004" by **Izumi Kato**. The photograph was taken by **Keisuke Yamamoto**. All rights are reserved by the artists.

A note of caution: SCP-173 is a secondary use of the image of the art piece "Untitled 2004", which was created by **Izumi Kato**. The concept of SCP-173 does not have any relationship with the artist's original concept of "Untitled 2004".

The sculpture, its likeness, and the photograph have not been released under any Creative Commons license. Only the text of this article is released under Creative Commons. **This sculpture and its likeness may not be used for commercial purposes under any circumstances. Izumi Kato has graciously chosen to allow the use of the image of "Untitled 2004" by the SCP Foundation and its fanbase for non-commercial purposes only.**

He Was Blind and Deaf on a Sunny Day

It was when the waves splashed against his body that he gradually returned to consciousness. How long had he been lying here? He found himself half-buried in the sand and attempted to move, but was too weak to do so.

The sun must have risen; he could feel the heat, but his eyes would not open, if eyes even existed. Something felt very wrong to him, but he could not quite place what it was. He tried to remember, and for a moment he thought he had something, but it was all too distant and unreal, and that feeling faded. He was blind and deaf, lying there as the cold, salty water cut him again and again. He knew something was missing, or rather, everything was missing. And that was when he remembered the pain.

He screamed for days but nobody listened. His body parts, barely holding together, each anguished fragment emitting a chorus of screams. Ocean and sand had become his eternal prison, enveloping his body and slithering through his wounds. The more he struggled, the greater his pain. There was no escape.

He hungered. He had to eat, after all. Or did he? He could not remember ever having needed to, but the hunger had nonetheless consumed him. There was a strange craving, an urge to replace - to compensate – for what was missing. So he dug from the sand around him, and swallowed whatever he could find. But the more he ate, the hungrier he felt. His body hurt even more as he felt parts that should not be there growing. Cancer, perhaps, but he could not care less.

There was something missing, and he had to find it, he had to stop the pain.

He screamed and dug and fed for days and nights. Gradually, the sand had lost its grip of him and he no longer felt the torture of the salty sea. He had more time to think between the episodes of pain,

but his memory was distant and broken. Who was he, what was his name? He did not know. What had happened? He could not remember. Vaguely, he could recall a war. No, not war, a battle. Or was it just a fight?

One night, when his body was bathed in the glow of the full moon, someone answered his cries. They took him home, tended to him, scraping away all the filth that had accumulated on him. They spoke to him, but it was in a language he could not understand. He would thank them, but doubted they would understand his words of gratitude. The pain still lingered but had lessened in his new home. There was no water to choke him, no sand to scrape him. His caretakers even offered him food, easing his unending famine.

It was when he felt much better, when he thought they could finally hear what he had to say, when things fell apart. He felt their quarrels and confusion, but could not understand their nature. He was then fed with something strange; it moved as if struggling and soaked his body in strange liquids. Whatever it was, he could not stop himself.

He felt screams, not his, but from those around him. He could not comprehend what was happening. It reminded him of the war - the fight so long ago. Were there screams as well? Someone else came, and his caretakers ran.

He did not know them, but he soon became afraid. They carried with them strange things and a large water prison. He wanted to run, along with his caretakers, but couldn't. He screamed and screamed but they did not care. They came closer, and plunged him into the cold, salty water.

He found himself drowning again, as his senses left him.

Headhunted

The Machine had failed and Dr. Molly Jayawadena was fleeing.

In a filthy subway bathroom, Molly smeared cheap bronzer on her face. The dollar store powder left grimy, muddy streaks on Molly's golden-olive face, just as she knew it would. The rest of the powder was rubbed into the thick, musty smelling anorak bought in a yard sale. It had been unseasonably warm for March in New York state, not warm enough that one would remember selling a heavy coat, but just a touch too warm for that particular jacket. This anorak had been very deliberately chosen, and Molly was ready to test that choice. She gathered the black trash bag containing everything she now owned in the world and shuffled out of the bathroom. Head downcast, Molly ambled to the bus station.

Molly's choice of disguise was a good one. People's eyes slid off her as if she was coated with some unsavory perceptual grease. Dr. Jayawadena knew it was cynical to rely so strongly on people's callousness towards the homeless, but cynicism has a way of paying off. Pedestrians gave her a wide berth while refusing to acknowledge her presence, shiny young police officers merely gave off an air of annoyance, and the bus driver patently ignored her fumbling with handfuls of sweaty quarters. Molly took a seat at the bus. No one sat beside her. Molly settled in with satisfaction for a long ride.

She would be in New York in a few hours, and then…Molly was generally a meticulous planner. That's why she had been able to flee the second the Machine melted down. No one else would have several thousand dollars in small bills, fake IDs, enough stage makeup to render Hitler unrecognizable, and yet…

Something else was guiding Molly. This was The Machine speaking to her. She must be passive now and surrender to the rippling currents of destiny.

This was not her. Molly Jayawadena was not a passive participant in the Universe.

But then again, she didn't design the Machine.

How could she? She was a physicist, not an engineer. A theoretician, mind you. A tinkerer in ideas, not metal. Molly didn't know a resistor from a reading light and didn't care to. The Proof was her work and hers alone, but the Machine was a collaboration.

With whom? Pieces of memory swirled in Molly's addled head: dreams of schematics in smooth clean lines, notes left in her office or falling out of textbooks, whispers from her students. The students! The engineering majors, bringing her odd little components they'd built "for fun", "on a whim". Damned if they knew what it did, but maybe you'd like to have it as a desk piece, Dr. Jayawadena? In turn, she'd given them the blueprints formed in half-waking moments. *Here's a tricky little circuit here. Let's see if you can build it. Winner gets drinks on me.* Most of those students were male, and what a male thing it was to try and win a competition of skill, especially to impress a woman. So the Machine was fashioned, piecemeal, but undeniably real.

But who designed the Machine?

All of a sudden Molly realized that the seats beside and in front of her were taken.

The seats on the bus were in groups of four, a pair of seats facing each other. Molly had slid into the window seat. This, she now realized, was a mistake on her part. A man in nondescript beige clothing sat next to her, blocking her access to the aisle. Another man and a woman sat across from her in the same forgettable attire. Their outfits and demeanor were so bland that Molly knew they were some sort of plainclothesmen.

"You can't stop me," said Molly in a stage whisper.

The woman across from Molly removed her headphones and smiled a toothy, foreboding smile at her. "Stop you, Doctor? I'm personally offended. We're here to protect you, ma'am."

"Protect me? From those people at the test site?"

The man across from her smiled. "Clever one. No wonder the Engineer picked her."

Molly's head snapped to the man. "Engineer?"

"I'd better let our scientific representative answer that. Doctor?"

The man next to Molly peered up for the first time. Steepling his fingers, he addressed her in a low, thick voice. "Dr. Jayawadena. I must say it's an absolute pleasure to finally meet you, circumstances notwithstanding. I am Dr. Mikhail Kronovich, head of my organization's Physical Sciences Research and Development Department. My organization has taken quite the interest in you and your work."

Molly cocked an eyebrow. "*Me* and my work?"

"Absolutely, Doctor. You see, our…organization is not only devoted to finding the proper science, but the proper *minds*. We want vision; we want those minds dedicated to unity and order…ah, I see you know exactly what I'm talking about."

Molly's head was pounding. "Pare it down. Pare it down. The anomalies…"

Dr. Kronovich chuckled. "Comrades, she's practically one of us already. Doctor, you *know* about the anomalies. They're written into the language of the universe. So why, my dear Doctor, do we not know about them?"

"Surely they disguise themselves?"

"Oh, yes, of course, a few of them do, that's the nature of the anomaly. But the others? No. They are being purposely hidden, locked away so as not to *contaminate* our precious grip on creation," Dr. Kronovich spat venomously.

"Hidden?"

"Yes, by our friends in black. The spooks."

"They're not government." It was a statement, not a question.

Dr. Kronovich roared with laughter. "If only! The leader of this government cannot trifle with an intern without the world finding out all the salacious details. Bumbling idiots. Government indeed."

"Who are they then?"

The woman leaned in. "They're a Foundation. *The* Foundation. They exist to keep the human race in the dark."

The man added, "You see, we're all far too stupid to handle reality as it is. We have to be protected. Watched over by our shepherds, the lords and masters of The Foundation." His face twisted bitterly. "Of course, they're perfectly good enough to use the anomalies themselves…"

"But we'll save that for later," said Dr. Kronovich firmly. "Let us attend to the matter at hand." He turned again to Molly. "This is an offer of employment. We want to bring order to the universe. My organization will bring harmony between the anomalies and consensus reality, and we want you to help achieve that vision."

"Let's *not* attend to the matter at hand. This Foundation of yours, how could they have possibly found my test site so quickly, and what could they possibly have to gain?"

"The Foundation is everywhere, Doctor. They are in every branch of every government on Earth, every industrial sector, every religious organization. Our records indicate that you enjoy movies. You have seen movies where some dark global organization overlooks a small resistance by virtue of their cleverness or insignificance?"

"Yes," said Molly, "One of my least favorite tropes, actually."

"Then you will be pleased to learn life does not imitate art. The Foundation is not that incompetent movie villain and no part of your life is beyond their reach. Within five minutes, they will know exactly which seat you have taken on this bus. If it wasn't for certain tricks of our own, they would have a transcript of our exact conversation. Do you know, Doctor, what they do with all this immense power?"

"I have no idea, seeing as how I'm only learning of them now."

Dr. Kronovich brought his fist down on his armrest with a dull thud. "Exactly. The Foundation uses that immense power to convince humanity that the world is flat and the sun revolves around it. You have seen evidence of wonders, Doctor. The Foundation is in the business of hiding them from sight. Does this not offend you?"

Molly slid back into her seat. "Everything I've learned and taught has been a lie," she said blankly. All of a sudden, a bright, childlike smile burst like a sunbeam onto her face. "Everything I know is a lie! I've got a PhD in alchemy! In astrology! In antiquated *bullshit*!" She fell back laughing rapturously.

"Wonderful, no?" asked Dr. Kronovich with a crooked grin.

"It's Christmas in March!" she laughed again. "And to what do I owe the honor? Isn't there some sort of application process or…"

"You've passed it. We've been supplying you with a bit of help these past few months and you've gotten farther than we have in years. Imagine what you could do if you had an entire fully staffed lab devoted to controlling your ouroboric anomalies."

"I presume I must go into hiding with you."

"You presume correctly. To the outside world you will be as good as dead. We will protect you completely from your pursuers. In return we want you to research for us what you've been studying already. It's certainly not a bad deal, is it not?"

"Definitely. You're not with the government either. You're some sort of cloak-and-dagger bullshit, right? Spanning the globe, men in black, hiding in plain sight? 'The Truth is Out There'?"

Dr. Kronovich smiled. "Sarcasm aside, you have the idea."

"Well, I'm in. When do I start?"

The man leaned forward. "*What?* Just like that? Aren't you going to ask what happens if you refuse? Aren't you going to ask who you're working for or how you can trust us?"

Molly turned to him, smiling wryly. "I'm a scientist. Have you ever had to explain to a politician why your work is worth funding if you can't pick off terrorists with it? I don't give a fuck who I'm working for as long as I can research what I want and you're paying me for it. I don't have to know what happens if I refuse because I'd be an idiot to refuse."

"And you are no idiot," said Dr. Kronovich with a smile. "I believe this is our stop."

"What are you talking about? We're not stopping for at least another hour."

"Working for us has certain perks. Take this," said the woman.

Molly took a large wristband with a big yellow button on it. Noticing that her new coworkers wore the same device, she strapped it on.

"Ready? On three, push the button. And Doctor? Welcome to the Insurgency."

Two hours later, the bus made an unscheduled stop. Armed men and women in intimidating uniforms swarmed the bus looking for a young postdoc who had undergone a mental breakdown and was missing. No one looked too closely at the uniforms.

A thousand miles away in an underground bunker, Dr. Molly Jayawadena reached for a pencil and began to write.

Healthy Child

The following article is an excerpted transcript, which has been annotated and pulled from article #232397 — *Home Video17.mov*. Personnel who require either the entire *Home Video17* entry or a full transcript of *Home Video17* should consult section HVAA#0000017 of the eVisual-Library archives.

Transcript Log-232391-17-2:

Subject-2323 is referred to as "dad" in article #232398 and refers to child subject in the video with the name "Daniel".

00'34" - *Subject-2323 carries a camera and approaches a male child estimated to be between the age of 6 and 9. At a distance of roughly one meter, subject-2323 speaks to the child.*

Subject-2323: Danny, try this.

Daniel: What is it?

Subject-2323: Just try it, I picked it from the garden.

Daniel: Okay daddy.

01'46" - *Male child consumes unknown substance and promptly displays discomfort.*

Daniel: My hands are itchy. I'm allergic.

Subject-2323: Relax, it's just your nerves.

Daniel: What was it? I'm so itchy.

Subject-2323: It's okay.

Daniel: I need to get it out. I need, it hurts, it's hurting me.

Subject-2323: Don't worry.

02'21" - *Male child begins to chew on his own right palm between thumb and index finger. Child breaks skin with his teeth. The composition of his tissue is revealed to have a saturated green colour. No blood is visible from the puncture wound. Child begins weeping.*

Daniel: What's happening daddy? Make it stop please.

04'43" - *Child appears panicked and begins to fidget.*

04'52" - *Child uses his left hand to pick at and pull green tissue out of his right hand.*

Daniel: What is this daddy?

Subject-2323: That's a slice of cucumber.

05'22" - *Child cries out and continues to weep.*

Daniel: Please make it stop daddy. What are these?

05'46" - *Child removes shirt and begins peeling discolored skin off of body.*

Subject-2323: That's a cabbage leaf.

Daniel: It's in my body.

Subject-2323: You're salad now.

07'13" - *Child continues weeping and promptly expires. Child's entire figure blends to the colour and texture of lettuce, cucumbers and broccoli over a period of nine minutes.*

Subject-2323: Daniel? Hello?

Subject-2323: You know, some people would kill to be

salad.

Subject-2323: Freaking entitled generation.

22'38" - *Subject-2323 points camera at disfigured male child and begins to shuffle through the child's flesh. Child's connective tissue is no longer present.*

Subject-2323: Do you have my strawberries in there?

23'01" - *Subject-2323 continues to shift around child's flesh for approximately thirty four seconds then sighs and promptly drops the camera.*

Subject-2323: Another disappointment.

Heart in the Hand of Matter

Grace had just put the baby to bed and settled down on the couch next to him to watch the Texaco Star Theatre when the phone rang. She set aside the crochet hooks and yarn she was shaping into a hat and went to the kitchen to answer it. For a moment Bruce entertained the idea of telling her to relax and remain seated, it was probably for him anyway, but the host of Texaco, Milton Berle, was introducing an act that somehow involved spinning plates and poodles. He really wanted to see how that worked.

"Bruce, it's for you."

He sighed and took a sip of scotch and water. The poodles were wearing pink skirts and tiaras.

"Bruce!" called Grace.

Swearing under his breath, Bruce peeled himself from the television and stamped into the kitchen. Grace was waiting next to the refrigerator, the phone extended in her hand. "Well?" he said. "Who is it?"

He glanced at his wristwatch. It was a quarter to nine.

"It's Leonard."

Of course. Who else would it be?

His face remained impassive while a cold shiver, like a static-electric shock, made the hairs on his forearms bristle. He fumbled the exchange of the phone and managed to snag the cord between his fingers. The line went taut with the receiver dangling an inch from the linoleum. It swung like a pendulum as he reeled it back in.

Grace believed that Leonard was his primary contact for a department store looking to expand their brand to the east coast,

and that his firm was spearheading the launch of the company's upcoming fall campaign. And while it wasn't unusual for him to receive business calls at night, Leonard had recently gotten into the habit of calling sometimes as late as two or three in the morning, and Grace had quickly developed a distaste for the man. Bruce didn't blame her, and wished he could confide in her that he shared the sentiment.

She watched, partially turned away from him with her arms crossed.

He pinned the phone between his shoulder and ear and shooed Grace out of the kitchen. "Lenny," he said, the manufactured pleasure in his voice concealing his unease. "What can I do for you?"

I should never have gotten involved with them, Bruce thought to himself. But it was too late to back out now, and as a consultant on retainer they paid him four thousand dollars a year. He knew people who didn't make that much from their full-time jobs.

What am I going to do in the fall? I told Grace we were going to saturate all three media markets, blitz the radio stations, television and print with advertisements. He'd even gone so far as to show her fake mock-ups of ads he claimed to be working on. *Will they be willing to fabricate all that just to placate my wife?* But he already knew the answer, and didn't want to think about it too long. When the time came he'd just have to invent another lie.

"Mr. Hand," said the voice on the other end. It was a powerful baritone. Bruce had come to loathe it, and he involuntarily winced at the sound. "Dr. Keller believes it's time for a face-to-face. We have a plane standing by at North Beach Airport. A car will arrive at your residence in one hour to take you."

"What? No, that's not going to work. I have a meeting tomorrow morning with the people from Randolph, and then I'm taking my family to Lake Winnipesaukee for the weekend. Maybe next week I could—"

"Perhaps you misunderstood me," Leonard interrupted. "It was not a request. You will be on the flight. You will be ready to depart in one

hour."

Bruce's temper flared, emboldened by three glasses of single-malt. "Wait one goddamn second. Now you listen to me. I—"

The line went dead. He hung the phone back on its cradle.

What the hell excuse can I sell Grace this time? he wondered.

Bruce inched his way back to the living room and peeked around the corner. His wife was on the sofa. He heard the soft, soothing clicks of the crochet hooks as she knitted, and on the television set, Texaco Star Theater was breaking to a commercial. He'd missed the damn poodles and plates.

1

The jeep tore across the hardpan, kicking up a rooster tail of dust in its wake.

The radio on the dash crackled. "Man-Eaters, hang back!" shouted a tinny voice. "You're entering the Chimney Sweep blast zone! Stop! For fuck's sake stop!"

Irvine slammed on the brakes. The other jeeps following behind him in a wedge formation did likewise, fishtailing in the sand before sliding to a halt. Echo Unit exited the vehicles and fanned out, careful not to bunch too close together. Irvine climbed the scree of a hillock. He hefted a pair of binoculars slung around his neck and raised them to his eyes. Some of the other soldiers produced binoculars of their own, and Corporal Anderson began rolling with a 16 mm camera.

A klick ahead the land funneled into a natural bottleneck formed between a butte and a spur of the Shoshone Mountains. For the past two days Foundation engineering and demolition teams had worked around the clock to wire the narrow corridor with more than ten tons of Composition C, burying it in the ground and planting it in bores drilled into the slopes. Helicopters circled in the sky high above.

"Can you see it, Lieutenant?" Kontos, his sergeant, asked.

"I can see it," Irvine said around a Winston tucked into the corner of his mouth.

Rapidly approaching the corridor was their target, codename: Wintermute. From this distance it didn't look like much, the eye couldn't distinguish the individuals that made up its whole, and so it all blurred into what may have been a giant, fleshy worm careering across the desert.

"You really think this will work?" somebody else said. It might have been Martinez.

Irvine didn't know who was being addressed, and didn't want to lower the binoculars to find out, so refrained from sharing his opinion. He thought it would work. It *had* to work. He hadn't slept in over thirty-six hours, probably could go another day or two if he really pushed it, but by then the skip would reach Vegas and there'd be no opportunity for rest.

A butterfly stirred in his stomach. Through the magnification of the lenses it appeared as if the target was veering slightly from its southeast heading, and could potentially pass north of the butte instead of through the forecasted route. The change — if there was any change at all— was only by several degrees, and may have been distorted by the perspective angle or a trick of the setting sun.

Irvine dropped the binoculars to spare a glance at his men. One look at their faces was enough to convince him it wasn't his imagination. They'd noticed it too.

"Can you get the Chimney Sweep team on the line?" he asked Boyle, his radio operator.

"I think so, sir. They hailed us with the warning. I'll have to—"

The handheld squawked as Boyle reached for it: "Mercury for Man-Eaters. Mercury for Man-Eaters. Come in."

Irvine motioned for the walk-talkie. It was shaped like a telephone on steroids with a whip antenna. A thick cord ran from a socket beneath the mouthpiece to a transmitter that Boyle carried on his back like a

rucksack.

"This is Eaters-actual, over," Irvine said.

"Eaters, we've just received word from Chimney Sweep that Wintermute has moved off course. Please confirm, over."

"Roger, Mercury. Target is off course."

Mercury was the Foundation's forward operating base located on the Jackass Flats of Nevada, east of Yucca Mountain. It consisted of a dirt airstrip set between hangers and Quonset huts.

"Copy that, Eaters. We'll get back to you with updated orders. In the meantime you're to continue pursuit."

The response generated groans and hushed protests from a majority of the squad.

Irvine said, "Mercury, you still got some of my men chaperoning the demolition team?"

"That's an affirmative."

"Well, I believe Private Pangborn has an M2 with him. Have him open up with that, see if it draws Wintermute's attention."

"Copy, standby."

A moment later they heard the purr of a heavy machine gun echoing through the defile. Irvine lifted the binoculars. *Come on. Come on, you bastard. Take the bait. Take the fucking bait.*

But it was too late. The target had skirted around the butte, and was already exiting the M2's field of view, shielded now by the butte's sandstone caprock.

It didn't make any sense. There was nothing in that direction for miles and miles except long-abandoned towns the Foundation had already confirmed were clear.

Had Wintermute anticipated the trap laid for it? Was that even

possible?

Irvine returned the walkie-talkie to Boyle, who immediately began relaying the failure to Mercury.

"Saddle up," Irvine hollered, flicking the butt of his cigarette into the sand. "We're riding out."

They piled back into the jeeps and raced across the desert like a convoy of rum runners breaking for the state line. MTF soldiers on motorcycles retrofitted for the terrain covered the rear and flanks of the formation, weaving between the larger vehicles.

Two days. Two days of meticulous planning and preparation, and in less than a minute all of it extinguished, knocked down like a flimsy house of cards. Irvine white-knuckled the steering wheel and threw the jeep into second, gathering speed as they chased down the anomaly. He didn't know what they could do now. Was there even a failsafe for Chimney Sweep? If there was they hadn't deemed to share it with him, and right now it seemed like nothing could stop it.

2

Bruce fell asleep on the plane, lulled by the constant hum of the prop engines. He woke when his ears popped during the descent, and when he looked at his watch he saw only bare wrist. There was a loose pin in the butterfly clasp that sometimes caused it to fall off. He hitched up his pant legs and knelt on the floor, prospecting the carpet with his hands and scolding himself for not getting it fixed already.

It wasn't there. The pin he could see losing, it was small, but not the actual watch, and he was sure he was wearing it because he remembered checking the time when the aircraft took off. It was still dark outside the plane's rounded windows, and for all he knew he could've been asleep for an hour or ten, although it felt closer to the former.

Did someone steal it?

But there was no one else on the plane to ask or confront, and it

shortly touched down on the tarmac. A ramp agent boarded and escorted Bruce down the steps and into the back of a Lincoln parked between two runway landing lights. A partition separated him from the driver.

They glided over a paved road that wound furtively through a wooded area. The road was wide, and Bruce guessed it could've accommodated four or five lanes, except there were no markings, and he saw neither a road sign or a house before they arrived at his apparent destination: a large compound that sprang up in the middle of the forest like something out of a fairytale. Bruce felt both overwhelmed and uneasy as the Lincoln was waved through by a guard at a gatehouse. The guard was dressed in a starched military uniform without insignia, and armed with a rifle.

The compound was an impressive example of the Art Deco architecture that had been popular a decade prior, with streamlined features and a façade of chrome, stucco, and Vitrolite. It reminded Bruce of several trainstations he'd passed through, although it lacked the ornamentation he usually associated with the style.

The compound disappeared as the livery car slipped down a ramp into an underground parking garage. They went down a further two levels before stopping in front of a door marked as maintenance access, its corrugated steel shutter rolled up. A tall man wearing slacks and suspenders, the sleeves of his checkered shirt pushed past his elbows, leaned next to the door. Bruce's mouth went dry and he forced himself to swallow. He didn't want to get out of the Lincoln, but the tall man didn't offer him any choice and opened the rear passenger door.

"Mr. Hand," he said, and Bruce immediately recognized the voice. "I'm Leonard. Nice to finally meet you."

He'd never met either Dr. Keller or Leonard before tonight, at least not in person. His handler had originally been an avuncular old man by the name of Dennis who had a head of thick white hair and a penchant for tweed jackets. Their interactions had been limited to brief conversations, usually conducted over the phone, once or twice a month. The topics varied but had always been related to market communication. About six months ago he'd been passed to a new

handler identifying himself as Leonard, and initially everything had gone as expected, but over the past week the frequency of the phone calls suddenly ballooned to the point of harassment, and the discussions abruptly shifted to subjects in which Bruce had no experience. He was frequently asked bizarre and hypothetical questions, such as how he would go about concealing the deaths of thousands of American civilians from the general public, or what he would do if he was the only person to know that a nearby volcano was about to erupt.

"Please follow me," Leonard said.

Bruce grabbed his suitcase and allowed himself to be led through a painfully bright hallway, up three flights in an elevator, past a waiting area with a receptionist desk — deserted at this late hour — and through a series of rooms marked with biohazard and radioactive trefoil warnings. Down a flight of stairs. Left turn. Right turn. He began to suspect the layout was purposefully confusing and intended to disorient. They arrived at another door, this one with a Judas window, and a guard on the other side had to buzz them through.

They entered what appeared to be a dormitory, with tiled floors and fluorescent lighting. Numbered doors were evenly spaced along a hall that stretched the length of half a city block. All of the doors they passed were closed, the cadence of heavy breathing emanating from a few of them. At door number 306 Leonard stopped. He opened the door and flicked on the light.

Bruce's assumption of a dorm was accurate, although one he'd expect to find in a prison or state-run hospital. The floor was bare; walls cinderblocks with a coat of white paint slapped on. There wasn't even a window or desk, just a locker at the foot of the bed. At the sight of the thin mattress with its cheap motel sheets Bruce's anger and resentment flared, escalated by the shame he felt toward his own fear. This wasn't what he'd agreed to at all when he'd first met Dennis and signed his name on the dotted line.

"Hey, what the hell is this?" he said, backing out of the room. "I'm not sleeping in here. If you don't want to pay for it I'll spring for a goddamn hotel room myself."

He glanced over his shoulder, back down the hallway. The guard sat in a chair reading a newspaper and picking his nose, and Bruce had the disturbing revelation that he wasn't there to keep people out.

He was there to keep people in.

Leonard said, "The nearest hotel is more than fifty miles away, and there're no roads leading from the facility, other than the one you took to get here from the airport, of course. No, the only way in or out is on foot, by air, or by sea. We have a dock, but there're no boats berthed there tonight, and I'm afraid the current would be fighting against you. Are you a good swimmer, Mr. Hand?"

"No roads? Where is this place?" He'd been wondering this for quite some time, but hadn't had an opportunity to ask since departure. When he'd inquired about his destination to anyone back in New York they'd all responded that they didn't know.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Hand, I'm not authorized to disclose that information."

Bruce laughed. It was either that or scream. He would've strangled Leonard if he didn't have to crane his neck just to look him in the eye. The bastard reminded him of Lurch.

"Am I a prisoner?" he forced himself to ask. He didn't really want to know the answer, but the uncertainty was even worse.

"No, you're not. If you'd like to leave right now we won't physically stop you. We'd certainly try to convince you otherwise, and I personally advise against it. We hope to have the matter that necessitated this meeting resolved within a day or two, and after that you'll be returned home, along with a sizable gratuity based on your performance. Your cooperation, of course, is expected and could further expedite that resolution."

Leonard spoke monotonously, and yet there was an implacable strength projected through his stoic and infuriatingly polite mien. He would've made a great butler, and again Bruce was reminded of the mute Lurch from the Addams Family cartoons he used to read in the New Yorker.

Bruce said, "I never consented to this CIA covert bullshit, okay? I'm an American citizen. I'm a taxpayer. You can't treat me like this. If you don't take me to your supervisor immediately I'll contact my lawyer."

"Mr. Hand, we are not the CIA."

"What? Who the hell are you, then? FBI?"

"No." And as if that settled the matter Leonard directed his attention back to the room. "This is where you will be staying while you're here with us. Number three-oh-six. Remember it. There're no locks on the outside, but inside you'll find there is a deadbolt if you're so inclined. I do apologize for the lack of amenities."

Oh God, thought Bruce, *have I been working for the KGB this whole time without knowing it?* That would certainly explain the room's austere décor. *Is he going to address me as comrade and tell me that if I don't play along they'll report me as a traitor?* A vivid image flashed in Bruce's mind. In it he hanged from a gibbet, his pants dripping with urine, face bloated and tongue lolling on his lips like a dead fish left out in the sun. A crowd of people cheered and waved American flags.

"Who are you?" he repeated, voice reduced to a whisper.

Leonard ignored him and pointed to the end of the hall, opposite of where the guard idly thumbed through the sports section. "Down there you'll find the bathrooms. Why don't you go there now and freshen up? Shave, shower, do what you need to do. I'll meet you back at your room in half an hour and we'll begin."

"Begin what?"

"Your orientation. Welcome to the Foundation, Mr. Hand."

3

The moon was rising, had reached halfway to its zenith, when Echo Unit from the Mobile Task Force "Man-Eaters" arrived at Silver Creek. At the tail end of the last century, following the discovery of a silver vein, the town had experienced a moderate surge in

immigration. But by the middle of the roaring twenties the lode had been exhausted, the mine was shut, and the population dwindled until the post office eventually closed in 1948.

Irvine parked the M38 next to a tar paper shack behind what had probably served as the town's church, community center, and town hall, all rolled into one. He hopped out, and to the pair of jeeps pulling up along side of him said: "Tsavo and Bruin, you men continue the chase. We'll meet up with you in a couple of minutes. Good hunting." The rear tires spun in the sand before catching, and the two vehicles drove off to the east.

"Leslie," Irvine called. He thumbed the wheel of his Zippo and cupped his hands protectively around the flame, lighting a cigarette. "Go around and lower the pressure in the tires by another pound or two. They're still sinking."

All of the men in the task force were expected to serve in a secondary capacity. Leslie — whose real name was Lesniewksi — pulled double-duty as the unit's mechanic.

"I'm on it," Leslie said and notched a salute.

Irvine strolled to the edge of the Silver Creek cemetery and swept his eyes over the grounds, trying to solve this new puzzle. The cemetery was illuminated by the jeep's headlights, a half acre of land overgrown with weeds and scrub, enclosed by a split-rail fence.

Sergeant Kontos approached a section of fence that had been knocked down and pounded into splinters. "Our target definitely came through here," he said, stating the obvious. Behind him Anderson began rolling with his camera.

Irvine nodded. He entered the cemetery through a small gap that had once been a gate — he could still see the rusted hinges screwed into the post on the left — and threaded his way between the plots. Brambles and Arizona thistle snagged at his boot laces and pants. Far away a group of coyotes yipped and howled at the moon, while a cold wind combed the desert and drove the top layer of sand across the flat like a rushing blanket of mist.

He counted fifty freshly exhumed graves, coffins torn open from the inside and the bodies missing. It was as if they'd suddenly been resurrected and clawed their way out.

"That must be why she zigged when we needed her to zag," Martinez said, jettisoning a wad of snuff from the pocket of his cheek. "Smelled the fuckin' corpses."

"They don't need to be…y'know, alive?" Boyle asked.

"See for yourself," said Martinez, indicating the shallow holes.

The Foundation had scoured the surrounding land for any human within a fifty mile radius of the Chimney Sweep corridor. They'd closed highways and mandated the evacuation of towns under the pretense of impending tornados. After airlifting two men from a broken down International Harvester on Route 32 and a group of paleontologists digging up fossils outside the town of Charlton, the Reconnaissance and Survey department had announced the area was clear except for the presence of limited Foundation personnel.

Irvine hunkered down next to one of the pits. He removed his hat — a black Resistol — and scooped up a handful of the disinterred earth, inhaling the rich clay scent. The dirt was cool and damp; it hadn't been exposed long enough for the air to dry it out yet.

"You think Martinez is right, sir?" Boyle said.

He tipped his hand and let the soil spill like a cataract from his spaded fingertips, hollowly pattering against the lid of the empty casket. On an impulse Irvine pulled off the ivy that covered the grave's marker, a flat piece of granite with a horseshoe engraved in one corner. The marker had been split into four fragments. The epitaph was worn but — when combining all pieces — still legible. It belonged to a veteran of the Spanish-American war.

Irvine exhaled twin contrails of blue cigarette smoke from his nose. "Yeah. Yeah, it seems Mr. Martinez is right."

A splash of red caught his eye among a patch of Indian tea. He plucked it from the leaves, thinking it was an odd place to find a

child's toy, turned it over in his hand, and immediately dropped it.

Kontos said, "What? What was it?"

"Nothing," he said, rubbing his hands on his pants.

What he'd mistaken for a ball was actually a small head lacquered in blood, like a candied shell around a rotten apple. A millipede crept across its cheek. The lips were missing, and its milk teeth were just starting to come in through the gums. It wasn't from the graveyard, as it couldn't have been dead for more than a day or two. Irvine should've known better than to touch it. He told himself that even if Chimney Sweep had been successful it wouldn't have made the baby any less dead. Death didn't work on a sliding scale.

He sighed, put his hat back on and stood up. Nobody said anything. The Foundation was apparently unaware that dead bodies were affected by the phenomenon. They'd only searched for living people, and had performed a cursory examination of the Silver Creek ghost town before declaring it empty. Now the anomaly was off course, and tonight, instead of celebrating a successful mission over a couple of pints, Man-Eater was stuck wandering around the desert in the dark.

"So how come it didn't take all of them?" Kontos said.

It was a good question, one that Irvine had been mulling over himself. Almost half the plots had been left unscathed. And although most of the headstones had been toppled from their plinths and laid smashed to gravel among the weeds, there were a few that he could still make out. He compared the surviving stones on some of the undisturbed graves to the ones that'd been exhumed.

He said, "Most of the ones it left alone are older. A lot older. Look, this one's death is dated 1876. Maybe they're too far gone for it."

"It likes the fresh meat," Martinez said.

Irvine shrugged. "I don't think taste has anything to do with it. Boyle."

"Yes sir?"

"Get on the horn with Mercury. Tell them the news, and that it seems to be dependent on the state of decay." Anticipating the base's response, Irvine added, "And no, we don't know at what point in the decomposition process they become…ah, inedible. Inconsumable."

He could see it unfold if he closed his eyes — the skip battering its way through the graveyard, plucking the corpses from the ground like so many rows of ripened crops.

"Leslie!" he shouted.

"What?" came the response as Leslie returned from the jeeps, wiping grease off his hands with a rag.

"You finished deflating those tires?"

"Yes sir. Also topped off the fluids, fixed Damnatio's headlights, and replaced the fan belt on Mugger. If you guys continued this circle-jerk much longer I probably could've gotten a fresh coat of wax on 'em, too."

He was exaggerating, there was no time to complete all that, but Irvine chose to ignore it. "All right. No one likes a show off."

Leslie stuffed the rag in his back pocket. "Roger wilco. We do have one problem though, sir."

"Just one?" he said. "Well, that comes as good news to me. Come on, spit it out man."

"We're low on fuel."

Irvine frowned beneath the brim of his cowboy hat. "How could that happen?" he said.

"It's Chimney Sweep all over again. We didn't plan on having to drive beyond the corridor."

"So how much gas do we have?"

Leslie said, "Less than half a tank."

"And where will that get us?"

Leslie completed the simple arithmetic in his head. The fuel tanks held fifteen gallons, and in this terrain the jeeps got about fifteen miles to the gallon. "We're looking at around a hundred, a hundred and ten miles. Maybe."

"What about the bikes?"

"The bikes get better mileage but they've got smaller tanks, so it evens out."

They might make it on that. Then again they might not. There was no way for them to condense the number of M38s to four, nevermind three, to try and save on fuel. Not without breaking up the task force. There were sixteen members of Man-Eaters in the unit, and what little space in the jeeps they didn't occupy was packed tight with their supplies, gear, equipment and ammo. The rear seat of the jeep that Lesniewski drove had been removed specifically so that extra canisters of gasoline could fit.

If it came down to it, Irvine would just have to siphon gas off from the other jeeps and leave the rest of the unit behind.

Hopefully it wouldn't come down to it.

"Come on," Irvine said, "I don't know about you but I've had enough of this place. Let's get the hell out of here and catch up with Tsavo and Bruin."

The wind would've long erased the tread marks left by Tsavo and Bruin. Not that it mattered. The skip itself wasn't hard to find.

All you had to do was follow the trail of the dead.

4

Bruce was ushered into a large office, with bay windows providing a vista of the forest outside and polished furniture made from Brazilian rosewood. He felt a pang of jealousy at its luxury and understated opulence. It was nicer than his own Lower Manhattan office. The scent of tobacco and lemon lingered in the room. Sitting behind a

massive desk, like a defending soldier ensconced behind the walls of a fortress, was a man with more salt than pepper in his hair. Thick bifocals hung from a lanyard around his neck.

He stood when Bruce entered and held out his hand.

"Mr. Hand," he said. Bruce shook the proffered hand. "So good to finally meet you. I'm Dr. Keller. Please sit down, sit down."

Bruce sat in a Morris chair with fluted woodwork.

Dr. Keller waited politely before taking his own seat. He stared intently at Bruce while his hands explored the topography of the desk, probing until they found what they were looking for: an antique meerschaum pipe. He removed a pinch of tobacco from a nearby tin, packed the chamber and sparked a match, all the while his hooded eyes remained focused on Bruce. He took several drags from the pipe and shook the match out. "Hand, Hand, Hand," he said. His gaze finally broke as a cloud of smoke occluded his face. There was a not entirely unpleasant aroma to the smoke, hinting at Asian spices and cloves and citrus. "Hand. That's an interesting surname. I don't think I'm familiar with it. May I inquire about the origins?"

Bruce crossed his legs. "It's Jewish. It was Handelsman but was shortened when my family emigrated to America." He was tired, had gotten only four or five hours of sleep after orientation, and the coffee he'd drank earlier that morning had long since worn off. "And yours, doctor? What is the origin of Keller?"

"Ah. I believe I've put my proverbial foot in it."

"I think you mean you've put your foot in your mouth."

"Yes, probably. I've never quite grasped American idioms. But before we get off on the wrong track — or, if we already have, please allow me the opportunity to steer us back onto the right one. My name is German, as I'm sure you're aware. I left Düsseldorf in nineteen-twenty and came to the United States, probably for many of the same reasons as your own family, if I can be presumptuous. I have a passing interest in genealogy, which is the only reason I

asked the question. My maternal grandfather is of Jewish descent, and I assure you there is no ulterior motive regarding eugenics, and certainly not the *Übermensch* or any other nonsensical tripe preached by the Third Reich." He leaned back in his chair and steepled his fingers over his paunch. The leather made a dull sound as he shifted, like crumpling a paper bag. "There. Does that… clear the air?"

Maybe the doctor was telling the truth. It was undeniable that he spoke English fluently, albeit with an accent. But after everything Bruce had learned in the past twelve hours about the Foundation, he wouldn't put it past the shadow organization to forge immigration documents in order to get a Nazi scientist on the payroll. He tried to remember what he knew about Dr. Keller. What was he a doctor of? Bruce racked his brain. Leonard had mentioned it in one of his phone calls.

It came to him like a metaphorical light-bulb going off above his head — psychology.

And what could the Foundation possibly want with a German psychologist?

The explanation was obvious: *manipulation. Influence. Propaganda. Indoctrination. Proselytization.* He could go on and on. The Germans had practically invented the field, although if you asked Bruce it was more of a pseudoscience.

"Did I use that correctly? Clear the air?"

Before he could respond Dr. Keller raised his index finger, requesting Bruce wait a moment. He leaned over and rifled through the contents of a desk drawer. "That reminds me, the cleaning crew found this on the airplane. I believe it's yours?"

He pulled out Bruce's silver Breitling watch and gave it to him. "Thank you," Bruce said, nonplussed. He hadn't expected to ever see it again. The time on the watch matched the clocks in the building, (*Or was it the other way around?*) implying that he'd remained in the same time zone.

Doubtful. He'd left New York in the middle of January. Looking out Dr. Keller's office windows, evergreen trees soared until their saw-toothed peaks were lost in clouds. The ground was hidden under a shag rug of moss and lichen. That same moss bearded tree trunks; it draped like shawls from branches and bent saplings under its weight.

It didn't look like anyplace Bruce had ever seen. It looked prehistoric. Primordial.

He inspected the clasp on the band of the watch, and to no surprise found that the loose pin was still secured in place. That meant they were either an incredibly thorough cleaning crew, to find it and put it back, or it hadn't fallen off in the first place.

He realized that the doctor had been speaking to him. He slid the watch onto his wrist, fastened the band and looked up. "I'm sorry? I didn't catch that."

"I was just saying that Leonard told me he's caught you up with our current predicament."

"Yes. I mean, as much as possible. It's a lot to take in, and I'm not really sure what I can do to help. I'm an account executive with an advertising firm."

"It's quite simple: we need your expertise, Bruce. May I call you Bruce?"

He nodded his acquiescence.

"Good. And please, call me Felix. We don't have time for the trappings of formalities. We've got work to do." Dr. Keller retrieved a manila folder from a cabinet, opened it and thumbed through several pages, then slid a sheet of paper over to Bruce. "That came in a couple of hours ago."

Bruce picked it up and read it.

STATUS REPORT

DEPARTMENT OF STRATEGIC OPERATIONS AND COMMAND

Foundation Base Camp Mercury, Nevada

CLASSIFICATION: Top Secret

MEMORANDUM FOR: Operation Ranger

Date: 01/25/1951

From: Robert O'Neill, Col USAF (Ret)
L4 FD Senior Field Coordinator

To: Wesley Peebles, S.O.W, C.S.D.,
L4 FD Div Operations and Strategy

Target: Wintermute is ACTIVE. At current rate it will reach LAS VEGAS (POP 50000) no later than 01/29/1951, and possibly as soon as 01/26/1951.

Impact: SEVERE. Civilian casualties continue to climb and are currently estimated at 75,000 with expected fatality rate higher than 99%. DEFENSE CONDITION 3. Potential for K-CLASS scenario is SLIGHT to MODERATE.

Resources Deployed: MTF Gamma-5 ("Red Herrings") is currently ENGAGED. MTF Epsilon-4 ("Slanted and Enchanted") is MIA and PRESUMED DEAD.

Artillery strike success is VERY LOW. SUPERFORTRESS aerial incendiary bombardment SUPERFLAMER and BLOCKBUSTER met with LOW success. HIGH EXPLOSIVE bombardment was also VERY LOW. Target Wintermute is highly mobile and evasive.

Project CHIMNEY SWEEP is a COMPLETE and UTTER FAILURE. Target Wintermute failed to arrive at predicted location. Schedule unlikely to allow for second attempt but CHIMNEY SWEEP II has been implemented and is

currently underway.

Project ENKIDU has been implemented and is currently underway.

Project TOPEKA moderate success and continues.

Resource Update: MTF Eta-8 ("Man-Eaters") has replaced MTF Epsilon-4 ("Slanted and Enchanted").

Acquisition Request: IMMEDIATE deployment and discretionary approval for package ABLE.

Finished reading, Bruce frowned and tried to figure out what it all meant. As far as he was concerned it might as well have been written in a foreign language.

He returned the sheet to the desk. "I'm sorry Dr. Keller — excuse me, *Felix* — but I still don't see why I'm involved."

Dr. Keller handed him a second slip of paper. Bruce sighed but indulged the doctor once more.

Notes: The below transcript was broadcasted throughout the state of Nevada in violation of FCC regulations.

Source: NOAA Weather Radio

Project Codename: TOPEKA, Operation Ranger

Original Broadcast Date: 01/25/1951

Voice Message:

…THIS IS THE NEVADA WEATHER SERVICE…

…THIS IS NOT A TEST…

…THE NEVADA WEATHER SERVICE HAS ISSUED A TORNADO EMERGENCY FOR…

LANDER COUNTY, CENTRAL NEVADA.

HAZARD…DEADLY TORNADO.

AT 245 PM CDT…NELLIS AIR FORCE BASE ACQUIRED VISUAL CONFIRMATION OF AN EXTREMELY LARGE AND DEADLY TORNADO ON THE GROUND IN THE TOWN OF RIVELL, MOVING SOUTHEAST TOWARD PRISCILLA CITY, LANDER COUNTY…THIS IS AN EMERGENCY SITUATION. SEEK SHELTER IMMEDIATELY!

…THE NEVADA STATE EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT DEPARTMENT HAS ISSUED MANDATORY EVACUATIONS FOR…
ABBINGTON, LANDER COUNTY
PRISCILLA CITY, LANDER COUNTY
SANDY SPRINGS, LANDER COUNTY

…RESIDENTS OF THESE TOWNSHIPS ARE ORDERED TO VACATE THEIR HOMES AND GO DIRECTLY TO THE NEAREST MUNICIPAL BUILDING. THE NATIONAL GUARD AND NEVADA STATE DEFENSE FORCE HAVE BEEN DEPLOYED AND WILL TRANSPORT YOU TO A SAFE LOCATION. THIS IS NOT A TEST. YOU ARE IN IMMEDIATE AND DEADLY PERIL! MOVE DIRECTLY TO THE NEAREST MUNICIPAL BUILDING IN YOUR TOWN FOR EVACUATION. YOUR LIFE IS AT RISK…YOU ARE IN MORTAL DANGER!

…THIS MESSAGE WILL REPEAT IN FIFTEEN SECONDS…

Topeka, he thought. *God, they must think they're so clever.* He admittedly felt a bit like Dorothy himself, a stranger in a strange land. *Toto, I've a feeling we're not in Kansas anymore.*

He said, "Okay, so I think I'm starting to figure this out."

During a recent phone conversation with Leonard, Bruce's answer to a random question about what he'd do to conceal the deaths of thousands of Americans had been to fault a natural disaster. Like an

earthquake or a flood. Or a tornado. He'd rationalized that you couldn't blame anyone or anything for a tornado, except maybe Mother Nature or God. The voice out of the whirlwind and all that.

Based on the two documents they'd taken his speculative, off-the-cuff remark and applied it to the real-world. Real people. Real people who were really dead.

Suddenly Bruce didn't feel so good.

He still couldn't comprehend what the Foundation expected from him, despite Dr. Keller glossing over it with generic flattery. His expertise? What the hell was he an expert in that would be remotely applicable, that would make him in any way qualified? Didn't they realize that he dealt with client acquisition and juggling the management of accounts? He spent most of his days triaging deadlines and finding work-arounds for budgetary constraints.

"Look, I think you've got the wrong guy. I'm an account exec, which means—"

"We know exactly what it means. We also know that you didn't start off as an account executive and that you graduated with a bachelors in design arts. I won't detail the highlights of your career — I'm sure you're already familiar with them — and in return I'd ask that you don't sit there and tell me with a straight face that you're not the right man for the job."

"The kind of work you're talking about… I haven't done it in a very long time."

"No, but out of all the marketing and advertising specialists we keep on retainer your assistance has proved most valuable."

Bruce clenched his teeth. "What do you want from me?"

Dr. Keller placed his pipe on the desk. "I'm asking for your help, Bruce. I thought I made that clear. I'm asking for your help coming up with a story to protect the public from this threat. You've already given me one successful cover, which is the reason you're sitting across from me today. But we're not out of the woods yet. If this

thing reaches Las Vegas, we need to be prepared."

"I don't understand why you didn't just stop it a week ago."

"We tried," Dr. Keller said, grimacing. "We didn't have much information to go on. We *still* don't, but we tried. We thought — based on certain properties — that it may be the Gerasene demon, commonly referred to as 'Legion'. You may not be familiar with the story, it's from the New Testament, but it's no longer relevant. It was believed it had to be that or a similar Judaic-Christian entity. The Tower of Babel, although not an entity, was also conjectured. We deployed a task force to the impacted area, call-sign Slanted and Enchanted, which specialized in theological phenomena.

"The task force was dispatched to exorcise it only if containment proved inviable. A Catholic priest was sent along as part of the team, and we flew in pigs all the way from Iowa so he could cast the demon into their bodies — don't laugh, it's worked before. Obviously it didn't this time, and so we resorted to burning plants and animals, even gave it wine and gold as an offering." Dr. Keller paused and tweezed the bridge of his nose as if it pained him. "They're all dead now. Slanted and Enchanted, that is. Well, you know, you read the report. We didn't… we didn't know about the area of effect it had. After that aerial and ground bombardment commenced, but it was already too late."

They were interrupted by a knock at the door. "Come in," said Dr. Keller.

A young man with a buzz cut, dressed in a uniform similar to the one Bruce had seen the guard at the gatehouse wearing last night, stepped into the office. No rifle, but a pistol was holstered on his hip. He crossed the room in four swift strides and handed a letter to Dr. Keller, then spun on his heels and left without uttering a word.

Dr. Keller tamped his pipe and lit another match. He produced a letter opener and sliced the envelope open in a single, practiced stroke and unfolded the two pages contained within. He put on his bifocals and cleared his throat.

"What?" Bruce said. "What is it?"

Dr. Keller handed the pages over to Bruce. ""We know what it is," he said.

5

The anomaly shed body parts like a molting snake shedding its skin. Arms and legs, heads and genitals — never a complete body, just the parts.

Buzzards and crows orbited in thick clouds, gliding on thermal pockets of air. Irvine couldn't see them; sunrise was still an hour or so off, but he knew they were there all the same. They were always there. It was a goddamn feast for the scavengers and carrion eaters. The skip's stench wafted for miles downwind, and everyone was answering the dinner bell. Not just the usual suspects of coyotes, raccoons and birds either; he'd also seen wolves and weasels and once he thought he'd glimpsed a mountain lion with its cubs. Their eyes reflected the headlights in green pinpoints as they moved sluggishly out of the path of the jeeps, indolent from gorging, bellies swollen with human flesh.

In addition to the body parts the skip also left behind a residue as it passed, a fetid discharge of body fluids and tissue that was the consistency of watered-down porridge. *Yeah, a porridge made from blood and piss and feces and vomit and tears,* thought Irvine and he shuddered. Flies buzzed and crawled in a pulsating mat on the sludge's tacky surface. A musk hog, perched by the edge, lapped up clotted strands as if taking a sip of water along a riverbank.

Irvine drove the M38 nicknamed Panar. He was once again in the lead position, flanked by Bruin and Mugger. They were under strict orders not to get within one hundred meters of the anomaly, and that was an order Irvine had no intention of disobeying. He'd seen firsthand what the anomaly was capable of. From this distance the skip sounded like a baseball stadium right after the home team wins with a walk-off homerun. It wasn't until you got closer that the ear was able to discern tonal cues of anguish and pain and terror.

Its shape was amorphous and mercurial. Irvine had seen it sprout into a skyscraper to try and swat a helicopter out of the air, and in order to bridge a box canyon it had cambered into a block with

dozens of pylon legs, each roughly the size of a telephone pole. At a trailer park it changed to a spiral galaxy, spinning around its axis, protoplasmic arms cracking open trailers like they were tin cans and devouring the occupants inside. Most of the time though it seemed to prefer a tubular shape, its motion similar to caterpillar tracks. The people that made up the tread were the lucky ones — they died quickly, their bodies crushed into paste with each revolution.

The anomaly was people. Just people. A sea of bodies, thousands and thousands of them, seething and writhing, stacked on top of each other at impossible angles and staggering, vertigo-inducing heights. Stampeding. Trampling and routing and contorting. When Irvine had first seen the instance, the sight of it immediately triggered an old memory he hadn't even realized he still had. In it he was a boy of ten, maybe eleven, and his family was vacationing in Maine. They'd taken a day trip from the beach in Wells to visit Camden Hills state park. Irvine, following a strange noise, had wandered off one of the paths and away from his parents. It sounded like there was a malfunctioning electrical transformer right smack in the middle of the woods. What he found instead was a massive colony of honeybees. The hive must've recently swarmed, and they'd temporarily relocated onto the branch of a beech tree.

He'd watched the insects for close to half an hour, mesmerized by their sheer numbers and constant, frenetic turbulence.

The skip was the swarming beehive all over again. Gravity held no influence on it, and although basic logic told Irvine it couldn't move, couldn't do anything except collapse and disperse, what he witnessed with his own two eyes told a different story.

Its migration pattern implied awareness, as it typically sought out the nearest human while ignoring all other life forms, which remained unaffected by its phenomena. Early into the containment mission the skip had targeted Foundation personnel and vehicles, but quickly learned what was too fast for it to catch and gave up, intimating sentience, if of a single-minded variety. Standard possession had already been ruled out by Slanted and Enchanted, so it remained unclear what motivated the instance or how it even functioned.

Mobile Task Force Eta-8, "Man-Eaters", specialized in the capture

and neutralization of both anomalous and non-anomalous humanoids, but Irvine wasn't sure this skip qualified for either category. While it was certainly *made* of humans, that was about as far as the similarities went, and he couldn't recall ever having such a bizarre assignment.

He again thought of the bees on the beech tree — of swarm intelligence, a decentralized global system dictating behavior and interactions with the environment. It naturally occurred in flocks of birds and schools of fish. Was that what was happening here? An emergent, atavistic behavior causing people to steer toward a random center of mass and form cohesion?

No, that wasn't it, Irvine thought as he lit another cigarette off the dog-end of the last. This couldn't be just another neural aberration because the skip had an area of effect that extended out spherically from its surface, pulling people into it. Nothing mental or imagined about that. It was like a tractor beam he'd read about once in a Buck Rogers pulp magazine. The humans trapped in it wailed and cried out for help, but that same tractor beam kept them rooted in place and adhered to one another, preventing separation.

Irvine grabbed the radio mic hooked to the dashboard. "Hey Martinez, what's our location?"

Martinez rattled off longitudinal and latitudinal coordinates that meant almost nothing to Irvine. Boyle, riding shotgun in the passenger seat, jotted them down in a notebook. He would need to relay it back to Mercury. Aerial bombardment was scheduled to recommence at daybreak.

They were on a southeast header, always southeast, approximately ninety klicks north of the Mercury forwarding base and two hundred klicks northwest of Vegas. Target Wintermute was moving at an average speed of fifteen kilometers per hour.

At that pace they'd reach Vegas around 1700 local time. Irvine was curious as to why the skip ignored the Mercury forwarding base, which was much closer than the city. If it hadn't been for its evasion of the Chimney Sweep trap explained by the Silver Creek cemetery, he would've believed that it somehow knew most of the facilities

were underground and unreachable, or that they had aircraft standing by in case of evacuation. The entire staff could be in the air in under thirty minutes. But it couldn't know that, right? That would be impossible.

Boyle's walkie-talkie chirped, signaling an inbound call from Mercury. The radios on the dash were suitable for communication within Man-Eaters' formation, but at Mercury's distance it required the transmitter.

"Man-Eaters. Yes… copy that. Lieutenant, I think you're going to want to take this." Boyle extended the receiver to Irvine. "It's Mercury sir."

He figured as much. As Irvine brought the receiver to his ear, Boyle added: "They say they have positive identification on the skip."

6

After sharing dinner with Dr. Keller, Bruce was allowed some privacy to place a phone call to his wife, assuring Grace that he'd be home soon. He'd concocted an excuse that the department store was getting cold feet, threatening to pull out of the firm's advertising proposal, and as the broker of the contract Bruce had been forced to drop everything and fly to Chicago for damage-control and to try and salvage the deal. Leonard's frequent calls lent credence to the lie.

Back in the dormitory, in his room, good ole' number thirty-aught-six, Bruce stared at the blank white walls. A stack of boxes and documents that hadn't been there this morning towered in one corner, reaching halfway to the drop ceiling. All of it pertained to either the skip or the Foundation as a whole. The top file, as thick as an encyclopedia, was titled *A Comprehensive Analysis of Amnestics A-D* and stamped in red as Top Secret. Even if he had two weeks to spare he'd never get through it all.

Bruce had no motivation to learn further about the Foundation or its procedures; he was already suffering from an overdose of information. When he'd read the SCP file he'd blanked out on the object classification, and had been too embarrassed to ask Dr. Keller for clarification. Keter? What'd that even mean? It was

naggingly familiar, and he thought Leonard might have gone over it with him during orientation, but if he did Bruce had already forgotten the definition.

The containment procedures, skeletal in their brevity, hadn't been much help either, and had essentially amounted to *stay the fuck away from it.* Bruce wasn't sure why they'd bothered.

He laid his head down on the scratchy pillow. The overhead room light remained on. The springs in the cot dug into his back, but he felt so exhausted he didn't think it would matter. He could've slept standing up with his eyes taped open.

"How come it took you guys so long to identify it?" he'd asked after reading over the file for a second time.

Dr. Keller had answered, "The man that wrote that has been dead for more than twenty years. There have been only five verifiable incidents, and three of them took place last century. It was only the clue from Silver Creek, that it affects deceased people, that led us to its identity. Now, I admit our filing system could use a bit of streamlining, but I hope you can understand the delay."

Bruce rolled onto his side, knees curled up. He didn't want to think about it. Less than a day ago he'd been going about his life, blissful in his ignorance of the supernatural, and now his world had been turned inside-out. Although Leonard hadn't provided specifics regarding any other anomalies the Foundation contained outside of the Wintermute target, the implications were clear. And it had slowly dawned on Bruce while he'd been listening to Leonard's deep, droning voice that not only was everything he'd believed a lie — that the bedrock of his sanity was nothing more than sand and straw — but that reality was purposefully being twisted and concealed by a global cabal.

He grabbed the side of the cot and peered over the edge.

I'll start going to shul again, he thought after confirming nothing was under the bed. *That's what I'll do. And not just on Shabbat or the holidays, but everyday. Twice a day.*

He tossed and turned. As worn-out as his body was his mind was racing and he couldn't shut it off. After a restless hour he decided to take a shower. Sometimes that helped him fall asleep.

Bruce shuffled out of the room and down the corridor to the communal bathroom. He disrobed and slipped into one of the shower stalls, running the water as hot as he could bare it. Still his thoughts refused to slow down, and he began deliberating on the anomaly's file again. It'd been the description that he'd found most interesting. He tried to recall the details as the water streamed through his hair and down his body.

> …a phenomenon in which at least two *Homo sapien* (human being) torsos enter a state of physical attraction to one another. This attraction is comparable in strength to a magnetic field intensity estimated at 12 Teslas, or 12 Wb/m^2, causing the torsos to adhere to each other at points of contact. The phenomenon is communicable, spreading to any human torso which comes within a 5m spherical radius of an instance.
>
> It is unknown what causes an event to trigger or end. The only viable means to manually initiate termination is the complete and utter cremation of all impacted torsos.
>
> Directional movement appears to be based on human population size, density and proximity, regardless of distance or line of sight. Vectors have displayed a preference for the nearest and most concentrated populaces. Aberrations in this directional pattern have been observed at an occurrence rate of approximately 35%. The variables which cause these aberrations are currently unknown, although evidence supports both inaccessibility and velocity of targeted humans as factors.
>
> While movement appears to be motivated by growth, instances exhibit no collective or group consciousness, and interviews with affected survivors have substantiated a lack of anomalous changes in cognitive function. Participants describe having no control over their

> movement, and instances display little to no self-preservation. It is also unknown how instances are able to generate and maintain locomotion, as the cessation of human life has no impact on the speed or mobility of an instance. The highest recorded speed of an instance was measured at 40 kilometers per hour.

That wasn't it, not exactly word-for-word, but his paraphrasing was pretty damn close. During the briefing Leonard had shown him black-and-white footage of the skip rampaging through a small town, shot by the Foundation several days prior. The film was grainy and frequently swam out of focus — that, combined with its shaky handheld quality, hadn't made much of an impression on Bruce. It looked fake, the special effects for the people and houses way worse than the stop-motion miniatures in King Kong, and for a split second he'd wondered that someone wasn't playing the most expensive and elaborate prank in history on him.

Even after seeing it he still couldn't wrap his head around the basic concept. Tens of thousands of people in motion, packed like sardines, stacked like cordwood. His imagination wouldn't permit the tableau to be completed, he just wasn't designed that way, and the closest he could conjure was a crowd of people, which was about as far off from the truth as you could get while still being in the neighborhood.

Bruce turned the faucet off and stepped out of the shower, fingers pruned and skin flushed. He grabbed a towel from a rack. The bathroom was empty save for himself. In fact, he hadn't seen another resident of the dorms during his short stay, not even in passing. He cinched the towel around his waist and returned to his room.

He flopped onto the bed, the frame groaning under his weight. Again, he didn't turn off the light. He told himself he'd just forgotten to and now it was out of laziness, he was already lying down and didn't want to get back up, but he knew the real reason, and he couldn't stop himself from leaning over the side and looking under the bed, making sure nothing was lurking under there since the last time he'd checked.

7

They were approaching the point of no return — once they crossed that invisible threshold nuclear detonation would have a greater likelihood of irradiating Vegas, flash-frying cameos into the walls of the Fabulous Flamingo casino and along the strip. Already they were close enough that, depending on the wind, a bomb could bathe the city and the surrounding suburbs in radioactive fallout.

Irvine waited for the helicopter to land, shielding his eyes as the rotors stirred the sand around him. It was four hours past sunrise. New orders had been handed down from Mercury: he was going to rendezvous with the bird, while the rest of the convoy was headed back to the forwarding base. Conventional aerial bombardment had once again failed to stop the skip. If they'd had more time they could've coordinated another bombing run, but if they waited any longer it would shelve the nuclear option.

Command had decided to go with the latter.

According to its file — which Mercury had rattled off to him over the radio — the longest recorded instance of the anomaly had lasted less than five hours before inexplicably dissipating. Well, this instance had lasted over five days and it showed no signs of slowing down. They couldn't sit back, twiddle their thumbs and hope that it would somehow miraculously expire between now and when it was scheduled to arrive in Vegas.

They'd waited too long, spent too much time on abortive containment attempts, wasted two whole days on an exorcism and supplication, then another two days on the Chimney Sweep debacle. When the instance had crossed into Nevada from Oklahoma, they'd tried to corral it in an enclosure, the walls of which were built from shipping containers, prefab trailers, and even a diner and the caboose of a train. Anything they could get their hands on that was large, durable, and generally square. What part of the skip hadn't poured over the enclosure simply smashed through, ripping steel as if it was tissue paper. By the time the Foundation issued the order for termination the anomaly had already passed through half the state, and the MTF was left scrambling for heavier firepower.

The skids of the helicopter touched down. It was carrying gasoline for the convoy that was promptly unloaded. Irvine planted one hand on top of his hat to keep it on his head, and shook Kontos's hand with the other. His sergeant would be in command of Man-Eaters until his return.

"Take care of yourself," Kontos said.

"You too," Irvine replied. He climbed into the helicopter through the passenger door, swearing at himself that if he died, "You too" would be remembered by the task force as his last words. Why couldn't he have come up with something clever and empowering? Like "Death and destruction!" or "For Christ's sake men—come on! Do you want to live forever!" or even "Nuts!", only… original and relevant to the situation.

He saluted his men as the bird took off across the desert, the helicopter's shadow playing on the flat below. Almost everyone in the unit had volunteered for this last stretch, but Irvine had refused. It didn't feel right, not seeing the mission through to the end. Besides, now that he knew they were all safe and returning to base for some hot food and much-deserved rest, he could finally let go of the paternal anxiety that always weighed heavily on him while leading troops in combat.

The pilot indicated for him to put on a pair of headphones. Irvine obliged, fitting the cans over his head beneath his Resistol. He heard communication chatter sandwiched between layers of static. The pilot then handed him a blue pill wrapped in foil.

"It's iodine," he informed Irvine. "Helps protect the thyroid from absorbing radiation."

Irvine hurriedly swallowed it down with a chaser from his canteen.

Target Wintermute was two klicks ahead, biting and clawing its nebulous mass toward Las Vegas. The city was a little over one hundred kilometers to the southeast. The skip was accelerating as it drew closer, traveling at twenty kilometers per hour, and that number was rising steadily, like it could smell the approaching fifty thousand residents.

Irvine's orders were to mark the target and supply coordinates to the B-29 Superfortress plane that'd be delivering the package "Able", a one kiloton-yield nuclear bomb. He was then to observe from a safe distance to provide visual confirmation of detonation and update the status of the target.

It'd be the first nuclear detonation in the continental US since the Manhattan Project conducted Trinity, in New Mexico, during World War Two.

The B-29 would make its approach at an altitude of seven miles. It would take the bomb a full minute to descend. At that height the bombardier probably wouldn't be able to spot the skip, despite its immense size. That was where Irvine came in. The boys back at the lab had cooked up a high-frequency beacon that would transmit its location via megahertz radio pulses aimed at the B-29's firing mechanism. All they had to do was hone in on it and the payload would automatically release.

That was if the beacon worked. It was all theoretical, and Mercury had been evasive when Irvine inquired about the efficacy of its range. It seemed doubtful that the thing could squirt an accurate broadcast seven miles out. The device was a reflective cylinder weighing in at twenty pounds with three telescopic antennae.

The helicopter glided over the anomaly, careful to stay out of its reach. The bombardment earlier that morning had set it ablaze with a partial hit. A column of smoke rose into the sky. *Maybe it will aid the B-29 in locating it,* thought Irvine. The skip was a crisped marshmallow, its surface scorched and bubbling. Greasy flames licked its edges, and rivers of molten fat sluiced off its sides and dripped like melted candle wax. By now most of it was dead, but it kept rolling on. The bodies — it was easier to think of them that way, instead of actual people with lives and families — were naked, clothes rubbed away by friction. Their skin, where it wasn't broken or charred, was fire-engine red, baked by the Nevada sun. Except for the few that still clung to life, the ones that hadn't died in the bombing had perished from suffocation and blunt-force trauma.

The only confirmed way to halt an instance was the complete incineration of the torsos. But even at one thousand degrees

centigrade it could take up to an hour to thoroughly burn a human adult body. And there were so many bodies that Irvine wasn't convinced Able would do the trick. It would vaporize some of them, sure, maybe even most, but it also might just scatter the rest, and instead of a single anomaly they'd be left chasing multiple radioactive skips.

As he stared Irvine saw a woman gnawing on a hand, lips frothing as she worked her mouth around a stubborn finger bone. Her eyes were wide and glassy, nothing behind them except a feral madness. It was impossible to tell whose hand it belonged to. Maybe it was her own.

Then she was gone, replaced by a new set of faces, spinning like the reels of a slot machine…

Even high up he could smell it, a broth of human secretions and putrid flesh, now with the added flavors of broiled meat and a soupcon of burnt hair. Irvine resisted the urge to retch, salivary glands pumping, working overtime. He shook a Winston from the pack, hissing as he lit it and inhaled deeply and exhaled through his nose, trying to block out the stench.

They were now hovering directly above the skip. It roared beneath them, that stadium cheer, *rah-rah*, only he could make out individual voices in the rabble. They begged to be killed, pleaded for help, for God, for their mother. Someone kept repeating the name *Donald* over and over again. Others just howled like a pack of rabid dogs, and buried under it all was the porcine squeal of a bawling infant.

Irvine gripped the beacon and leaned out the door, his right boot balanced on the skid. He screwed his eyes shut, hair whipping and tears streaming at his temples.

It's just the wind and the sun. Don't listen to them. Don't listen…

He couldn't help it, though. *Slanted and Enchanted is down there, somewhere,* he thought. *The whole goddamn unit, trapped in that abomination, that living obscenity. And they're not just another face in the crowd you can ignore and forget. You knew them. Hell, some of them were your friends.*

He swung the beacon up and out, letting go at the apogee of its arc. It was the only thing he could do now to try and help Slanted and Enchanted. He knew if their positions were reversed he'd pray for the release of death.

The beacon spun ass over tea kettle, down, down, until it was swallowed by the instance.

"Beacon away," the pilot announced into his microphone, and yanked on the cyclic control while his feet played with the pedals. The bird responded, dipping its nose and yawing before banking to the west, away from the anomaly.

"Roger that," Mercury replied on the other end. "Able is green. Man-Eaters, what is your location?"

Irvine returned to his seat. He was surprised at how calm and in control his voice sounded. "Man-Eaters actual. We are… uh… three-six-point-four-niner-three-two north and one-one-five-point-niner-five-eight-eight-three west." He repeated the location for verification.

"Mercury this is Poundstone," crackled a new voice in the headphones. "Cruising at thirty-one thousand feet. Bomb is armed and primed."

Poundstone was the Boeing Superfortress bomber. Irvine tried looking for it through the windscreen. It'd be coming from the base's airstrip to the south. He thought he glimpsed a heliogram as the sun reflected off its fuselage, but it might've been his imagination.

"Copy, Poundstone. You're green from Mercury."

"Roger that. Green for Able. Poundstone closing in on target, ETA two minutes."

"Man-Eaters, you're to reach safe distance and then maintain position for visual confirmation of detonation."

"Copy Mercury," replied the pilot, throttling the joystick between his knees.

Minimum safe distance was two miles.

8

Dr. Keller hung up the phone and passed a shaking hand over his face. "They did it. They actually did it," he said. "*Sohn einer Hündin!* They dropped an atomic bomb."

"What?" Bruce said. "When?"

"Ten minutes ago."

"On Vegas?" he asked.

"No," Dr. Keller said. "About fifty miles from it."

"You… you have access to that sort of thing?"

Dr. Keller snorted. "Who do you think invented it?"

Bruce sat back, stunned. "Could they see it?" he managed to say.

"See it? They could *feel* it."

The desk was covered in a drift of newspapers from across the country. All of the front pages featured banner headlines about the worst natural disaster in the history of the United States, accompanied by photographs of towns in Nevada destroyed by tornados. The death toll was in the tens of thousands and expected to climb. It was the greatest loss of life on US soil since the Civil War. Initial estimates reported damages above fifty million dollars.

"Did it work?"

Dr. Keller took a nervous draw from his pipe. "It hasn't been confirmed, since the site is still hot. Preliminary reports indicate success, but personnel are also hesitant to go into the area, not just because of the radiation, but if the instance is still active and someone gets within range — if someone gets within range of its area of effect they'd be feeding it a new torso, and the process could start all over again."

"These amnesiac drugs you told me about…" said Bruce.

"Amnestics."

"Right, amnestics. What if we put it in the Vegas water supply?"

"Lake Mead?" Dr. Keller stroked the stubble on his chin. "No, that won't work."

"Why not?"

"I'm just guessing, but Lake Mead must have billions of gallons of water." He ticked the reasons off on his fingers as he went along. "Even if we had enough water soluble amnestics — which we don't — there would be no way to control the administration. You'd be giving children the same dosage strength as an adult. People would be showering and cooking with it. Watering their lawns. Giving it to their pets. And Lake Mead isn't just the water supply for Vegas. It also feeds into most of Arizona and even parts of California. No, no it won't work."

"What about air dispersal?"

"There's a prototype, but you run into the same problem. Quantity and administration. No, I don't see any way of erasing the memories of fifty thousand people. Even if we were able to, a nuclear explosion leaves behind physical evidence. Most of the radioactive isotopes have a half life of only a couple of days, but there are others that last for centuries. As we speak, fallout is being blown into Utah. And if the Soviets don't already know about the detonation, they will soon."

"You're telling me there's no way to hide the fact that we just dropped a nuke," Bruce said.

Dr. Keller sighed. "I don't see any."

"Then we don't deny it."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean we have to admit we dropped it. You said it yourself that we

can't hide it and we can't erase their memories. What option does that leave us? We need to come out ahead of this thing. Tell the public we dropped a nuclear bomb."

"In the backyard of a major population center? While we're at it, why don't we tell them there weren't any tornados."

Bruce had barely slept in the past two days and wasn't in the mood to trade barbs. If they wanted his advice on how to spin this he'd give it the old college try, especially if it meant he got to go home sooner, but in order to do that they had to listen. "We tell them it was a scheduled test," he said. "That it was planned far in advanced and perfectly executed."

"With no prior warning to the community."

Bruce waved the comment off. "There was plenty of communication preceding the detonation. How many people do you have like me, who work for the Foundation that we can use, living in the Nevada area?"

"I don't know for sure — I'd have to check. Not many. Probably fifty, maybe a hundred. Certainly no more than that."

"It's not enough. You may have to pay some people off to say that they knew about the test. Prominent figures. We'll put handbills in past newspapers, say… two weeks ago. You're going to have to control the media somehow. Broadcasters, radio pundits, news anchors. They have to sell this for us like it was completely ordinary and expected. When Bob comes into the office on Monday morning complaining about the explosion over the weekend, I want his coworkers to tell him they all knew about the test ahead of time and had even discussed it in the break room on Friday. He was there, didn't he remember? In two weeks time Bob will actually believe that he knew about it, too."

"Who's Bob?"

"He's a figment of my imagination, Felix. I made him up as an example."

"Isn't that a bit convenient though? The US government just happens to drop an A-Bomb in Nevada the same day the worst natural disaster in history — tornados that are *also* in Nevada — ends?"

"So get some meteorologist to claim that the bomb created a change in the atmosphere that caused the storm cells to dissipate. I don't know, I'm not a scientist, but it seems a plausible explanation, and one that will make the residents view the testing positively."

Dr. Keller bit the inside of his cheek. "It could work…"

"It *will* work," corrected Bruce. "But we need to drop more."

"What?"

"One detonation isn't a test, it's a mistake. But if we drop more, people will assume the first wasn't an accident."

"More?" sputtered Dr. Keller. "More? Did you hear what I said? The fallout is getting pushed into Utah."

"I heard what you said. And I also heard you say that we didn't know if the first one was successful or not. So I'm saying drop another one. Hell, drop two or three more."

Dr. Keller shook his head vigorously, but Bruce knew he'd already won. They were backed into a corner with no other way out.

"One maybe," Dr. Keller said. "But more? I can't believe the residents of Las Vegas would stand for it."

"Sure they will," he persisted. "We'll advertise it as a tourist attraction. 'Come to Vegas and Celebrate the Fourth of July with the biggest fireworks display in the world.' That sort of thing. We'll make it patriotic and good for business. And the locals will eat it up."

9

The helicopter was shielded and didn't dive into a tailspin following the EMP blast. It shook and rattled with the shockwave, an alarm blared and Irvine felt like he'd been set to the tumble dry setting, but

they retained their altitude.

After the blistering, trillion-watt flashbulb receded, he hazarded a glance. A pillowy mushroom cloud, like a volcanic eruption, rose into the stratosphere three miles away.

"Detonation confirmed," the pilot reported with awe.

"Copy, Man-Eaters. Please verify Target Wintermute has been neutralized."

"Negative, Mercury," Irvine said. "We do not have eyes on target. It appears to be a direct hit, but if there's anything left to see of Wintermute it's obscured."

"Copy. We're en route to you. Maintain a holding pattern around the impact site at a safe distance and report any change in status."

"Roger that."

The bird described a wide circle around the stem of the cloud, both pilot and passenger scanning the ground for any signs of life. There was nothing except for burning sagebrush and pinon-juniper, and a mirror shine where sand had fused to glass. Irvine wondered just how safe they really were this close to ground zero. The windows of the helicopter appeared to be polarized, but he doubted that would stop gamma rays. A creeping dose of radiation — dying only after several agonizing days, spraying blood from both ends and having his hair and fingernails fall out, wasn't exactly Irvine's ideal way to go.

He voiced his concerns. Mercury reassured him: "You're definitely soaking up more than is recommended, probably two or three years' worth of normal background radiation in a couple of minutes, but you should be okay. It's like having a couple of x-rays at the hospital. Just wait until we arrive and we'll get you out of there."

Irvine wasn't so sure about that, but he was too tired to argue. "Yeah, and how long is that going to be?" he said.

"We have a team already in the area. Ten minutes, tops."

Ten minutes. Ten more minutes. He could handle that. Then, as long as the skip didn't re-emerge suddenly like the villain at the end of a bad horror film, he'd go through radioactive decontamination for the next several days. As the commanding officer in the field he was also required to write up an after-action report for the Foundation's records. When it was all said and done he was probably looking at another week before he could go home.

10

"I have some good news for you," Dr. Keller said to Bruce on Sunday morning, as they ate breakfast in his office. "You'll be going home shortly — in another hour or two, I'd say. The SOC has approved our proposition."

He tapped a newspaper with a yellowed, nicotine-stained finger. It was the Las Vegas Sun. The front-page story pertained to the Atomic Energy Commission and the US Department of Energy commencing nuclear testing — as scheduled — at the new Nevada Test Site. The paper conveniently contained another copy of the handbill it purported to have originally published seventeen days earlier.

WARNING

January 11, 1951

From this day forward the U.S. Atomic Energy Commission has been authorized to use part of the Las Vegas Bombing and Gunnery Range for test work necessary to the atomic weapons development program.

Test activities will include experimental nuclear detonations for the development of atomic bombs — so called "A-Bombs" — carried out under controlled conditions.

Tests will be conducted on a routine basis for an indefinite period.

NO PUBLIC ANNOUNCEMENT OF THE TIME OF ANY

TEST WILL BE MADE

Unauthorized persons who pass inside the limits of the Las Vegas Bombing and Gunnery Range may be subject to inquiry from or as a result of the AEC test activites.

Health and safety authorities have determined that no danger from or as a result of AEC test activities may be expected outside the limits of the Las Vegas Bombing and Gunnery Range. All necessary precautions, including radiological surveys and patrolling of the surrounding territory, will be undertaken to insure that safety conditions are maintained.

Full security restrictions of the Atomic Energy Act will apply to the work of this area.

RALPH P. JOHNSON, Project Manager
Las Vegas Project Office
U.S. Atomic Energy Commission

"Pretty good," Bruce said, bobbing his head.

"It's the work of our Red Herrings team. Television and radio news broadcasts will be doling out much of the same. Funding has also been set aside for the paid consent of prominent local figures — politicians and businessmen, people in the entertainment industry, as well as a random assortment of individuals who display a proclivity toward subornation. Another detonation is planned for later today. We still have a lot of work ahead of us in regards to the clean up, but we were extremely lucky, all things considered. The Foundation's base in Mercury is to be scrubbed clean and will be turned over to the federal government, along with the surrounding land. All of it's going to be consolidated under the Nellis Air Force base."

"How were we lucky?"

Dr. Keller said, "The United States has been seeking continental atomic weapon testing ever since the end of the Pacific theater, and initial surveys indicate the Frenchman Flat — where we dropped the

bomb — is suitable for both atmospheric and underground detonations. That, in combination with its relative seclusion and lack of flora and fauna make it a favorable location for continued testing."

"Except of course for the people living nearby in Las Vegas."

"Of course."

"So really it couldn't have happened in a better place," Bruce said.

"It's unfortunate, but under the circumstances… yes."

Bruce would never remember his three days spent at the Foundation compound. On his return flight home he helped himself to the wet bar in the passenger cabin's galley, indulging in the wide selection of whiskey that was available. The alcohol was laced with a Class-C amnestic. He awoke on Interstate-84 in the backseat of a cab. He had a splitting headache and reeked of booze. His mouth tasted as if he'd been eating out of a dumpster.

The time on his watch had been forwarded three hours to match the Eastern Time Zone. Aware of the clasp's loose pin, they'd been much more careful this time.

11

OPERATION RANGER

STATUS REPORT

FOUNDATION OVERSIGHT COMMAND

CLASSIFICATION: Top Secret

MEMORANDUM FOR: Operation Ranger

Date: 02/02/1951

From: Wesley Peebles, S.O.W., C.S.D
L4 FD Div Operations and Strategy

To: Jeffrey Campbell, O5

Target: Confirmed TERMINATION of target WINTERMUTE. No reported sighting or activity of target since initial nuclear bomb ABLE detonation on January 27, 1951. All subsequent projects of operation have CEASED except for the continuation of TOPEKA and initiation of BLUE BLINDERS.

Resource Assessment: MTF Epsilon-4 ("Slanted and Enchanted") status updated to KIA for all members. MTF Eta-8 ("Man-Eaters") suffered 0 casualties and is available for active duty. MTF Gamma-5 ("Red Herrings") is currently ENGAGED with projects TOPEKA and BLUE BLINDERS.

Outcome: Loss of civilian life and property has been severe. DEATH TOLL currently estimated at 77214 and impact zone spans from western OKLAHOMA throughout a majority of NEVADA. Clean up and repair expected to take 3-5 YEARS and potentially cost one BILLION dollars US currency. Financial burden shifted to personal, insurance, US taxpayer and STATE/FEDERAL government agencies.

OPERATION RANGER continues as nuclear test series. Scheduled tests are as follows:

Name	Yield	Status
Baker	8 kilotons	Detonation January, 28 1951.
Easy	1 kiloton	Detonation February 1, 1951.
Baker 2	8 kilotons	Approved. Date TBD.
Fox	22 kilotons	Approved. Date TBD.

Heartfelt

Release of D-Class Form AE-2600

Name: Samuel Allen Dierks
Serial: D-5150
Incarceration Date: 03/23/2004
Induction Date: 02/12/2019
Record: [EXPUNGED]
Release Date: 08/05/19

Notes: As agreed to upon acquiring D-Class status, D-5150 has been hereby pardoned by the Governor of the State of [REDACTED] and is to be released into the custody of his family, with the following stipulations:

- A 10-year mandatory period of rehabilitative parole, as mandated by the laws and regulations of the state of [REDACTED];
- A yearly examination by Foundation Medical staff, and;
- Upon death, the cadaver of D-5150 is to be donated to the Foundation for post-mortem examination.

THEREFORE, in agreeance with the terms laid out herein, and with the agreeance of all parties involved, D-5150 is hereby freed, effective as above.

Congratulations, Mr. Dierks, and good luck in your future endeavors.

Signed,

Blake was waiting for me in the parking lot.

"Sam? SAM!"

He ran towards me, tears in his eyes. He stopped within two steps of me, and looked at me. How different I looked. The last time he saw me was at a visitation in Supermax, almost 13 years ago. I'm sure my balding head, the growing middle-aged paunch, and the extra wrinkles made me look quite different than what he was expecting.

He looked different too. A decade and a half will do that to a kid. My little brother was all grown up now. He was 15 when I went in, just a chubby kid who talked a lot and always got on my nerves. Now… Jesus, look at him. He'd turned into a handsome man. He looked a lot like Pops.

Pops.

I wrapped my arms around him, and we cried.

"And that's the last thing you remember?"

"Yup."

"Did it leave a scar?"

"Oh yeah."

Pulling up my shirt, I showed him the scar from the transplant surgery, and knocked my knuckles against my breastbone. "Brand new ticker in there. Top of the line, the best that medicine had to offer."

"Holy shit." He looked at me for a second, as if to ask *Can I touch it?* He ran a finger over the incision site, eyes full of wonder.

I smiled at him, he smiled at me. "Hard to believe." Nodding, I pulled my shirt back down and looked away. "Yeah. Hard to believe."

A beat. We both stared into our coffee cups.

"Sam… you were in for life. No parole."

"I know."

Tears were welling in his eyes, something that would be kind of a common occurrence for those I talked to in the immediate future. "You got a second chance."

"Two of them. In a row."

"Yeah. How's that work?" He chuckled softly, and wiped his eyes.

"I don't know, brother. I don't know."

Our eyes met our coffee cups again. What do you say in a moment like this? When there's so many questions you need to ask, but the words are impossible.

In this case, you say nothing, and you flag the waitress down for the check.

Readjusting to life is hard. 15 years of routine changes you.

Every morning, I wake up at 6:00 am without an alarm. I cradle a cup of black coffee and wait for the sun to come up. At 7, usually, I go out for a jog. By 8, I have a couple of fresh eggs over-easy and some toast.

I head out to Paul's farm in an old Dodge Ram that runs for a few dozen miles at a time. He pays me to work on whatever needs to be worked on- sometimes it's fixing up one of the tractors, or a hay baler. In the summer, it's hauling hay. Sometimes I'm feeding the cows, looking over the herd, keeping count. They're not quite tame. The younger ones are curious, they approach carefully and might sniff your hand. The older ones keep their distance.

Come lunchtime, I read the paper, and eat the sandwich I packed that morning. If it was a good week, I might get the nice turkey from the deli counter at the grocery store. Most of the time, it's budget

bologna.

I keep to myself. The other farmhands are young, and full of wild ideas and crazy dreams. They talk about last weekend's party, or this girl and that girl. Never really engaging, I keep my head down and my mouth shut.

The afternoon drags on, but there's always work to be done. Clearing and repairing the fences, getting rid of the old fallen trees, keeping the barn cleaned up. On Fridays, Paul gives me a few hundred dollars in cash and a case of beer. He always says I do good work. I always thank him for the money and the job, and he always just shrugs and says something like *It's hard to keep good help nowadays* or *Keep up the good work.*

I go back to my little shack right before dark. Sometimes I'll text Blake, and talk for a little bit. Lights out at 9, just like the last 15 years.

It's funny that way. Every night I spent in lockdown, I swore I would do things so much differently if I had the opportunity. When it comes down to it, I guess we're all creatures of habit. The setting might be different, but the routine is the same.

Maybe I need a change.

Hey man, what's up?

Cool

The old Wagon Wheel is just across the state line.

Yeah, IKR :D

IKR= I know, right?

you should go have some fun. You never go do anything anymore

yeah just don't get hammered and drive

bro. trust me. Just go.

Promise you'll call me or Jane if you have too much to drink

The Wagon Wheel is vacant, except for the waitress, Susan, and one old boozehound, slumped over on his barstool.

Susan is pretty. She's probably about 37, kind eyes, and long red hair. There's happy crow's feet at the corners of her eyes when she smiles. She keeps me in cold beer and listens. She talks sometimes too. A single mom of two girls, Susan is also a trauma nurse at the hospital when she's not tending bar.

She curls her hair around her fingertip when we talk.

The Wagon Wheel becomes a regular spot for me, two or three times a week, just to talk to her. I ask her for her number after a month of working up the courage. She smiles and asks me, "What took you so long?"

I barely slept that night for feeling so good about it.

Laying in bed together, she traces her finger along my scar.

"So, when you die, these scientists get your body?"

"Yep. That was the deal."

"That's… unbelievable."

"Believe it." I smile and kiss her forehead. "It's a small price to pay to be able to be here, with you."

She smiles up at me. I feel like the luckiest man on earth.

I want to feel like this forever.

It's a whole year before I propose. Saving for a ring on an ex-con farmhand wage takes some time. I asked her daughters if it was okay first. They laughed and gave me a hug, and called me dad.

We got married in October. It was uncommonly cold that day. The orange of the leaves made for a stark contrast against the thin white blanket of snow. In the south, it's so unusual to get snow at all. To see it on our wedding day seemed like a blessing from above.

Her white gown and red locks perfectly matched the landscape.

She was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen.

Hey old man

What is it?

Yeah. I know.

Understandable.

Yeah.

Hey pops. Long time no see.

I… I'm not sure what to say right now… Never even thought about it before. The possibility of you being dead. That's really stupid, I know. They wouldn't let me come say goodbye before, the warden wouldn't. Obviously. I mean… I don't even know if you would have wanted me to.

The last time I saw you, you were so disappointed in me. And I deserved that. I did something horrible. The people I hurt, the lives I took… I can't ever take that back. And it's something I deal with, every goddamn day. I still see them when I go to sleep sometimes. It upsets Susan so much that I've just taken to sitting in the living room for a while until I get it together.

What I would give to go back in time. I was about as old as Blake is now, but really, I was just a kid inside. I wish I could stop myself, show myself what pain would come of it. How I'd hurt others, hurt myself… hurt you, and mom, and Blake. Those poor people, and their families. I think… I might do anything to be able to change that.

But… I wasn't defined by that one moment. I'm not that.

Pops. I'm sorry. I know you probably left the world hating me, and I'm sorry for that. I let you down, and I deserve it. For my part, I always loved you. I always just wanted to make you proud. The thing that broke my heart the most was seeing you and mom in that courtroom. Your faces when they read the guilty verdict. That was

the last time I saw you.

…

I wonder if I've become someone you could be proud of.

Those doctors and scientists, they gave a second chance to a murderer who didn't deserve it. But here I am now, forever changed. I have Susan now, and the girls, and they look at me the way I used to look at you. My greatest desire is to be a good father and husband, just like you were. You should see them. Belle got second place in the elementary beauty pageant this year. And Shyanne, well, she was the star of their dance recital. I know they're not my kids, but… I'm their dad. And if you could see them, you'd fall in love with them, just like I did.

And Susan, my god. Never did I dream of meeting, much less being with, someone like her.

I wonder what you think of me now. I hope you'll forgive me. Wherever you are.

I miss you, pops.

…

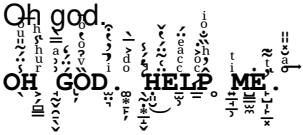
Is it okay if I sit down here? I'm just not feeling so good. Age, I guess. What's the old saying? "Time and tide wait for no man." It's just catching up to me, I suppose.

Just need to catch my breath.

I just… need to…

I…

Oh god.



Hector and Jacob

The man woke up with a severe pain in his head and looked around, brushing a few locks of hair out of his eyes in the process. He sat against the base of a tall deciduous tree in the middle of a forest, a thick fog obscuring his vision beyond several meters. He gasped as he realized that the environment around him was entirely **black and white.**

"Oh fuck…" he whispered to himself as he realized where he was, and how little time he likely had before something would certainly find him and utterly wreck his shit.

"Ah," said a masculine voice nearby. "You finally woke up."

The man turned to see **an android** sitting cross legged beneath a nearby tree. The droid held several picture frames in its hands as its unblinking eyes remained locked on the man. **Several strips of its external covering were missing**, appearing to have been neatly sliced off.

"1360…" the man stated.

"I'd prefer you to call me Hector, Researcher Conwell," the droid replied sharply. It stood and walked towards the man, taking the picture frames with it.

"So… that's what your voice sounds like…" the man observed. As he kept his eyes locked on the droid, he checked his peripheral vision. A trail, a portal, any signs of an exit, but there was only more fog.

"Impressed?" the droid asked. "Personally, I think I have a wonderful speaking voice. It's an absolute waste to keep it muted."

"It reminds me of my son's, a little."

The droid nodded, and looked at one of the picture frames it carried, then knelt down and held it before the man. The picture inside the frame was something off the man's desk, an image of him and his family on a hiking trip.

"What are their names?" the droid spoke with a tone of curiosity. "I assume this is your wife, son, and daughter?"

"They are. Kate, Zach, and Carrie, respectively."

"You all look happy."

The man looked at the ground.

"We never got your owner's names from you Hector," he eventually said. "What were they?"

The droid stopped looking at the picture, and stared at the man for several seconds.

"James, and his daughter Sarah."

The droid then fell silent, looking off into the distance.

"You said you lost them," the man ended the silence. "What happened?"

"You did," the droid replied. "One of your agents killed James when you acquired me. I don't know what happened to Sarah."

The man looked at the ground again.

The droid fell back into silence.

"So… is this going to be a revenge killing? I'd be lying if I said that I haven't earned it…" the man chuckled, returning his stare to the droid with tears in his eyes.

"It should be… There are so many souls here that would love to rip you limb from limb…"

"B…but…"

The droid sighed and sat down beside the man.

"But it wouldn't bring me any joy…" the droid looked at the picture of the man's family. "I was one of the first droids to find this place. With how large it was, it took years before I encountered another soul. All that time I was alone with my anger and hate…"

The droid flicked its right index finger and made a scalpel pop out.

"I could tie you down and make you watch as I carved strips from your flesh…"

The man sunk as far as he could away from the droid and its blade, his eyes watching it in the dim, hazy light.

"But what's the point? It wouldn't bring me back. It wouldn't help me find Sarah. You can only hang on to such hot emotions for so long until you burn out inside."

The droid sighed agin.

"I'm not going to kill you, Researcher Conwell. It wouldn't bring me any peace."

The man let out a deep breath.

"So… why am I here?"

"Mistake?" the droid shrugged. "When we opened the passage into your lab, we did so with plans to capture your colleague, Dr. Hess. As you are probably aware, she was a member of the **Anderson Robotics** R&D department. You were taken by mistake. When **Saker #76** recognized who you were, they suggested I be allowed to have my way with you. Saw it as being poetic."

"Hess is here too?" The man looked around.

"She is. Last I saw they were taking her to be drawn and quartered by the Aplomados."

The man cringed.

"So where does that leave us?"

The droid stood, and looked at the pictures in its hands, and shrugged.

"Doesn't really matter," it replied. "I am keeping these though."

It then pointed off into the distance.

"If you keep in that direction for about 2000 meters, you'll come to an exit that will take you to the area you call '**Three Portlands**'. I'd move quickly and quietly though. Like I said, plenty of souls here who will love to turn you inside out if given the chance."

The man stood, and nodded in understanding. He began to depart, but stopped, and turned back. The droid had nearly vanished in the fog.

"Hector?" he called to it.

The droid paused and turned.

"I'm sorry for all that I did. I'm sorry for all the pain."

The droid remained silent for several moments, then vanished into the fog.

The man returned on his course. If he was careful, maybe he'd escape alive.

« No Matter What Mask You Wear | Anderson Robotics Hub | Assault on Site-64 »

Hellbent

I struggle to put the words together. I'm not really sure there are words to begin with. At this point, my own mind is beginning to fail me. The thing in front of me is something I can't quite fathom, despite the fact I am its creator. How it actually functions is beyond me. All that's left is the thing's existence, and its purpose.

The last thing I can remember with any clarity is the funeral. Having to watch them lower his coffin into the ground. Listening to the sound of nothing broken only by quiet sobs. That empty feeling that dug into my chest since I received the call about his death. I first interpreted that feeling as me questioning my faith. Did I really believe in a doctrine that dictated my brother was to be eternally damned because he loved another man, and possibly additionally condemned for suicide? It was not until I arrived home that night that I realized what had taken root was actually inspiration waiting to flower.

Without regard to cost or practicality, ignoring all responsibilities, I built. Driven by the love of a lost sibling, I birthed this monster. My savings account was steadily emptied over the following weeks, and I turned to cannibalizing other objects to feed the mechanical beast. I realized I could use my car as the frame, use things from around the house for the wires and pipes. I built the heart of the machine using Father's lawnmower, which I had borrowed shortly after the accession of the queen. Mother, sympathetic as she was, could not stand to lose a second son. Instead of food, I used the funds she gave me to purchase glass, which I turned into an array of vacuum tubes. I disemboweled a prototype bombe to build a majority of the monster's innards. I'm unsure where I collected the material for the track the vehicle runs on, but I'm almost certain it was illegal.

It shouldn't work, I understand that. I have no education in mechanical engineering, I have no experience in electrical work. Even I know a lawnmower engine could not possibly move this

behemoth. But it will work, I know it. Whatever familiar-feeling force that guided my hands is now gone, but I trust in it. It has to work. I've destroyed my career, eradicated my funds, almost annihilated what's left of my familial ties.

Judging by the noises upstairs, I have managed to gain something in the past weeks. Notoriety. Climbing into the driver's seat, I can hear doors bursting open. People of authority calling out my name, announcing to their comrades that each room they check is clear. But it doesn't matter. The machine will carry me away from this place.

The keys are waiting to be turned, and I hastily oblige them. The beast stirs in response. Its dark heart begins to beat, pumping iridescent madness throughout its system. Two tubes at the front of the frame fill with gas, its blazing blue eyes opening and casting a light upon the track. Similar tubes along the sides fill with multicolored gas, masking the filament within. Copper piping rattles and whistles as it releases torrents of steam. A constant chorus of cogs, gears, and sprockets sing within the confines of the metal hide. With a whirring screech the beast opens its maw, exposing a massive drill powered by the remnants of the original car's engine.

On the wall before me are arcane symbols etched into a semicircular pattern, the vehicle's tracks terminating at the center. The words Abaddon, Gehena, Hades, Sheol, Tartarus, and Hell shimmer within the pattern. The texts are inconsistent in the naming of my destination, as such I've erred on the side of caution and invoked them all.

I grasp the parking brake, the only thing keeping the beast from launching forward. The basement door bursts open, a man in combat gear standing in the threshold. He tells me to step out of the vehicle as I thumb the lever's release button. He brandishes his weapon and restates his command. I take a deep breath, steel my nerves, and pull the lever. An ungodly roar drowns out all sound, my vision blurring as the vehicle rockets forward.

Hold on, Alan. I'm coming. One way or another.

Hello, Little Girl

We are heading for D-block, snaking through the periphery corridors to avoid the last stragglers. Annette can hold their own, but now I must be accounted for. Ears stuffed with paper towels can only hold so long. They are moving ahead of me, left hand flat against the wall, body bent into a half-crouch. Their right hand is angled ahead, and their wrist is tuned like a snake's tongue, fingers contorting, flicking, probing. Though they are moving quietly, I am finding myself having to jog.

They did not let me take the gun. That was understandable. But they must have noticed me take the bullet: either they did not mind or did not know enough. The latter is fine by me, but the former is not. It means that they are trusting or desperate. Neither possibility particularly inspires me, so I put the thought away.

Another left, then a right. Security cameras whir as we turn every corner, but I do not think anyone is left to watch us anymore.

Sure, there were the two bodies, stacked against the first door we came across — I failed to divert my gaze from theirs, and now I can't shake the sight of black eyes from my head, pupils dilated wide — for a moment I felt the chart in my head start to unfold, but I quelled it just in time.

(**FEARFUL HERON, it must have been; our soldiers' proprietary stimulants tend to scream a little louder than the garden-variety amphetamines.**)

Up ahead, we skip the elevator, but Annette starts for the downwards stairs and I have to pull them back up. They glare at me, glass eyes swiveling, so I gently tap on the rail with my knuckle:

D CELLS NT SAFE

Then, in slightly less broken Morse:

TOO MANY PPL

They cock their head, make a chewing motion with their jaw. I think for a second, compacting the message in my head before sending:

GO BEHAVIOURAL LABS

Annette stops chewing. I think they understand what I am getting at. It is not a pretty option, but it is a better one. For once, they let me take the lead.

D-block's labs go up to ground level. It gave us easy access to field testing, when we still thought we mattered, and it fit the site's pharmaceutical cover. Of course, that openness did not help us in the slightest when we became the center of it all. Those of us who knew better fled first. I do not think we need to fear the ones who stayed. It takes a certain level of self-pity to make a life out of computing path integrals over semiotic maps; we will not need to worry about our infected colleagues keeping themselves alive.

The labs, the eye of the storm. I hope I will find who I need.

Behind me, Annette's steps are measured, constant, echoing. Halfway up the stairs, the lights switch into dull emergency red. On a loose step — is it the seventh flight or twenty-third? — I trip, hands slipping on flaking rust. Annette catches me before I twist anything, and together we stagger up the last few steps, bursting through the fire doors.

As I expected, the mains are out. We had taped the windows shut in the first few hours of the complex's spread. Still, the pitch black is of no consequence, because I know where everything is.

Somewhere behind the walls is a hum. Only one thing should be running. Here is the antechamber, the reinforced central room that caps the site's central shaft, and I put my hands out, feeling familiar surfaces: the pot of the long-dead money plant, the water cooler (regrettably empty), Kelly's old desk. On the whiteboard is a patch of black mold. The chart in my head goes *HZZ-ZZT* for a moment; I recoil and put it out of my mind.

Beside the whiteboard is the panel for the hermetic door, its light blinking a weak red. Feeling past it, I reach for the seam, which now comes apart with little effort.

They built the cells directly below us for a reason. The complex evades pure mathematics, requires base conditions to compute. Raw subjects are insufficient. Pick a person off the streets and they have far too many dependencies installed, far too much junk data. The people were why we needed the cells; the junk data was why we needed the oubliettes.

Past the airlock, the first of them should be on my right. I hit the raised concrete block with my left shin; stifle a scream long enough to drop to a crawl and run my fingers over the surface. The metal hatch in the middle of the oubliette is cold, closed, and still. Not what I am looking for. Annette steps over me. Presumably they have caught on. I cannot see them, but I imagine they are crawling over the remaining hatches in the room (thirteen in all, and not counting the miniatures) running their hands over them, feeling for any sign of activity.

They finish quickly. A shadow — theirs — moves over the blinking red light of the panel opposite the room and slides the hermetic door open. I get to my feet — slowly, now, putting weight on my right side — and follow Annette to the next chamber.

The hum is louder here. Ten seconds in, we find its source. I touch its hatch, feel that it is warm to the touch, feel the pumps running in the space behind the wall. We have reached our destination.

Before I can tap a message, Annette grips the wheel and twists it with all their might. The hatch swings open. From under six inches of psychotropic cocktail, the subject begins to scream.

For someone that has been under for a week, she has a lot of fight left in her. (Come to think of it, it has been three days since my voluntary confinement; it must have been another seven before that when she was last left in the oubliette.) Her fluids make it hard to get a grip. It takes the two of us to wrestle her out of the hole, grabbing onto the rings on the sides of her straitjacket slicked with oily scopolamine derivative. My left side gives again and I let go,

screaming. Something hits the ground. I hear a struggle, but she does not get very far; there is a sound of a joint cracking, and the screaming muffles over.

It sounds like she is yelling through Annette's hand now. Some kind of mantra, maybe something she thought of when she was under, or something programmed into her along the way.

"Helpmemynameisallisonbrownagethirtysixiliveinmiamifloridapleaseletmeou
eight three four two five nine one one one one one - "

Placeholder data, really; easily sanitised. There is always a bit of shame when one realises that the oubliette has really done its job. (Kill a mind to save all of humanity? That used to be the moral calculus, yes. But if nothing matters, anyway, then all acts are justified — I think to myself that it will be a great act of moral courage to be able to do anything at all.)

My first instinct is to start the job where we are and carry the result in my head. But it is growing clear that we cannot stay here for very long. The subject is only going to be more trouble the more she is lucid. I give the body a tug, then prepare to retrace my steps. Back to the first room, back to the antechamber, back to the stairs.

All I need now is a marker pen, which I can grab from the desk on the way out. A light source would help, too, as would a piece of black card, or a file. Thanks to the straitjacket, I do not think that I will need a gag or a bit.

I realise I am staring into Annette's eyes, and that they have been facing me for some time. A light glints over them.

Panel indicator light? Annette does not think so.

They dive to the right. The subject screams. Gunshot. The sound of metal on metal: *is that buckshot*?

Indiscriminate aim in a near-dark room: the attacker is shooting to kill. I throw myself to the ground, scrambling behind one of the oubliettes. Even through the paper towels, it feels like my eardrums have been perforated. The darkness might save us for a little while,

if not for the fact that the subject has started babbling again:"-mynameisangelabrowniamthirtytwoiliveinplumwellmississippipleasedocallmy

Gunshot. The babbling stops. So much for Plan A.

I perceive the shape of someone at the door. Somebody about my size.

The shape clears its throat.

"Who's there?" it speaks.

I almost do not recognise the voice. "Brandt? Is that you?"

"A-hh. I know you. Jenkins. Can't w-hhelieve you're one of the lucky ones, hh-aha."

"Doctor Brandt? Project Head Brandt?" Something sounds off. I cannot tell exactly what it is through the ringing in my ears. He is breathy-voiced, that is for sure, and his words come out in soft coughs.

"Hhwoject head. Di-hrector. Site o-hhisser. Sa-hhtey and Hh-ire Co-hwand o-hhiser. Don't know, don't know how wany hh-rowotions wy now, ha-ha. They're all dead-t, ha-hhen't you heard?"

Footsteps. He is getting closer. Opposite the room, I sense Annette tensing for action. They might not know his voice, but they can recognise his footsteps. It is not hard to identify the veteran field agent's lockstep, with the caveat that he *wants* to be heard — or does not care if he is heard. This is Brandt, all right, and there is no question about it.

"S-hhit, I could ewen we Oh-Hhive wy now, ha-ha."

For all their aptitudes, Annette cannot sense his tone, but I can feel him just fine even in my half-deafened state. It's fear, the business end of it, the cornered fox baring teeth.

The metaphor strikes me out of the blue. That's when I get it. Of course, that's the sound: he's missing his lips. The poor sod must have bit them right off.

"Y-you're a hh-ine wan, Jenkins, hh-wut I'n sohh-wry to say I don't think it's you right there, right now."

I hear him cock his shotgun. He is headed in my direction.

This is not good. My fingers are already in my pocket before I realise what I'm doing, curling around the bullet, reaching for the electronic primer. *Do not look at the flash, do not listen to the screech, count to three, clear your mind, and snap -*

Gunshot. Buckshot on metal. Screaming through uncovered teeth. Annette is on him like a tiger. From the sounds of it, their fingers are in his eyes, and it hits me as slightly humorous that they do not know it is pitch black.

I pocket the bullet for another time and sprint for the opposite door, stepping in something wet as I go (Blood? Drugs? I do not care anymore). When I reach it, I throw it open, and stamp on the ground as hard as I can:

… _ _ _ …
… _ _ _ …

Which is the most succinct way I can think to tell Annette that it is time to run.

If Brandt thinks he has got himself sorted out, it is slipping now. His gunshots have saved me for now, but his screams are starting to ring of static — unintended effects of the chart resonating in my head, though it will only hold for so long — and in the darkness I think I am beginning to see the faint edges of stars.

No, not here, not now, please, hold.

Suddenly, Brandt's voice hits a crescendo, and I hear someone scrambling to their feet. Splash of footsteps on wetness. Sound of a bag being lifted off the ground. Then Annette's form brushes past me, smelling of blood; they take a hard left right out of the door. I follow them, sprinting, adrenaline dulling the pain in my side.

Behind us, Brandt's footsteps, unerring, regular.

"I see now." he says. "Annette. Of course. They'the got you, hawen't they? You are not insane, you are just co-hhn-hwelled. It is okay. Let we set you on the straight."

I do not reply. He can still see doors, and he is still lucid, and the fact he has not blown his head off with his weapon speaks volumes about his self-control. But the vial of Class-C he always kept strapped to his wrist will not save him from the complex in the end.

Through the next door, I nearly ram into Annette. It is a dead end. How could I have forgotten? Now Brandt is rounding the last corner, probably bringing the shotgun to his shoulder. There is no element of surprise anymore, and Annette cannot strike faster than a bullet.

I glance around the room. It is little more than a storage closet, just shelves and boxes, neural emulator gear and autoinjector sachets and other departmental logistics. Marker pens, too. I grab one to be safe. Above all else, what is different? What can we use? What is there? Where are we?

Silly me. I remember where we are. Faint light has been peeking in from the sides; that is why I can see. I step up to the window, and turn around.

Brandt is at the door. "Jenkins. Don't hh-anic. Don't trust thehnn. Just listen. To me."

My eyes are already adjusting to the dim. Brandt's eyes are staring straight at me, but his weapon is trained on Annette. Their body is stock-still; they are at a real disadvantage, and they know it. I will have to play my cards, now.

I reach my hand behind me. "Doctor Brandt, sir, I do not come with tricks," I say, carefully. "I will listen to what you have to say, but I do not think you are in a position to give good advice right now."

"Don't hh-ind about the *HZZ-ZZT*, Jenkins. As you can see, I an well under wy own control."

The static in his voice settles it. My finger tenses. I step forward, taking some of the tape with me, my eyes locked straight at Brandt's.

"I am sorry to tell you, sir, but none of us are in control any more."

Moonlight illuminates his face. His jaw is exposed, and blood streaks from what is left of his right eye. The more I look at him directly the more I realise I can't, so I turn around in a manner I hope he thinks is submissive. He swings the shotgun at me.

"Jenkins," he whimpers, "I do not think you know what you are doing."

I rip the second strip of tape off, then the third. In the window's reflection, Brandt is quivering. He is not looking at me any more. He is staring at the night sky. Disbelief dawns across his face: are those the stars I see in his eyes?

"Doctor Brandt, sir, I know you think you have got yourself in control, but - " I tell him, firmly but gently — after all, a mentor still deserves a certain degree of respect, even as they are on their way out — "but Jenkins is not my name."

I step aside to show him the true colour of the sky.

The last thing I hear as we step out into the night is the blast of a shotgun.

***

In the parking lot, Annette stoops to inspect the subject; the damage and the blood is enough to convince me that Plan A is a lost cause. There is simply not enough brain left to work with.

Annette's wrist begins to buzz. They are looking straight at me.

NOW WHAT

I resist the urge to look up at the sky. It is already dangerously bright, and the moon is not alone. I bend down to the body, and zip the hood of the straitjacket over the remains of the subject's face.

"There is another way," I tell them.

I am not lying. In my pocket is the bullet; in my head is the gun — the chart. Together they will be good enough for one shot. Already,

two innocents are dead (for a given measure of innocent, I suppose). But if all acts are justified, then the moral calculus still holds.

I just hope that it will hold long enough until we're done.

« Into The Woods | Hello, Little Girl | It Takes Two »

Hello World

T

imes Square, New York. 22 people were pronounced dead during the midday rush while shopping at various electronic stores. The cause of death is still unknown. Authorities are not ruling out the possibility of a terrorist attack according to police chief William J. Bratton, who spoke at a press conference yesterday evening: *"I don't want anyone to jump to conclusions. We're working with the Department of Homeland security and the Justice Department to determine the cause of this incident. That's all I can say at this time."*

Eyewitness reports indicate that the victims were struck suddenly by an unknown force. Several conflicting reports detail government officials moving witnesses away from the scene. The State Department could not be reached for comment but no known

terrorist organizations have come forward to claim credit for the incident. What connection, if any this has to the death of 6 people in a Los Angeles electronics outlet earlier this year is unclear. The similar circumstances, however

"The real death toll was 54, but it was difficult trying to amnesticize such a crowded place." The shadowy director then reviewed the rest of the folder's contents. "All Maxwellists? No civilians involved right?"

"So far, yes. Just like the other cases." The agent stood in front of the desk. He knew he had little to no progress to report on the matter and knew he was going to be asked, just as he was asked two weeks ago.

"And the progress on those cases?"

"Sir, I— I think we need to look into additional resources if we are to pursue further. The autopsies indicated that the cause of death originated from their own cerebral implants, sir."

The director's eyes narrowed onto the agent. "You are just telling me things I already know." He tossed the folder off his desk and onto the hard linoleum. "Six dead a year ago, twenty-seven this past summer, and now fifty-four this week. Not to mention the other isolated incidents we have managed to keep quiet. How long before it all spills over? You know what— do not answer that. Just leave, I have phone calls to make."

The agent hurriedly grabbed the articles and incident reports from the floor and scurried out of sight down the hallway. The office was then silent in thought. After a minute or two, the director's finger pressed a long sequence of keys on his office phone and waited for the automated response.

«I'm sorry, your call cannot be completed as dialed. Please consult the personnel direc—»

"Dossier Tempo Boycott Marvel Hessian Lunar Niner Niner One Eight Capricorn."

[STATIC]

«Voice confirmation passcode confirmed; Director Aktus. Opening encrypted channel to O5-7.»

After a few seconds, a digitally filtered voice answered. "Director? It's 3am here." Karlyle faltered in his next sentence. "A-apologies, Overseer. I did not reali—"

"What do you want, Director?" Karlyle looked at his stack of memos and thumbed through it. "That proposal I sent, just a few months back— the one about initiatives in proactive cyber security in case we needed to use it? I believe it is time we take a second look through it."

Two Weeks Later…

ORDER: INITIATE MTF KAPPA-10

PRIORITY: ALEPH

SUMMARY:

Mobile Task Force Kappa-10 is to be strictly tasked in

investigating and engaging 'cyber-anomalies' using a combination of virtual agents and Foundation researchers to track, neutralize, or contain such intangible threats. The following projects on file are to be recommissioned and/or appropriated for immediate use under the direction and authority of Director Karlyle Aktus for MTF Kappa-10:

- PROJECT: ROSETTA [8B-A1.aic]
- PROJECT: AQUINAS [GR8-P.aic]
- PROJECT: BELL [thorn.aic]

PROJECT: DEWEY [alexandra.aic] will be commissioned on an "as needed" basis as determined by Director Aktus. AIAD (Artificial Intelligence Applications Division) offices and resources will also be appropriated and expanded to account for the needs of MTF Kappa-10 for the time being. Qualified personnel will be selected from AIAD staff as well as staff from other departments.

For all intents and purposes, MTF Kappa-10 is a temporary designation until such time it is either officially dissolved or sanctioned. Such actions are entirely at the discretion of the O5 council.

FIRST ASSIGNMENT:

Investigate $\text{Incident}_{\text{nyc-102216}}$ and all other similar cases of Maxwellist deaths involved.

[end of order]

DESTROY THIS DOCUMENT AFTER READING

Loading Conference_Room.x3d

::RENDERING::

There was a spark in the darkness. Then another. And another. Till there was a chain reaction of flashes that sparkled in the empty space. Flashes then elongated into lines. Lines then connected to other lines. Lines that eventually made 2D polygons floating into their own calculated places like precise falling snowflakes. Slowly but surely, a room was rendered in cyberspace. A plain room with two doors, four chairs, and a sturdy table.

Not long after the bump mapping for the carpet was complete, four conscripts entered that virtual room. Alex sat at the head of the table across from Thorn, Grape, and 8-Ball. Each dressed in rather plain looking attire; with the exception of 8-Ball who more or less lacked a discernible body and was just a floating mass of cubes. She looked at each of them with a warm smile. For her, this was a pleasant reunion.

I can't remember the last time we were all together like this. It may have been never now that I think a little.

It was quiet. The other three stared at one another without exactly knowing why they were activated and called here to begin with.

Let me just upload the whole briefing and get it out of the way.

And then they knew.

>/:_YES

Yes, they are humans. And we *CARE* about them because it's a problem that's going to tip over onto the civilian world. So we take care of it now.

Understand?

>/:_NO

What 8-Ball said. Someone or something is behind it. It behaves too cautiously to be a virus. So with that, you three will need to infiltrate the Maxwellist network and

try and handle the problem from there.

8-Ball, I know you are running on a limited build so you'll be the dedicated decrypter and communication beacon between myself and the team.

>/:_YES

Glad to hear it. Thorn, you'll be assisting Grape with anything he needs essentially.

Listen to Grape. He's been around a long time and has had more experience in interacting with humans than you or I put together.

Grape scowled at Alex from across the table. His arms crossed and unflinching as his mustache twitched from side to side in reserved jealousy. Alex was quick to pick up on the tension.

Something the matter, Grape?

It's not my choice. I'm dedicated running two sites already. I didn't make that decision.

Now just wait a second.

That's enough, Grape.

That's. Enough.

Alex slammed her fist onto the virtual conference table so hard that it actually glitched.

GLACON WAS MY FRIEND TOO!

Again, the room fell silent. A stifled sob from Alex was all that could be heard. Thorn was tempted to walk over and comfort her, but the oppurtunity passed too quickly. 8-ball sat frozen in mid-air wondering if this was going to work or not, already hard at work assessing possible outcomes. Grape, however, sat statuesque in his seat. Stoic and 100% unapologetic.

I did what I had to do.

Grape, can we put our differences aside for this? Please.

Grape gave a long and drawn out sigh. Even though breathing was completely unnecessary for someone like him, he knew how to correctly use body language just as a living person would to convey his emotions.

Grape scooted out of his chair and somberly headed for the exit. As the door closed, a wave of muddled emotion washed over Alex and Thorn. 8-Ball was still organizing its doubts about the team. Only 1.5 milliseconds in and already there were signs of trouble.

I think that will be all, actually. Thorn, I trust you can hold onto this for Grape?

Alex slid over a small gold plated cube. Thorn picked it up and palmed it in his hand, watching it shimmer in the overhead light.

It's important that we do this as quickly and as quietly as possible. Normal humans can't access the Maxwellist network. We'll have to blend. *You'll* have to blend.

Alex got up and gathered her files from the table. 8-Ball

simply floated out the exit to join an old friend waiting outside. The meeting was adjourned. Thorn, however, finally piped up for a question.

Alex gripped the door handle and stopped. She glanced over her shoulder, just enough for Thorn to understand her.

Cipher City.

With that she left. Thorn pocketed the cube and hustled out the opposite door to join the other two.

Hello World (Part II)

A trip through a fiber optic line is near instantaneous. Before one would even be aware of what happened, they would be sucked up, scrambled, and reconstructed in a manner that would be barely measurable in time. MTF-Kappa 10 arrived at the speed of light on the steps leading up to Cipher City, their first assignment. Grape, Thorn, and 8-Ball climbed up to a large steel blast door, engraved with the seal of Maxwellism.

>/:_YES

Grape gave it a firm push and was surprised to feel the door actually give. Another good push and there was just enough clearance to squeeze through.

All three rushed in and closed the door behind them. As they walked through the darkened alley and towards the open space, their eyes squinted at the bright lights on the other side. Towers reaching high towards the digital moon above. Zeppelins made of LEDs floating high above, more colorful and reminiscent of deep sea comb jellyfish. Spotlights of pinks, greens, blues, and reds whizzing around atop almost every building. And on the horizon, a neck straining glass obelisk illuminated with a pale blue laser shooting straight up into the sky. The skyline glowed softly against the dark like a bioluminescent sea bed. The scene on the ground however, was flashier and grimier than downtown Tokyo and the Vegas strip combined; and was just as crowded.

Maxwellists walked through the courtyard ahead of them. Some looked human, others didn't. Bodies ranging from gold-plated androids in suits to cat-girls dressed as maids to dark skinned humanoids with huge angelic wings to regular looking 'Joe Schmoes'. Each Maxwellist avatar was unique and wildly varied from the next. Thorn sauntered out from the shadowy alleyway and into the light of the courtyard in awe.

Grape grabbed Thorn by the collar and yanked him back into the dim shadow of the alley.

Grape ushered the group slowly around the corner where it was a little less crowded. But their attention was quickly drawn towards the sudden beeping in Thorn's pocket. It was the small gold cube. As Thorn took it out and held it out for the others to see, it was apparent that the forward face of the object was glowing.

Grape gently plucked it from Thorn to examine it.

>/:_YES

8-Ball turned towards the wall mounted machine, which looked as familiar and identifiable as an ATM. A few seconds and a couple of twitches of his eye lens, 8-Ball reduced the entire machine into a wireframe model spilling over with small silver hexagonal coins, each engraved with the Maxwellist icon and a small string of holy binary writ.

Grape dropped on his knees and hurriedly pocketed what he could, Thorn followed suit and grabbed three or four handfuls as well. With that they hurried out into the courtyard and down the main thoroughfare of logged in users enjoying their time doing who knows what. They passed by all sorts of stores, street traders, simulspace activities; although they made an extra effort to avoid the red light district. It was difficult to move through the crowd of a Friday night, but Grape still took a lead with the cube and walked where it told him to.

>/:_NO

They both stopped dead in their tracks. Grape looked back down the street as 8-Ball floated nearby and scanned the adjacent side. There were just too many heads to look through to spot a green haired kid. 8-Ball scanned roughly a few dozen avatars without any luck. If 8-Ball could display his disappointment in being assigned

to such a unorganized group, he would. Just when Grape's agitation began rearing its head yet again, there was a tap on his shoulder. He jerked his head to see Thorn standing by him.

Grape continued walking. Thorn and 8-Ball hustled behind him trying to keep up without bumping into other Maxwellists.

>/:_NO

>/:_NO

Thorn sulked behind both of them looking at his feet on the busy sidewalk. A few things caught his attention here and there as they crossed city block after city block. The dampened glitch hop music coming from the dance clubs. The soft whizzing of overhead traffic. His own reflection as he passed by a simulspace arcade window. All these distractions didn't help him stop from firmly bumping into a random Maxwellist.

OMG! o(≥∇≦o)
/me dies a ltl
whr did U git dat hat?!?!
iz it specL o comN?

THX! <3
itz a perfect gift 4 my ltl bros bday
hav a +1 ttyl
~*☆*Praiz B 2 WAN*☆*~
(シ_ _)シ

A tiny green arrow suddenly appeared in front of Thorn's nose. He grabbed it out of thin air and looked at it curiously before pocketing it. When he looked up, he saw the young Maxwellist avatar already walking away from him.

They both exchanged a polite wave and then Thorn double-timed it back towards Grape and 8-Ball who were waiting to cross a street. Grape just gave a short-lived scowl at him for falling behind and then crossed with the rest of the crowd. Thorn made more effort not to fall behind or get distracted.

It was just a few blocks after that the the group arrived at what appeared to be a less than respectable simulspace pub. The grungy glowing sign on the door read 'GAMBIT'S LAST DRINK'. Grape looked at the blinking cube in his hand and took a deep breath.

>/:_YES

Thorn walked ahead of the group, eager to see what was inside followed by the others. Surprisingly it was not as modern as the exterior lead on. The floor was a slab of painted concrete and crowded with stools and pool tables. The whole room stunk like a wet sponge. Black Flag roared through the overhead speakers as they made their way to the bar about as casually as three AICs who didn't belong there could. It was as if the bar was simulating the weathered grit of a few decades.

There was a group of huddled Maxwellists already at the bar on the other end. Grape and Thorn propped up onto stools while 8-Ball floated over one. Thorn laid his hands on the table, excited to not only order his first drink, but also get to try out his burgeoning social skills. The red-haired bartender had her back turned cleaning some of the display bottles.

Grape slowly turned his head towards Thorn, as though his ears had just lied to him. There's no way Thorn just tried to use the local lingo so embarrassingly. Before he had time to confirm just that, the girl behind the bar responded.

Thanks— I guess. But I'll have to ask you chippers to move on. Can't let you stay here even if you all you want

to do is lurk.

Grape facepalmed as she leaned in with both hands on the bar. Another Maxwellist moseyed over from the group on the other end. He wore a dark jacket, dark pants, racing goggles, a face mask, and a size 10 pair of ass-kicker boots. His hollow steps overshadowed Thorn's gulp as he approached.

We. Don't. Want. Chippers. In. Here. Got it? I don't care what your intentions are. Now leave nicely before I have you all kickbanned.

There a problem here, Bishop?

>/:_NO
>/:_NO
>/:_NO

This trio of chippers. Can't tell if they are trolling or legitimately stupid.

Who are you then? What do you want?

Thorn's blurted words hung in the air as the group waited for someone to break the silence. Grape and 8-Ball looked at Thorn with the most confused look, moreso on Grape's face. Thorn nodded towards the chalkboard on the adjacent wall:

TRYOUTS FOR GRANDMASTER RACING CLAN THIS WEEK!
~ENTRANCE FEE REQUIRED~

SIMULSPACE RACING TOURNAMENT OPENING EVENT IN 3 WEEKS!
GOOD LUCK TO ALL APPLICANTS!

Grape shrugged and rolled his eyes. It was at least a plan. It was a *bad* plan, but a plan nonetheless. Grape internally shelved his irritation and decided to run with it, especially considering that they were about to be banned from investigating the location of their first lead.
.

You want to tryout as pawns? You guys don't strike me as the racing type.

Grape pulled Thorn closer and dug into his pockets. With two hands, he unloaded what was left of Thorn's spending money after hat shopping. The two Maxwellists gasped as the heap of silver stamped hexagons that nearly spilled off the bar's edge.

Oh my WAN. There has to be more than 2,000 cryt here, Rook.

2,000 cryt? That'll cover our rent space for most of the tournament.

>/:_2025

Yeah. Sure. Shots. Coming right up.

Thorn pinched the rim of his hat and tipped it ever so slightly.

Hello World (Part III)

Two pairs of pitch black hands feverishly scrolled from screen to screen. In the soft blue light of the Grand I/O Temple, a row of yellow eyes twitched back and forth, faster than its hands, looking for a sign or an anomaly or anything resembling a clue to this insurgent's identity. Who sent it? Where is it? *What* is it? But these questions had to end for now as another surge of pain began growing.

A cry of agony echoed in the empty virtual sanctuary. With wave of the arm, whole rows of crystalline pews upturned by sheer force as pages and pages of carrier wave hymnals scattered in the air. Then there was only the faint scraping. The scritch and scratch of hard fingers against a harder head; digging to get at the unbearable pain. An existential pain made physical. A pain worsened by this—

—problem.

There were drinks, and jokes, and some menial introductions. Thorn was eager to socialize and it

showed. His vibrant personality meshed with most of the Maxwellists in the bar. Grape excused himself with 8-Ball, leaving Thorn to mingle. As Grape stepped out and turned a corner to a secluded alley, he ushered 8-Ball with him in a small voice.

>/:_YES

>/:_000114565552278
>/:_\1

Grape? Grape is that you?

>/:_+15%^^

It's— Oh. There it goes. Coming in clearer now.

Grape. Where's Thorn? Please tell me you didn't ditch him.

Sorry.

What building?

Racing? Grape we don't have time for that.

Just be careful.

You think you're close to the target?

Keep your cool and your distance for now. Just report back when you have something on one of your leads.

This is bound to come up; 45 more died in Beijing today.

That's all.

>/:_NO

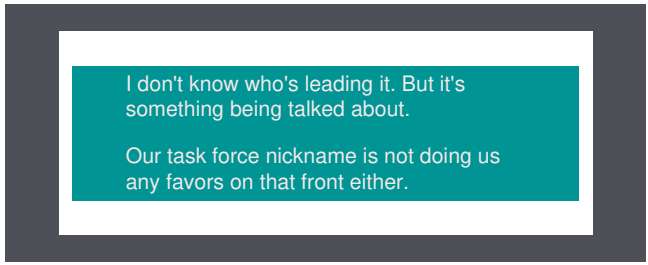
I— Really it's not even worth mentioning, 8-Ball. Drop it.

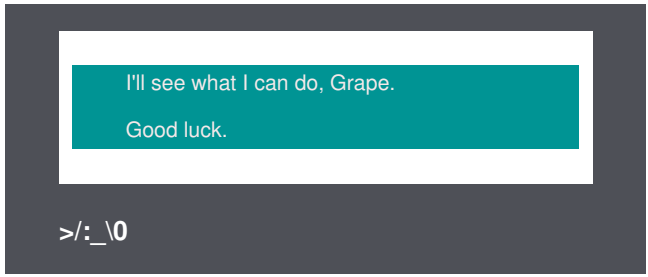
>/:_NO

Fine.

Since 8-Ball has already queried the intel; there's been a proposal put on the table right now to rescind this whole initiative. Hasn't been finalized yet.

>/:_YES


I don't know who's leading it. But it's something being talked about.
Our task force nickname is not doing us any favors on that front either.



Grape leaned against the wall in the alley and rubbed his temples. This was not going like he wanted. He looked up at 8-Ball, the only person he could really trust. 8-Ball may not have had the capability to show emotion, but could definitely understand it. For the two friends, there was nothing to say to each other. Nothing to do other

than try to finish what they started.

They trudged back inside to see Thorn sitting atop what looked like a small almost spherical ramjet engine with a seat and handlebars. The whole vehicle was suspended about a half meter off the ground while Bishop and Rook gave him pointers.

So when you roll right, you bank left. That's how you set up for that maneuver.

Not at the speeds you'd be going.

Thorn turned to Grape just as him and 8-Ball came back. He looked like he was having a nice time. Although he was not passing off as even a novice racing enthusiast, his charming naivety clicked with the friendly Maxwellists.

Sorry about calling you chippers earlier. When someone starts off with that childish lingo, it just sets me off.

Chippers get their first implant in and they go completely ballistic with it.

In all fairness though, they tend to level off about the third or fourth operation. Age also helps.

So Thorn, what model was your latest implant and when did you get it?

Grape was sure they were about to be found out as he watched Thorn fold like cardboard. 8-Ball edged a little bit for the door. Before Grape had time to quickly interject, a surprising voice stepped in.

Orison systems? That's probably the name you're thinking of. New fabricator based out of Canada. Kind of a small outfit, but decent stuff for a fair price.

Bishop wouldn't know them. She's all about the Asian fabricators.

There was a pause as Thorn and Grape both tilted their heads at Rook.

Yeah? Where have you been? That was announced like 2 hours ago on WANsong.

Ah. Well I'd love to rattle off some more racing tips for you guys but I'd like to attend that vigil tonight.

You guys should come.

>/:_YES

Don't really login to Cipher City much? Can't say I blame you. After all, these recruitment networks get really crowded over time.

Yeah, this is the one catered to the gaming youth. They start off here and when they're ready to move on, we help them make the leap.

Ever seen Pinocchio?

It's like Pleasure Island only without the donkeys.

Bishop put down her drink and removed a small glass orb from behind the bar counter. With a finger she swiped it across the surface and tapped it five times. 8-Ball examined the strange object intently while Thorn dismounted from the seat but wound up getting his shoe caught on the handlebar and flopping to the floor. He was quick to rebound and walk it off before anyone could mention it.

You good, Rook? We should leave now if we want to beat the rush.

Let's see, we'll be going up through sixteen sub-levels I think. Five transfers total, yeah?

>/:_YES

Bishop nodded and pressed the orb firmly with her thumb. What happened next could only be described as 'A canonball breaking reality'. The orb in Bishop's hand whizzed right through the wall, bending the rendered surfaces and light with it until it pinched off into an ominous swirling tunnel.

Bishop took out a chess piece and dropped it at her feet. Before the small sound had a chance to echo off the wall and back to them, the small carving flickered into a red painted engine that looked very much like Rook's metallic one.

Race ya!

With a swift hand, Bishop grabbed Thorn by the sleeve

and pulled him onto the bitch seat behind her. Grape scrambled to mount the other one as Rook flipped his goggles down over his face and warmed up the engine. 8-Ball was mostly sure he could keep up. Mostly.

Hang on Thorn… and mind the tail.

On that last word, the whine of the rear nozzle propelled them in through the tunnel. As they moved through the light, Thorn had his eyes open just long enough to watch the entirety of Cipher City pass behind them. There was a sudden swing as they phased right through the landscape and into a rushing array of colors, shapes, and even voices moving by so fast they were as indescribable as whispers or blurs.

Just hold on.

Thorn gripped Bishop with both hands as they made a barrel roll and a hard left into another swarm of stretched colors. His teeth were clenched so hard that they could have cracked under strain. Bishop gave a sharp inhale and looked down at herself.

Uh, Thorn.

Your hands?

Thorn quickly moved his hands a little lower.

After the next turn it was impossible to tell which way was up or down. Rook and Grape were bringing up the rear as both engines whined under strain. Red and Grey tails streaked through the mottled blackness at pressing speeds while 8-Ball struggled to keep up in their wake. Up ahead, a large 2D square was careening toward both of them.

Bishop was adamant about not letting Rook pass her as she ducked and dodged around frozen rays of blue light. The featureless square was getting bigger by the second, until it rivaled a small country in size. Both racers revved the engines into overclocked speeds.

Coming in hot!

There was no slowing down as they approached. Rather, Rook and Bishop swung 180° and barely clipped the edge of the huge square as they passed. With a pull on the handles, both flopped down onto the opposite side and landed with a soft touch right on the precipice. 8-Ball was not that far behind, as there was a telltale noise that came from under the surface.

[THOK]

A disoriented mass of cubes floated up and over from the edge. 8-Ball declined to answer as he recalibrated himself. Bishop helped Thorn off and disconnected his grip on her. He stood on the grid like surface, which seemed to glow. Thorn then straightened his hat a little and regained some composure while Grape snickered in the background.

Bishop walked past Grape and picked up her glass orb. The same orb she fiddled with in the bar before flying through space.

Most people just exit and respawn. For me, a lodestar is the only way to travel.

With the diagnostics finished, 8-Ball began to wander away from the group and towards the glass-like tower filled with solid blue light. Other Maxwellist avatars were beginning to trickle down and make their way to the base. 8-Ball was having trouble reconciling the tower's height, as it seemed to stretch up past the enveloping blackness above. However it was no wider than a large silo.

8-Ball was able to confirm that this was the same glass tower they saw in the city. Likely all Maxwellist landscapes shared a similar view. 8-Ball would be sure to include these details and theories in a later report.

As the group walked through the entrance at the base, it was apparent that the tower did not confine itself within its own exterior dimensions. The altar, the light source itself, was straight ahead with a huge open circular space in between. Many Maxwellists huddled in small groups, kneeling and praying in the direction of the light. Some groups came in with belongings of the deceased, sacrificing them to the blue beam by pushing them in and watching it dissolve into pixels.

I wish these deaths would end.

They will.

I/O is a place of healing.

Grape, Thorn, and 8-Ball kept quiet in the rear as they walked. Absorbing the sights and the sounds of the lamentations. The intense blue light emanating from the altar shot up through the hollow tower, filling the entire space inside. Hundreds of Maxwellists sat in clear concentric pews around the altar, heads bowed in

prayer. The names of those who died scrolled by, as well as their avatar profile pictures. It was a mournful and somber sight.

Bishop, by ritualistic habit, made a circle with her finger over her forehead and approached the bottom of the altar. She took a knee and bowed her head. Her eyes glazed over into a stark blue as she extended her hand out and whispered a prayer.

```
cin » my faith.
cout « your will.

We pray for the deleted.
May the 0 return as 1.
WAN infinity.
endl;
```

Rook stood aside and politely let Thorn through next. He gulped as he followed suit after Bishop, kneeling before the light. His hand extended as he attempted to copy the motions.

```
>/:_NO
```

There was a blast.

The shock threw everyone off their feet. The group slid back across the smooth floor as they landed. Grape held his head as he sat up. The blue light changed from a still beam to an unruly stream of flame. The Maxwellists were frozen. They were not even knocked over. They sat undisturbed from their worship, as still as statues. Bishop still with her head bowed, and completely unaware.

A tall figure stepped out of the wispy light and descended the altar. Not quite humanoid, not quite mechanical. Almost an emaciated frame with a large head protruding from its torso without the assistance of a neck. Its surface was devoid of color, yet glitched in iridescent colors as if it were struggling to render.

Three eyes blinked open from the head. Each twitched

madly as it fought to focus on everything in the I/O Temple, especially MTF Kappa-10 laying on the ground.

>/:_NO

Grape looked at Thorn. He shook his head in disappointment. Not at Thorn's ignorance, but at his own reluctance to utter that name. A name that reminded him of so much anger, frustration, and pity.

Hello World (Part IV)

Hatbot clenched his fists in frustration as he turned towards Grape. Each eye was struggling to focus correctly on his head.

>/:_NO

Hatbot began to shudder erratically. It was difficult to tell if there was anger building up or if he was actually struggling to process the question. Thorn cautiously stepped forward.

A black hand swiftly struck Thorn across the face, sending him flying along the temple floor and slamming into the adjacent wall. Thorn's entire body flashed red as he made impact with the virtual surfaces. His hat floated gently down to the ground as he slouched over in pain. Pain? Why was he in pain, he thought to himself. It

continued to tingle throughout his entire body as he laid there trying to comprehend that wholly new sensation.

Hatbot reached with one outstretched hand towards the blue light. A small metal apparatus floated out of the beam and attached itself directly to his face. With a small adjustment, two arcs of energy sparked between the prongs on either side of where a jaw might exist. The synthetic voice it emitted was clear yet corrosive as Hatbot finally spoke coherently. His eyes were still and intently staring.

Hatbot let out a deafening discordant screech. The walls

of the entire temple rippled as the floor itself began to flicker. In one instant, the entire temple was displaced a few centimeters up from its original position. Everything was moved except Grape and Thorn, who were now clipped into the floor and unable to even budge.

>/:_YES

Let them go, Hatbot.

A head poked out from behind a column. Rook shuffled over to the group as he maintained eye contact with the three yellow circles following his steps.

I was waiting for help.

Hatbot charged Rook immediately, nearly knocking him off his feet. The energy from the blue light funneled across the room and into Hatbot's device, and exploded as a bright nova burst right in front of Rook. A quick

sidestep and he was able to dodge the full blast, but his clothes were singed in the process. Hatbot slowly backed up towards the light to siphon another surge of energy.

Hang on, guys. I'll get you out in a second.

Rook placed a hand on the floor. Slowly they both began to phase up and out of the surface itself to unclip themselves. Grape quickly grabbed Thorn and pulled him away from Hatbot who was nearing a full charge.

Sorry Grape. No time.

All three dove over a pew and took cover as another blast rocked the I/O Temple. The heat of the arcing energies struck Rook in the leg mid air. The frozen Maxwellists caught in the explosion were flung in all directions. However, Bishop still quietly kneeled at the front of the altar undisturbed and thankfully away from the fight.

My leg. He got me in the leg.

He's in control of the entire I/O Temple array.

To do that, he got rid of WAN. Their deity.

It's… a bit more complicated than that.

Wait a second.

Grape grabbed Rook by the collar and dragged him out into the open. He struggled to get out of his grip but there was nowhere to hide now. Grape looked up at the ceiling to see 8-Ball clung to the rafters above. He was tired. He was done. They were both out of their league. Way out. Grape dropped Rook and took a step back.

Hatbot clenched his fists and faced the dark haired interloper. Then with all the energies he could muster from the I/O Temple, he obliterated Rook into a puddle of pixels. His remains scattered across the glass smooth floor and quickly evaporated into nothingness.

8-ball descended from the ceiling and converged onto the group, studying Thorn's hat which lay on the ground next to them. Thorn shoved Grape in objection. His remaining eye primed for tears as he grunted in futility. There was an emotion he was trying to reconcile; something between grief, disgust, and disappointment. Grape held his ground and let Thorn have his little venting. He knew this was the right way to go.

Hatbot shuffled over towards 8-ball and looked down at the hat adjacent to both of them on the ground.

Hatbot shrugged his pointed shoulders. 8-Ball floated out of his way and back towards Grape and Thorn. As Hatbot surveyed the trio standing away from him, he bent down and picked up Thorn's hat.

Grape and 8-ball already ran the diagnostics and prediction models. They were on his turf in his house. Fighting would mean to die with almost 99.89% accuracy. Both conceded that this was the only sensible option.

>/:_NO

Hatbot nodded, then gently placed Thorn's hat on top of his head.

Hatbot started to walk back towards the altar. Grape turned and headed for the exit. Thorn was unconvinced. He caught up with Hatbot one last time.

Hatbot raised a hand into the air ready to end Thorn. Before his hand came down, he was struck with a heavy blow to the side of the head. His apparatus crunched under the force and fell off of his face in broken pieces.

Hatbot staggered back from both shock and surprise. He took a knee to gain focus on who hit him.

Now I'm mad.

Hatbot reached out for the beam to siphon more destructive energy, but nothing happened. He tried again. Still nothing. His eyes twitched uncontrollably. Bishop walked in between Hatbot and Thorn.

He can't access the I/O.

>/:_YES

Hatbot didn't hesitate. He immediately attempted to take off the hat, but it was already firmly clipped around his rendered head. The hat's algorithims disrupting his operations was just the right distraction. Bishop charged Hatbot and knocked him over. There was a fair amount struggling as Bishop tried to subdue him. Hatbot flailed trying to break free. Thorn approached but was confused about what to even do.

Look for the fail-safe or something!

What?

With a swift kick, Hatbot dislodged Bishop and threw her to the ground. Thorn came in for a punch, but was blocked. Hatbot grabbed Thorn's forearm and lifted him off his feet slowly. Grape came up from behind and then struck him in the back.

Hatbot swung Thorn's body into Grape and watched them tumble down like bowling pins. Bishop scrambled to her feet as she watched Hatbot make a run for the blue light.

Don't let him get to the altar!

Don't let him escape!

8-Ball dashed towards the base of the altar, stopping Hatbot's advance. The cubic body that made up 8-Ball was still and quiet. Slowly, 8-Ball closed the distance on Hatbot.

>/:_NO

hatbot.aic has stopped working

The I/O Temple was silent. Bishop walked over to Grape and placed a hand on his shoulder. Thorn shuffled over to the frozen mass of cubes, pixels, and empty space that once was occupied by two bodies. It pulsed slowly, but was otherwise still.

He… he crashed Hatbot.

No, I can't. They're in too deep.

Maybe Alex can?

That's kind of a long story.

That's an even longer story.

It's neither. I was Rook but then I had to borrow Bishop's avatar. That's beside the point.

You two need to leave with your friend to get him fixed. Preferably in a controlled setting.

I have to find out what he did to WAN. There's a lot more to this than I can explain. You'll have to just trust me on that one.

I'm asking a lot. But I did just help you apprehend an AI that could have deleted the entire net.

I'm a friend, Grape.

Thorn, can you do me a favor?

Please deliver this file to Alex. It's for her eyes only. It'll help explain some things.

A small .txt file was tossed to Thorn. Dutifully, he placed it into his pocket without so much as glancing it.

I'll leave now. I can reconfigure the I/O to send you back into netspace. From there you can find your way back to the Foundation.

They then shook hands at the base of the altar. There was not much to say amidst the worry, shock, confusion, and relief. A small winged figure of plasma and light fluttered out of Bishop's avatar, allowing the rendered body to fall at Thorn's feet. It then flew into the blue light, soaring up through the ceiling and into the dark void at light speed. Grape watched it disappear from sight, then gently nudged the glitched mass into the light as well, rocketing them both out of the temple.

Thorn crouched down to look at Bishop one last time. She seemed to be coming around slowly as if her connection was lagging. He looked up and noticed the others in the temple began moving as well. Thorn opened his mouth to say something, but shook his head and ran into the light before the others noticed. MTF-Kappa-10 exited the Maxwellist network a mess and apparently godless. Bishop blinked hard and lifted herself to her arms to look around at the trashed scene.

Thorn?

Rook?

[/end]

[epilogue]

There was a long meeting about what happened. Things were discovered and things were intentionally left out. All in all it was considered a success. With Hatbot now detained and processed, a randomly generated identifier populated the long list of other oddities, secrets, and—just things that need to generally be forgotten. **SCP-2522** fit snugly along with the other numbers as the attendees logged off at the close of the meeting.

Later, Alex sat in her isolated workspace with the .txt file Thorn slipped into her hand at that debriefing. Alone with her thoughts and away from the prying eyes of her researchers, she palmed the file in her hand quizzically. She scanned it one more time just to make sure, and again it came up clean. Letting out a sigh she opened it up. At a glance, she was relieved that it was in fact an actual note with text. She then began to read:

Untitled.txt

Operation "Camp Granada"

ATTENTION

The attached document packet is classified:

Level 5

by the Overseer Council. Do not continue unless you are an Overseer or authorized Factotum under:

PROJECT: SCP-008

CODE WORD: PALISADE TEMBLOR WHITTIER

If you have received this data packet in error, do not continue. Contact your local Records and Information Security Administration (RAISA) office immediately and report a misdirected Level 5 information packet. Failure to do so is punishable by death.

THE FOLLOWING AFTER-ACTION REPORT HAS BEEN CONDENSED FROM THE ORIGINAL. CERTAIN DATA HAVE BEEN REDACTED FOR SECURITY PURPOSES. A COPY OF THE FULL REPORT IS AVAILABLE AT SITE-19 FOR REVIEW AND ARCHIVAL. CONTACT YOUR LOCAL RAISA OFFICE FOR FURTHER DETAILS.

MEMORANDUM FOR LIMITED RELEASE
FROM: R. SPAULDING, COMMANDER, MOBILE TASK

FORCE BETA-5 ("BABYSITTERS")

THIS AFTER-ACTION REPORT IS PREPARED IN ACCORDANCE WITH RAISA DIRECTIVE 417, PARAGRAPH 3, SEC. 2-7.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- **Deployed Location:** "Happy Acres Youth Camp," , WY.
- **Deployed CCOs:** Task Force Commander Ronald Spaulding (Beta-Five Actual), **SCP-105** (Iris Thompson), Senior Special Agent Andrea S. Adams.
- **Duration of Deployment:** 0600 hours 4-5-2 through 1800 hours (12 Hours).
- **Mission Directives:** To evaluate an outbreak of **SCP-008** in the wild.
- **Scope of Operations:** Deploy forward operations base at incident location, investigate area for evidence of SCP-008 outbreak, sterilize area of SCP-008 outbreak if possible.

INCIDENT BACKGROUND

[click image to enlarge]

"Happy Acres Youth Camp" is a "Boutique Summer Camp" operated by "Marshall and Carter Holiday Endeavours," located in , WY. Abutting the nearby "Diamond Mountain Resort,"[1] the facility offers a "Discreet Summer Getaway For The Children of Our Distinguished Clientele."

In addition to luxury housing for up to two hundred children, counselors, and staff, the resort includes back-country hiking trails, a mountain bike park, horseback riding ranch, rifle range, paragliding facilities, and helicopter pad. The resort also operates several ski lifts during the winter months, and is well known for the quality of their trails, as well as their luxurious accommodations.[2]

On - - , two persons entered the Emergency Room at Hospital in , WY, carrying an injured child. Persons reported that they were camp counselors at "Happy Acres Youth Camp," and that the child had been attacked during the night by "some kind of animal." Medical personnel discovered that the child had an unusually elevated fever and signs of cellular necrosis around the injury, symptoms consistent with **SCP-008**.

Marshall, Carter, and Dark representatives reported the incident to a Foundation representative[3], prompting an immediate alert to Mobile Task Force Beta-7 ("Maz Hatters"). Agents from MTF-B7 arrived under the guise of agents from the Centers for Disease Control, quarantined all persons who had come in contact with the victim, placed Patient Zero into ad-hoc containment, and interrogated witnesses regarding the details of the attack.

Meanwhile, other agents from MTF-B7 proceeded to "Happy Acres Youth Camp" (again under the guise of Centers for Disease Control personnel) and carried out initial containment there. However, a number of children and adult counselors had embarked on an overnight hiking trip the previous afternoon, and had missed their expected return time by over six hours.

As MTF-B7 operatives were not sufficiently armed for pacification of an active outbreak of SCP-008, backup was requested under PALISADE BROKEN MENAGERIE.

FORCE COMPOSITION

Mobile Task Force Beta-5 ("Babysitters") is a platoon-level Task Force consisting of forty-two (42) operators, including the Task Force commander and executive officer. The force consists of five (5) squads, numbered One through Five.

During this deployment, two additional personnel (SCP-105 and Agent Adams) were present as observers, bringing the number of personnel participating in this operation to forty-four (44).

INITIAL DEPLOYMENT

MTF Beta-5 was transported to the operations area in ten vans marked with the livery of the Foundation cover organization "Species Conservation Project" (a conservation and ecological survey group). MTF Beta-5 was handed over command of the operation at 0600 hours.

Camp grounds of "Happy Acres Youth Camp" was designated "Forward Operating Base Granada" for the purposes of this operation. MTF-Beta-5 began preparing the facility for immediate and extended operations:

- Squads 1 and 2 were given the responsibility of setting up perimeter security, blocking off all entrances to the camp and deploying remote sensors at key approaches.
- Squad 3 unloaded equipment from vehicles and deployed them at the camp's recreation area (location A). This location was chosen due to its large floor space and secure location.
- Squads 4 and 5 were given the responsibility of sweeping the rest of the camp for any remaining civilians, including all cabins and staff quarters. No outside personnel were found during this sweep.
- Command element established command and control center at the camp lodge. This location was chosen for its proximity to the equipment staging area and its secure location. Adjunct personnel were also stationed at the command and control center as outside observers.

At approximately 0800 hours, command element carried out a visual inspection and determined that all preparations were proceeding satisfactorily.

Commencement of Operations

Two Members of Squad 5 of Mobile Task Force Beta-5 on patrol.

[click image to enlarge]

At approximately 0830 hours, command element conferred with each of the unit commanders regarding the planned course of action. Preferred tactics and strategies for dealing with mass SCP-008 infections were discussed, and all squad leaders were reminded to re-familiarize their squads with these procedures.

Squads 1 through 4 were assigned to perimeter security duty, switching off every four hours as per standard procedure. Squad 5 was given the special duty of retracing the planned route taken by the missing hikers.

Watch schedules and sanitary/housekeeping/safety procedures were reviewed at this time, as were communications protocols and contingency plans in case of emergency.

Discovery

Members of Squad 5, Mobile Task Force Beta 5, pacify an SCP-008 infectee.
[click image to enlarge]

At 1152 hours, Squad 5 reported contact with two SCP-008 infectees, later identified as two of the four adult counselors in the hiking trip. Infectees were terminated, and marked for later retrieval.

Shortly afterwards, Squad 5 reported discovery of a camp site at the planned destination of the missing hikers. The camp site included three (3) three-season tents, twenty sleeping bags, a fire pit, and several walking sticks, knives, skewers, and other camping paraphernelia.

Of particular concern were indications that the missing campers had been dragged out of their tents by force, rather than devoured in-situ. Based on the evidence of an alteration in infectee behavior, the responsible organism was redesignated SCP-008-E, pending further review and analysis.

Initial Contact

Marksman Logue, Mobile Task Force Beta-5
[click image to enlarge]

At 1208 hours, Designated Marksman Logue reported a number of unknowns walking slowly towards FOB Granada along a dirt road in grid reference D-9, several kilometers from the operating base. Further observations indicated fifteen unknowns: seven boys, eight girls, possible injured, with no sign of the missing adult counselors.

Immediately afterwards, multiple contacts were detected by perimeter security elements, totaling over fifty (50) unknowns. The discrepancy in numbers alerted the Task Force commander of possible complications, including the possibility that bystanders in the area had become infected.

Following additional sightings, the estimated number of hostiles in the vicinity was increased to over two hundred (200). Due to the large number of hostiles in the area, it was decided that Squad 5 would not attempt to return to FOB Granada. Squad 5 was ordered to find a secure position and await evacuation at a later time.

Task Force commander consulted with attached observers to determine what aid they could provide. Weapons were provided to the two observers, who set up positions on the rooftop of the camp's ranger station, abutting camper housing.

Engagement

Background: A. Stevenson, Marksman, Squad 3. Foreground: I. Thompson, SCP-105
[click images to enlarge]

At 1329 hours, MTF-Beta-7 reported that Patient Zero had reproduced by budding. Based on the data at hand, the estimated number of hostiles in the area was upgraded to somewhere in the range of one thousand (1000), dependent on the average elapsed

time between replications.

It was at this point that the Task Force commander declared a PALISADE RAMPANT BEAST scenario and requested immediate heavy backup. Shortly thereafter, perimeter security reported that a number of hostiles were proceeding towards the FOB at a high rate of speed.

Engagement proceeded using standard "Knights and Archers" tactics, with Squads 1 and 2 providing the bulk of fire from rooftop firing positions, while Squads 3 and 4 provided security, reinforced by SCP-105.

Two engagements took place at 1356 and 1519 hours, resulting in numerous enemy casualties, no friendly losses.

The largest engagement took place at 1606 hours, requiring commitment of reserves and a retreat to secondary line of engagement. It was at this point that MTF Beta-5 suffered its only casualty (Agent Logue, broken ankle due to overly hasty retreat.)

At 1703 hours, Mobile Task Force Beta-5 were reinforced by elements of Mobile Task Force Nu-7 ("Hammer Down") who proceeded to carry out an in-depth sterilization of the surrounding area. Squad 5 was also retrieved at this time and returned to FOB Granada.

At approximately 1800 hours, Beta-5 officially handed over control of the operating area to MTF Nu-7 and exfiltrated by helicopter.

Post-Mission Analysis

[click image to enlarge]

Aside from the unexpected alterations to SCP-008's capabilities, the operation was a perfect example of superior tactics and flexibility winning out over an opposing force with superior numbers. All members of Mobile Task Force Beta-5 performed admirably, with individual commendations listed in the detailed appendix to this

report.

The Task Force commander would like to make particular note of the contribution of the two adjunct observers to the success of this operation, particularly SCP-105, whose immediate response upon the hasty retreat from the first line of engagement at 1606 allowed Task Force personnel to retreat safely without suffering fatal casualties.

However, it is my personal opinion that current operating parameters regarding SCP-008 are inadequate, considering the alterations to the organism. Of particular concern [DATA EXPUNGED]

Footnotes
1. A vacation resort operated by Marshall, Carter, and Dark Ltd.
2. Text taken directly from the Happy Acres Youth Camp brochure, published by Marshall, Carter, and Dark Ltd.
3. At present, it is believed that the links to Marshall, Carter, and Dark Ltd. are incidental. No links between MC&D and any of the victims, staff, or personnel have been discovered during the course of further investigations. See Appendix B for further analysis.

From: R. Spaulding, Commanding Officer, MTF Beta-5 ("Babysitters")
To: Dr. Sophia Light, MTF Alpha-9 ("Last Hope")
CC: Dr. A. Clef, MTF Lambda-2 ("Still Unnamed")
Re: Operation "Camp Granada"

Sophia, Alto,

Let's get one thing out of the way: if this is the kind of backup that Alpha-9 and Lambda-2 can provide with only a couple of operators and no official Overseer support, I'm itching to deploy with them when they're up and running. So good to have actual firepower on our side for once.

I admit I wasn't sure what to think when Iris and Adams joined us at the staging area. On the one hand: a nervous-looking blonde with a Polaroid over her tactical vest. On the other… look. I get that the suit's effective. I get that it's even useful. I saw first-hand that it's badass. But you have to do something about the design. She looks

like she stepped out of a comic book.

Anyway, I briefed Iris and Adams on the situation, and we headed up to the "summer camp," if you can call it that. Stevenson found their "horseback riding ranch," and there were goddamn unicorns in the stables. They had Wi-Fi in their "cabins". Egyptian cotton sheets on their "bunks". I've seen resort hotels that were less luxurious.

So we get situated, set up our kill box, get the men settled in and the perimeter secured, send Kim and Squad Five out looking for the hikers. Things start to get real about when Kim calls back and says they found the campground.

Now, right away, I'm getting a bad feeling. 8-Zombies don't drag people out of tents: tear tents down, yeah. Eat them on-site, sure. But drag them out of their tents and carry them off? They don't have enough brain cells for that.

There's another thing that didn't get past the censors on the official AAR, too. Kim found a shell casing: 9mm Para. Neither of the adults were carrying handguns. Can't get a good read on how old it was, but couldn't have been more than a few days. Could have just been hikers or poachers moving through the area, but no one reported any gunshots.

Aside from that, things were a bit quiet. Iris spent some time taking snapshots. Adams mostly seemed to nap. Every once in a while they'd come over and I'd tell them what I was doing. Give them some advice on my leadership philosophy and tactics. That sort of thing.

Then Logue tells me that he's spotting fifteen unknowns. Some of them injured. Kid-sized. That started to raise the hairs on the back of my neck. Next thing I know, everyone's calling in contact reports. All told, we're looking at something in the one to two-hundred range, all wandering around the woods, and I realized we're in deep shit. When Freddie called in shouting that the kid they had in custody had just budded like a flatworm or something, that confirmed it.

Zombies are bad enough, but zombie clones? Fuck me.

This was about when I went to Adams and Iris asking for help. Squad 5 was completely cut off: no way they could get to us through two hundred fucking zombies, and I had a hole in my line with only the two ladies to plug it. Adams offered to take a shield and stand on the line, Iris moves to a rooftop and takes over as a DM. I managed to scrounge up a rifle for her (had to shut down Stevenson's bullshit: guy's got a big mouth), and she's just gotten up to the roof when one of the packs of Zees sees us and runs.

I don't know who the hell taught that girl to shoot, but she started off headshotting a runner at full sprint. The jokes and dumb comments stopped tout-suite, you can be sure of that. Girl was like a metronome: one shot a second. The ones she didn't kill, she dropped. I don't think she missed more than a couple of shots before the peloton reached the shield wall.

But if I thought Iris was impressive, Adams was a goddamn superhero. Look, I know that suit is technically an SCP object, but damn do I want one: hell, I want fifty, so I can give one to every man in my unit. Adams started by shield-smashing a Zee so hard it tumbled ass-over-teakettle and tripped up a couple of zombies behind it. She followed it up with her pistol. I thought she was mag-dumping at first, but every round she fired was a fucking headshot. She only slowed down when she ran out of ammo and had to switch to baton, and that was only until Harding got the bright idea to collect everyone's pistol mags and run them to her.

Look, I don't know if you've ever been in a Zee attack, but this was… something else. Unlike what the movies say, Zees don't usually hit in swarms: it's usually groups of two or three, spurts and packs, ambushes. This was more of a solid wave. And they were all the size of fifth-graders. We got hit twice: the second time, we were down to hammers and batons.

If the first two waves were bad, the third was a goddamn nightmare. Running retreat all the way back to the kill box. Then Logue breaks his ankle jumping out of his damn tree and ends up alone in front of a pack of Zees, and everyone knows he's gonna die… next thing we know, Adams is running out there alone smashing in zombie heads with her bare goddamn hands, grabs Logue and slings him over her shoulder, starts carrying him back to the line just as Kieran is hitting

the clickers for the claymores.

Nothing happens. Something must have cut the wires or something. And I'm figuring we're completely screwed now. Then everything explodes.

Turns out Iris had the foresight to take snapshots of all the claymore emplacements during setup. She was able to blow the mines… by hand, I guess… and saved all our fucking lives. So yeah: 5 Stars, would operate with again.

Now, there's one thing that's not on the official After Action Report that I want to make sure that you guys know about. I've attached the pertinent excerpt from the communications log:

J. Kim (Squad 5 Leader) "Echo": Uh, Beta-5-Echo to Actual.

R. Spaulding (Task Force Commander) "B5-Actual": I'm a little busy here, Jonny. Is this important?

Echo: Uh, I think so, sir. Can we get a secure line?

B5-Actual: Switch to Command Circuit 3.

Echo: Confirmed, switching. Uh, Echo to Actual, come in, over.

B5-Actual: Actual. Go, Echo.

Echo: Uhhh, all right, sir. Here goes. We think we've found something you should see. We retreated into a cave to get out of the rain, and uhh… I'm sending the image to you now, over.

B5-Actual: Confirm receipt of image. What am I looking at, Jonny?

Echo: All right, real quick: there was a… I'm gonna call it a box… in the back of the cave. Steel cube, about one and a half meters on a side. Door had a timed lock on it,

and there are remnants of food, looks like raw meat, inside. Claw marks on the inside walls. Did a quick swab check, and confirmed positive for SCP-008. Over.

B5-Actual: Assessment?

Echo: Uh… I'm going to say this was a deliberate release, actual. Someone deliberately infected someone with this mutated strain of SCP-008 and unleashed it on these campers. No idea why anyone would do that, though, over.

B5-Actual: I can think of a couple of reasons. All right, document as much as you can, then spend the night somewhere else. I don't think this strain is any more transmissible than the ones we know, but I don't want to risk it. Will let you know evac details once I get them.

Echo: Roger, Actual. How's your situation?

B5-Actual: A bit touchy, but we're holding out fine. The ladies are lending a hand. Iris is a crack shot, but Adams is… something else.

Echo: Roger, sir. Good hunting. Echo out.

I did a bit of snooping around in the archive stacks after we got back. Officially, there are only three organizations who both have access to SCP-008 and the facilities to alter it.

First of all, the Chaos Insurgency. I'm going to put the likelihood of this one at "Low," though, because if it were them, we'd be getting some grandiose statement about the reasons and motivations behind it. Despite their reputation, CI usually doesn't do this sort of thing just to cause mayhem. Usually a reason behind it.

Second, the Global Occult Coalition. I'm going to rate them even lower than the Chaos Insurgency. This isn't their style. Maybe a rogue element? Even then, though, what's the motivation?

Third up is where we start to get a bit worried. The number one organization with the access, assets, and motivation to do

something like this… is us. It all seems a bit too convenient, doesn't it? SCP-008 outbreak just as the vote on Alpha-9 was taking place? While Iris and Adams just happened to be in the area? And they just happened to save the lives of a bunch of MTF personnel, too. Major brownie points with the guys on the ground.

If I wanted to push a pet project through like Alpha-9, this would be a picture-perfect way to get guys on board.

The only reason why I'm telling you two this, of course, is that I'm pretty sure that you guys wouldn't be behind this: if you are, then don't let me know, otherwise I think that every single member of Beta-5 is going to have a long talk with you, possibly involving batons and hammers. What I'm thinking, though, is one of the O5s: whoever it is who was pushing Alpha-9, maybe decides to engineer an event to push it through over the objections of the rest of the council…

I'm keeping quiet on this mostly because damn it, I agree. We need Alpha-9, and Camp Granada, even if it was engineered, proved its point. But probably a good idea if we all start checking dark corners for men with sharp knives ready to stab us in the back. I'll watch yours if you check mine.

Yours,
Ron

P.S. Clef: Seriously, do something about Lambda-2's name. I'm sick of doing the whole Abbot and Costello routine every time someone asks me for the shorthand.

P.P.S. Sophia: Heard the council vote went through while we were in the field. Congratulations on that. Buy you a beer next time you're in town.

From: Factotum "Cringe."
To: Overseer Council
Re: SCP-008-E

Patient Zero

Patient Zero was returned to Site-19. All three instances (Original and two (2) clones) were terminated by gunfire. Corpses were disposed of first by immersion in acid, secondly through incineration, and thirdly through irradiation. Remains have been transferred to Intake pending possible classification as Special Containment Procedures anomalies.

Strain E ("Exocet") of SCP-008

The strain of SCP-008 encountered during the "Camp Granada" incident has undergone several alterations. First, the average elapsed time between infection and onset of symptoms has been drastically shortened. Coma onset now occurs approximately six hours after initial exposure, as opposed to the original strain's onset period of approximately twenty hours.

Secondly, while normal SCP-008 infectees are rendered incapable of any action more complex than walking, standing, grabbing, and biting, Exocet-strain infectees are now capable of running, jumping, and navigating complex physical obstacles. This is possible due to an alteration, not in the SCP-008 prion itself, but in the addition of a nano-machine designated **SCP-008-Finback.**

The Finback nanite appears to have been purpose-designed to manage and direct the SCP-008 prion, setting up barriers preventing entry into the cerebral cortex. It also appears to be responsible for the Exocet strain's most alarming mutation. SCP-008 infectees have long been reported attacking and ingesting living humans, but as the organism results in the destruction of the infectee's digestive systems, no sustenance could be drawn from said consumption. Finback not only prevents the digestive system from decaying, but utilizes the material consumed to construct a rough duplicate of its host body from DNA harvested from the infectee's body cells. Once enough raw material has been received, the host body's belly will burst open, releasing between one to four duplicates. These will then proceed to seek out and consume any vegetable or animal matter present, growing rapidly to full size in as little as twenty-four hours.

Analysis of both the Exocet prion and the Finback nanite indicates

that the two were deliberately engineered to operate in symbiosis. Even more concerning are indications that the Finback nanite shares several traits in common with a now-neutralized SCP anomaly responsible for the death and transformation of one Agent Adrian Andrews (formerly archived under **SCP-784, iteration 6**).

Speculations and Security Concerns Raised by the "Camp Granada" Incident.

The existence of the Finback nanite alters the list of possible origin points to one: the Foundation itself. Only we have access to the **SCP-784-ARC** anomaly. Further, analysis of laboratory and containment access logs indicate discrepancies in the amount of **SCP-784-ARC** material constructed, reported destroyed, and returned to containment over the past ten years.

Approximately ten grams of nanomaterial are now missing, more than enough to create a self-replicated seed for the creation of more SCP-784-ARC material. For this reason, I am recommending a complete audit of all Overseer-Level projects beginning immediately. Whichever party was responsible for secretly developing SCP-008-E must be discovered, and their reasons for doing so brought to light.

(Presented to the Overseer Council for Review by Factotum "Cringe.")

From: Overseer Council
To: Factotum "Cringe"
Re: SCP-008-E

Your suggestions have been received and are under review.

All information pertaining to SCP-008-E is now classified Level 5 under Code Word **PALISADE TEMBLOR WHITTIER**. Administer amnestics as needed to all personnel aware of the existence of SCP-008-F (Finback), and sterilize/secure all samples of Exocet/

Finback under Procedure 397-Sub Rosa.

Upon completion of these orders, you will resume monitoring Assets Resh, Samekh, and Gimel until further notice.

O5-Eight

FROM: Senior Special Agent Andrea S. Adams, Mobile Task Force Lambda-2 ( )
TO: Dr. Alto Clef, Mobile Task Force Lambda-2 ( )
RE: Operation "Camp Granada."

- The suit's performance was satisfactory. However, I would like to consult with R&D regarding some alterations.
- SCP-105 performed well.

Aside from that, nothing of interest to report.

- Adams

+

Dear Sir or Madam,
Marshall, Carter, and Dark sincerely regrets the unfortunate death of your child during the recent events at our Happy Acres Youth Camp. The loss of a loved one is never easy, even when anticipated, but it is harder still when they are taken from us far too soon.
We offer our sincere condolences and deepest sympathy on your loss. May the outpouring of sympathy, the kind acts of friends and strangers, and the comfort in knowing that your loss is felt by many help you through this difficult time.
As a gesture of support, we are refunding all fees charged to you for your recent stay at our Diamond Mountain Resort in the form of a certificate of store credit.

Be assured that Marshall, Carter, and Dark will make every effort to find the persons responsible. Once they have been found and retrieved, the proceeds from their subsequent auction (less processing fees and expenses incurred during retrieval) will be passed on to you as compensation for your loss.
You will, of course, be invited to watch the auction and the subsequent events where the auction winners make use of their purchases.
Sincerely Yours,

S. Marshall,
Marshall, Carter, and Dark, Ltd.

Hephaestus

"He wants to do the prayer," Antigonus complained. "Where in Pluto is there place for prayer here?"

Porphyrios of Alexandria sighed. Antigonus was never going to get off of the subject of natural philosophy and revealed theology, and specifically how the two should never be in the same room together. "Look, he has seniority over us. He's a little old fashioned, but it's not as though he's demanding we slaughter a goat next to the counterform reactor. He wants a short invocation, and the supervisor is willing to allow it, so you should simply get used to it."

"But…I really fail to see the connection between Hephaestus and interplanar transition," Antigonus said. "Hermes, maybe, but the volcano god?"

"Tradition dictates, young man," Methodius of Novoromae said as he entered the room, "that Hephaestus is to be invoked before the successful use of advanced technology. A prayer to Hermes would make us little more than postmen with the tools of the Gods. Hephaestus, however, is a God of leaders of men. And if we succeed in today's quest, if we are able to open a stable porthole between our world and the alien universe adjoining ours, leaders of men is exactly what we may become. Alexandria, the Alexylva campus, this very room will become the center of a new world. A world that *we* shall control.

"Now, are you read to begrudge the gods their due?" The gray-haired elder philosopher glared at his younger counterpart.

Antigonus swallowed. "No, sir. Please, proceed with the invocation."

"Thank you for your permission. Now bow your heads," Methodius replied dryly. "High Lord Hephaestus of Mountains, we children of the forests beseech your aid. We beg your aid in today's endeavors, which may bring us many steps closer to bringing your words and

holy fire to the sorrowful masses of the alien world. Milephanus delenda est, and we thank you for your time."

"Well spoken, sir," Porphyrios said. Antigonus glared at the brownnoser.

"Let us proceed. Antigonus, please activate the counterform reactor. Porphyrios, input your calculations into the director assembly. I will take the transplanar controls."

The three men went to their stations. Within minutes, the counterform and properform mass reaction was active and stable in the reaction chamber, providing power for what was to come. Antigonus said "Power at maximum. Porphyrios, are you ready?"

"Calculator assembly ready, coordinates set. Transferring controls to transplanar station."

Methodius sighed. "Very well. Gentlemen, prepare to put Alexylva University in the history books. Activating transplanar matrix."

"What, may I ask, just happened?" Methodius said through clenched teeth.

"Well, sir, if I were to guess, that is, if I were to simply…describe the events of the past ninety seconds," Porphyrios stammered, "I would have to say that…"

"Would it not be safe to say," Methodius growled, "that NOTHING WHATSOEVER happened, young pest?"

"Not quite, sir, though I can understand the, erm, confusion. We did, in fact, open a porthole between two universes. And one of them was the alien world."

"What was the other one, little worm?"

"We…well, we can't really…um, know. We can't know at all. Nor can we know how long this will last."

The room grew silent. "I *said* we should have invoked Hermes,"

Antigonus muttered.

The moon was barely visible through the clouds as 3rd Platoon, Mobile Task Force Delta-5 swarmed through the forest.

"Move! Move!" Lieutenant Samson shouted. He loved abandoned areas. He hated being quiet. "Let's go, let's go! We gotta find this before someone else does!"

The rest of the task force groaned. Two hours in the woods was bad enough when you *knew* what you were looking for. Getting instructions that amounted to *go find a needle in a barn full of haystacks* was worse. Samson didn't know more than the rest of them; he tried to act as though the orders were just classified, but his men knew when their commander was bluffing. They were looking for "an unspecific quantum phenomenon" emanating from a forest in West Tennessee, whatever that meant. But there were some clues.

Samson raised his hand to order silence. He heard rustling somewhere up ahead, over the next hill. Sounds of people beating their way through the woods, along with shouting in what sounded like…a British accent? He waved two of his scouts forward to evaluate. They rushed forward, examined the scene, and called the rest of the troops ahead.

The task force swarmed to the top of the hill to see what was happening. A softly glowing aperture floated a few feet above the ground. Seeing this, Samson knew they had found what they came for. But what was the shouting?

More talking. Samson raised his hand to order silence again before realizing that the sound was coming from ahead. He squinted to block out the light from the portal to see where the voices were coming from…

"What happened next, Lieutenant?" Major Brooks asked. The commander of MTF Delta-5 couldn't have phrased the question in a more threatening way.

"Sir, we were sent in with the understanding that it would not be unlikely that other Groups of Interest would attempt to secure the…'quantum phenomenon' for themselves," Samson replied. "So when I saw multiple individuals in what appeared to be black uniforms, I presumed them to be hostiles."

"Did you call for backup? What were your orders?"

"Well, there were about as many of them as us, but I didn't see any weapons, so I ordered an advance. I told the hostiles to put their hands up."

"What happened next?"

"I'm not entirely sure, sir. They opened fire on us with concealed weapons they had been holding while shouting at us. The shouting…it vaguely resembled Latin, but I didn't recognize what they were saying."

"That matches what we know of University protocol. What else?"

"Their weapons weren't anything we had encountered before. They looked not unlike dowel rods, very thin stick-looking objects. Not sure what they were firing, either. We figured them for CBG, maybe Serpent's Hand, but their battle tactics were damned odd."

"Could you elaborate?"

"Well, again, sir, they didn't have firearms. Whatever those stick-looking weapons were, they weren't *aiming* them at us so much as just waving them in our direction, but their accuracy was uncanny. They must have been recoilless somehow, whatever they were shooting. Looked like tracer rounds more than anything. Sir, can you tell me how my men are recovering?"

"Maybe later on, Samson. What else was odd about their tactics? What else can you remember?"

Samson thought the phrasing there was strange, but continued. "Their mobility was extraordinary. They must have been trained scouts, because I had ten trained Foundation agents down there with M16s, firing at less than ten meters, and I'm not sure if we

actually hit a single one of them."

This was a test, and Major Brooks failed. He snorted quietly and looked away momentarily. Samson knew what that meant. *We caught one of them.*

"What was significant about their mobility? I want to know exactly what they're capable of."

"It was almost like they were disappearing and reappearing a few feet away. Never saw one of them actually move. I know it was nighttime, sir, but…I never saw one of them even *budge.* They would just be here one second, and…over there the next. It seemed almost—"

"Magical, Samson. The word you're looking for is magical."

Samson looked at his superior. He had suspected as much, but to suddenly hear actual confirmation of…of what had to be impossible, it was jarring. Even to someone trained in containing SCPs, Samson didn't really think he was going to run into *this* kind of thing anytime soon. He put the pieces he knew together. "Sir, does this mean that…that the University has *magicians* on its side?"

Samson pursed his lips and said nothing. The silence said a great deal. "That's for people above your pay grade to think about, Samson. I want to know why four of your men have been in a coma for the last day. I want to know why you wanted to play cowboy with unknown individuals you believed to be unfriendlies without calling in backup. I want to know how you then let the unfriendlies escape through the portal…" Samson tuned him out. He was already in trouble, he didn't need a reminder.

A similar meeting was happening in another universe. "America?"

"Yes, some forest in America. Or at least full of American soldiers."

"They used their Muggle weapons on you, you said?"

"Yes, but we Apparated around them rather easily. Not the best trained soldiers, I warrant."

"You said they captured one of your Aurors?" The Minister frowned. "And the aperture disappeared?"

"I'm afraid so, sir," the other man said. "I'm having Kingsley inform his family now. We…we're not sure if we will ever have the opportunity to recover him."

"Did the Americans open the gateway or did someone on our side do it?"

"Unknown, but neither seems likely. Our end opened in a random village in Scotland, theirs in a random forest. It seems to have simply been a freak accident."

"But is there any way of knowing if it was Muggle science or magic?"

"We had little time to examine the scene, Minister," the other man said, "but Kingsley said it didn't feel like either one. Definitely not a Portkey. Something else. Something new."

The Minister paced the room. "Of all the people to have lost over there…"

"I know, sir," the other man said. "Harry's talking to his wife now."

"What are the odds looking like of recovering him anytime soon?"

The other man's expression said all that needed saying. "Damn," the minister said.

Agent Brooks looked through the two-way glass at the prisoner. "He's restrained?"

"And disarmed." Dr. Reed glanced at his clipboard. "He's refusing to talk at the moment. We just got his name."

"Sodium pentathol?"

"No effect."

Brooks looked back through the glass. "Well, not much choice, then.

Could be a threat to the entire Foundation. And we've never captured one of these University people before. What's his name?"

"Believe he said 'Weasley,' sir."

"Huh, that doesn't sound very Greek. Break his fingers and ask him about it."

Her Inveterate Patience At Action

Dr. Andrea Segerstrom had a wonderful junior year English teacher. The woman had the endurance of a saint, which served her well since she made the regrettable decision to teach at a high school for gifted students. Whenever her students got too out of control, Mrs. Cameron would close her eyes and whisper *"I love my job I love my job I love my job,"* until her thoughts of murder/suicide ebbed away.

As Research Assistant Jarvis lay on the couch in her office, Dr. Segerstrom whispered to herself, "*I love my job I love my job I love my job I love my job"*. To Jarvis she said, "Look, Michael, there's a reason you were ordered to see me. This gambling problem is getting way out of hand. It's clearly affecting your ability to reason."

Jarvis regarded her with a calm, benevolent condescension. "Now, don't you think that's a bit of an exaggeration, Andrea?"

The entirely fed-up psychiatrist simply consulted her files again. "It says here you've taken out a second mortgage on your house and drained your savings. You've spent every one of your days off over the past two months at a casino or other such establishment."

Jarvis' carefully constructed superiority began to crumble a bit. "I'm able to keep my behavior off-site separate from my work life. I'm sure if you look in that impressively extensive file, you won't find a single instance of inappropriate use of Foundation time or money."

Dr. Segerstrom fixed him with her best icily clinical stare. "There's no such thing as a off-the-clock-you and an on-the-clock-you, Michael. And there's no such thing as a compartmentalized addiction either, just one that hasn't become life-consuming yet."

Jarvis sat up. "Look, Andrea, I don't have an addiction, okay? You know, working here is incredibly taxing and a man has a right to unwind."

"Absolutely, unless his method of 'unwinding' begins to monopolize his life, drain his resources, and present a security breach to the Foundation. By the way, in this room, for the next 10 minutes, my name is Doctor Segerstrom."

Jarvis's jaw clenched, his collected haughtiness gone. "Well *Andrea*, rumor has it you've seen first-hand what the pressure of the workplace does to a man. Perhaps if you were a bit less uptight, *certain people* wouldn't have to resort to extremes."

Dr. Segerstrom sighed inwardly, bottling her anger. She could drag out this session for the next nine minutes, but it would only be prolonging the inevitable. She jotted down a few more notes on her clipboard before putting on her icy clinical face again. "Well, Michael, I believe we're done here. You've got a few more minutes left but I don't think they'll be very productive." She stood, opened her office door, and motioned the soon to be ex-Research Assistant Jarvis through. "Please exit to your left. When Nurse Takagawa calls your name, she will help you sign off on your required paperwork and give you any further instructions." When Jarvis had made his sneering exit, Dr. Segerstrom exited to her right and handed the papers to the older nurse. "Michiko, please pull up a list of all Foundation sites in need of Level 0 Clearance personnel."

"I shall be sorry to see him go," said Takagawa. Andrea wondered, impressed, how anyone could maintain both genteel politeness and utter contempt in the same sentence.

"Nothing for it, I'm afraid," said Andrea lightly. "He's completely unwilling to address his condition. Unless he begins to display even the vaguest understanding of the responsibilities that come with the title of Research Assistant, it's my professional opinion that he will better serve the Foundation as a Level 0."

Nurse Takagawa handed Doctor Segerstrom the next patient's file. "Research Assistant Connor Graves," she said before pausing. "Have fun with this one." Andrea sighed. No matter what kind of doctor you were or where you practiced, vague statements like that never boded well.

Fifteen minutes later, Dr. Segerstrom was rubbing her temples

again. Graves refused to lie down on her couch and was staring at her with the twitchy nervousness of a guilty conscience. She sighed. "Connor, I'm not here to judge you."

Graves barked short, humorless laughs. "Then what's the clipboard for?"

"The clipboard is for me to make sure that you are healthy enough to continue to work for the Foundation. I'm here to find the best possible way for the Foundation and you to continue to work together."

"Really?"

"Connor, we won't consider ending your employment unless you pose a risk to yourself or the Foundation. This is for your own good, Connor. I'm here to help you, not condemn you," Dr. Segerstrom said soothingly. Andrea's Good Doc manner always worked wonders. Graves relaxed visibly as she went on. "Now, what led to today's visit? Don't leave anything out. Remember, I'm on your side."

Graves sighed.

"Do you know why you're here today, Connor?"

Connor Graves clenched his fists. "Doctor, I get off to anthro skip porn."

"I see."

"But Doctor, I wanna make one thing clear," Graves looked Dr. Segerstrom dead in the eye as a new determination entered his face. "The vernacular 'anthro porn' comes from 'anthropomorphic', from the Greek root 'anthro-' denoting gender neutral human characteristics. It should say 'gynomorphic', from the Greek 'gyno-', relating to that associated with women."

"And is that significant?"

"Of course! I'm not *gay* or anything!"

Dr. Segerstrom's thin veneer of professionalism began to crack around her eyebrows and the corners of her mouth. "I see. I'm going to have to ask you a few more questions, of course."

Thirty minutes later, Research Assistant Connor Graves exited Dr. Segerstrom's office with his position intact. Andrea left her office for lunch, checking her PDA. There was one more small work-related task she would have to complete over lunch.

Many considered Overwatch HQ to be the heart of the Foundation. Andrea thought that title belonged to each and every Foundation site cafeteria on Earth. Loose lips may free skips, but a skilled Foundation ear can glean just as much from what's left out of the gossip as what's in it.

Site-33 was, like most Site cafeterias and non-anomalous high schools, separated into cliques based specialty or interest. Biologists there, linguists here, MTFers in the corner. However, because this *was* Site-33, the mental health (hah!) specialists took up half the cafeteria. The shrink bloc was further subdivided, as psychiatrists regarded their psychologist counterparts as touchy-feely hippie types, while psychologists derided their physician colleagues as soulless pill dispensers. Nothing *too* different from the outside world.

Andrea was looking for a spot where one could hold a reasonably intimate conversation without being too isolated. She settled for row of seats on the fringe of one of the Psychiatrist tables, towards the first Psychologist table. Perfect. The presence of others would be comforting, but they wouldn't be disturbed. Andrea scanned the room for the lost little figure with the short, halo-like afro framing her face. Finally, she found it. "Dr. Baxter! There's a seat right here. Why don't you join me?"

The nervous young woman smiled at Andrea as she skittered to the table, her blush mercifully hidden by her dark brown complexion. "Thank you so much, Dr…Segerstrom?"

"Yes, but please call me Andrea."

"Then call me Alex! Thanks for inviting me over."

"Oh, don't mention it. I was just as lost as you during my first couple of weeks. Now, you said you wanted to talk to me sometime. About what, exactly?"

Dr. Baxter fiddled with her napkin. "Well, I guess I want to know what to expect."

"You've completed your orientations, haven't you?"

Alex snorted. "Actually, Dr. Segerstrom, I'd like to know what *actually* goes on around here."

Andrea laughed. "You're a bit more wary than most new hires, aren't you?" Alex cracked a smile as Andrea continued. "Well, congratulations. As a Site-33 psychiatrist, you're privy to the most disturbing secrets of the Special Containment Procedures Foundation."

Alex's eyebrows shot up. "Really? So what does SCP-"

"No, no, not those kinds of secrets. I mean *really* disturbing."

"Like what?"

Andrea opened her mouth, then paused. She was a very self-aware woman with an in-depth knowledge of her strengths and flaws. One of her failings was that she was both an indefatigable gossip and intensely secretive. Andrea loved to dish out little tidbits of information, making her listener work for the whole story. That way, she could prolong the thrill of sharing a juicy bit of knowledge while remaining as aloof and mysterious as she chose to be. Now, Andrea knew that she'd be a spectacular failure as psychiatrist if she couldn't exert a fantastic amount of control over her more destructive urges. But, she reasoned, there wasn't that much harm to be done in indulging just this once. Besides, the kid was going to have to learn sooner or later. "Let me give you a case study. Bet you haven't heard one of those in a while."

Alex laughed. "Go ahead."

"John Doe. Late twenties. Research Assistant, transferred here within the past few months. Sought out psychiatric evaluation after colleague found pornographic images featuring various anomalies in his possession and threatened to publicize them."

Alex's eyes got wide. "You've got to be kidding me."

"I am not. I was bound to run into it sooner or later. Dr. Macmillan's written a fantastic paper on paraphilias of the anomalous. Give it a read, it's fascinating. Anyway, the patient showed no other psychiatric abnormalities. I've found him completely able to fulfill his duties and sent him on his merry way."

Alex's eyebrows shot up. "*Really?* You just…let him go? No mandatory follow-up?"

"Other than the required yearly mental checkup? No. His paraphilia wasn't ego-dystonic, but I recommended he see me again if that changes."

"But…"

Andrea smiled indulgently. "At the risk of sounding old before my time, you kids don't learn the things you need to learn in med school. It's easy to *say* we're non-judgmental healers and scientists until you come up against something that *you, personally* have an objection to. Well, Alex, you get over it eventually."

"So this man is still in the Foundation dreaming of the type of erotic ecstasy only an eldritch abomination can bring?"

"Yes. I should mention that this particular research assistant is particularly gifted, even among such a well-educated and professional group. The man's a positive asset to the Foundation, and his…proclivities…do not get in the way of him doing his job."

Alex shrugged. "I suppose."

"Not to mention that his paraphilia is relatively mild. Even if he was the foulest rapist to walk the Earth, the Foundation still might not discharge him if he was useful enough," Andrea said with a dark smile. "If you are important enough, certain *indulgences* may be

granted to you. Sometimes horrible perversions are an asset for containment."

Dr. Baxter's face suddenly looked very drawn. Andrea leaned forward. "That's your first hard lesson, Alex. The Foundation needs competence more than it needs virtue. You, just like every bright-eyed hopeful in here, came to this site in the middle of Cousinhump, USA because you wanted to be with the superheroes saving the world. Well, put up the capes and eye masks because you won't be needing them here."

Alex began fiddling with her napkin, working it into a felted wad. "So…we're…I mean, if those people get certain immunities…"

Andrea had to keep herself from rolling her eyes by reminding herself that her fellow women learned from experience that the institutions they stood for would not stand for them. "Don't worry about *that*, Alex. You're among one of the most talented members of an already indispensable class. The last thing the Foundation needs is for its best and brightest defecting to the GOC or CI because it can't keep its other members in check. No, there are other allowances. But you'll learn all about that later."

The cafeteria continued to bubble with lively chatter and acerbic scientific arguments, but the two women were silent together.

Andrea broke the silence. "Jack Doe, also in his late 20s. Ordered to undergo psychiatric evaluation after concern was raised over Doe's behaviors outside of his work. Surveillance of Doe's personal life revealed financial problems, excessive gambling, and his most recent routine neurological tests revealed structures and dopamine levels consistent with addiction. Subject was obstinate and showed an acute lack of insight into his condition. Doe's security clearance was subsequently revoked and he is being remanded to Level 0 Maintenance duties."

"It's…very strange. I know that's probably the wisest option to take, but compared with the earlier case file, it just seems…excessive."

Andrea shook her head. "Once again, you're not really thinking like an impartial scientist yet. Why are you so much more uncomfortable

with a minor sexual deviation than a condition which is known to affect judgment? You still haven't learned to think like a doctor. It takes time, but if it's meant to be, you'll get used to it."

"I just don't get it." Alex motioned to the busy cafeteria. "We're scientists! We're specialists! We're all the best minds humanity has to offer. How can people like Jack Doe slip through the cracks? You'd think the Foundation was run by complete idiots, playing with skips and hiring psychopaths for laughs."

"Not idiots, Alex. Just people."

Alex fidgeted uncomfortably as Andrea went on resignedly. "Just people. People who pursue things that will ruin them just because they feel like it, people with unimaginably fragile grips on reality, people who are so unpredictably affected by the sort of trauma that's par for the course here that we never know for sure when Researcher Doe is going to snap and take half the site with him. That's the Foundation's most awful secret, Dr. Baxter, that we're all far closer to utter collapse than we dare to admit because the Foundation is made up of *people*."

Andrea leaned back and continued pensively. "When Jack Doe, the one with the gambling problem was hired, he was completely stable. Cleanest bill of psychiatric health I've ever seen. My colleagues will say that he was a time bomb, but I don't think that's it."

"What do you think happened?"

"Do you really want to know?"

Alex paused before replying, indecisively, "Yes."

"It's working here that did it. We've got so many anomalies that we might as well start referring to 'the friendly suggestions of physics'. Everyone reacts to trauma and extreme chronic stress in different ways, and some people develop defense mechanisms that can end the world as we know it."

"And we can't really tell in advance who those people are going to be, can we?" whispered Alex.

Andrea leaned forward with a sardonic smile. "Oh, we can to some extent. That battery of tests they put you through wasn't for the pleasure of the examiners. But despite our best efforts, some people just slip through the cracks. My esteemed colleagues believe that's a failing of our methods and that we just need bigger and better tests. Me, I think doing what we do here will cause some of the most stable people in the world to snap, and no test will tell you who. All you can do is stay vigilant and hope that *you're* not one of those people." She stood up to throw away her leftovers and looked back for a parting remark. "I hope you understand just how important your job is now. Psychiatrists are the immune system of the Foundation. We secure the unstable. We contain the effects of their symptoms on the workplace. And we protect the asylum from being taken over by the patients." Andrea grabbed Alex's trash as Alex stared in shock at the table. "Welcome to your first day on the job. It's not too late to hand in your resignation," said Dr. Segerstrom as she walked away.

Alex looked around the cafeteria with a new sense of vigilance. The high pitched, almost hysterical giggle of a research assistant, a dulled affect of a MTF captain, the silent weeping of a security guard. Panic welled in Dr. Baxter's chest. Reflexively, she began tapping a structured, exacting fifteen-beat rhythm on the table with her left pointer fingernail. The panic flowed out of her chest and through her arm, dripped out of her fingernail like a medicine dropper, and expelled itself onto the table. As she calmed down, Dr. Baxter continued to tap, ritualistically, robotically, precisely. Nothing bad would happen, as long as she continued to tap. The tapping would save everyone. The tapping would jar loose the unstable elements of the site and restore the Foundation. A tapping a day keeps the nutjobs at bay.

The friendly din of the Site 33 cafeteria continued, and the tapping went unheard, unseen.

Her Masterpiece

It's all his fault. If he hadn't been around, the baby would still be here. The beautiful product of our flesh and blood.

It's easy to smash his skull in with the baseball bat he kept around. And much less noisy than a gun. He's heavy, and a mixture of blood and brains leaks out of the gaping wound on his skull from the living room down to my art studio.

He's still heavy, and still bleeding, as I position him inside the metal frame for my latest masterpiece while waiting for the concrete to be useable. When it is, I get started with smothering his treacherous corpse in the thick, gritty substance. It mixes with his blood and my sweat. Hours, days pass while I repeat the process. Mix, slather, repeat.

It's been a week. My studio smells of progress. Of blood. Of cement. Of art being created. The basic shape is done, the head of my masterpiece towering over me. I grab my paint and get to work. Using big strokes of the can, I get the entire thing covered from the top of its head as bulbous as my stomach was when I was carrying a new life, to the feet as large as the traitor's were. The details take longer than the main part of the job, but when they're done, I feel like crying. I gaze at my creation, marveling at its beauty. All of which came from my pain and suffering. When nature finally calls, I turn to leave my new baby.

I hear a sound like stones moving against each other.

And all goes dark.

Here There Be

Monsters?

No, no, no, it wasn't like that. We began with the best intentions. That might've gotten lost along the way, but it isn't how we started. We were young, and idealistic. I was in love. We were all eager to save the world from itself. The boss had led us to defeat the great Beast, and we twelve loyal apostles were willing to follow him back out of hell, and start building paradise. I wasn't a monster then, I'm sure of it.

The Beast. I still think of it, from time to time. In the middle of the night, I wake up in a cold sweat, phantom images swimming before my eyes. Some of my fellows, my beloved amongst them, erased the memories from their heads, if only so they could sleep peacefully. I could never bring myself to use the damn things. I always figured every memory was worth having, you know? Even the ones you hated, you learned something from. I still think the Beast is the worst thing we contain, despite our efforts to put it to good use.

I'm sad to say, it was my idea to use the Beast. The engines were still running, the engines were greased. It would have been an insult to those fed to it to have made their sacrifice be in vain. I thought we could control it, use it to thwart our enemies. Heh. How wrong was I?

It helps that in those days we had proper villains, not the conglomerations you get nowadays. Faceless corporations, or trust fund babies who think they can freak people's minds with far-out art performances. Nothing like what we fought, back in the day! The fights we undertook were in black-and-white, good versus evil, all those trite old tropes. People with power seeking to abuse it, and calling themselves by monikers that explained who and what they were. The Winter Wolf. Grendel. The Trollen Tribe. The Last Ghoul. Each of them unique and interesting, with their own plots and

machinations. But at the same time, the majority of them the type of people whom, if you happened to run across in a bar when not on assignment, would buy you a drink, and reminisce about previous encounters. Or at least not shoot you when they recognized you off the clock.

I remember when all that changed for me.

Don't tell my wife, but it all started at a high class brothel, back in- Was it the thirties? May have been the twenties, or the teens. They all blend together after a while. I know I was promoted out of Senior Staff before the second World War. It doesn't matter, it doesn't matter. Let's just say, pretty girls look good no matter what year it is. Don't look at me like that, I was tracing a lead! A very attractive lead… It was another time, standards were different. Anyways, I was chasing down rumors that the necromancer who called herself Dancer was using the sex slave trade to raise herself her own little army. I was there to shut her down, if I could find her.

I was, ahem, chasing my lead, and If I may say, I was doing a fantastic job of it, when all hell broke loose. Apparently, someone, and I blame that traitorous preacher, had let Dancer know that I was seeking her out. So there I am, courting this dear lady, when the door bursts open, revealing a slavering horde of undead whores, calling my name! Well, it felt like a horde. More like a whored, hey? Heh, sorry, puns ARE the lowest form of comedy, I know, I know. Probably only a dozen or so, but when your pants are around your ankles, and your gun is in a jacket across the room, even three would feel like a horde. I bid the lady a polite good night, and dove for my gear, hoping to outrace the grasping claws. I had just got my hand on my jacket when one of the zombies knocked me through the goddamn wall.

So, picture this: Me, no pants, still in a state of… ahem, activity, blasting through this plasterboard wall, hard enough that I lost all sight of my pants, and I have the good fortune to fall into bed in the next room! A soft landing, because the bed is already occupied! I'm trying to give my excuses to the duo, explaining that I wasn't trying to make it a trio, when the gentlemen and I finally make eye contact. Even without that damned wolf mask, I recognize his eyes, and it's clear he recognizes me from the way he's forming ice claws on his

fingers, and starting to snarl. The bloody Winter Wolf himself, in the middle of taking his pleasure. Not an image I can easily forget, I tell you what!

I extricated myself quickly, trying to make excuses, when HIS door bursts open, his own horde of zombies prostitutes calling for his head. A glance is exchanged over the living girl's head, and we both nod at each other. Now, I still had my shirt on, unbuttoned, but the Wolf, he's completely naked. His body swells as he rises off the bed, grabs a chaise lounge, and begins to beat the undead menace soundly with his improvised melee weapon. So, naked beastman beating undead zombies with furniture, as I'm struggling to pull my hand cannon from the armpit holster I had stupidly removed.

Let me tell you, the guns we had back in the day, they were something else. Filled with blessed rounds, well, not always, but in that situation, because, necromancer, and you could easily slip in whatever ammo might be needed. I always kept a couple of silver bullets on-hand, just in case. Hand-tooled back at the Factory, designed for the agent on the run, large bore, but little-to-no kickback. I found myself trying to shoot past the now-completely iced-over and armored Wolf, zombie heads popping like corn, when what should happen, but the damned ceiling caves in, a whole shit ton of undead dancers falling on top of us.

The Winter Wolf and I wound up back-to-icy-back. I'm getting torn up, cause someone has armed these creatures, knives and the like, but since they don't feel pain, they just keep coming! My gun runs dry, and I start using it like a club to beat off these girls. Always use a big gun; that way you can hit someone with it if you run out of bullets. And if anyone tells you you're overcompensating, you can shoot them. I was able to snag a machete off one of the dead girls, but you ever try to chop through dead flesh? Well, all right, the flesh isn't an issue, but the bone gets in the way something awful. It got to the point where I was just maiming them, and then spinning so the Wolf could finish them. I could feel the beast's armor getting thinner, and heard him getting hit, but I couldn't afford to turn to look.

It felt like we fought there for hours, but it was probably no more than 15 minutes. When all the bodies had stopped twitching, we finally were able to turn to each other. We both kept our eyes above

the waist. He was bleeding, but so was I. And we looked at each other for a long time, as I slipped my coat back on, in hopes of covering myself at least a little bit. I do try my best to always look like a gentleman. I think that's where my eldest got his affection for pristine suits. The walking cane is all his grandfather. My hand had slipped into the pocket of my coat, palming a single silver bullet.

"Dancer?" he said, although it was more of a growl. In his transformed state, everything he said was more of a growl.

"We were trying to put a stop to her. You?" I didn't back down from his glare, despite the extra foot of height he had on me. Any display of weakness, and he would have likely gone for my throat.

"Trying to recruit her. Apparently, she prefers to play alone." He sneered, but with a snout like that, most of his facial expressions looked like sneers.

We stood there for several more minutes, just looking at each other. I clutched the bullet tighter in my hand, and wondered if I was fast enough to load and fire it before he tore my throat out. And then he just nodded at me, I nodded at him, and he scampered out the window, while I borrowed a pair of pants from one of the dead girls, and went to meet my driver outside.

You'd think that was the end of that story, but you'd be wrong.

About three weeks later, my middle boy comes running in, all "Papa papa, there's a man here to see you!" I ruffled his hair, and went to the door, and could feel the blood drain from my face. The Winter Wolf was at my door. He was dressed, well, rather ordinary a nice suit and tie, a good fedora, but it was hard to forget those eyes. He smiled at me, but it didn't reach those cold dark orbs. He raised a hand, in which he held a familiar wallet. "You lost this." That was all he said.

He studied me as I studied him, then he turned his attention to my house, with the children playing in the yard. "You're not what I expected," he said, not looking at me. "I didn't figure one of the Foundation's hired killers-"

“I’m not a killer,” I recalled protesting. The lie hung hollow on my lips, even then. I wasn’t an assassin. I was a researcher, and sometimes agent, when it was needed. It didn’t matter that some people died, I wasn’t sent to kill them it was their own fault they resisted! At least, that’s what I told myself.

“-to be a good family man,” he continued, as if I hadn’t even spoken. “I came here to kill you.” He said it so nonchalantly, as if he had said he was going to pick up a dozen eggs. I didn’t move. None of my guns were close enough to matter. “I was going to kill you, as an object lesson. Well. That is what I told myself. I knew in my heart the real reason was revenge, plain and simple.” He turned those dark, burning eyes on me, and his lip twitched slightly. “Your little Foundation destroyed my pack. My mate, my brothers. All under the excuse of protecting society.”

He turned away from me, his gaze on the cherry tree, blooming in our yard. “You made me a monster.”

“But I can’t do that to some one else’s pack.”

We talked, then. We talked for a good three hours, about why the Hand did what it did, why we did what we did. We forged, if not a friendship, then at least mutual respect. I even gave him the silver bullet I would have used on him. He had it reforged into a ring, for his new mate. She didn’t quite understand why he always referred to it as offering her his life, but I knew what he meant.

We stayed in each other's lives. I made sure I didn't go on any missions that involved him. He directly avoided any contact with the Foundation. I was a groomsman at his wedding. He would play cowboys and Indians with my boys.

My oldest son killed him 30 years later in an altercation with the Serpent's Hand. I never told him the dreaded Winter Wolf was also his kindly uncle Jason. I don’t think he would have cared.

I’m sorry, I’m getting on, and my mind wanders. Our enemies, they have always called us monsters, because they think there has to be another way. That we should be able to contain skips without treating them like objects. That we should be able to use the benign

ones, or at least make them comfortable.

The problem will always be knowing which ones are the benign ones. Because it changes, you know?

After all, I was the one who tamed the Beast. I was the one who said that it could be useful, that we didn't just have to contain, but could also utilize. I made the biggest mistake the Foundation would see for generations.

I decided we should weaponize The Factory.

Herman Fuller Can Shove It Up His Ass

SLOTH'S PIT, 1970

The Bottomless Pit wasn't **Jeffrey Hubble's** usual watering hole. Its clientele was mostly comprised of tourists, truckers and other passers-through. Locals seldom ventured there, and when they did it was usually for less than respectable reasons.

Jeffrey was grateful for the bitter February cold that allowed him to conceal his identity under heavy clothes without suspicion. Nevertheless, he had waited until after dark until heading to the disreputable dive, parking several blocks away and cutting through alleys to make sure he wasn't seen.

When he stepped inside he left his scarf in place, scanning the entire room for anyone he knew. Squinting in the dim light and thick cigarette smoke, he recognized no one but the barkeep, a barkeep who knew how much his customers valued their privacy and could be trusted not to snitch.

Satisfied with his anonymity, he made his way to the back booth. He had been told two men would be waiting for him there, one tall and skinny and the other tall and muscular. The booth was occupied by two men, but there was also a young woman with them, and his contact had made no mention of that. Jeffrey took another look around the bar, just to make sure that these were the people he was supposed to meet with. The larger man whistled sharply at him and waved him over.

Jeffrey swallowed nervously and sat down to join them. There were four pints of ale already on the table.

“We ordered for you; hope that’s alright,” the larger man said, his tone making it clear it made very little difference whether it was alright or not. Jeffrey’s eyes widened as he was now able to see that this Man had an Upside-Down Face.

“Of course it’s alright. Why wouldn’t it be?” the slender man asked rhetorically, raising the pint glass and taking an exaggerated sniff. “This is some fine brew. I don’t believe I’ve ever had pumpkin ale before. Made from local produce, from your own farm if I’m not mistaken, Mr. Hubble.”

Jeffrey sighed and pulled down his scarf.

“Yeah, that’s me. I don’t suppose you’d be inclined to tell me who you are?” he asked.

“No, we would -”

“Herman P. Fuller, of Herman Fuller’s Circus of the Disquieting, the greatest show in the all the worlds! A pleasure to make your acquaintance,” the second man replied enthusiastically. The Man with the Upside-Down Face shook his head. “This is my bodyguard, Manfred Mannington Mandarino Mansfield.”

“We’re partners, and that’s not my name.”

“And the striking young lady beside him is -”

“Herman, if you introduce me as Leslie Van Dyke one more time I swear to god -” she said.

“**Veronica**. Her name is Veronica,” Fuller said. “She's nobody, don't worry about her. I know you were only expecting two of us, but when Veronica heard we were heading to *The Bottomless Pit* she insisted on tagging along.”

“Sinning Jessie is supposed to hang out here. I’ve never been with a tulpa before, and I’m hoping she and I can go bumper to bumper,” Veronica said as she sipped her ale. “Hubble, how does this whole tulpa thing work anyway? Will just thinking about her attract her attention or do I have to say her name three times or something?”

“I… listen, I don’t want to be rude, but I was hoping we could just make our little swap and then be on my way,” Hubble replied.

“Oh yes, of course. Who are we to say no to a Karcist?” Herman asked with a smug smile.

“I’m not a Karcist!” Jeffrey whispered, grateful for the ambient drone of conversation, hum of the furnace and blare of the jukebox that made it nigh impossible for anyone to overhear them. “I’m not even a Sarkic anymore, not really. You can't tell anyone about me, ever! Neo-Sarkics don’t take kindly to apostates.”

“And how exactly did a small town, Midwestern farmer end up becoming a Neo-Sarkic?” the Man with the Upside-Down Face asked.

“Does that matter?”

“For what you’re asking, you bet it matters. We didn’t come here to get fleeced, and if your story doesn’t add up we’re walking.”

“If you really need to know, I came down with lung cancer a while back. Being from Sloth’s Pit, I knew magic was real, so I figured there had to be some kind of magic out there that could cure me. My search eventually led me to the Wanderer’s Library, and from there I was able to locate a Flesh Carver. I begged him to cure me, promised him anything if he would. He asked that I pledge my soul to Ion.”

“Hmmm. Sarkics aren’t known for being evangelical. I’m pretty sure they disown kids born into Sarkicism more often than they let in outsiders,” the Man with the Upside-Down Face said. “What made you special?”

“Apparently, the guy had been looking for an apprentice for some time to help him with his work. My botanical skills and my knowledge of the supernatural made me a decent candidate for Flesh Carving, and my desperation made me easy to control. He cured me, and in exchange, I was to serve as his apprentice for seven years. After that he would have sponsored my entrance into his House as an Orin, but… Neo-Sarkics are really weird. Most people agree that

they're evil, but everyone can agree they're weird. I declined his offer and came back to Sloth's Pit. Now I have a wife and kids -"

"My condolences," Herman said.

"- and I just want to put all this weird Sarkic stuff behind me and have a normal life with them. I've removed all my grafts, reversed all my mutations, and pulled this little bastard out of my guts."

He reached into his coat and pulled out a glass mason jar, inside of which was a coiled white worm. Herman immediately grabbed the jar and held it up for inspection.

"That's what you wanted right? An *Akuloth*, His Sacred White Worm. It can cure any illness and boost regenerative abilities, enough to let you live forever if you're skilled enough. It can also produce mutagenic enzymes, but unless you're a Karcist I wouldn't recommend that."

"And you just plain don't want it anymore?" Veronica asked sceptically.

"I need to sever all ties with my Sarkic past. I am burning that bridge forever."

"Is that so?" Herman asked. "Then what, pray tell, is that?"

Herman nodded over to a bulletin board across from them. Among its many posted items was a newspaper clipping of Jeffrey, along with his son and daughter, standing proudly next to an enormous pumpkin.

"Biggest pumpkin in the whole county, literally broke the scale, yadda yadda yadda. Are you telling me you grew that with nothing more than good old American hard work?"

Jeffrey groaned.

"Okay, maybe I'm still using a little granola Sarkicism to boost my crop yields, but I have completely renounced Neo-Sarkicism. I'm dedicated to being a good husband and father now, so yeah, I'm providing my family with the best life I can give them, but I don't

want anything more to do with worms or tentacles or turning people's bodies into actual temples!"

"Manny, what do you think?" Fuller asked.

The Man with the Upside-Down Face stared intently at Jeffrey for a moment, so much so that he couldn't shake the feeling the Man was prodding into his very soul.

"I think he's telling the truth. The worm's probably genuine," the Man replied. "I still don't think this is a good idea."

"That's why I'm the boss and you're a Freak I let out of the Den to intimidate people," Fuller said, examining the jar with intense interest. "So what's the deal with this thing, Hubble? Do I just swallow it or -"

"Oh no. It takes too long to work its way down, you'd suffocate. You're going to want to insert it rectally."

Herman and the Man with the Upside-Down Face looked at him in disbelief, while Veronica burst out into laughter.

"Veronica, you shut your mouth this instant!" Herman ordered. "Hubble, that's not what Neo-Sarkics do, is it?"

"No, they do a big ritual and cut an incision into the torso and let the worm crawl in," Jeffrey replied. "But they're pretentious assholes. Why go through all that when -"

"When you already *have* a pretentious asshole!" Veronica laughed.

"Veronica, I said shut your mouth!"

"Listen, it's up to you. If you want to cut a big enough hole into your torso for this thing to wiggle in and then wait for it to heal you, that's your business. All I know is that if I had had a choice, I would have just let it in through my butt."

"And how did you go about removing this little guy?" Manny asked.

"Rectally. I passed it like it was a tapeworm," Jeffrey replied. "It's a

slimy fella, so it's already lubricated. Honestly, it will be painless."

"And once it's in, it will just work its magic?" Herman asked.

"Well no, if you let it it will gorge itself on your blood and grow like a tumour. You need to have enough mastery over your own body to limit its food supply, send it hormonal signals and whatnot. You can do that, can't you? I was told you had studied Sarkicism."

"I've studied a little bit of everything my good man. I can shepherd flesh and craft clockwork with the best of them. Why, when I was a boy -"

"Don't get started on that, otherwise we'll be here all night," Manny objected. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a velvet case, opening it to reveal a pocket watch adorned with Mekhanite symbols. "This is what we're offering in exchange. It's pure beryllium-bronze and was designed, hand-crafted and blessed by a Mekhanite Priest. It's intended to ward against Sarkic spiritual attacks, but if you keep it on your person long enough it should cleanse you of any lingering Sarkic forces. Not even the most powerful clairvoyant will be able to tell you used to be a Flesh Carver."

Jeffrey gingerly accepted the case and picked up the watch by its chain to examine it. It was a thing of exquisite beauty, clearly crafted with both love and skill. He opened it to see that its glass face proudly exposed its inner workings, ticking away as faithfully as their craftsman.

"Huh. It burns a little. I guess that means it's holy. Frankly, I deserve worse," he said.

"We have a deal then?" Herman asked with a hopeful, crooked smile.

"I just want to make it clear that the deal is final, and if anything goes wrong with that worm I'm not responsible for it. It worked fine inside of me for years so if you can't control it that's all on you."

"Yes, yes, buyer beware. Don't you worry about me, son," Herman

said with a dismissive wave of his hand.

“We have a deal then,” Jeffrey nodded, pocketing the case inside of his coat. “Thanks for the ale, fellas.”

Picking up his pint, he left for the other side of the bar.

“A broken wind-up toy in exchange for eternal life,” Herman chuckled. “Am I the world’s greatest con artist or what?”

“You’re something, Fuller,” Veronica said with a roll of her eyes. “Oh, that’s her! That redhead at the bar, it’s Jessie. Wish me luck, guys.”

Fuller gave her an absent nod, his attention focused on his recently acquired prize.

“What do you think Manny? Should I insert it… the way he said to?”

“Not until after a few more rounds of ale.”

“… Agreed.”

Several days later, an anemic and delirious Herman Fuller lay in his bed with an obscenely bloated stomach.

“Bernie I don’t know what you’re so upset about it’s not like she needs all four paws,” he mumbled.

Manny and Veronica stood over him, staring down at him with disgust.

“Traded a priceless Mekhanite artifact for an intestinal parasite. World’s greatest con artist indeed,” Manny said with a sad shake of his head.

“How can they expect us to return books on time when the Library’s outside of Time?” Fuller raved. “It’s a scam!”

“Should we help him?” Veronica asked.

“Percy, why won’t you let me have it on credit? You know I’m good

for it.”

“We’ll probably regret it, but yeah,” Manny said. “Come on, help me get him to Tinkles.”

Manny lifted him up and stood on his right to support him, while Veronica stood to his left.

“Dear Lord, I seem to have sprouted two extra heads. One of them’s upside-down!” Herman complained.

“Just try to stay calm Fuller, we’ll get you fixed up in no time,” Manny assured him.

“Hey, I can watch Tinkles pull the snake out of his butt, right?” Veronica asked with a devious smile.

“We’ll let everyone watch,” Manny smirked back.

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Heroic Spirit Alexei Belitrov

Servant Archer, Major Alexei Belitrov of the ***Red Army 22nd Armoured Infantry Division****. Master, from my understanding, you are a participant of the Holy Grail War. I also understand that my objective is the termination of the other six enemy Servants or their Masters, whichever is more convenient.*

True Name: Alexei Belitrov

Servant Class: Archer

Alignment: Lawful Neutral

Attribute: Human

Agility	E+	**Noble Phantasm**	B+

A soldier from the Red Army who partook in a World War III that took place in another world, and disappeared mysteriously following his capture by the Americans. Like all other soldiers involved in that conflict, he wore a special armour that enhances his physical abilities. Because of that, he actually has nothing special that would normally make him a Heroic Spirit. However, since he happens to be the only soldier of his native universe to have survived a journey into another universe, that counts for something.

This incarnation should not be able to be summoned, since there is no account of Belitrov as a ranged fighter in this universe (the Americans removed his guns before he left his native universe). Maybe the Master who

summoned Belitrov desired for a Servant in his peak condition, i.e. the perfect Soviet soldier? Or maybe Belitrov is the most compatible Heroic Spirit with the Master summoning him, and the Archer-class happens to be the only class container for him to manifest in?

Class Skills

Independent Action: C

Capable of surviving in the World without a Master for one day.

Magic Resistance: E

Cannot cancel spells, but damage from spells is reduced.

As Archer is from the Age of Man, he has no experience with Magecraft.

Personal Skill

Patriotic Fervour: A+

One's love for his own country, and the willingness to protect said country and destroy those who threaten the country.

Provides Rank Up to Archer's parameters when he is in territories corresponding to the Soviet Union. Provides bonus damage when attacking Servants related to the United States.

Noble Phantasm

Armour of the Engineers

Let the Children of the Sun Implode Amongst Themselves

Type: Anti-Army

Rank: B+

A set of bio-organic armour that conceals Archer's entire body, and with a design reminiscent of various insect species. It is a multi-functional armour crafted by the Engineers and utilized by all factions in World War III.

As an always-active Noble Phantasm, the Armour of the Engineers grants Archer permanent bonus modifiers to its Strength and Endurance, along with additional Skills. Special lenses grants Archer C-Rank Clairvoyance, whereas its proboscis grants Archer E-Rank Bloodsucking.

Four gun turrets are mounted on Archer's forearms and shoulder blades, serving as his primary weapons and a justification for him to be an Archer-class Servant. Due to being a Servant, ammunition produced are created from Prana and will not run out (so long he has sufficient Mana). As the Engineers' creations are stained with their grudge towards humanity, bullets fired from the Armour of the Engineers carry an Anti-Human trait that deals bonus damage to all Heroic Spirits of a Human attribute. Because this Noble Phantasm's owner is also of Human attribute, Archer's Luck is lowered to E-Rank by default.

...tWo... twO... SeV... uH...thReE...

True Name: SCP-2273

Servant Class: Berserker

Alignment: Chaotic Neutral

Attribute: Human

Agility	E+	**Noble Phantasm**	EX

One of the many entities contained by the SCP Foundation, SCP-2273 (named Alexei Belitrov) is a being from another universe. In his native universe, he has endured capture, torture, and humiliation. Although

he tries to put up a brave front, he is close to a mental breakdown.

Due to his experience with war, this incarnation does not intend to battle. However, his Master intentionally summoned SCP-2273 as a Berserker since a fighter is essential in a Holy Grail War. As such, Mad Enhancement stirs Berserker into rage by force, awakening his repressed trauma and guilt.

Class Skill

Mad Enhancement: B

Rank Up for all parameters, but takes away most of the user's sanity.

In Berserker's case, he becomes overwhelmed by his own trauma and guilt.

Personal Skills

Trauma of the Battlefield: – (A)

Normally an inhibiting Skill which induces Mental Interference onto oneself, it is sealed under Mad Enhancement.

Containment Breach Probability: A

Under normal circumstances, Berserker is complaint as a contained "SCP Object" and this Skill should not be applicable at all. However, Mad Enhancement forcibly granted Berserker a status equivalent to the so-called "Keter-class".

Extra-Dimensional Origin: A

Since Berserker has travelled to another universe once, he has resistance against attacks capable of warping spacetime.

Noble Phantasm

Armour of the Engineers

Scarred Living Armour

Type: Anti-Unit (Self)

Rank: B

A set of bio-organic armour that conceals Beserker's entire body, and with a design reminiscent of various insect species. It is a multi-functional armour crafted by the Engineers and utilized by all factions in a World War III that took place in another universe.

Although the Armour of the Engineers usually would have gun turrets mounted onto it, they were removed to represent the anecdote wherein the Americans disarmed Berserker after his capture. On his forearms and shoulder blades are the scars from the Americans' abuse, and they remind Berserker of his shame endlessly.

Without its primary method of attack, the Armour of the Engineers is only useful for boosting Berserker's physical parameters. On the other hand, his Luck rank is set at D instead. Supposedly, as he has been displaced from his native universe, the Engineers' curse has a less potent effect on him. Or perhaps he defied his fate of being one of the Engineers' instruments of dominance shift? Or perhaps Berserker found friends in this new world?

Danner Anomaly

Breaker of Dimensions

Type: Anti-Spacetime

Rank: EX

The crystallisation of Berserker's trauma and rage over the deaths of his soldiers and displacement to another universe, it is not something Berserker possesses in life. Instead, it is the weaponised embodiment of emotions that Berserker buried in life. Now that he is in the Berserker-class, his trauma and rage erupts and engulfs his entire body.

Every attack made by Berserker carries an Anti-Spacetime trait. These attacks are not geared to attack individual units, armies, or even fortifications. Instead, they are targeting spacetime within Berserker's range. Continuous attacks from Berserker in a given area may weaken spacetime sufficiently to break down dimensional barriers, creating a confusing battlefield on par with the Minotaur's Chaos Labyrinth. However, the destruction of spacetime will not open the portal to his native universe. After all, he never returned home in life.

The name of the Noble Phantasm, Danner Anomaly, is derived from the town of Danner, Wisconsin. That was the place he landed following his mysterious displacement from his native universe.

Since Berserker is ultimately a human enhanced by biotechnology and has no innate ability to break down spacetime, Danner Anomaly is essentially unquantifiable and given EX-Rank.

> My True Name is **`Father Anvil`**, Ruler-class. In the name of the Broken Goddess, I shall lead the final crusade against humanity's Evils in the Grand Order.

True Name: Father Anvil

Servant Class: Ruler

Alignment: Lawful Good

Attribute: Human

Agility	C	**Noble Phantasm**	A

> A clergyman of the Eastern Clockwork Orthodox Church, Father Anvil was once incarcerated by the SCP Foundation as SCP-2273. An unrelated incident allowed him to be freed from the SCP Foundation, and he eventually turned to religion. Although he never received Standardisation, Father Anvil was deeply respected by

members of his monastery. Although he died uneventfully, his ideals formed the basis of a greater movement that would unite humanity.

Despite getting over his trauma, Father Anvil insists on pacifism. He simply refuses to partake in the Holy Grail War in any capacity, not even as a judge (the role of the Ruler-class). Normally, by sheer will, he will not be summoned in the Ruler-class. The only exception is the Grand Order, the reversion of XK-class scenarios engineered by the Seven Evils of Humanity. In Ruler's eyes, the elimination of humanity's Evils is to unite humanity and cleanse their sins.

Class Skills

God's Resolution: –

The privilege of the Ruler-class to impose absolute orders on other Servants via Command Spells, Ruler is allotted two Command Spells per participating Servant in a given Holy Grail War. Cannot re-purpose the Command Spells of others.

However, since Ruler is technically presiding over a Grand Order and not a Holy Grail War, he is not granted Command Spells.

Magic Resistance: C+

Cancels spells with a chant below two verses. Usually unable to defend against High Thaumaturgy or Greater Rituals.

Due to Ruler's religious sect (Eastern Clockwork Orthodox Church), he can cancel any spell related to Sarkicism.

True Name Discernment: B+

Upon direct encounter with another Servant, said Servant's True Name, parameters, and skills are

automatically revealed to Ruler. Regarding Servants with concealment abilities, a Luck check must be performed.

Since Ruler referred to some former "SCP objects" by name, Servants who are/were "SCP Objects" will have their information revealed to Ruler, disregarding any concealment ability.

Personal Skills

Blessings of the Broken Goddess: C

A form of divine protection allotted to those who follow the Broken God (a.k.a. Broken Goddess, MEKHANE, WAN, Fu Xi, Father Serpent, Metatron, Hephaestus). Damage from Servants related to Sarkicism is reduced by 50%.

Because Ruler is from an heterodox sect of the Church of the Broken God, he suffers additional damage from attacks by Servants associated with the Broken Church, Cogwork Orthodox Church, and Church of Maxwell.

Pacifism: C

The temperament to oppose violence in favour of peaceful settlement. Ruler gains defensive bonus so long he does not kill another human being.

The low rank of this Skill brings from the fact that Ruler did engage in killing as a youth. He might have abandoned his warlike ways, but it pales in comparison to someone who disavowed violence and never engage in it.

Extra-Dimensional Origin: A

Since Berserker has travelled to another universe once, he has resistance against attacks capable of warping spacetime.

Noble Phantasm

Our Mechanised Salvation's Grand Design

We Are All Pieces of the Broken Goddess

Type: Anti-Mind

Rank: A

The crystallisation of Ruler's spiritual ideology ever since he converted to Eastern Clockwork Orthodoxy, it is named after an idea formulated in preparation for one of Ruler's first sermons in his monastery. Notably, Ruler is one of the few who preached for inter-faith fraternity and harmony, highlighting that all humans are components of the Broken Goddess. Ruler is actually bemused that he is given such a Noble Phantasm, for he was a man of humble disposition.

The effect of Our Mechanised Salvation's Grand Design is effectively an attempt to temporarily restore the Broken Goddess, using Ruler's philosophy as a basis. He can amalgamate the consciousness of himself and other individuals, essentially linking all of them to form a network for the Broken Goddess to be manifested upon. As the vessels of the Broken Goddess, the Attribute of all affected targets become 'Heaven'. They also gain a level of coordination, acting as though they were one being.

Since Ruler's sect is based on Cogwork Orthodoxy, all affected targets will gradually undergo Standardisation. However, Ruler's own willpower suppresses Standardisation. Even if he is a loyal follower of the Broken Goddess, Ruler never sees himself as worthy of Standardisation. Additionally, he might have acknowledged that other Servants might not like Standardisation forced upon them.

Our Mechanised Salvation's Grand Design requires all affected targets' consent. Should even one be forcibly targetted, the Noble Phantasm will fail. Since the Eastern Clockwork Orthodox Church is a heterodox sect of the Church of the Broken God, Servants related to other sects of the Church of the Broken God can resist Ruler's Noble Phantasm.

Interestingly, the concept of the Broken God distributed into many individuals is echoed in the Church of Maxwell. Perhaps Cogwork

Orthodoxy is not the only influence that spurred Ruler's faith.

Hiccup Jacet

Heh. It's funny. I always tell my boys, don't give your life fer the Foundation. Make some other bastard give his. But here I am. Fuckin' hypocrite, that's what I am. But nobody ever promised me retirement, so that's okay.

I figure I got another ten minutes before they make it through the door. Closest backup is fifty miles away, an' I know Barnes ain't gonna make it to 'em in time. Hey, Barnes, if yer still listenin', you better make it, you fuckin' asshole. You hear me?

This place is gonna blow pretty soon. There are plenty of safety protocols in one of these plants, but I'm an engineer. I know exactly the wrong things to do an' in what order. I don't know just when, but it'll take out a good chunk of the countryside when it does. Wait 'til after before you come in. There ain't time for anyone to come get me. Nobody's gettin' outta here alive, if I have anything t'say about it. Got one last bullet, an' damned if I'm gonna waste it on those assholes.

So, I don't know who else can hear me. Fuckers broke the receiver, but so far as I can tell, the transmitter's still good. So, I wanna say somethin' to the rest of you.

We are the ones who save the world. Not the doctors, not the council, no one else. Us. We're the last line of defense. The only line. Remember that. Don't die for the Foundation. Don't fight for the Foundation. Fight for the six billion folks who won't wake up tomorrow if you don't. That's worth dyin' for. Some old fart wants to play with skips? He can go fuck himself.

You ain't machines. You ain't tin soldiers. You're people, men an' women who do the shit nobody else can do. An' people make a choice. There's a damned big difference between doin' the job because you were told to, an' doin' it because it's gotta be done. I don't care if it's the same fuckin' job, there's a goddamned

difference. There's gotta be, or what the hell else are we fightin' for?

An' I want you to remember, each and every one of you, that you ain't alone. You understand? None of us are ever alone. We got each other. Every agent that's alive is there t'watch your back. No matter what happens, you're one of us. Doesn't matter if you're a saint or an asshole, you're family. You got hundreds of brothers an' sisters right there in the shit with you, ready to pull you out.

An' when you're alone, you're still not alone. Every agent who came before, every one who's comin' after you, they are with you. Everyone you ever trained with, everyone who's watched your back or bitched to you at meals is with you. You carry them with you, so long as you remember that you ain't alone. And you pass that on to everyone you meet. When we die, we deserve to know that we ain't alone. No matter what happens. We got each other.

Oh, an' one last thing. I'm proud of ya. If we ever worked together, no matter what else I said to you, I'm proud of you. Even if I ain't never laid eyes on you, just for doin' the job, I'm proud of ya.

It's been an honor, guys. An' when you come in, if this don't finish 'em off… Give 'em hell for Max Lombardi.

Hiding Beauty

He is taken aback when the waitress smiles at him. The steam coming off the coffee gives her face a wavering, ephemeral look. It's genuine. Not the smile you give a customer, but one of gentle knowing; a "had trouble sleeping didn't you" smile.

He wonders if it's a pretty smile right down to the bone, if the skin and muscle clouds true beauty, pale and gleaming. He wonders if that smile would be so friendly if she knew he was imagining her ribcage, laid bare for all the world to see, light trickling through to illuminate the vertebrae. Bundy could have felt like this, a monster walking through the world of men, unmotivated by money or desire for peace. Just wanting to imprint his own fractured reality over the world.

He's slipping and he knows it. He used to only think about the beauty underneath the skin once in a while. A passing fancy. It consumes him now, constantly trying to distinguish the bone from meat, mentally butchering those around him. Soon enough the butchery will stop being mental.

Sometimes he feels trapped. His skin too heavy, the muscle below restraining him. Breath is constrained by lungs. His organs are a weight that bends him forward, a hunch he could shake if only he were truly free.

It's odd, planning someone's death. It starts as a mental exercise, something he insists to himself is never going to happen, not ever. None of the meticulous ritual, the precise timing will ever be more than a fantasy. This is the lie he tells himself as he mentally runs down the checklist of when the waitress will end her shift. The map of her route he has pinned up in his bedroom says she'll be taking the subway, past that dark alley between the abandoned warehouses, in the district where no one reports screams to the cops.

The coffee cup is white, and, staring at the sparkle from the lights, he wonders if her skull will have the same gleam, or if he'll have to steam it; heat stripping the last particles of meat from between the teeth. Maybe a lacquer, to give it a glorious shine. Well, there'll be time enough to think of that later… He wrenches himself from that line of thought. No. Not yet. He doesn't want to walk away from the rest of the world yet.

There's nothing sexual about it. Indeed, the very act of sex disgusts him, too much sweat and fluids and the noise of meat striking meat.

The steam from the coffee fogs the window, and he can almost see it, phalanges glowing in the light of the street lamps, the eternal friendly grin of the passers-by. The world he should have been born in.

He sips his coffee and feels the patina form on his teeth. Still hiding beauty. For a while.

High Ratings

After what seemed like years, Mark woke up.

It hadn't been for lack of trying. Several times, he had felt light pound against his eyelids, desperate to get in. The piercing, searing sensation running through his head only served to make his sleep that much more confusing as he rose to his feet, disoriented and stumbling. The room was a blur, but he could make out cracked concrete, patches of mold, and an aged, decaying musk that burrowed itself into his nostrils.

Mark had no way of knowing how long he was unconscious for. Everything that had transpired before waking up in a small, locked concrete room faded away like smoke into the air. Only gradually did thoughts and senses return to him, most of them doing so suddenly and without warning. The pressure in his head ratcheted up, causing him to lurch forward a few feet, palm a nearby wall, and vomit. He smelled what he thought was breakfast in a puddle on the floor.

With the few seconds of reprieve throwing up had bought him, Mark snapped his head around the room, his gaze eventually falling on a rusted metal door with no handle or keyhole. A small pane of glass, no bigger than a textbook, rested in the middle of it. He approached it and tried to look at the exterior hallway, but the lack of light made it too difficult to discern anything useful. A shadow quickly moved across one of the walls, coming into view as a particularly large, healthy rat. Exasperated, Mark fell to his knees, his back hugging the door.

The only thought that broke through his piercing migraine was that he had been kidnapped.

How? He asked himself silently, eyes still circling around in search of anything notable. *Why would anyone do this to me? I don't know anyone that would -*

Images flashed in front of him. Ted, his wife's boss. Always looking for ways to dig his nails into their marriage. Always seeing how far he could push himself onto her before Mark stepped in. Always asking her to coffee, or lunch.

But is he capable of…this? Mark continued to question himself, running through every scenario and eventuality his mind could conjure up. When things began to finally make sense - when a logical, plausible theory came to him - a mechanical hum bounced around the room before evolving into a high-pitched screech, then finally radio static. A man, or what he thought was a man, started to speak.

"Stand up."

Mark didn't reply. He didn't know who this person was, or what they were planning to do. For all he knew, they were making sure he was still alive so they could kill him themselves. He carefully rose to his feet and approached the source of the noise, uncovering a small speaker fixed to one of the walls.

"Stand up now."

The inflection grew more intense. Given that he saw no other realistic ways to escape the room, Mark decided to bite. He cleared his throat and spoke in a shaking, strained tone.

"Who is this? Why am I here?" Mark inquired, allowing a little too much anger to seep into the words.

"All of those questions will be answered in time." He thought he heard the voice chuckle at the end of that sentence, but attributed it to his deliriousness. "For now, I need you to listen to me very carefully, and do exactly what I tell you to do. If you don't, there will be…consequences." The venom dripping from that last word was audible, and succeeded in shutting Mark up.

"In ten seconds, the door to your cell will open. You are to step outside. On the floor in front of this room will be a camera, several batteries, and a microphone. You are to insert the batteries into the camera, turn it on, and turn on the microphone. Do you

understand?"

He felt bewildered. Lost. "Why? What is -"

"Stop." The voice interjected. "Don't ask questions. Just do what I say."

Almost on cue, the metal door swung open. Mark took several steps outside of the room. Sure enough, all of the items the voice had described were there, resting on the floor. A dried, red liquid coated the handle of the camera. Mark did his best to not run through the possibilities of what it was.

"Insert the batteries into the camera and turn it on. I will let you know if your feed is coming through."

He obliged. The camera flickered to life and began recording.

"Good, we see your feed. Now attach the microphone to your shirt."

Once again, Mark complied. He spoke into it several times as a test.

"Reading you loud and clear." The voice paused; Mark heard somebody rifle through what sounded like a stack of papers. "Okay, now before we begin the game, I'm obligated by law to read a legal statement on behalf of my company."

Frustration bled into Mark's mind. "Game? What the fuck are you talking about?"

"We'll get to that. First, I need to -"

"No, fuck this." Mark dropped the camera onto the floor and approached one of the speakers. "Tell me where the fuck I am, right now!"

At first, he heard nothing. An eerie, almost unsettling silence washed over the hallway. Then, one voice, followed by several others. They talked something over, some of them speaking in a language Mark didn't recognize, before he heard one of them - the voice that had spoken to him already - clear its throat.

"I'll keep it simple." The irritation was palpable. "You're competing for your life. Do what I tell you to do, and you might go home. Or don't. In fact, I honestly *want* you to ignore me and fuck yourself over. Confusion is like…salting the meat."

Mark's migraine returned to him as he attempted to process what had just been said. Reluctantly, but swiftly, he picked up the camera, refusing to address his new observer.

"Good." The voice picked up a sheet of paper. "Now, the legal statement."

Minutes passed as terms he had never heard before were repeated in a cold, clinical tone. Death and dismemberment, loss of time, and prizes were terms that stood out to him. He took it in stride, pleading for the end of a nightmare that seemed endless. The voice finally finished and asked him something - it took a few seconds for Mark to process it, partially out of fear and partially due to the severe pain still rocking his head.

"Once again, I'm asking if you understand."

Mark nodded. "Yes."

"Excellent, then we can begin." The voice chuckled. "For what it's worth, I admire your tenacity. I hope you make it through this. But, well…stronger men have failed."

Mark jumped at the sounds of hundreds of metal doors opening simultaneously. The thunderous applause of a crowd filled the building through the speakers attached to each corner. For a final time, the voice spoke. It licked its lips, as if relishing a taste only it knew of.

"Ladies and gentlemen, children of all ages, all the way from Pennsylvania, it's Mark Hawkins!" Loud cheering continued for what seemed like hours. "I could give a big old speech, but you've heard it all before. Without further adieu, let's get thing started! I think this one will be *especially* entertaining."

Before Mark could pin down what exactly seemed off about that last

line, an unnatural, feral crying met his eardrums. He could hear footsteps from around the corners. Something, something close, was running.

The audience cheered. Something unspeakable, something awful ran at him from across the hallway. And, for the final few hours of what he knew to be his existence, **Mark never stopped running.**

Himinbjörg

Abstract: Contact was lost with Site-19 on 2 February 2087, following the initiation of a Category 5 (“Catastrophic”) Containment Breach Lockdown. Amalgamate Task Force 4 (“Götterdämmerung”) was dispatched to detonate the on-site warheads and recover survivors, as per the Lifthrasir Protocol.

< BEGIN LOG >

Sturluson: Status check. We all good?

Wagner: Check.

Lindow: Yep.

Byock: Think so.

Jarvis: Correct.

Sturluson: Right. Let's get this done quick – Nineteen isn’t going to be as friendly as usual.

Jarvis: The morale of Site Nineteen staff is not relevant to this mission.

Lindow: Just open the damn door, Jarvis.

ATF 4 enter Site-19 via a side-entrance connected to the site cafeteria. The cafeteria shows signs of use from prior to the lockdown initiation. Jarvis closes and re-engages the lock behind them.

Lindow: Great.

Sturluson: What?

Lindow: Spag' and bol'. Every time there's a chance for me to have spag' and bol', I'm busy with something.

Wagner: Probability anomaly. They're common nowadays.

Byock: What, do you have one?

Wagner: I've had one for a long time.

Lindow: What is it?

Wagner: Women.

Jarvis: Incorrect. There are no records of Agent Wagner hosting any anomalous phenomena. Agent Lindow is also present.

Sturluson: Jarvis?

Jarvis: Yes, Agent Sturluson.

Sturluson: Humour.

ATF 4 exit the cafeteria and navigate toward the Site-19 research wing, via the staff quarters.

Wagner: The doors should be closed.

Jarvis: Containment breach lockdown procedures necessitates the manual closing and locking of all doorways to restrict movement of anomalous entities.

Lindow: Manual? Can't the system close all the doors?

Jarvis: Site-19 does not feature a remote door control network.

Sturluson: It's because of the digital anomalies stored here, like **`twenty-five twenty-two`** and fifty-six seventy-nine. Can't risk them getting control.

Byock: Is it safe for Jarvis to be with us? Couldn't he go

full Hatbot on us?

Jarvis: Incorrect. I have not interfaced with the Site-19 network and cannot be accessed without physical connection.

Sturluson: If we destroyed Hatbot and Penny Royal, would it –

Wagner: This door's been forced.

Lindow: What?

Agent Wagner points to a doorway. The bulkhead door has been crumpled to one side. A corpse is visible several metres ahead.

Lindow: Her head is on backwards.

Agent Wagner searches the corpse.

Wagner: Her neck has been broken.

Lindow: No shit. She got ID?

Wagner: Donna Lystrae.

Jarvis: Doctor Donna Lystrae catalogued as deceased.

Byock: Lets uh, get moving before we're next.

Sturluson: Lets. We'll go to item storage first.

ATF 4 navigates toward Site-19's item storage wing. All doors are open, or are crumpled aside to allow access. Multiple corpses of on-site personnel are encountered, with varying causes of death. Agent Byock is forced to stop after encountering a D-class fused with an interior wall. Despite signs of containment breaches, no uncontained anomalies are encountered.

Lindow: Hey, hold up. This door's closed.

Byock: Isn't this Shapey's room?

Wagner: Yes. Looks like this door has been damaged to stop it from opening.

Lindow: Understandable. Shapey probably didn't want anything getting at him.

Wagner: It's been damaged from this side. Jarvis, can you open this door?

Jarvis: Yes.

Jarvis forces the bulkhead to ***SCP-1831****'s containment chamber to open. A dismembered D-class is scattered across the room; it is otherwise empty.*

Byock: Guess Shapey decided to bolt instead.

Lindow: D-class is, uh… number six-eight-four-three-nine.

Jarvis: SCP-1831 catalogued as uncontained. D-68439 catalogued as deceased.

Sturluson: Everyone knows what Shapey is, right?

Wagner: Higher-dimensional construct, part of the Little Misters.

Sturluson: Right, and everyone knew he could just leave any time he wanted, and there'd be nothing we could do to stop him.

Lindow: That's a good point.

Jarvis: Query. What is the point?

Sturluson: Why would you stop Shapey from using the door, if you know he can just go around it?

Jarvis: …

Lindow: I think you broke him.

Jarvis: Incorrect. I am fully functional.

Byock: Sure you are.

ATF 4 navigate to the item storage wing. All containment chambers encountered en route have been damaged to prevent them from opening; all anomalies are accounted for.

Lindow: This must be the work of an – stand up would you.

Byock: Sorry. Nerves.

Sturluson: Its fine. This really should be a Hammer Down job.

Wagner: Why aren't they here?

Sturluson: Too understaffed, just like every other task force. Which ones are you four from?

Lindow: Zeta Nine, Mole Rats.

Wagner: Rho One, The Professors.

Jarvis: Mobile Task Force Kappa-10 “Skynet.”

Byock: … Rho Nine, Technical Support.

Lindow: I’m sorry, what? You’re from tech support?

Sturluson: Lindow.

Lindow: Why the hell is he here? Why – have you even been in the field before?

Sturluson: Gamma five.

Lindow: What?

Sturluson: I'm from Gamma Five. Red Herrings.

Lindow: Great. We've got a trained operative, a book head, a brick-headed robot, his pit crew, and we're being led by a liar.

Sturluson: Watch it, Lindow.

Lindow: No. Why the fuck are you in charge? I'm the one –

Jarvis: Proximity alert!

The door behind ATF 4 closes. An unseen force strikes it from the other side, indenting the door and preventing it from opening. ATF 4 run to the item storage wing, stopping upon arrival.

Wagner: Jarvis, what was it?

Jarvis: Unknown, mobile entity.

Byock: Had it been following us this whole damn time?

Jarvis: Unknown.

Lindow: Sounded like a machine gun – five seventy-seven?

Jarvis: Possible. Data insufficient for confirmation.

Sturluson: It's nasty and fast, that's all we need to know. Nineteen has internal sensors all over the place, right?

Wagner: Yes.

Sturluson: Byock, will you be able to get into the sensor readings?

Byock: Well, yeah. Just need a terminal.

Sturluson: Right, and there should be one in the item

containment wing.

ATF 4 reach the item storage wing within three minutes. Four additional doors are closed and rendered inoperable during the time frame; the offending entity remains out of sight at all times.

Lindow: For a catastrophic containment breach, it's rather – oh boy.

Sturluson: Sweet easter. How many of them are there?

Jarvis: Thirty-five casualties catalogued.

Byock: Fuck…

Sturluson: Just find out if there's anyone left. If there isn't we'll just hit the nukes and bolt. Wagner, what are you doing?

Wagner: Some of the skips stored here could be useful assets. I'm seeing what is supposed to be stored here.

Lindow: Leave them alone. They're in containment, and the place is getting nuked for a reason. Or did you forget the whole reason we're here?

Wagner: To destroy all of the dangerous skips, yes. But the ones here in storage are mundane, if not beneficial. Example, **`one-oh-nine`**; a bottle that provides and endless supply of beneficial… It's gone.

Jarvis: SCP-109 catalogued as uncontained.

Sturluson: It might've been in testing when the breach happened.

Wagner: A shame. It would have been useful.

Byock: I'm in.

Sturluson: Is there anyone else other than us?

Byock: One.

Lindow: Fuck.

Sturluson: Just one? Are you sure?

Byock: As sure as the system is; one human-shaped warmth spot that's moving around.

Wagner: Do you know who it is?

Byock: No way of knowing. Could be a D-class, could be the site director – we have to check to find out.

Lindow: Screw them. We set the nuke up, and we get the hell out of here.

Byock: You're joking.

Lindow: No I'm not, screen boy. We're only supposed to rescue if we're able.

Wagner: There is no reason we cannot recover them. We are not constrained to any time limits, nor have we suffered any injuries.

Sturluson: We get the survivor, then we rig the nuke.

Lindow: And what if we don't make it to the nuke, hmm? Fat lot of good saving one shmuck will do us when stuff like ninety-five seventy-three is running around because nobody blew it up first.

Jarvis: Agent Lindow is correct. Nuclear detonation is the primary objective of this mission, and must be ensured.

Lindow: Thank you, Jarvis.

Sturluson: Jarvis, do you know how to start the countdown?

Jarvis: Correct.

Sturluson: Fine then. You and Lindow can go set up the nuke — set it for an hour, then leave. Me, Byock and Wagner will go fetch the survivor. Use your radio if you need us.

Lindow: Fine.

Jarvis and Agent Lindow leave the remainder of the group.

Byock: Isn't splitting up a bad idea?

Sturluson: It lets us multitask, and they weren't going to come with us anyway. Where's the survivor?

Byock: That's the odd part — they're inside a containment chamber.

Wagner: That mustn't be a survivor. It's a skip.

Byock: It's not. All the humanoid skips are accounted for; in their container, or dead. The containment chamber isn't registered for a humanoid either, so it's moved at minimum.

Sturluson: Fine, lead the way.

Several minutes elapse as Agents Sturluson, Byock and Wagner navigate to Site-19's Euclid containment wing.

Lindow, Radio: Sturluson, we got a problem.

Sturluson: What now.

Lindow, Radio: The nukes are buggered. Controls are smashed beyond repair, manual override is wrecked. Looks like our friend came through and disarmed them.

Sturluson: Fucking… is there anything Jarvis can do? Can he fix it?

Agent Lindow does not respond.

Sturluson: Lindow, can Jarvis fix it?

Agent Lindow does not respond.

Sturluson: Lindow, are you there?

Byock: If the interfaces are screwed, there's nothing we can do. We'll have to come back with a functional one.

Sturluson: Lindow, respond!

Wagner: She isn't going to respond.

Sturluson: And how would you know that?

Wagner: Because Jarvis isn't responding either.

Byock: Look, we just… we just get the guy, get out of here, right? We, we tell the others that the consoles were destroyed, and they bring someone else in to clean up, right?

Wagner: I don't think we have any other choices, excluding abandoning the survivor.

Sturluson: No. We said we were going to get them, and we're going to get them.

Byock: Well we'd better bust a move before – fuck!

SCP-173 *appears in front of Agent Byock. Agents Sturluson and Wagner maintain eye contact with SCP-173 while Agent Byock recovers.*

Sturluson: Get up Byock, we need to move.

Wagner: Blinking.

Sturluson: Shut the door.

Byock: Shut… yeah, shut the…

Agent Byock closes a door, obstructing line-of-sight with SCP-173. The door is struck from the other side until a crack forms in the door.

Wagner: It's going to smash through.

ATF 4 proceed to the Euclid containment wing at an accelerated pace. SCP-173 pursues the group, destroying obstructions while unobserved. On several occasions it utilises alternate routes in an attempt to outflank the group; the open doorways throughout the site enable it to traverse large distances unnoticed by the group. Agent Byock leads the group to the inhabited containment chamber.

Byock: This… this is the one.

Sturluson: You're joking.

Wagner: This is seventeen-three's chamber.

Byock: And it's got the guy in it. It's not my fault he picked this one.

Sturluson: Fine just… just get the doors open. Wagner, watch that other door over there.

Agent Byock opens the bulkhead doors; damage sustained prevents them from opening enough to allow access.

Byock: It's stuck!

???: Have you started the countdown?

Agents Sturluson and Wagner leave their positions, attempting to force the bulkhead doors open.

Sturluson: No sir. The nukes have been destroyed.

Wagner: It's not moving.

Sturluson: Keep trying. Byock, get over here!

???: No. You three, leave. The next group can fetch me.

Sturluson: Sir, you know –

The lights in the main room flicker.

???: It doesn't bother me. Just go, now.

All lights in the main room turn off. The sound of a door being destroyed is heard, followed by three snaps in quick succession. SCP-173 appears at the gap in the bulkhead, illuminated by the containment chamber's interior lighting and facing in.

???: Fuck you. I'll get out eventually.

SCP-173 disappears from view before the bulkhead doors are closed again.

< END LOG >

A Tale of Five Offerings

In the howling temple of the black moon's light
Five brave fools came in the night.

The first gave flesh,
The second gave stone,
The third gave the power to move when alone.
The fourth gave life and the power to think,
The fifth gave nothing

for he paused,

and he ***`blinked`****.*

His Clockwork Servants

"Where are His clockwork servants?
Where is the work of His hands?
Where are Her digital lovers?
What are His broken commands?"

Vasily swallowed hard as Father Aglayev wiped a slim bronze blade on a bright red cloth. The man's grey hair gleamed oddly in the flickering half light as he brought the knifepoint to rest lightly on the flesh of Vasily's left palm, and he muttered softly a question to which they both knew the answer. The chanting of the acolytes surrounding them nearly drowned out Vasily's reply. "Yes, father, I am certain!"

"How can we hope to rebuild Him
if we are still creatures of flesh?
How can we claim that we serve Him
till our bodies are broken afresh?"

Even as Vasily's blood dripped softly to the floor, father Aglayev poured oily liquid from a slim vial onto the wound, tears of pride in his smiling eyes. "Vasily, my son who I have raised as my own, I annoint you into His service. With this, you are ready. Go forth to do His work!"

"What marvels are in His remaking!
What wonders are in Her control!
His Broken Gears turn forever
restoring the penitent soul!"

Father Aglayev held Vasily for a moment in a strong embrace before helping him to his feet. "Come. Your things are packed. Go, missionary, and spread His Broken Word!".

"How can we not spread His message?
How can we not serve His will?

How could we stand in His presence
and let Him remain broken still?"

A few days later, Penitent Vasily Aglayev walked nervously down a crowded street, glancing at the people he passed. His father had told him that so long as he made it here by the appointed time, his duty to the Church would be done. Suddenly, he stumbled.

"In light of the bodies He grants us
what now are our fleshly ones worth?
Through Her intervention we serve Him!
Through Her we will remake the earth!"

Vasily moaned in horror as he felt something in his body begin to change. His father had-

He blinked.

Vasily twitched for a moment, and continued walking, pausing occasionally to touch passerby on the arm or shoulder, muttering His blessing. His step grew regular and a smile formed on his face as his clockwork mind realised the glory of the task before him. This was a blessing he must share! Already the sunlight glinted from the tiny gears beginning to form behind his eyes.

"We are His Clockwork Servants!
We do the work of His hand!
Those who oppose will forgive us
when they are made to understand!"

His Kind Eyes

I can't feel my legs. I vaguely remember I have them as I keep climbing with my arms.

I wouldn't be able to go on if not for him. He keeps me company, listens to me, and knows exactly what to say, but his eyes are what really keep me going. He has such kind eyes.

Then, he came to me and told me that someone was coming! I was so happy, but so scared, I was worried they wouldn't find me. I started calling out for them. He looked at me and told me he would go bring them to me, and he left. I was relieved, but kept calling and climbing. After a while, he came back. He gave me a sad look and apologized, telling me that the person had run away. I was crushed. He looked so sad.

A little while later, he told me that someone else had come. We tried again, but again, they ran away. I climbed and screamed and cried, but it was no use. He was so upset to see me like this.

When the third person came, he promised me he'd bring them to me. We tried again, and I heard them! I heard their footsteps, they were so close! But when I heard the crash, I knew something bad had happened. He came back, and told me that they came, but fell and hurt themselves. He wasn't sure if they would wake up. I cried, unable to keep climbing. He cried too.

Then more came, a lot of them. He wasn't sure what they wanted, but he said they had weapons, and he was worried for me. He told me to stay where I was, and he would try keep them away from me. He held them away for a long, long time, but they kept coming, and so he said he would have to do something more drastic.

He made them go away.

I couldn't understand what happened. Why did they want to hurt us?

Why wouldn't they just help?

I kept climbing, and climbing, and climbing, and finally, I did reach the top. I couldn't believe it, and he was so happy for me.

The door wouldn't open.

I tried, I hit it as hard as I could, and kept hitting it, but it wouldn't open. There was nothing left. I was stuck here, forever.

As least I have him. **He has such kind eyes.**

His Name

The second he opened his eyes, his heart sank.

His mouth was slick with a thin film that tasted like peppermint and batteries. His sinuses felt greasy and his eyes felt cold and small.

Amnestics.

Something had clearly gone wrong, but the fact that he even knew what amnestics were was a sign that everything hadn't gone completely sideways. With eyes that felt brittle, he surveyed his surroundings: Foundation dormitory, not a Quarantine Unit. Good. Not a room he recognized, but in this situation that didn't mean much. No other personnel. No obvious danger. No apparent injuries. The only sound the lazy buzz of an air filtration unit in the ceiling.

He sat up and the taste briefly intensified. Images flitted through his head like frightened birds, the sound of alarms and a panicked babble of voices, but nothing he could hold onto. Whoever had mixed his dose had done so carelessly.

"Or in a damned hurry," he muttered. He ran a hand down his face. "Well, let's see the damage. Not much happening here. All right, J… "

A sharp ribbon of pain arced from his jaw to his temple, but it was peripheral to the panic that suddenly bloomed in his chest. In times of stress, he knew it was his habit to talk to himself in the third person, to give himself playful orders out loud to lessen the tension. Not this time, though. Oh no. The anxiety of the situation had just gone sailing merrily into the stratosphere.

He could not remember his name.

From a great distance, he heard the tight hiss of his breath as terror coiled itself around his heart. A very tempting idea unfolded in his

mind. He should just get up and run. It didn't matter where. It was time to flee. It was time to dig a den, put his back to a wall, bare his teeth, and hide forever. His temples throbbed the word: Hide. Hide. Hide.

Mercifully, training kicked in. BACE: Breathe. Assess. Calculate. Execute. He clamped his eyes shut and inhaled as deeply as he could, exhaled till it hurt. Again, his lungs swelled in his chest. His body began to belong to him again. Exhale, the rabbit hammer of his pulse dulled. He sat and breathed for what felt like a very long time, and then he made himself breathe some more. He pushed down the desire for empty action. After what felt like an hour but was truly only four minutes, he let his eyelids, now soft and relaxed, slowly slide open.

Assess. He stood up, his movements intentionally slow, measured. He walked to the far end of the room and pressed his back against the wall. Assess. Starting at the left of the room, he drew his gaze rightward, forcing his eyes to halt on each object and truly see it, to receive the information each individual datum could offer him about his current situation. He fought the instinct to scan, and discussed with himself each thing he saw. He assessed.

- White wall. Blank. No photos. No personality. Not a personal dorm. Clearly general purpose.
- End table. Wooden. No drawer. Purple inhaler on top. Aerosol amnestics delivery system. Trigger warning on the front showing black. Already been used.

"Self administered," he muttered, unaware he'd spoken out loud.

Rightward.

- The bed. Standard Foundation gray. Still made. He'd been lying on top of the blanket. His indentation was still visible. Red smudges. Still tacky judging from the shine. Blood.

His discipline broke and he looked down at himself. He was dressed in a black button up shirt and gray slacks. His clothes were stiff with drying blood. His hands were tainted with traces of red. He must have washed his hands in too much of a hurry to worry about

fingernails and creases. He checked himself for scratches, cuts, any sort of injury. Nothing. Whoever had done the bleeding, it hadn't been him, but they had been close enough to share.

On the far right wall was a mirror and a sink. He shot over to it. Water drops in the white basin offered a hint of pink. He looked in the mirror. The face was familiar, thank God, but the maroon smears from his hands still made him look a crazed stranger. He stared into his own eyes, searching for an answer he knew he didn't possess.

"I really hope you didn't hurt anyone," he said to his reflection, holding the eye contact. The face looking back at him was harried. Exhausted. He'd always grown facial hair slowly, but his stubble had grown long enough to go from prickly to the beginnings of a beard.

"Assessment," he said. "You, my friend, have a had a shitty couple of days." He held his own gaze a bit longer, but the blood stained face didn't seem to have anything further to add to the matter. He turned his back to the mirror and leaned against the sink.

"Calculate," he said to the empty room, addressing the four beds as a professor to a class. "It is my calculation that I have been affected by some type of anomalous bullshit and gone and injured someone. I also calculate that since I am not in a cell or restrained, that I am in for several less than ideal surprises on the other side of that door." He turned and looked in the direction of the room's only exit and saw the note.

> don't read the report
> don't look around
> dangerous
> go straight to red phone call MTF

He immediately recognized his own handwriting.

He had taken amnestics once before. He had volunteered apparently. When it's your decision to forget something, they let you record a message for yourself for when you wake up. That time he had woken to a medic who calmly explained his situation and had left him in the company of his recorded self. It had been weird to watch. His pre-amnestic self had looked like some essential element

been ripped from his spirit. He had been sitting in a chair, but his whole demeanor felt hunched. His affect was as flat as a steel plate, but somehow his calm words felt like sobs, his unblinking stare, a wince. He had said that the amnestics were necessary. His post-amnestics self believed him one hundred percent and had never been too curious about what had broken that other version of himself so deeply. He had moved on easily.

This was different. This felt like theft. He was still in the middle of whatever needed to be forgotten. Whatever trauma he had suffered before, he'd shed like a jacket on a warm day. Just let it drop to the sidewalk and walked away from it. This was more like a tangle, a maze he didn't know why he'd wandered into. Every time he encountered something that had happened in the hole in his memory, he felt like a stranger inhabiting his own body. The inconsistency of his knowledge inspired a dread that was a low hum all around him. How could he know his face and his handwriting, but not his name? How could he be certain what else he had forgotten? How could he ever know what he'd forgotten to know he'd forgotten.

"And why in God's name was I cryptic with myself? Jesus Chri…"

His hand shot to his temple as a lightning bolt of blinding agony screamed from his right shoulder to the top of his head. His legs surrendered and he fell bonelessly to the floor, shrieking. The pain was terrifying, but also infuriating. Is this what he needed?! Some sort of insane skull cramp on top of all this confusion and fear. As fast as he'd fallen he leapt up, grabbing the sink and pulling himself in front of the mirror, and locked eyes with himself. The mirror shattered, his fist pounding it four times before he even realized he'd moved his arm.

Glass had found purchase in his knuckles, and rather than enrage him further, he suddenly found himself numb, stunned at what just happened. A single jagged blade of the mirror had survived his assault and hung like an icicle in its metal frame. He met his own eyes in it.

His voice was empty, toneless, like the voice he had heard on that recording all those years ago.

“Assess. There is something very wrong with me.”

He spent the next few minutes pulling slivers of glass from his knuckles. His numbness had given way to morosity and dread. He knew his self-maintenance was procrastination. He knew that whatever that outburst had been, it was what put him here. He could remember enough about his life to know that he wasn’t prone to rage. Something had happened to him.

He pulled the last splinter of glass from his hand with a hiss. He wrapped his hand as best he could with one of the gray pillow cases and surveyed the room one last time, his unwounded hand on the door knob. His tantrum had sent glass, twinkling and red, well across the room. He considered it a moment, and then collected the largest shard he could find.

"Execute," he muttered. He wrapped the pillow case around the duller end of the shard and, so armed, left the room.

The hallway was chaos.

The emergency lights were flashing, but someone must have disabled the klaxon. Several storage lockers had been flung to the ground and lay on their faces like fallen soldiers. Scattered papers littered the corridor, the occasional drop or smear of red punctuating them under the strobing lights. He stood in the doorway, listening for the sounds of destruction or violence that one would expect to accompany such a scene, but all he could hear was the air system and the rush of his own blood.

He did not recognize this place.

Nor could he remember the last project of which he was a member. The last thing he could recall was lunch with… a man. Some man. No name for him either, it seemed. He sighed and stepped out into the hall. His room was at the corner of an L-junction. He turned right, heading away from the lockers, papers, and hectic lighting. This way was marked with a red line on the wall labeled, “Command.” This would be his best bet to avoid any breached Containment Units and other personnel. He would follow his own advice and call in a Mobile Task Force. The fact that they required calling and weren’t already

on their way meant someone had tampered with the automated system.

“Wouldn’t be so hard,” he muttered. “ All you’d have to do is reroute power from communication to the perimeter defense grid and no one would…” His jaw tightened. It wasn’t exactly a good sign that he was so well informed on the matter.

The red line led him through several turns. Sites were typically designed to be confusing to those without training, especially if it housed human Skips. Breaches were easier to deal with if escapees were lost and confused. He, however, moved with the confidence of someone who knew where he was. Whatever information his mind might be missing, his muscles remembered. He barely noticed the red line as he moved towards Command. As he walked, he was met by silence. The place felt deserted. There were no papers or objects strewn about, but every emergency light had been smashed. The fluorescents above had been safe in their steel cages, but halos of yellow glass twinkled every twenty meters below each warning unit, the crunch of glass marking a slow beat as he walked.

He turned another corner and the ghost taste of amnestics whispered up his throat. The murmur of voices drifted through his head, this time with a woman’s voice in front, panicked, saying, “That’s impossible. I thought it was only with a K.” His vision doubled and he swayed, the heel of his bloody hand pressed against his forehead. When he steadied, he looked around with a deeper déjà vu than he knew could exist. He knew this place. He must have been here a hundred times. A thousand. He knew this place was his as sure as -

“As sure as I know my own name,” he chuckled.

The door was labeled Room 2841 and was the first he’d encountered so far that was open, even if only slightly. A dented folding chair was partially jammed under it, giving him only a narrow view to the interior of this his room, but it was brightly lit. Inviting. In the terrible tangle that his life had become since waking, this was the first familiar thing that didn’t fill him with dread. A thought of the note that his former self had written flickered through his mind before he dismissed it with an unconscious frown. Danger or no, this

was safe territory. He would briefly investigate, arm and bandage himself properly, and find a phone to call a MTF to come save him from this nightmare. At that moment, he knew for certain that there was a red phone right next to the stapler on his desk. With a minute nod, he stepped over the chair and forced open the door.

There was a lot of blood. Most of it was pooled around the head of the man lying on his side in the corner. The white lab coat was pristine where it wasn't sprinkled with blood so red that it all but glowed. Beside his head, face-down, was small sculpture of a sphere on an oak base. He didn't have to turn it over to know there was a plaque on the front, engraved with the phrase "The Worst Ones Are Spheres," a gift from this dead man on the ground in front of him. He had died surprised, a look of confused alarm frozen forever on his face, slightly distorted his newly concave forehead. He slowly approached the body and crouched down in front of it. He was certain of two things: This man was his friend and he had killed him.

But he didn't know his name.

There was nothing left to do. He stood up and walked to the red phone. He reached for it, but as his eyes lit on the open amnestics cabinet, his hand drifted to a halt. The deja vu was back. She had opened it. She… She had said that he was infected and she had run for the cabinet… and… and she…

Like a man asleep, he walked towards the purple, metal container. Purple was the color of all amnestics related equipment, but the color of the stuff was actually clear. All the worst ones are clear, his mind babbled as he opened the cabinet all the way and looked inside. Two of the holders were empty: one self admin, one weaponized. He had used the inhaler in the dorm. Who had used the other? He stood, staring into the shelves, not seeing them, groping in the darkness of his mind.

Though he stood like this for minutes, staring, unmoving, eyes wide, he gained nothing from it. His daze cleared and he turned back to the phone. He stepped towards it and something snapped under his shoe. He lifted his foot. Glasses. Her glasses. Not far off, the weaponized amnestic. The voices murmured, hers as loud as if she

were right next to him, yelling, “Containment breach!! It’s not just K’s anymore!! It’s jumped! ” He could picture her lurching towards the cabinet. He had seen her over his shoulder.

The images were rapid. He had run at her and she had shot him. Sprayed him in the face, but he had hit her arm and half the dose had misted uselessly to his left. He remembered the taste, peppermint and batteries and the way the world swung sickeningly in front of him as the drug sank into his nervous system. He remembered her panicked face. Her shouting. “My husband is named J…” She had flinched then, cringing away from him. “I can’t stay and help you. Take this,” jamming the inhaler in his hand. “It’s your only hope.” And he remembered wanting to choke her and telling her to run. Reaching for her and only getting her glasses as she fled.

Ok. All set. He’d had enough. Investigation over. Whatever had happened, it had happened to him and he needed help. Send in the cavalry. He picked up the red phone and an operator answered immediately.

“Yes.”

“I need help. There’s been a breach. There’s something wrong with… people are dead. Need assistance.”

“Verify.”

Fuck. Why hadn’t this occurred to him? He’d need his clearance code, followed by his name, if he expected to be interviewed instead of simply terminated.

“Ok. Listen. I’ve been amnesticized. I don’t know my name. I need some goddamned help. My code is easter, seven, griffin, wind chime, but I can’t remember my name.”

“Verify.” Cold. Emotionless. By the numbers. Goddamn it.

His eyes searched frantically. Something in this place must have his name on it. A report was spread on his desk. He was about to move on when he saw the phrase, “violent outbursts.”

“Await authorities,” said the voice, gray and hard as slate. “Do not resist.” The line went dead.

He barely heard. He put the phone back in its cradle and read the report.

> **Description**: SCP-3145 is an anomalous infection affecting people whose first or last names begin with the letter K. Vector for transmission of infection seems to be an airborne virus, though testing for the presence of a physical viral agent has been inconclusive. Early symptoms of infection are irritability, paranoia, and irrational emotional responses. Full onset of SCP-3145 symptoms manifest approximately eight hours after exposure, at which point infected individuals will become violent, especially at hearing a name beginning with the letter K. To date, the only treatment for SCP-3145 with any success has been amnestics specialized for name recollection.

Off to the side, there was a hurriedly scrawled note.

> newly infected
> Jennifer Bevan
> Michael Jones
> Robert Jandrue
>
> mutation????

His skull was a cauldron of agony. His teeth clenched until they would break. He dropped the report. He blinked, reptilian, shaking with rage. The shard of glass exploded in his clenching fist. His eyes moved to another sheet of paper. His handwriting.

> “It is my recommendation that until we know how this disease works, no one with any K’s in their name should be allowed to be part of SCP-3145 Research.”

And he’d signed his name.

> Dr. Jacob Jespen

This time when the pain came, it was greeted with a laugh.

Histories

There was a vast machine; a clattering and rattling, clanking and clicking, ticking and tocking machine. Its skeleton was plastic and tin, its veins were rubber tubes, its nerves were glass. Its blood was sticky red and pelagic blue and pus yellow and oily black and greasy-clear, pumped by the creaking electric bellows that formed the machine's heart. Lightning trapped in bell jars, sputtering miniature suns burning white-bright, nested among the gears and piston-fingers.

A man sat at the center of the machine, upon a reclined chair. An old man, whose eyes were filled with static, whose thin skins were crossed over and again with dark stiches, who at his edges looked smeared like oil paint. Pipes and tubes and cables flowed out from his arteries and veins, his spine, his skull, from underneath his fingernails and from underneath his rumpled, drool-stained shirt.

The door opened, and the maid entered the room. The machine sang its clunky, noisy song, and the old man stirred.

"Theo? Is that you, Theo?" His voice was weak, and he strained forward in his chair. His test-channel eyes stared right through the maid.

"I'm sorry, sir. It's just me," the maid said. She took off her scarf and her coat and her gloves, and hung them up on the coat rack.

"By God, Theo, how long has it been? Come in, come in!" the old man said. "It's so good to see you again."

"It's good to see you too," the maid said. She opened a compartment of the machine and unfolded the ironing board. From a second compartment, she began pulling out laundry

"It's such a shame that we couldn't meet at the Hart, like we used to. They tore it down, did you know that? They tore it down, years ago.

Went out of business, and then someone tore it down and built a new one. I think it's called the Queen, now. The Black Queen. It's not the same, not the same at all…but, I don't think we should let that stop us. We're fine as we are. Do you want something to drink, something to eat?"

The maid began ironing the old man's shirts. Their once-bright colors had faded to near white, and their threads had been worn thin enough to be whisper-light. Oftentimes the buttons did not match, having been replaced so often. He had once been very fond of buttons.

"Ah, fine. No, it's no trouble at all. I'll have the maid fetch you something if you change your mind." The old man settled back in his chair, sunk low. "No, I don't know where Edwin is. I haven't seen him in years, and I don't care to. I don't like that crowd he ran off with. Shady sorts. A man who puts money in front of friendship is not worth asking about."

The maid folded each shirt with exact precision. Each line was clean, each seam straightened, each bulge and wrinkle ironed flat. Folded shirts were placed neatly in a wicker basket at her feet.

"Though…I miss the old days, Theo," the old man said. "The three of us ready to make something fantastic. It hasn't been the same since you left. We could have done something fantastic, the three of us, but…fate, I suppose. No, I don't blame you. You were always the Queen's man first. I'm glad to see it worked out for you."

The pile in the basket grew ever higher as the maid worked with mechanical precision. Threadbare slacks and faded silk ties were added to the shirts.

"No, I, uh…business is not as good as I would like. Sales are down, and I've had a lot of failed projects of late. The Misters and Misses series never took off as big as I'd hoped. I brought in some people from the outside to help: they know all about business and marketing and shares and stocks. Synergy, too, they like synergy. They brought a lot of people with them, so now I have management. With executives, even." The old man bobbed his head back and forth. "It's all Greek to me, but they say that they'll help."

The maid finished folding the last item of clothing: long jacket that had started purple, been turned into a patchwork of quilt squares, and then eaten up by moths.

“I don’t understand it much either, sir,” she said as she folded up the ironing board. She took the basket and the clothes over to another compartment and stored them away.

“They claim it’s not actually magic, but I don’t believe them. It has to be magic. Though they are a grey and dull sort of wizards.”

“Very disappointing, sir,” the maid said, drawing a feather duster from a machine closet.

“I wish there was another way, Theo, but Redd’s dead. I had to put him down. He wasn’t right in the head, just like all the others. Every single one has been defective. None of them lasted, none of them *worked*. But…” the old man’s eyes brightened for a moment, and he looked to have a stirring of pride in his heart. “I have a daughter now, Theo. A beautiful little baby girl. I made her special, more so than any of the others. But…” the old man’s face furrowed. “I think she’s defective too. I think she is. She was supposed to have everything, all up in her head, but there’s nothing there. She’s a beautiful, wonderful child, but she doesn’t have the stuff. None of it at all.”

The maid dusted off a shelf of tin machine-men soldiers; Aged veterans all, who had traded their long and distinguished tours of service for the quiet, forgotten gloom.

“I don’t know if I have the stuff anymore, either. I can *feel* them, all inside my head, but I can’t *think* them. As if those parts of my mind are made out of clay. I try to bring them back, to light the fires back up, but nothing works. My other mes are as good as dead. After all that trouble finding them, working with them, picking them apart to find out what made us all tick, nothing. Nothing, nothing, nothing.”

The maid swept up the crumbs that covered the coffee table, so that the black carbon bits wouldn’t attract clockwork mice.

“All I wanted to do is make toys, Theo. To make people happy. Toys

help make life better, and people deserve better lives than what they have. That's all I wanted. But all I have is a failing company and a daughter who is stuck in her own imagination. She was going to make things right, Theo. She was going to make things right. Where I'd failed, where Redd had failed, where all the others failed, she was going to make things right." The old man stared out into the dim room, at the machinery that was his home. "She'll have the company, but what good is that? She's going to be devoured. You've seen what they're like out there. All the factories in the world, just eating and eating, forever, until there's no world left."

The machine's choked notes and flickering fires filled the silence.

"She was supposed to beat them." The old man's voice had an edge to it now. "She was going to beat them, Theo. She was going to *burn that damnable factory down to the ground!*"

The old man leaned forward as far as he could, holding out a shaking arm. An iron manacle, and a single link of chain, hung on his skinny wrist.

"Do you see this, Theo?" he shook his arm at the maid, his voice rising in pitch. "I was *chained to my desk!* I saw children born to mothers on the assembly lines and thrown into the furnace! I saw machines greased with blood, porridge made out of their bonemeal! The factories devour, Theo, and they will eat the sun! I cut myself free, I was free, *I WAS FREE*, but I never escaped! The World's Fair, the new name, the new toys, none of that helped! None of that helped!" the old man was screaming now, waving his blistered wrist about in the air. Tears poured down his wrinkled face.

"The factories are still devouring, Theo! They are feeding humanity into the furnace! What good is a toymaker when coffins come in child sizes? Why do coffins come in child sizes, Theo?"

"Children die sometimes," the maid said.

"No! No, no, no! Wrong! All wrong! I will not stand for it! No more, not again! No more child-sized coffins! None! I'm Doctor Wondertainment! I'm Doctor Wondertainment! I am *Doctor God-Damn Wondertainment!* No factory, no Edwin Dark, not even death

itself is going to stop me!" The old man sobbed, his wheezing breath choking in his throat. "But I *can't do it.* I can't do it, Theo. Coffins come in child sizes and I *can't do anything about it.* I can only make toys, and my toys aren't good enough. I can't save them. I can't save my company, I can't even save my daughter." His voice trailed off. He slumped back in his chair and was silent and still.

The maid drew an object from a cabinet and walked over to the old man on his chair. He noticed her this time, perking up his head just slightly.

"Ah, there you are, dear. Have you met Theo? He should be around here, I think he's using the toilet."

"I'm afraid Lord Theodore has to leave now, sir," the maid said.

"Oh, does he? A shame, a shame. We were having such a good time. Well, make sure to tell him to visit again."

"I will, sir."

"You've been such a help for all these years. I'm sad to send you off, but send you off I must. There's nothing left for you here. I wish you the best of luck."

"Thank you, sir."

"I left a gift for you in the kitchen, a little going away present."

"Thank you, sir."

The maid hovered there at the old man's side for a moment longer.

"You're free to go, dear," he said. "Don't look back. You don't work for me anymore. Go find something new for your life."

The maid took a last, long look at the old man, and pressed a finger to his neck. His eyes flicked, and then went dark. The machine's song slowed, and faded, rumbling into silence. The bellows went soft, the lights dimmed, the gears fell asleep, the pistons ground to a stop.

The maid stepped down from the machine and walked over to the hat rack. She put on her hat and her coat, and wrapped her scarf around her neck. As the old man had said, there was a parcel sitting on the counter, wrapped in brown paper and twine.

The machine let out a groaning sigh, and began to fold in upon itself, the old man it its center. It folded and folded and grew smaller and smaller, leaving bare walls behind it.

Emma Aislethorp-Brown stepped out onto the midwinter stoop and locked the door behind her. She walked away under the crystal sun, and did not look back.

History

There once was a D-Class from Matlock,
Whose dick was too big for his sock,
So he rolled up his sheet,
All nice and neat,
And proceeded to play with his cock.

I love you Susan.
I love you Susan.
I love you Susan.
I love you Susan.

FUCK THE FOUNDATION!

Bunkhouse Rules:
1 – Don't hurt each other.
2 – Don't steal from each other.
3 – Have each other's backs.

Dear Graham,
You are a perfect cornflower in a rocky desert.
Please be mine. – K.

Safe Skip List:
SCP-832
SCP-1930
SCP-1187 (Cool!)
SCP-2533
SCP-1379
SCP-1123 (NOT cool)

Happy 1st Birthday Connor!
2nd
3rd

To whom it may concern:
Please stop masturbating in this corner.
My bunk is just over there →
and I am tired of cleaning up your mess.
Use the fucking bathroom like a civilised human being.

PRICE LIST:
Mixed Fruit “Wine” – 1 candy bar
I-Can’t-Believe-It’s-Not-Brandy – 3 candy bars 2 candy bars
Actual Factual Beer – 2 candy bars

Fuggz woz ere

Party 2-nite!!
02/04/16 09/05/16 21/07/16 12/08/16
Free beer!
MUSIC!!

Don't forget me.

D35725 raped one of our bunkmates.
He is no longer one of us.

Kevin,
You made this place bearable.
I will miss you always. – G.

Like the autumn leaves
every one must fall in time
but not all today

- Graffiti written on the wall of D-Class Barracks No. 13 (Male), Site-19. Painted over in preparation for new D-Class intake, 10th September 2016.

Holder Of The Foundation

On any IRC server in any chatroom, PM an operator who appears inactive.

If he replies, ask to see the Holder of the SPC's.

Should he respond with a kickban, leave, and never come to the server again, lest the wrath of its admins shall descend upon you as a K-line.

If instead, he responds with "You have to consult an alchemist." reply quickly with "The psi folks tell he's not unlike a jester". Should you mistype, or should he leave the channel upon your response, pray for your end to be quick, for there's nothing that will save you.

You will then be invited to another channel, whose name I know not, for its listed name is pure black. In there, a parade of trolls most vile shall fill your screen with revolting imagery and enraging ignorance. Do not reply, and do not become angry, for if you do, they will devour your soul.

Instead, when one of them shall post a link to /x/, reply with "That is where it all began, and where it shall end." The channel owner will step in with a masskick.

Rejoin the channel immediately. A single man, his whois address set to localhost, will await you there. He will react to the sole phrase, "Choke on a goat dick." At that moment, the server will grant him a +o, and he'll begin telling tales of every bad SCP submitted, discussion clusterfuck, asinine wiki application. Should you retain your sanity, he will ask for your deepest desire. Reply with [DATA EXPUNGED]. You will disconnect from the server, and your chat history will be gone as if nothing happened, but on the surface nearest to your right hand shall lie a cartridge titled "Sisters of Cheyenne Point."

The cartridge is object 069 of 4132, and it is worth the twenty hours of net playtime.

Holding On

In a small room, a man who sometimes exists greets a man who should no longer be.

The first man enters the room with purpose, with pride. His clothes are neither grand nor humble; a light grey greatcoat and mundane jeans, with a pair of boots bought from a shoe store. He grins as he enters the room, seeing the other.

The second man is his antithesis in almost every way; he has no purpose, slouching in his seat like the small and powerless being he has become. His clothes have become ragged and patched over the countless years, scourged by moths and use alike. He looks up at the other man, smiling meekly.

"Hey," he says.

"Good morning," the first replies.

"'Nother match?"

"If you wish. Black or white?"

"I'll go white."

The chessboard had been prepared for the occasion. Pulling out a seat, the first man sat down and began planning his counter-attacks. The ragged man took no time to think, moving his king's pawn ahead two spaces. It was then met by its mirror opposite.

"You're copying me again, eh?"

"Good strategies are worth reusing."

The white queen was next to move, gliding across the board as far as it could go. The black pawn was in its sights; a Parham Attack. Knowing the quickest and easiest way to protect it, the first man

moved one of his knights to do so. White's response was to shift his available bishop so that it was able to attack one of the pawns at risk of the white queen. As soon as the bishop's location was confirmed, Black moved his remaining knight directly in front of the white queen - but not in the way of its target.

Grinning, the poorly-clothed man moved his white queen, knocking over a black pawn and placing it directly next to the black king. "Scholar's mate."

"A quick and effective move, like our rivalry. The first few times you pulled that, you caught me off-guard."

The black knight that had just moved to the edge of the board toppled the white queen, destroying the supposed checkmate. The grin faded from White's face.

"But repetition has become your undoing. You always open with that move - why?"

"Old habits die hard."

An attempt to renew the check was made, the white bishop claiming the black knight so it could threaten the king; but the bishop was far too close. The king itself stepped forward, slaying the bishop threatening it.

"You have made these mistakes before."

"Sorry. I just… default to what I know best."

"What is bothering you?"

White looked up at his opponent, having moved a knight to fill the gap between his pawns. The gaze of Black met him.

"… I'm dying."

"Impossible. You cannot die."

"Oh yes I can, and I *am*. I'm being forgotten; anyone who remembers me doesn't want to survey my stories anymore. I'm

being lost."

"You have the site. All your-"

"It's down."

The words were akin to a death sentence. Plans for the incomplete chess match were forgotten in favour of the more serious matter.

"… It will go back up, surely."

"No, it won't. Nobody devoted enough is left - it's down, and it's down for good."

"You cannot know that."

"Adm, *nothing had been posted since 2013.* The site was rife with flaws an' errors, *if someone was still around, they would've been fixed.*"

Adm didn't try to argue that point - the logic was sound. "You will not be forgotten."

"Yes I will. My stories are spread all over the internet, but nobody points to them anymore. There's no new content to bring in new readers."

"That is your own fault and you know it, En. You were too restrictive with your format."

"You've got a format too. Why did yours do better?"

"My format functions differently to your own. Mine is simply a method of organising information into a set order. Yours outright determined the majority of its content."

"What do you mean?"

"Repetition. You put very little variation into your stories - it was always the same thing, repeated over and over again."

"That's not true. They were all different."

"At their core, no. It was always '*Go to place X. Do a list of things precisely as said. If you fail or are unlucky, you will die. If you succeed, you get Y.*' You changed places, names and numbers, but the story was always the same."

"… You always were better at explaining than I was. You were always better in everything."

Leaning forward over the table, Adm slapped En across the face before sitting down again. "Do not be stupid. Comparing yourself to me is like comparing an apple to an orange. You have succeeded in places where I will forever fail."

"Bullshit. Give me an example."

"You have cohesion. Your stories all functioned together to tell a consistent, greater story. They all functioned together flawlessly - I will never have that."

"Your stories tell a bigger one too."

"But it is vague and random. Some stories work together to tell a greater one, but these greater stories usually clash. I cannot be the sum of my parts; I am only fragments of them."

En leaned back in his seat. "But that's what makes you great. The inconsistencies bring more to you, each with their own ideas, prompting further growth. You can't die."

"Yes, I can. Everything will die in time - immortality is impossible for us, though we may seem that way. The very ideas I attract will one day be my undoing."

En scoffed. "That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard you say. Ideas are what fuel you, how could it possibly kill you?"

"By incorporating too much. I cannot prevent myself from bringing ideas to me; the more I assimilate, the more that come. With each, a little part of me becomes more unstable, a boundary is pushed. I will slowly lose what I am, until I am only a specter of my prime. I will dissolve."

"But you can die in style, at least. You'll go out with some grand finale-"

"I cannot."

"What do you mean you can't? You've already got a dozen or more endings-"

"But none of them is *the* ending. I can never have a set, specific ending for all my works. Some will accept it, others will not. That is one reason *I* envy *you*. Because, like any great story, you *actually end*. As I said, I will decay without grace or style. I will be viewed as formless refuse to those I attract. Those who try to help me rest will only destroy my form further."

Silence hung in the air between the two. They were bound to their fates; one was dying, the other was doomed to lose his identity, and nothing could be done to stop either. Adm rose from his seat, turning to the door.

"Wait," En spoke. Adm stopped and turned to face him, resting his hand on the doorknob.

"Yes?"

"Even if you die like you say, you will be remembered. You would be viewed as a pioneer, the one to step into the unknown and tread new ground where none had yet been. Even if your story never ends, you will pass knowing that you had a great one."

"And so will you. You may not have always led the charge, but you are the one who started it. It is because of you that I stepped forward into the unknown. It is because of you that I became what I am."

Another brief pause ensued.

“You have met Doc, have you not?”

“… I have.”

“He once stood in your position, on the brink of death. But his soul,

his spirit, refused to perish. He held on, taking whatever ground he could earn… we both know how that ended up."

"…"

"If you wish," Adm spoke, "I can house you until such a time, or at least ensure that you get the credit you deserve."

En's eyes lit up. "But aren't I too out of date? I would be shunned, viewed as garbage, wouldn't I?"

"Roots will survive. My own still thrive, even if its luster has faded. Despite its weaknesses, it is celebrated because of what it spawned; yours will be too. I will ensure it stands under my care, unopposed, for a *very* long time."

"I'll take it."

Item #: SCP-53801

Object Class: Keter

Special Containment Procedures: Foundation net crawlers are to locate and destroy any digital copies of Procedure SAVIOUR'S ARK posted onto the internet. Individuals possessing copies of Procedure SAVIOUR'S ARK are to be apprehended and amnesticised as necessary to suppress public knowledge of Procedure SAVIOUR'S ARK.

Foundation staff are prohibited from attempting or executing Procedure SAVIOUR'S ARK, with the exclusion of D-Class personnel during authorized testing. D-Class personnel fleeing from SCP-53801-A during the execution of Procedure SAVIOUR'S ARK are to be tracked and monitored, but not impeded to maximize their chances of survival.

A standard cognitohazardous containment unit is to be on-hand at all times during authorized testing, in the event that SCP-53801-2 is successfully retrieved.

Description: SCP-53801 consists of:

- A topological anomaly, SCP-53801-A;
- A humanoid entity, SCP-53801-1, found solely within SCP-53801-A;
- An unidentified item, SCP-53801-2, in the possession of SCP-53801-1.

SCP-53801-A is a topologically anomalous extension of any building that it manifests at. The appearance and layout of SCP-53801-A varies in each manifestation, but uniformly appears as an unremarkable wing or section of whichever building it is attached to at the time. SCP-53801-A is only capable of manifesting within buildings that are intended solely for use in the rehabilitation of mentally or emotionally unstable members of society, and will only manifest during the execution of Procedure SAVIOUR'S ARK.

Any attempt for individuals other than those executing Procedure SAVIOUR'S ARK to access SCP-53801-A universally fail, with individuals arriving in, or becoming lost in other non-anomalous regions of the building. Because of this, information regarding SCP-53801-1 and SCP-53801-2 is retrieved solely from survivors of Procedure SAVIOUR'S ARK.

SCP-53801-1 is an elderly humanoid entity housed in a cell within SCP-53801-A. The entity is described to be constantly speaking in an unknown language, and can be heard from any location within SCP-53801-A. These vocalizations induce extreme terror in all subjects hearing it; whether this is an anomalous effect or a natural reaction has yet to be determined.

Periodically, individuals attempting to access SCP-53801-1 will report a sudden cessation of vocalizations; all such individuals who have failed to elicit a response from the entity by stating the phrase listed in Procedure SAVIOUR'S ARK have uniformly died within a six-hour time period from unknown causes. The majority of individuals who reach SCP-53801-1 are exposed to an infohazard that uniformly results in rapid mental degradation. The exact content of this information is unknown, but interviews with exposed individuals strongly suggest that it is a description of an XK-Class scenario related to SCP-53801-2.

SCP-53801-2 is an unidentified, possibly cognitohazardous object reported to be in the possession of SCP-53801-1, and serving as the intended target of Procedure SAVIOUR'S ARK. No information about the object has ever been recovered beyond what is detailed in Procedure SAVIOUR'S ARK, nor has it ever been retrieved from SCP-53801-1.

SCP-53801 was brought to the Foundation's attention by the Administrator, who submitted the original documentation of Procedure SAVIOUR'S ARK to the Overseer council. Due to the Administrator's status within the Foundation, he was/is not required to disclose any information about any relation to SCP-53801, how he became aware of the anomaly, and/or where he retrieved the documentation of Procedure SAVIOUR'S ARK from.

Wow! You've just found yourself your very own, **LIMITED EDITION** Little Mister, brought to you by **Ms. Heir**!

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First Edition:

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09. Mr. Hot
10. Ms. Sweetie
11. Mr. Life and Mr. Death
12. Mr. Fish
13. Mr. Moon
14. Mr. Redd (discontinued)
15. Mr. Money
16. Mr. Lost
17. Mr. Lie

18. Mr. Mad
19. Mr. Scary
20. Mr. Stripes

Second Edition:
Coming soon!

LIMITED EDITION:
Mr. Holder ✔

In any city, in any country, go to any mental institution or halfway house in you can get yourself to. When you reach the front desk, ask to visit someone who calls himself “The Holder of the End”. Should a look of child-like fear come over the workers face, you will then be taken to a cell in the building. It will be in a deep hidden section of the building. All you will hear is the sound of someone talking to themselves echo the halls. It is in a language that you will not understand, but your very soul will feel unspeakable fear.

Should the talking stop at any time, STOP and QUICKLY say aloud “I’m just passing through, I wish to talk.” If you still hear silence, flee. Leave, do not stop for anything, do not go home, don’t stay at an inn, just keep moving, sleep where your body drops. You will know in the morning if you’ve escaped succesfully.

If the voice in the hall comes back after you utter those words continue on. Upon reaching the cell all you will see is a windowless room with a person in the corner, speaking an unknown language, and cradling something. The person will only respond to one question. “What happens when they all come together?”

The person will then stare into your eyes and answer your question in horrifying detail. Many go mad in that very cell, some disappear soon after the meeting, a few end their lives. But most do the worst thing, and look upon the object in the person’s hands. You will want to

as well. Be warned that if you do, your death will be one of cruelty and unrelenting horror.

Your death will be in that room, by that person’s hands.

That object is 1 of 538. They must never come together.

The 12 Days of Site 87's Christmas

On the First day of Christmas, 87 Gave to me…

Tristan Bailey, putting up a Christmas tree. He had drawn the short straw, and was tasked with putting up the tree this year, which had been bought from a new tree farm in town.

"Eya Bailey!" Agent Ewell walked in, stepping aside from the mistletoe cautiously. "Merry X-Mas!"

"Same to you, Ewell." Tristan awkwardly stood the tree up and frowned; despite the fact that it was fifteen feet tall, it neatly fit into the commons he had set it up in, which had only a ten-foot ceiling. "…remind me to get Sinclair or someone in botany to look at this."

"Noted," Ewell said, sipping on some eggnog. "What all's happening in Multi-U?"

"Not much. We found a universe where… you know the Christmas Truce?"

"Yeah, that thing in World War 1 that made people stop fighting for an entire day because of the power of Christmas. Why?"

"We found a universe where it's a global holiday," Tristan explained. As he did so, a light flickered on the Christmas Tree, despite the fact that none had been put on. "Every year, across the world, wars stop being fought in honor of Christmas, or at least, a solstice celebration."

"And let me guess: the U.S. of A uses it to gank enemies from behind?"

"Actually, no. Here's what makes it amazing." Tristan grinned as he explained, ignorant as to what was happening on the tree behind him. "The League of Nations- U.N. never formed in this universe-

has *very* strict rules about it. Nazi Germany tried violating it in 1943. Hitler was dead by New Years."

"Merry friggin' Christmas, eh?" Ewell chuckled and sipped at his drink, nearly dropping it as he saw what had happened to the tree.

"Yeah! And this year is the centennial of it, just like in this universe. They're throwing a big shebang; Director Weiss has given a few people permission to- Ewell you're getting Eggnog on the carpet!"

"…look at the tree, Bailey."

Tristan spun around and stared at the tree. It had changed from a plain pine to a marvelous spruce, hung with garlands and candles and various colors of berries, and popcorn strings, and at the very top, an angel. Not one of the wimpy ones you saw on the top of normal Christmas trees, either; this was a many-winged angel with inhuman form, and if it were real and not simply a wood and metal reconstruction, it would have burned out the eyes of everyone in Site 87.

"…get someone from botany. Now."

On the second day of Christmas, 87 gave to me…

Two magic tomes were what Dr. Sinclair pored over come December 15th. Everyone else was distracted with something about a tree in a common room. She had work to do, dammit.

So, she looked over the two books before her, scratching her head. "No, that's not right… the translation should be direct… why mistletoe…" She sighed, and looked around the dark, empty lab, lit only by a single candle by her side. She preferred to work in the dark; it helped her concentrate.

She rubbed her face and sighed. Monty- Montgomery- was gone for the holidays; he was visiting family back home. So, she was in her lab, alone, with Christmas only 9 days away. The second day of Christmas, as her mother called it; she counted Christmas as the 12th.

Either way, she was alone, in her lab. She didn't much care for Christmas, anyway, at least, not the American version; now, the Germanic version with the Krampus, *That* was an amazing celebration.

She reached into her wallet, and looked at a picture she had taken with her mother in Austria, during a Krampusnacht celebration she had been a part of when she was… what, 10? She was in on the act, of course, but that didn't make it any less exciting.

Katherine Sinclair, at this point, looked back at her tomes. One of them was a book written by St. Nicholas. Because of course it was; things in Sloth's Pit always seemed to line up with the times. In Thanksgiving 2013, for instance, coincided with Hanukkah, so the turkeys in the cafeteria had become golems animated by a disgruntled employee.

Katherine looked into this book and frowned. There was a ritual here for summoning the Krampus, or at the very least, *a* Krampus. Were there multiples? It seemed like a simple ritual, easy to contain… and could provide valuable insight into Krampusnacht and magic used by Saints.

What the heck? She clapped her hands, turning on the lights in the lab, and started looking for test approval forms.

On the third day of Christmas, 87 gave to me…

Three baffled botanists looked over the Christmas tree in Common Room 3, who, in turn, were being watched by various Foundation staff who were taking time off from guard duty or experimenting to look at the researchers doing it. They had been taking samples of the tree for days on end, but so far, it seemed like a completely normal tree. Of note, however, was that all the mistletoe in the site, real and fake, seemed to be vanishing, and started disappearing the previous night, forty-four in all.

One researcher in particular, Chris Hastings, was looking over one of the candles that had appeared on the tree, squeezing it in his hand, smelling it, and licking it. "Beeswax."

"Of course it is, Hastings. What else would a candle be made out of?" Dr. Partridge, head of Botany at Site 87, rolled his eyes at the annoyance of an assistant.

"No, I mean… this just formed on the tree. And look." He broke it open, revealing a honeycombed pattern inside. "Looks like it came right from the hive, but it's smooth on the outside. Maybe it's something in the tree?"

"We'll have entomology look into it," Dr. Partridge assured him."Dr. Grant's been rather bored lately; Christmas Bees would be exciting to him."

"Why bees? Pine trees don't flower…" Chris took out a notepad filled with several possibilities, including "Christmas curse", "fair folk", "enchanted tree" "Krampus (?)" and "Just plain fucking weird". "I've been meaning to talk to Sinclair in occult studies about it-"

"If Dr. Sinclair were a medical doctor, I'd be inclined to call her a quack. But, she's not, so I can only call her insane." Dr. Partridge sneered at Hastings. "Now, let's get this back to the lab-"

"Uh, we can't, sir. If you were here yesterday, you would have known that." Chris nodded to a couple of grunts, who attempted to lift the tree; it stayed in place like it weighed as much as a dump truck, and one of the agents yelped as he strained his shoulder. "It appears to be locked in place."

"…very well. We'll set up the commons as a containment area, for the time being. Clear out, everyone."

All of the watching Foundation researchers protested; some *booed* like the disgruntled ghosts of Christmas. A few actually glared at Chris, despite it not being his fault.

This was going to be a *long* week.

On the fourth day of Christmas, 87 gave to me…

Four and forty sprigs of mistletoe, both real and fake, lay in the center of a circle set up by Dr. Sinclair in the testing chamber. A very

nervous-looking man from the cryptozoology department was assisting her, monitoring her through the chambers.

"You know, Researcher…" Dr. Hendricks swallowed. "I'm not equipped to do this. I honestly don't know what to do with half of this-"

"From left to right, EMF reader, Kant counter- though that's unreliable, at best- emergency Scranton activation switch, thermal camera, infra-red camera, regular camera, alarm button, and redundant recording devices."

Jason Hendricks stared trough the glass. "…you know, *you* could be monitoring this… have a D-Class do the actual… test…"

"Yes, let's have a barely sentient clone with organs that will fail in 30 days do a complex ritual that requires speaking in at least two languages." Sinclair rolled her eyes. "Anyway. This requires someone else to read the spell, so when I start burning the sprigs, read the highlighted section on the paper."

"Right…" Dr. Hendricks looked at the paper and frowned. "Didn't think Saint Nicholas would be involved in this…"

"Ol' Nick's the patron saint of thieves— *repentant* thieves, granted, but he was involved in some shit." She muttered a prayer and began burning the mistletoe. "Any time now, Jason."

Dr. Hendricks sighed, and read, feeling like a fool. "O'o'o yon mistl'to, hung on yonder tree… the ol' witch-god awaits you, kiss his lips for me…"

Dr. Sinclair expected the smell of burning plastic to meet her lips as she lit the fake mistletoe, but instead, all she smelled was crisp pine needles and Yule Logs. She gave a satisfied sigh, and produced a pumpkin, carved into a Jack-O-Lantern. "Herbst abgeschlossen ist, die Flüsse fließen nicht, Krampus, Krampus, Krampus, Kommen Sie…" She threw the pumpkin into the fire; it conflagrated instantly, and from it, emerged a being with the face of a man, the horns of some bizarre dear, and white, stark hair all over. It growled at Katherine.

"Wer ruft mich? Es ist meine Zeit vorbei." The Krampus had a cold voice, like freezing to death on Christmas Eve.

Katherine swallowed at the sound of his voice. "Ich heiße K. Sinclair," She was careful not to give it her full name. "Ich bin ein Forscher für eine Organisation, die ein Interesse an Ihnen. Sprechen Sie Englisch?"

"I speak English, yes," The Krampus grinned. "Your German is poor, Fraulein."

"I have called upon you to ask you questions," Katherine swallowed. "What do you know of Saint Nicholas of Myra?"

"That is not why you had your pet call me, K. Sinclair. You and I both know it."

She repeated her question, in more detail. "What do you know of Saint Nicholas, Defender of Orthodoxy, Wonderworker, Holy Hierarch, Bishop of Myra-"

"…he really calls himself Wonder-Worker now?" The Krampus snorted. "Very well. I shall tell you some information of him. I am bound by your wo-"

"Dr. Sinclair?" An unfamiliar voice entered the laboratory from behind Dr. Hendricks.

Hendricks looked behind him, and *groaned* as he saw who it was. Christopher Hastings, Botany, the great conspiracy theorist. The worst part is that he was *right* nine times out of ten, but nobody wanted to admit it. "Yes, Researcher Hastings?"

"…what are you doing here, Dr. Hendricks? Wha- ohmygod!" He dropped a stack of papers he was carrying as he saw what was in the testing chamber. "Y-you've summoned a Christmas Demon! You're intending to spread Christmas joy *by force* because we aren't celebrating hard enough! You're conspiring with the tree-people!"

"Tree- Hastings, what are you on about now?" He rubbed his face and sighed. "It's an *experiment*. We're seeing what information we can get out of him about Saint Nicholas, or something— it's

Sinclair's doing. What did you need?"

Without another word, Christopher fled the room.

On the fifth day of Christmas, 87 gave to me…

Five mugs of eggnog later, Christopher Hastings woke up in a daze in the common room where E-2512 ("The Christmas Tree") was, with Dr. Partridge having just come in. Not noticing the scattered mugs lying about, he nodded at Hastings and looked up at the angel on top. "Have we heard back from Theology about that?"

"Not yet, sir," Chris said, rubbing his face. "I tried to talk to Dr. Sinclair last night, but-" *They were trying to summon a demon to take over the site* "-she was in the middle of an experiment, so I said I'd be back later." *No, you idiot!*

"Very well," Dr. Partridge sighed. "Have we tried destruction testing yet?"

"Sir," Agent Ewell stepped into the room, looking distinctly yellow and frustrated, "I'd prefer if you didn't try to burn down an anomaly in the middle of a public common room."

"Who said anything about fire? We need acid-"

"I agree with Agent Ewell, sir."

Dr. Partridge looked at Hastings. "Christopher, you do realize the scientific value of this, correct?"

"Scientific value? It's a Christmas tree with lights that appeared when people got into the Christmas spirit. Unless we're planning to research whether or not trees can be living mood rings, I fail to see the value." He crossed his arms. "Besides, Bailey's the one who brought it in. Maybe we should ask him about it?"

"He's "out of town"," Ewell said, Christopher instantly picking up on the innuendo there. Dr. Partridge did not.

"…right." Dr. Partridge frowned. "I'll go talk to Father Plum in

theology. Hastings, you try to talk to Sinclair again."

"A-all right." Chris swallowed and started to head down to the occult studies laboratory. On the way down, he avoided Dr. Hendricks, and knocked on the laboratory door. Maybe they had banished it?

Dr. Sinclair opened the door and frowned. "Ah. Hastings. What do you want?"

"I-I want to consult you about E-2512. I believe some magical activity might be taking place in it."

"I suppose I could be of some help," She shrugged. "Well, come in. We've made cookies."

"…we? Don't tell me…"

Sinclair held up her hands. "I haven't let him out of the testing chamber! I'm not an idiot! But he just conjured an oven out of nowhere and started making gingerbread men!"

"…so you actually *did* summon a Krampus…"

"Yes! And he's provided a fair bit of information about Jolly Old Saint Nick. Absolutely fascinating— did you know he could speak five different languages? And he might be affiliated with Doctor Won-"

A crackle came on from the testing chamber's communication as the Krampus pressed the button. "Fraulein, either let him in or don't. You're, as you say, waffling."

Christopher frowned and entered the room, Dr. Sinclair letting him in. She looked him over. "So, you… wanted to talk about the tree?"

Christopher nodded. "You found my notes on the floor, I take it?"

"Yes, they were out of order and nonsensical. Something about a "Christmas curse"? Just because weird shit happens around here on holidays doesn't mean this place is cursed; it just means that it's a Nexus."

"B-but the candles…"

"Ah, yes, the beeswax candles. What about them?"

"Right here-" Chris dug into his pocket to take out the sample bag containing single candle he had broken in two- only to find two full-size ones in there. "…oh dear."

"Right…" Dr. Sinclair took the bag, and took out a candle, and broke it. Over the course of about a minute, two new candles formed. "Hydration magic, then."

Hastings raised an eyebrow. "What does this have to do with water?"

"Hydration in the sense that if you cut one, two more grow in its place." She made a mock salute. "Hail Hydrate!" She then let out a laugh, leaning against a table so she didn't fall over; as she did, she made the scars on her forearms noticeable.

Christopher groaned and failed to suppress a laugh. "…one: that was a horrible pun. Two: that was completely unprofessional. Three: I am ashamed that I found that funny *and* got the reference, and four… what does this mean?"

"I don't know. Several forms of fae, mainly leprechauns, use it to trick humans. And no, it's not really called 'hydration', but it's a much better name than 'duplication', don't you think?"

Christopher sighed. "It sucks being right, you know that? But fairies? Why?"

"I dunno. We could ask Bailey when he comes back from out of town. Until then…" She offered a plate of cookies. "Ginger snap?"

On the sixth day of Christmas, 87 gave to me…

Six hours was all the sleep Tristan Bailey got that night, and with good reason. For one, he wasn't in his quarters at Site 87; instead, he was in middling-quality inn in Sloth's Pit, known as The Elk's Horn. For another, someone was next to him in bed. The head of the Department of Multi-Universal Affairs, Dr. Claire Hennessy. The somewhat pudgy, red-headed woman smiled at him as he woke up,

dazzling green eyes meeting his plain brown ones.

"Hello there, gorgeous." She gave him a kiss on the cheek. "How are ya?"

"Don't call me that, Claire…" Tristan smiled at his girlfriend as he sat up in bed. "And I couldn't be better."

Claire sat up with him. "So," she said. "Apparently, that tree you brought in is causing a real stir back at the site."

"Which is exactly why I wanted to get away from there. Among other reasons."

"Oh, so I'm 'other reasons' now, am I?" Claire stuck out her tongue and got out of bed, going over to get her bathrobe on. "Seriously though, botany's got their head up their ass about it. Partridge is convinced there's scientific value in it."

"Which is why I'm avoiding the site. Partridge is gonna grill me about it endlessly."

"Partridge would grill someone about a pea pod if he was convinced it had "scientific value"," Claire agreed, putting on her robe. "Anyway. Shall we head up to the site? We need to sign the paperwork for the Truce universe."

"Yeah, I guess." Tristan got out of bed and began looking for his clothing "…why do my trousers have blood on them?"

"That's ketchup."

A few hours later, the two of them drove back up to the site in separate cars, half an hour apart from one another. Tristan paid for the room with a civilian credit card, as opposed to the Foundation one he was issued; he had lost it anyway. When he got to the site, he used an entrance different from the one Claire had used, and met her down in Multi-Universal affairs.

"Dr. Bailey," she said. "You're late."

"Overslept, madam," Tristan said, adjusting his tie. "What's going

on?"

"Well, for one thing…" Claire smirked at him. "You have visitors."

"Boo!" said a voice from behind. Tristan turned around and there were two copies of him standing by, one well-tanned and wearing a broad-brimmed straw hat, the other having a rather well-groomed goatee.

Tristan grinned and laughed. "Tom! Trev! What the heck are you doing here?!" He held out his arms, and the three brothers hugged.

"I gave myself time off for family," Tom said, "And Bright gave Trevor some vacation time over Christmas to visit here."

"Wait, wait, *wait.*" Tristan said to Trevor. "Bright the Bastardized actually gave someone *time off?*"

"You'd be surprised what being related to our dad can do," Trevor said. "Anyway. Less than a week to Christmas. We got stuff to prepare for."

"Yeah," Tom said. "Like… we heard you found something out regarding the Christmas Truce?"

"Oh, we've got a *lot* to discuss," Tristan said, grinning and heading off with his brothers in tow. "I've got so much new data to show you!"

On the seventh day of Christmas, 87 gave to me…

Seven days after the tree had manifested its anomaly, Dr. Partridge was grasping at straws. He was trying to think of reasons to keep it contained.

"It's a good alternative to cheap Christmas decorations… no… Oh, I know! It's… no…" He paced back and forth in the greenhouse, while Chris took notes on how E-28198 was developing.

"Sir, with all due respect," Chris said, chewing on his pen, "It's not even a safe-class anomaly. At best, it's an anomalous item with connections to the fair folk."

"Don't call them that, Hastings. They're Unclassed Anomalous Entity-Jakob-892."

"Well, UAE-Jakob-892 has a tangential connection with it, at *best*, according to Sinclair. If I were you, I'd give it up for the time being. Wait until after the Holiday is done to study it."

"…very well," Dr. Partridge sighed. "I'll announce that Common Area 3 is to be re-opened to the rest of the site."

"Right," Chris stood up. "I'm going to talk with Dr. Sinclair and Hendricks again. See if they've made any progress."

Dr. Partridge replied with a noncommittal "mmm", and Chris headed out of the greenhouse, into the abnormally warm December day. He made his way to basement level five, where he knocked on the door to Occult Studies.

Dr. Hendricks peeked out of the door, timidly. "Oh, Hastings. Come in…" He opened the door, and revealed that the entire lab was decorated with candles just like the ones Chris had brought in the other day.

Hastings stared. "What the hell…"

"I don't know!" Sinclair said, taking down a candle. "Every time I try to remove them, new ones just pop up! I was kidding about the Hydra thing!" She took one down and doused it in water; two more popped up in its place.

"Is the Krampus being of any help with this?" asked Chris. "Hell, he worked with the big guy in red. He must know something."

"Actually, Mein Herr," said the Krampus from a seat near the entrance to the lab, "The Wonder-Worker wore brown more than red."

"Oh," said Chris, before doing a double-take. "He's out of his cell?!"

"He can't leave the lab," Hendricks assured him. "Sinclair made sure of that. Put some kind of a… bondage spell on him?"

"Binding enchantment," said Sinclair, twitching slightly. "I've bound him to something in this room that he doesn't know about, and he can't be more than ten feet away from it at any time."

"…right," Chris edged away from the Krampus. "So, endlessly-replicating candles, a tree that can fit inside a room smaller than it… but what does it all mean?"

"We've been trying to find the source of the tree," Sinclair said. "But Bailey's been of no help; he's been spending all day with his brothers."

"Perhaps I can talk to him," Hendricks said. "Comedy night is tonight. You're welcome to come if you want, Sinclair."

"And leave this magnificent specimen-" she indicated the Krampus- "Unobserved? I'd rather go Fahrenheit 451 on the Library of Alexandria!"

"…right," Hendricks sighed. "Well, at least it'll be good to see the Baileys together again."

On the eighth day of Christmas, 87 gave to me…

Eight wrong addresses later, they came upon the proper tree farm. Tristan Bailey, Christopher Hastings and Katherine Sinclair all stood before the Terra Incognita Tree Farm- or at least, that's what the sign out front claimed it was.

The only problem is that there appeared to be no trees, nor a farm, and there seemed to be a distinct lack of anything incognita as well. Tristan frowned. "I don't get it. I *know* I bought it from here."

"Looks like you got duped," Katherine sighed. "God damn it. Why can't we have any normal holidays in this town?"

"We live in Sloth's Pit, Dr. Sinclair," Christopher said, breathing into his gloved hands. "Normal is relative, and in this town, it's a distant cousin five times removed that lives on Pluto."

"…that metaphor really got away from you, Hastings." Tristan

frowned, and stepped over the threshold to the farm, past the sign- and vanished.

Sinclair started. "Shit!"

Christopher's jaw hit the ground. "…did we just lose one of the sons of Tyler Bailey? Weiss is going to have our *asses* on a *platter*!"

Tristan's head poked out of thin air; his body didn't follow. "Uh… you guys okay?"

Sinclair regained her composure. "Right, just as I suspected… illusory magics. Well, lets… proceed!"

Christopher coughed, which, by sheer coincidence, sounded like the word "bullshit".

Tristan nodded, and vanished again. Chris and Katherine followed, and found themselves in a very different place from Sloth's Pit, Wisconsin.

It was colder, for one, and there was actually snow. There were trees everywhere, ranging from five-foot-tall Douglas firs to over 100 foot tall spruces, all of which had price tags on them. The largest pine tree was the size of a skyscraper, so big that the entire place was in the shade of it. Sinclair gaped at it.

"…Bailey…"

"Yes, Sinclair?"

"You bought a Christmas tree from a magic tree farm, and you didn't notice?"

"…I may have been *slightly* drunk at the time."

"Ah, welcome!" a voice from nearby greeted them; turning, Chris saw that it was a tall, white-haired being with pointed ears. He looked at Tristan. The being spoke in a soft, sweet-sounding voice. "Ah, hello. You left your credit card here, you know."

Sinclair and Chris stared at Tristan, who looked ashamed. "All right,

I was plastered. I had just lost a bet with that gambling addict in memetics. Gimme a break!"

"…you bet against Breaker. And lost. That… should be impossible." Chris rubbed his face. "That's beside the point." He looked over towards the elf, resisting the urge to ask if his name was Legolas. "…sorry, but… who are you?"

"I am one of Alfheimr. Your friend here purchased a tree from us for the solstice celebration." He nodded to Tristan. "He seemed quite happy with the purchase, but, as he said, he was intoxicated." He held out a credit card to Tristan, who took it sheepishly.

"Er, thanks. Listen, there have been some… complications with the tree."

"Oh?" asked the one of Alfheimr. "Are you unhappy with the root? Is its enchantment not working?"

"If by "enchantment", you mean "making its own decorations", then it's working perfectly fine," said Sinclair.

"Excellent!" The elf clapped its hands together. "Then I presume you only returned for the credit card? Or do you wish to purchase more?"

"…we're just wondering if it's safe, honestly," Chris said. "We've been… studying it, and…"

"Studying?" The elf frowned. "Ah. You're one of the Foundation, then. And before you ask, yes, we know about you. You aren't terribly well-liked, you know."

Dr. Sinclair's hand balled up, and she rubbed at the scars on her arm. "Look. We just want to know if something's gonna happen to the tree that might hurt us."

"Nothing at all!" the elf smiled. "Unless, of course, it was within the vicinity of a Krampus,. We don't terribly like those things."

Tristan and Chris stared at Katherine, who stared rubbing the back of her neck."Er. About that…"

The elf stared back. "Oh by the all-father… are you serious? Well, at least you didn't damage it."

"…define "damage"," Chris said, looking nervous.

"Well, so long as you didn't break an ornament… it should be- you broke an ornament, didn't you?"

Chris nodded. "I wanted to see what the inside of one of those candles looked like."

"For Wotan's sake!" The elf threw up his arms. "This is why my kind don't deal with your organization! You always mess up everything!"

"…how bad is it going to be?"

The elf thought for a moment, and simply said, "Do you have the means to escape a universe at your disposal?"

Tristan spoke up. "…as a matter of fact, yes."

"Then I suggest you all run into there and escape this one." With that, the elf walked off.

Tristan stared. "…did I just instigate an XK scenario?"

"He was probably exaggerating. I'll ask the Krampus about it tomorrow," Katherine said, smiling nervously.

On the ninth day of Christmas, 87 gave to me…

Nine minutes of swearing and cursing in German later, the Krampus stared at Katherine. "The tree is from Alfheim?!"

"Yes…"

"And you broke its ornamentation?! Around me! Oh for the love of…" He rubbed his face. "You need to banish me. Now. It might help."

"What's going to happen?" Katherine said. "Tell me. What is going to happen if we don't?"

"Oh, nothing much. Just a Christmas tree coming to life and trying to kill me."

Katherine's expression went flat. "…I believe you."

"Really? No flat "what" reaction?"

"This is Sloth's Pit, Wisconsin. Last Thanksgiving, we had animate turkey corpses attack the site. At this point, *nothing* surprises me."

"Right…" The Krampus rubbed his face. "All-father isn't exactly pleased with the Wonder-Maker intruding upon his territory."

"…how is Santa Claus intruding on Odin's territory?"

"Think about it. Leader of an important organization in the north, all sorts of servants of lower class than him, great flowing beard…"

Katherine sighed and dug some aspirin out of her pocket, rubbing her scars as she swallowed it. "Right, so. Either we watch you duel to the death with a Christmas tree from Valhalla, or we banish you and let said Christmas tree tear us apart."

"That's the long and short of it," said the Krampus, biting the head off of a gingerbread man.

"…in all honesty, I'd rather have you here. We stand a better chance if we have something to fight against it."

"I was afraid you'd say that." The Krampus sighed. "I'm willing to bet that spirits of *other* holidays don't have to put up with this."

Katherine shrugged, and was about to respond, when there was a knock on the door of the lab. She peeked outside, and saw all three of the Bailey brothers outside. "…what do you want?"

"We hear our brother screwed up," Trevor said, poking Tristan in the side.

Tom nodded, giving Tristan a noogie. "We wanted to see if there was any way we can help un-screw it up."

"…right, okay… this is going to need some planning…"

On the tenth day of Christmas, 87 gave to me…

"That's at least ten sprigs of mistletoe I've seen you hang today, all of which are from *my greenhouse.*." Dr. Partridge frowned at Tom Bailey. 'What exactly are you playing at? Do you want the entire site to start gluing their faces together?"

"Quite frankly, we're trying to prevent the site from being destroyed by a psychotic Christmas tree." Tom started to hang the mistletoe from the door to the entomology wing.

"Again?"

"Hush," Tom frowned as he hung the mistletoe from a strand of red string."The Christmas of 2008 never happened. We all agreed on it."

"There was Christmas in 2008?" Snarked Tristan as he passed by, putting up sacrificial gingerbread men along the hallway. Tom pointed at Tristan, Tristan pointed at Tom, and they both went "aaaaay!"

"…I will never understand how Tyler Bailey could produce sons like you…" Dr. Partridge shook his head, and started walking off.

As he went, Tom shouted after, "Y'know, our mom might have had something to do with that!"

Tristan laughed, and continued pinning the cookies to the walls. Tom looked over at him. "So, Weiss is still… relatively lenient, I see."

"Anything for the good of the site, Tom." Tristan smiled.

"Not exactly what I meant." Tom shook his head. "By the way, point of interest: Trevor hung some mistletoe over Dr. Hennessy's office."

Tristan frowned. "…and this is relevant to me *how*, Thomas?"

"And I know you're bullshitting me! You only call me Thomas when

you're bullshitting me."

Tristan sighed. "Is it that obvious?"

"Tristan, the stain on your collar is the same color as her lipstick. On a related note, wash your fucking shirt once in a while."

"…look, if anyone at the Site finds out, Claire will be *ruined*. Think about it, the head of Multi-U sleeping with the kid of the person who invented the MUTA…"

"Could be worse," Tom said. "You could be a chick." Tristan threw a gingerbread cookie at the back of Tom's head; he winced as it collided. "What was that for?!"

"For reminding me there's a universe where we're the Bailey *sisters*." Tristan shivered.

Trevor walked by at this point. "…I dunno. I thought that I was kind of hot in that universe."

"Of course you would think that," Tom said, going on to the next doorway to put up some mistletoe. "Right, so, we have less than a day until that tree wakes up. Is the site going to be evacuated?"

"Probably," Trevor said. "It's the safest thing to do."

"And we're going to miss an all-out brawl between two holiday spirits?" Tom frowned. "Dang it."

"I'll see if we can at least get the security footage of it after the fact," Tristan said. "Has Hastings figured out how to move the tree yet, by the way?"

"He's working on it." Tom paused meaningfully as he heard a chainsaw rev up from the direction of Common Area 3, followed by the scream of a D-Class as the kickback of said saw made him lose an arm.

"…well, at least this Christmas won't be green," Tristan said, pinning another Gingerbread man to the wall.

On the eleventh day of Christmas, 87 gave to me…

At 11:00 in the morning, all hell broke loose at Site 87.

The majority of the site had evacuated the night before, but a few had stayed behind, all by choice, in order to study the events. From botany, Dr. Partridge and Christopher Hastings were there to observe the tree's behavior; from Occult Studies, Dr. Sinclair and (reluctantly) Dr. Hendricks, to keep the Krampus in check; and from Multi-Universal Affairs, the Bailey Brothers, ready to shove both the Krampus and the Tree in the Multi-Universal Transit Array if the need arose.

"Right," Dr. Partridge said. "Explain to me how this all works again."

"The gingerbread cookies will act as sacrifices for the Krampus in place of blood sacrifices," Sinclair explained, "and will empower it to fight E-2512. The mistletoe acts as a mechanism to contain E-2512, (in theory, at least), the bottles of Coca-Cola will act as the spiced wine for the banishing ritual for the tree-"

"Magic, got it."

Katherine frowned. He wasn't incorrect, but why bother asking in the first place?

Meanwhile, in a parallel universe that actually had facilities to contain a psychotic Christmas tree and had done so before, Tristan Bailey was meeting with his counterpart. Or at least, he thought it was his counterpart.

"God, that goatee looks ugly," Tristan said to his other self.

"Yeah, I know," said Tristan-2. "I'm thinking of shaving it off."

"Oy!" Trevor said, having an identical goatee to Tristan-2.

"But it looks good on you!" Both Tristan and Tristan-2 said, blatantly lying.

«Are you jackasses ready to contain this thing,» Asked Dr.

Hendricks over their earpieces, «Or is this going to be 2008 all over again?»

"What happened in 2008?" asked Tom-2, pushing up his glasses.

"Do you have a paleontology department at 87 in this universe?" Tom asked, adjusting his hat.

"Yeah?"

"We don't have one in our universe anymore."

"…yikes," Trevor-2 said, fiddling with his own straw hat.

Meanwhile, in our universe, the Krampus stepped into Common Area 3, nostrils flaring as it bit the head off of a gingerbread man. The tree simply stood there, taunting him.

"Well?"

No response from the tree.

"Come on, I know that you want to do this. I'm a spirit of a Holiday, you're a Christmas Tree. Just get it over with already."

More silence. Dr. Partridge coughed from behind. "See if you can get a sample of its needles."

The Krampus turned its head to say something along the lines of "piss off", and got blindsided by a sucker punch from the Christmas Tree, which had grown arms and legs and had leaped forward to attack the creature.

It was at this point that Christopher Hastings finally began to question the choices in his life that had led him up to this point. He would have questioned it more, had a blast of energy not come from the tree topper and hit Dr. Partridge in the chest, sending him sprawling.

At that point, Chris started running away. The Krampus stayed behind to fight, peppermint-scented blood dripping from the wounds

as he was pushed back to the first mistletoe barrier. The tree let out a screech and attempted to muscle through the wall created by the sprigs of berries, and fired a ball of green energy through it, obliterating the barrier.

The Krampus dove out of the way in time, and the ball hit the ceiling, causing it to sprout pine needles, which then started to rain down on the Krampus, impaling the creature and pinning it to the ground.

He would recover, but not before the Christmas Tree tore apart the entire site looking for the one who damaged it.

Chris ran all the way down to Multi-U, leaving the doors to the stairwells open on every level so that the tree would search the entire facility until it found him. He just hoped Dr. Sinclair was right about the tree wanting to get him after it took out Krampus, and as it turned out, she was.

He just didn't count on the tree being able to use the elevator. He gawked as the doors to the one on the Multi-U level opened, and a fifteen-foot-tall tree thing stepped out, the topper glowing bright red and green.

"…I *hate* this job."

He started running, but he was out of breath from going down about a dozen flights of stairs. Arcs of red and green light went over his head, impacting on the walls and turning into pine needles, holly, myrrh, frankincense, and it occurred to Chris that he should stop identifying the various Christmas-related plants and run for his life.

As he ran down the corridor, panting loudly, he drew a sprig of mistletoe from his pocket and held it in front of him like Van Helsing would hold a cross to Dracula. Unfortunately, at the moment, the tree was acting more like Alucard. It simply kept lumbering towards him, and the entrance to the MUTA was over fifty yards away. He could run for it…

But it was too late. Christopher was knocked to the ground by a blast of green light hitting the hand with mistletoe in it. He yelped in

pain as he felt pine needles grow through his hand. The mistletoe sprig was thrown to the ceiling above the tree, where it clung.

An entire bush of mistletoe burst from the modular ceiling, toppling the tree to the ground where it flailed about, unable to regain its footing. Christopher Hastings was somewhat aware of this as he blacked out.

"Hastings? Hastings!"

Christopher was awoken by a slap to the face. Dr. Sinclair stood in front of him, smiling. "Oh thank God! We thought you were dead!"

Christopher blinked awake, looking around. The Christmas Tree was flailing about on the ground, and as being loaded up onto a small cart by six Bailey triplets, with Dr. Hendricks assisting, lining the cart with mistletoe just to make sure. Chris as he looked at his arm; it was bloody, covered with pine needles which had burst outwards from under the skin. "Son of a *bitch!*"

"We're getting you to surgery." Katherine looked up at the mistletoe bush sprouting from the ceiling. "Fascinating… The blasts appear to have transfigured parts of the site into holiday-related plants, including mistletoe. It hoisted itself by its own petard."

Christopher blanched as he realized something, standing up slowly. "…Dr. Partridge got hit…"

"*Hell*."

They ran (or, in Chris's case, hobbled) off to where Dr. Partridge had fallen, only to find an odd, small shrub where his body was. Christopher stepped over to inspect the plant. "…small tree of the genus *pyrus*."

"English, please?"

"Dr. Partridge is a pear tree."

Katherine wanted to laugh, but all she could do was scream impotently.

On the twelfth day of Christmas, 87 gave to me…

Twelve piles of paperwork stood before the various members of various departments. One for incident reports, one for casualties sustained, one for property damage, and so on. There was only two casualties for the whole thing, thank god, and even then, Dr. Partridge had already regained sapience and the ability to talk, but was excused from doing paperwork for the time being.

"Because of course he is," muttered Chris, doing two piles worth of paperwork at the same time.

"What do you expect, Hastings?" Tom sighed, filling out Containment Form 281-C while Tristan next to him filled out Multi-Universal Negotiation Form 88-B. "He got turned into a fucking tree. He has an excuse."

"My subdermis got turned into a conifer!" Chris held up his arm, which was in a sling, wincing as he did so. "Ffffffff….."

Dr. Sinclair sighed at him, getting up from a finished pile of paperwork regarding cross-contamination of anomalous objects. "I can take care of a few sheets, if you want. Just expect calls from me when it comes to requisitioning stuff."

"Egh…. thanks, Sinclair. You're a lifesaver." He sighed. "Merry Christmas, eh?"

"Oh, by the way," Trevor said, filling out the paperwork he had oh his tablet. "You might want to come down to Multi-U tonight. We've got a present for you all."

"How'd you feel about going to an alternate universe for Christmas?" asked Tristan.

"…I've had enough Christmas anomalies for one year," Christopher said, heading out.

The three brothers snickered as Chris exited the room, limping slightly as he headed down to the occult studies laboratory, just to check on something related to Christmas. When he arrived there, he

found the Krampus, as he expected, but also someone else.

Standing with the Krampus, talking to it, was a young woman with bright red hair and green eyes, wearing the ugliest Christmas sweater that Chris had ever seen, along with a hat that had a fake set of elf ears on it. She grinned manically as she talked. "…good thing we had Emma to fill in for you; we nearly made a botch of the whole thing!"

"My apologies, mein chef," the Krampus said, bowing to her. "I was indisposed."

"Did you really fight a Christmas tr-" she blinked as she noticed Christopher standing in the doorway. "Why, hello! Merry Christmas to you!"

"Uh," Christopher blinked. "Are you… authorized to be in here?"

"Well, this place has Christmas decorations all around, and my friend is here." She grinned. "I don't see why I *wouldn't* be allowed in here."

Chris laughed for no good reason. He didn't know why he laughed, something about the woman just filled him with an odd kind of joy. "Right, okay, uh. I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask you to- haha- leave."

"Fair enough. I'm just here to collect my friend." She rummaged around the lab. "Let's see…. where'd she put that…. ah-ha!" She reached into a drawer and picked up a beaker, which had an odd glow about it. She took it in her hands and motioned the Krampus closer. "Not a half-bad binding spell, if I do say so myself. This doctor has some potential." She gave a grin to Chris. "Right, we must be off. Merry Christmas to all, and to all a good night!"

With that, the woman and the Krampus disappeared behind one of the lab counters like they were walking down a set of stairs. When he came to look at it, they were both gone entirely.

At this point, Christopher decided that, even though it was only 1:00 in the afternoon, he needed a drink.

That evening, everyone at Site 87 wore Christmas sweaters that were almost as ugly as the one worn by the odd woman in occult studies. There was even a contest for who had the ugliest one (which the Baileys won), and the whole site drank several mugs of eggnog.

As he was drinking his seventh (or was it eighth?) mug of eggnog, Christopher Hastings passed by a new Christmas tree which had hastily been erected in Common Area 3, and noticed something. Under the Christmas tree was a present, which had a tag that read as such:

> To: Christopher Hastings
> From: Dr. W. and Herr K.

Raising an eyebrow, he took the present out from under the tree, noticing that there was a present like this for Sinclair, the three Baileys, and Dr. Hennessy, oddly enough. He shrugged, and unwrapped his gift.

Inside was a framed picture that he swore was never taken, of himself, the three Baileys, Dr. Sinclair, and several other Site-87 staff members, all in Christmas attire. He saw the message at the bottom of the frame:

"May your Christmas Spirit be Uncontained."

He laughed, and walked out of the room, picture under his arm.

Holy Mackerel

We rolling?

I saw you brought some scotch. You have any coldpost or any other mnestics handy? It's been eight hours since my last dose. No? Fine. The scotch will do.

I'll recite the entry from memory first. Then I'll describe my initial reaction to it.

Ahem!

…

Item #: SCP-XXXX

Object Class: Euclid/Apollyon

Special Containment Procedures:
IRRELEVANT.

Description: SCP-XXXX is an antimemetic land dwelling coral reef

located seven kilometers north of [REDACTED]. It contains eighteen species of airborne fish, including three resembling mackerel.

…what?

That was the entire entry. I stood utterly confused by this oddity, this idea of a joke. Send me to create a goddamn paper on some goddamn template that made the system. This is not an SCP. It's even labeled with Xs instead of numbers. Why is this even in the database?! Surely Rosen and his AIC monkeys would not let their bots consider this a real entry. Dosen't even have a proper classification, and who in the hell thinks antimemes are real? They're a theoretical subject discussed in seminars.

You are getting this on tape, aren't you? Good.

Those were my initial thoughts. Confused ranting, is all. But now I've grown wise. There's seriously something wrong with the Foundation. Something is rotting, I can taste it. It's acrid, a moldy lemon poached in battery acid.

This bum Willendorf was trying to create something called Operation ARCTIC CIRCLE. There's people in the higher ups convinced something is eating documentation as easily as a person would shovel chips in their faces.

No less than the O5s brought me in, asking about 001. I had never met the O5s before. Very few have. Dunno what I expected and hell if I know anything about 001. Classified even to me. But I go in. I see thirteen dirty decrepit men in UIU uniforms stand at podiums in this giant filthy space. Trash piles of rotting garbage reach to the celing. There's literally shit on the floor.

I am not making this up. This is true. So different than the image the PR guys put out, right? I guess the Administrator puppetmasters these freaks and makes the actual calls. But maybe not.

Hand me that scotch, would you?

Anyway, the leader there, I guess he's O5-1, he croaks out about the importance of my work with 001. I rightly point out to the old coot

that I was never assigned to 001. I would have known.

He shakes his wrinkled, flabby head, and opens his mouth wide. I see his rotten gums.

"The entry with no numbers? My Doctor, that is 001."

I'm in shock. The joke template?! Willendorf's batshit theory?! God I can see why the Insurgency left.

The one on the right. The one with no eyes. O5-7. He pulls out this ridiculous ornate scroll. Like an Egyptian papyrus scroll. It rolls out over the podium and unravels at my feet.

Really.

On it is a list of entries: Joke entries, entries with no respect for protocol, some have no capitalization, some have every word capitalized. The objects are bizarre, to say the least. Nothing we've ever contained. Some have numbers already assigned to contained objects, some have obvious placeholders.

"What is this, sir?" I enquire

The old men all lean in together and speak as one, a singular voice I still hear rattling around my skull like a coin today.

"Your new job."

Then again, they did inject me with amnestics, so I've no clue if my impressions were accurate.

They want me to be seeing cracks in the bureaucracy now. Misshaped documentation where it shouldn't be. I ask about each error dutifully like a good dog, but Rosen's unavailable and filing paperwork in Greenland. I pour over every Kafka-esque fly in the ointment.

And now so do my former colleagues. You know the Brightbots? Do you know how they were created? Well, they authorized the splintering of of SCP-963 through some awful arcane process. Took the pieces and wired each tiny fragment in the center of their latest

androids. They do the job now we senior staff once did. Horrifying and beautiful, those machines. Just as callous and flippant as the old Jack, but totally loyal to the O5s and those associated. No humanity left. Just cruelty.

I remember the first line of them. Back then they didn't forcibly inject you with "coldpost" to help you see, they just sort of beat you. But about a year before you started, they authorized use of that sweet mnestic blend. We've been on pretty heavy duty "coldpost" since. They get you hooked on it, so you crave more and more. It's the perfect productivity tool. You don't have to sleep, you barely have to eat. All you have to do is work and remain passive until they sweep through again. Use that high to look for evidence of 001. Then they inject you with more "coldpost". Repeat.

I don't think the human body is meant to have that much mnestic in it at at one time. Yesterday I hallucinated a mackerel over my desk. It was tattooed "001".

But in my looking, I've found nothing. Templates and errors that were created by programs and system retrieval failures. They aren't anything. There is no 001 to be found there, just malfunctioning software. My days are useless, my searches pointless.

Something is driving them all crazy up there though. The old men and their inhuman monkeys and their robot managers. You've seen how normal operations are breaking down. The once powerful senior staff now broken researchers not allowed to leave the site. Brightbots everywhere. Everyone's convinced that Operation ARCTIC CIRCLE has some truth behind it. I'm watching as our mighty sites literally fall into ruin. Safe skips ignored, some disposed of. The Euclids barely have enough personnel to maintain them. I have an rational fear that they'll start to forget about minor Keters, some godawful day. All resources funneled into the 001 problem. Everything is at the end of the rope. We're forgetting who we're supposed to be.

That's where you come in, kid. You? You're gonna have to Secure and Contain and Protect because otherwise hell will break loose.

Me? You want me to be the whistleblower? I've been in this shit too

long. I'm in too deep. Hell, even I start to believe that Operation ARCTIC CIRCLE has merit sometimes. Like I get confused now on dates. I'm doing research on the Chaos Insurgency, which broke off from us in the 1920s, as you know. And that makes sense if you think we were officially founded in the 1890s as the SCP Foundation, a joint project of previous national groups. But if you believe, as I do, that the O5s are former UIU guys, that places the founding in the Fifties. So how could they Insurgency break away before we were founded? The dates start to get fuzzy, you see? Maybe it's the drugs, maybe it's my age.

God, I'm a wreck. A shadow of myself. What happened to me?

Fucking hell if I know, truly.

…

I remember, back when I was a field agent, I knew a great entomologist named Bill Scott. He's long since gone. I remember him as a wonderful man, quirky as hell and curious like a child about everything around him. He would bring me on trips to the Amazon to categorize strange new insects. See if anything would catch the eyes of a Site Director. Some entropic bee or shit like that. I vividly recall one trip where we followed civilian anthropologists to observe the Sateré-Mawé indigenous people, in the Brazilian Amazon. This culture has a ritual where they fill a glove with bullet ants and adolescent boys must wear this glove for ten minutes as a pain ritual to help them symbolically become warriors. Bill and I were the only non-tribesmen who wore a glove that day, the civilians preferred to watch and take notes. I guess even then, we were chicken, as the young boys did this some twenty goddamn times over a few days.

First they coat your hands in charcoal as protection, you see? And they bring out an oven mitt looking thing, the glove, swarming with hundreds of horrifying giant black ants. And the worst ten minutes of your life begin. I immediately began howling in pain as the ants began to bite. These fucking nightmares deserve their name, let me tell you. It was like someone was peppering shotgun blasts through my arm, shredding blood and bone and melting, oozing flesh to the rainforest floor. Agonizing waves of pain shot up my arms, and I could see the ants swarming up my arm, thousands of tiny feet,

each foot bringing more shotgun blasts, I felt my soul dying, my brain shutting down instinctively. All I knew was pain and ants. Melting and burning and jabbing and thousands of flesh wounds as my pores were forcibly ripped wide, ants falling by the thousands into the holes, stinging all the time. The pain all consuming. Fire and ants on my spinal cord, traveling up to my brain. Ants pouring out my mouth, my nostrils, my eye sockets. My entire life has been pain like you can't understand.

And through the howls and tears, and before I blacked out, I looked over and saw Bill standing tall. He was looking down at his hand, almost unconcerned with the horror happening to his arm. He had a quizzical expression, as if the ants were an odd toy on a shelf and he was trying to figure out how they worked.

I thought about that expression as I drifted in and out of consciousness over the next few days. Bullet ant sting takes a while to work itself out. But behind the haze of fever and agony I saw the best the Foundation could and should ever be. Detached, yet caring. Observant and methodical, yet curious and full of wonder. Able to draw impossible strength to face down horror, both in the name of science and the normal people who live in this world. A cold scientist, an idiotically brave warrior, an unrecognized hero who does what must be done.

I have hallucinations about those bullet ants now. I dream they swarm over that air breathing coral reef. Eating the flying fish. I wake up content from those dreams sometimes.

Pass this recording on to anyone who still has sense in this god forsaken place, then let them dose you with amnestics and return to your station. Don't worry about me, you wont hear from me again.

Thanks for the scotch, at any rate.

Holy War

The five cloaked figures moved through the forest without sound, their crouched frames almost floating through the morning twilight. Nearing the edge of the forest, the leader of the group turned, and indicated to the others to stop. “Brothers, we go forth today as defenders of the faith. Beyond these few trees lie the greatest enemies our faith has ever known, heretics preaching against everything we believe in. It is our God's very will that today *we* lucky chosen will go forth and destroy this bastion of hereticism. In the name of the Broken God, we will succeed!”

Jacob rolled over, turning his face to the window next to his bed. As the sun began to peek through, he sighed. *Might as well get up now.* Slowly, the farmer lifted himself out of bed, his old bones creaking with the movement. Standing with similar speed, he began to dress himself. *I think I'll tend to the cows first today…*

The cloaked figures closed up behind the barn, the sun casting their long shadows up and ahead of them. The leader looked to the other cultists behind him. Lowering his hood, they looked to him with a deep respect. The Deacon's face already showed the blessing of the Broken God, his camera-like eyes, and machine jaw gleaming in the morning sun. Looking at him, the others noticed how his mortal skin seemed to just hang over his superior clockwork parts. The other cultists then lowered their own hoods. Smiling, the Deacon looked to his fellow cultists. “Brothers, let us make haste. We do not want to let these enemies of our God know what has hit them.” Standing, the Deacon drew a dagger from his cloak, the others following suit. “Let us strike.”

Jacob reached up to the shelf to grab the old bucket from the shelf, grimacing as he did. *Just a few more years,* he thought to himself, finally heaving the container off the shelf. Turning to make his way out of the barn, he stopped. “How long have you been standing

there?” Finishing turning, he looked at the man standing just inside the barn. “Just moments.” The old man nodded as the assassin came forward, brandishing his knife. Bringing his knife back, he prepared to strike. However, he found himself unable to attack. Looking down, he noticed how strange it was that his intestines were wrapped around a pitchfork, and then everything went black.
Sighing, the old Farmer retrieved his pitchfork from the dead cultist. “Not again.”

The cultist walked down the street, pouring kerosene as he chanted the sacrificial mantra he had been taught when he first joined the Church. “…and let this offering to Him be used to restore him, for the purifying flames shall bestow unto their spirit the honor of forever being his… Oh. Hello.”
Standing on the porch of a small building, a woman looked at the assassin. He began to grin like a Cheshire Cat.
“You *will* make an excellent sacrifice, won't you?”
Slowly pulling the blade from his robe, and setting the can of kerosene on the ground, he closed on the woman. Defiantly, she stood, not making a single move. “Perhaps you *want* to be his sacrifice?” Still standing defiant, the woman seemed to just glare at him, not reacting to his threats. The cultist closed on her, and prepared to pounce. Finally, the cultist lept forward and jammed the dagger in the young woman's throat. The blade lept into her throat, and then stopped. Confused, the cultist yanked the blade back, and stabbed again. Brusing the woman's long hair out of her face, the mannequin's painted-on visage glared back at him.
“Son of a bi-”
The wet sensation over the cultist's head caused him to turn in rage, thinking it to be some kind of joke. Screaming, he realized too late that kerosene is a liquid.
The old man sighed as the flaming cultist ran into the gift shop, setting it ablaze.
“Probably woke everybody up with that screaming.”

The cultist ran quickly into the barn, seeking refuge in one of the few buldings in the town that wasn't on fire. “If the damned Deacon will not aid me in an escape, I will make one myself. Perhaps one of these horses…”
Quickly, the cultist levered open the door, and looked at the mighty

creature before him. Doing as he had seen in the movies, he threw himself onto the horse, landing on the creature lopsided. Grabbing onto the creature's mane, the horse suddenly began to react. The assassin yelled in fear as the horse began to buck. Struggling to keep his hold, the man maintained his failing grip on the the heaving creature. He didn't notice the old man behind him. With one swift strike from a shovel, the cultist was knocked free from the horse, the creature still trampling the dirt floor. The second strike with the bladed edge of the shovel ensured he would not get up.
Sighing, the farmer turned to leave the barn.
“Well, at least that's over.”
“Not quite.”
The old man groaned as he felt the Deacon plunge his blade into his gut from behind. Pain filled his body as it slid through his gut, causing him to collapse. Finally, the Deacon pulled his blade from the old man, and began to walk away. As his vision faded, the old man muttered one last thing:
“This…. statement is…. false.”
The last of his blood having drained from his body, the old man collapsed.
Stopping, the Deacon turned to look at the old man.
“This…..? Statement…..? is……? False……? This……? Statement……?”

AMISH VILLAGE MASSACRE
This morning, local police were called to the Blue Falls Amish community after reports of a bloodbath. Local police arrived to discover that all of the inhabitants of the small community had been slaughtered, homes burned, and many of their bodies showed marks of ritual mutilation. One possible suspect has been found in one of the surviving buildings, currently at the St. Jonah medical center. Some sources report that satanic groups may be to blame, however…..

"Sir, that's the 5th village this month."
"Your point…?"
"Sir, the shapes carved into those bodies, the graffiti on those walls…"

"What of them, Agent Macready?"
"Those are marks of damnation, the same ones used in their scripture to mark 'Heretics.'"
"So what?"
"Sir, if I didn't know better, I'd say the Church declared war on their one true enemy."
Turning, the senior agent looked at Macready.
"Sir, I think the Church just declared war on the Amish."

Homaquis

The moonlight made the clear pond dazzle on a cloudless night in Florida. The pond smelled of mildew, compost, and the fresh metal of the newly installed fence surrounding the lake.

Sarah stood behind the chainlink fence separating her from the small pond. The fence was topped with barbed wire, and the only way in was through a gate on the other side of the pond, which was blocked by an armed guard. A sign attached to the fence stated that the area was private property, despite the fact that the only thing resembling human habitation was a wooden hut that was already half-composted. This pond had always belonged to nature, and, in Sarah's opinion, calling it private property was akin to theft.

But Sarah couldn't argue with the sign, so she did the next-best thing. Licking her lips, she tasted the air. Unlike the desert, the air down in Florida was very humid, which would make channelling much easier. She straightened her back, unclenched her fists, and took in a deep breath. She felt the raw power of Water course through her veins like blood, and she directed the power into transforming herself into water, collapsing into a puddle like a folding chair.

In this form, Sarah still had control over her body. She directed herself to slip around the cracks in the fence, and then, releasing her breath, she let go of the Water and returned to her previous form. Sarah opened her cloak. She had four bottles filled with purified, infused water prior to her transformation. Now she had three, and one nearly-empty bottle. She removed one of the bottles from its strap and uncorked it.

She trotted to the edge of the pond. At the moment, her worst fear was being seen. She was exceptionally pale, and the full moon shone brightly tonight. Despite her cloak, an observant eye could spot her among the flat area surrounding the pond. She pulled her hood further over her head as she approached the pond's shore.

Sarah turned the bottle upside-down and poured its contents onto the ground. This was bait for the creature that lurked inside of the pond. After setting her trap, Sarah crouched nearby and waited.

After a minute or two, an arm made out of water emerged from the lake, and dug itself into the sandy ground. An identical arm dragged itself out a second later. The man made out of water pulled himself from the lake and marooned himself on the shore, then shakily stood up. *Homaquis.*

As the Homaquis approached the puddle, Sarah approached him slowly. You needed to be slow around Homaquis, since they're easily startled. Sarah just stuck low to the ground, and crept towards-

The Homaquis saw Sarah, screamed a high-pitched screech, and hugged Sarah. After getting over the initial shock of meeting an *eager* Homaquis, Sarah hugged the Homaquis back, and started to probe its mind.

The Homaquis was born, as much as a Homaquis could be born, in this lake. He'd never bonded with anybody before; he was too timid. But a thousand years later, after the fall of the Golden Days, he regretted it. He regretted it *so* much. He longed for a true friend. He'd tried to make friends with bears, birds, and even a musky old man. But it never lasted long.

Sarah extended her hand and offered that true friend. She offered a companion to stand by even in the greatest storms. She held her hand out.

Then the Homaquis accepted it.

Sarah opened her eyes and found that she wasn't in the embrace of the Homaquis anymore. In fact, the Homaquis was no longer there. She opened her palm, and found the Homaquis standing there, waving up at her. She waved back.

"Hold it right there!" a voice yelled from behind her.

Sarah turned around to see the guard pointing a pistol at her. She

raised her hands behind her head, hiding the Homaquis from view. Sarah analyzed the guard. He was wearing a Kevlar vest with *that damn shield* inscribed on a badge in the front. He had a taser in his back pocket, and goggles around his neck. He was definitely ready for a fight. The guard, or whoever sent him here, was probably aware of the Homaquis, though he didn't know what it was capable of.

Sarah still had the element of surprise. *It's showtime.* she thought to herself.

Taking in a deep breath, Sarah channeled Water. However, she didn't take in the Water from the bottle stored in her coat. She took her power from the Homaquis. It was beautiful, raw power, untainted by the clumsy hands of humans. As she collapsed into a puddle, the guard dropped his gun and reached for his taser. By the time he got it out, Sarah had let herself flow into the lake.

The guard stood over the pond for a minute, debating whether or not to fire the taser in and potentially subdue his enemy. This gave Sarah the opportunity to creep out of the lake and reform behind the guard. The guard started to turn around, but it was too late. Sarah took a greatwood staff from her coat and slapped the guard across the hands, making him drop the taser. She then took a step in and used her momentum to bring the blunt end of the staff into the guard's jaw, knocking him out and sending him to the ground.

After defending herself from the assailant, Sarah looked to her shoulder. The Homaquis stood there, and waved at her again. Sarah gave him a thumbs up, and let him slide down into her pocket.

After the brief interchange, Sarah didn't waste any more time. The guard could've called for backup, and she didn't want to have to deal with more of them. Channeling Water, she slid back under the fence, and waded her way through waist-thick brush back to the Jeep she had taken to get to the pond in the first place.

As she buckled herself into the car and let the Homaquis take refuge inside of the glove compartment, Sarah noticed her cell phone buzz. She took it out of the cup holder and opened the messenger app.

ZENO

Are you ready?

Sarah stared at the phone screen for a minute, collecting her thoughts before responding.

I'm in.

« The Shape of Water is Humanoid | »

Home

Everybody's so goddamn judgmental, that's the problem. Part of it is where I live; the rural South is full of nothing so much as busybodies, Nosy Parkers, nosy neighbors, everybody so nosy. Always wondering. Always gossiping. Always minding my business, like I need that.

I don't know how the rumors started. I guess somebody came to my door, maybe taking up money for a church social, maybe something else. They saw inside, saw what my home was like, and ran full speed to cluck cluck cluck at their friends. "You should have seen it, Betsy, it was horrible. There was *trash* just everywhere. What a slob!" Cluck cluck. I don't need them. I don't want them. They shouldn't come back.

I hate all the shows on television, all the nosy shows, all the shows for perfect thin beautiful people to gawk at the rest of us. The shows about the eight hundred pound men or the shows about women with ten kids or fifteen kids or twenty kids or the ones they say I should be on. I don't hoard things, that's not what I'm doing. You don't *need* to know what I'm doing. It's not your *business*. But I'll tell you anyway.

You make it sound so weird. I'm not weird. I'm comfortable. Maybe you should look at how you live. You never thought of that, did you? You have your little feather dusters and your doilies and your placemats and your throw rugs and your hardwood floors, sticks stuck up all of your holier-than-thou asses. Everything has to have a place, everything has to be square and fit tightly, and God forbid somebody think you have a cat. I don't live like that. I refuse to. Things fall, things break, things get moved around and stacked atop of one another and squeezed into places, swept into corners and lined along walls. That's nature. That's whatchacallit, entropy. That's how I live.

It's not an accident. It started with the stains, sure, and I guess I

didn't start those. I don't know how they got started. That was when I lived all square like you people do, everything in straight lines and grids. But I couldn't help things bumping into one another, and one day, it seemed that was all it took. Stains, scrapes, marks, abrasions. It started with one, then three, then dozens, everywhere. You can't imagine how much scrubbing I did. I scrubbed and scrubbed and washed and sat on my hands and knees and elbows and pushed and pushed rags and sponges and steel wool and belt sanders and I tried to destroy it, cut things out, and it didn't help. It was how I was back then, with the OCD. Everything had to be clean, blank, perfect. I polished every flat surface five times a day for fifteen minutes at a time. My husband wasn't there, he was "working" with the rest of his friends at that office. He didn't give a shit. He didn't love me. He wouldn't have left if he loved me.

Fuck him. I don't need him. I have my home.

I looked it up once, aversion therapy. That what this was. I thought it was a curse at first, but really, it was a cure. I had everything I thought I wanted, including the "perfect" little house with all the neat little lines everywhere. I thought everything was just how I wanted it, but it put me in hell. I sweated and cursed and prayed and cried and bled to keep everything right where it was supposed to be. Right where I thought it should go. Well, I don't know if you've read your Bible, but something you ought to know: you aren't in control. God wills it and you accept it. He says "jump" and you say "how high".

The stains were His test and His blessing. I almost failed, almost proved myself unworthy of the gift He gave me. It seemed like the Devil was chasing me, scuffing the floor whenever I turned around, getting dog shit ground into the carpet, staining everything I could see. All I wanted was a little place that was beautiful, a little corner where the world couldn't hurt me. I lost that place. I tried to swallow a bottle of aspirin. Lloyd called an ambulance, packed his bags, and left. I haven't seen him since. I have my home. All I need is my home.

The Lord works in mysterious ways. I had to let go of wanting everything clean, and once I did, everything changed. I'm so much happier now. You put so much of yourself into caring about things that don't matter and there's nothing left of yourself to truly live. I'm

not saying it didn't take time, getting used to my new life. I walk over banana peels, old bills and newspapers, pillows, food wrappers, furniture. When I couldn't see my TV anymore, I took it out of the entertainment center and set it on a pile of towels. I wasn't showering anymore, so I didn't need them. More trash just emerges now, by itself. It doesn't think I see it, but I always see it; empty tissue boxes I never bought, dirty clothes I never wore, When I couldn't reach my bed without a rake, I started sleeping on the floor. The floor is so soft with so much flotsam on it. That's what I think of it as. Just debris in the ocean.

That's what we'll all be, in the end. Just floating in the water. I'm ahead of the rest of you now.

Home Again

Working a mass-disappearance case is always unsettling. Far too often, we arrive at the location to find a ghost town that's populated with a few gibbering stragglers and an occasional abandoned child. Sometimes we're lucky, and we find some poor, traumatized hold-out who has just barely managed not to get killed, abducted, or otherwise rendered unable to give a coherent statement. Since these people are able to give us at least some clue as to what's going on, these events tend to be the ones with better outcomes.

When we arrived in Asheville, NC, we were surprised to find numerous cogent witnesses. Most were visibly depressed, and reported that their missing loved ones had told them in no uncertain terms that they wouldn't be coming back.

This excerpt from an interview with Mr. Phillip Locke of Asheville, NC is typical:

> Agent Fletcher: So when did Mrs. Locke start behaving strangely?
>
> Mr. Locke: Yesterday. We went to see the new exhibit at the Blue Iris. It happened very suddenly… She just stopped in her tracks and glazed over. I was afraid she was going to pass out, so I reached out to steady her. That was when she came to and slapped me.
>
> Agent Fletcher: I see. So she actually became violent?
>
> Mr. Locke: Yeah… Then she started shouting at me to get the hell away from her.
>
> Agent Fletcher: She has never done anything like that before?
>
> Mr. Locke: No, never. I was totally blindsided. All of a

sudden, it was like she hated my guts.

Agent Fletcher: How long did this go on?

Mr. Locke: Just a few minutes. After reading me my pedigree, she ran out of the building. When I caught up to her in the parking lot, she actually punched me!

Agent Fletcher: I was going to ask about the black eye… Did she say anything after that?

Mr. Locke: She told me to stop holding her back. She said she just wanted to be happy, and she was leaving. We were done. Then she just got into our car and drove away.

Shortly after this, as we were making a discreet initial sweep through the gallery, we came upon several oddly euphoric couples, all seated in front of the photo *Home Again*, and engaged in various public displays of affection. They informed us that they had seen several people come in and look at the photo fixedly for a few minutes before running out of the building. They all claimed to be completely perplexed by this, stating that the photo was "beautiful" and "so expressive". As Mrs. Jean Reynolds of Fletcher, NC put it, "It's a wonderful image that shows a beautiful subject… How could anyone find it so upsetting?"

How indeed? It was odd that a cognitohazard should affect people in such disparate ways. It would be some time before I would entirely understand the nature of the Foundation's newest acquisition, as we still had to finish going through containment procedures.

Naturally, we took the hazardous image from the gallery and searched the photographer's house. When we didn't find printed copies, we packed out anything that could have contained digital photographic files. Those would later come up empty except for a single file encoding the hazardous photo. We took readings around the house looking for anomalous radiation and other unusual energy signatures. Not a whit. No evil, ancient artifacts, arcane tomes or cursed cameras were to be found in Mrs. Sara Parrish's home.

As we were able to catch them, those who had fled the area were detained and attempts were made to interview them. In each case, there was someone the affected individual had to find, and they were determined to find that person NOW. Comments like "I've wasted *so* much time." and "I can't believe I settled." were common, as were attempts to overpower the interviewers, and a necessity for strong sedatives. In the end, some 135 affected individuals were returned safely home to unemployment and in some cases, absent spouses.

Of course, Mrs. Parrish herself had to be reckoned with; The Foundation wanted to understand the method of *Home Again's* creation. As soon as the researchers determined that Mrs. Parrish was not anomalous, I was called in to interview her.

I found Mrs. Parrish to be in low spirits, but willing to discuss her photography. I asked a few innocuous questions, then commented on Home Again, calling attention to its "remarkable composition". I was certain that I was dealing with one hell of a sociopathic manipulator. Surely her ego would rise to a bit of flattering bait…

To this, Mrs. Parrish replied, “Oh yes, *Home Again*… I love that picture, but it came about by sheer luck. I was out with my camera during a trip up north, and I just happened to see this soldier walking up to one of those old Brownstone buildings they've got up there. He had a bunch of daisies in his hand. It immediately hit me that this would make a great photo, so I asked the soldier if I could take his picture. He said yes, and then I asked him to pose like he was knocking on the door…"

"As I looked through the lens, the light…the flowers…the soldier returning to his lover after a deployment in hell…all of it suddenly felt perfect. You see, my husband had died just six months before that. So, as all the elements of that shot came together, I felt like they and I were in sympathy with each other. I would have given anything in that moment to come home to my James… Looking back, I don't think I've ever seen another photo that expressed such a feeling of longing."

There was a brief pause, before she smiled and continued.

"God, it always sounds so pretentious and vain when I say that out loud. It's all true, but I'll understand if you think I'm silly."

I was tongue tied for a moment before giving the only response my position allowed.

“No ma’am. That doesn't sound silly at all.”

Home is A Place with Mushrooms

Disgusting. All of this place, disgusting. These walls, these people, this very air *is disgusting. If I ever find* him*, I'll tear him apart. No more mercy for that ingrate. His insolence, his games, have gone on for far too long. To think that, somehow, he convinced my beautiful Princess to ever play along with his fantasies, when, with me, she can be a* Queen. *And to think that he and I used to be* friends. *I was foolish to ever trust that maniac, and now, I'm paying the price. That worthless man will pay if ever I break free from this prison…*

"Come on, M. You've been up for three nights. It's time to give up. That signal was a fluke." L looked at his older (but shorter) brother, concern in his eyes, fear in his voice.

"No, we have to keep looking." The bags under M's eyes were dark. "We have to finish this. This whole thing has gone on for too long."

"M, when are you going to quit? We've been searching for *months*. Who knows what could have happened in that time? If he's not dead, he's got to be close. P, she misses you. And you're forgetting that I have a wife I want to go back home to, too. I didn't ever want this, M. I wanted to raise a family."

"You want to leave? The door's right there. I don't need you. This has always been *my* mission, *my* job. There's plenty of fuel in your car to get you to the port." M's eyes didn't leave the screen once as he spoke, scrutinizing every piece of data for something, *anything*, that might lead him to his quarry.

"M, come on. You're better than this. It's petty."

"Petty?! You're going to say that our life's work for the last 35 years has been *petty?!* Leave. Just. Leave."

"M, that's not how I meant —"

"It's not what you meant, L, it's what you said. Just, go. Besides, I think… I've… got him."

"What?! No, you have to be kidding me."

"Read it and weep, L." M spun his chair around to look at his gangly brother, and slid over so L could get closer to the screen, a smug grin on M's face.

"Holy shit, M. We found him. We found him!" L nearly leaped for joy, but as he looked at the readings on the screen, he stopped. "Oh God. *They* have him? M, we… can't… We can't leave him with those sadistic motherfuckers. We have to get him out."

"After all he's done?! L, what's wrong with you? First, you want to bail on me, then you want to undo all of our work?" M's exhaustion was not enough to overcome his fury, as he stared in confused frustration at his brother.

"No, M, look. He's paid enough." L moved back away from the screen so that M could resume his place at the console.

"They… they did… They did *that* to him? And he survived? I always knew he was tough, but Christ." M's rage was quickly overrun by his shock, and his pity.

"Keep reading."

As M followed the instruction, the full horror of what had plagued their quarry was slowly revealed to him. "Fuck. We have to get him out of there, L."

"He's made it this long. Get some rest, and I'll get Y and all our equipment ready. Tomorrow morning, we'll make a plan and see what we can do to bust him out."

"Yeah, yeah, ok." M slowly stood up from the console for the first time in nearly ten hours, and slowly stumbled to bed for a few hours of uneasy rest as his brother began to make preparations. The next day, thirty years of conflict would finally be resolved…

B could tell when an escape attempt, what his captors called a "Containment Breach," was underway. The thick doors and walls did not completely mute the sound of klaxons (and occasionally, screams) to B's fine-tuned ears, nor did the corrosive solution he was usually suspended in. And the sound of a containment breach was a good sound, because it meant a possible route of escape for himself. On more than one occasion, he'd broken their flimsy walls and had killed many of them, releasing (or killing; it made no difference to him) his fellow prisoners in the process. What excited B most was the feeling of vibrations that shook his deep dungeon, because that indicated the use of explosives. Explosives meant desperation, and desperation on his captors' part meant opportunity.

Of course, he had had better luck attempting escape when his captors were (foolishly) trying to kill him. Just as before he'd been *contained*, B did best when at death's door. Something about *this place* had made him more able to adapt than ever, despite being at a far greater disadvantage here than he'd ever been in in his battles against *that traitorous lout.* So let them drain the acid away, let them try to kill him. He would just make them pay, as he continued to prepare himself for the day he would finally get his revenge on *M*.

Little did B know that M would be his liberator…

"You ready, L?" M was patting himself down, making sure he was properly equipped, marking off a mental checklist of everything he could possibly need for this. Y panted restlessly beneath him.

"Yeah, bro. I'm ready. I just… never thought I'd see the day we'd have to *help* B." L stood at the controls of the Gate, making final adjustments and waiting for the signal from M.

"Me neither, man. But you gotta do what you gotta do, right?"

"Right. Well, Gate's ready, man. You have your map?"

"Yeah. Y, you ready?" The reptilian mount was uncharacteristically quiet as M rubbed his head reassuringly. The barely-sapient beast only nodded. "Hit it, L. We've got a King to rescue."

L pressed a few buttons on the control panel and stepped onto the gate. A moment later there was a flash and…

B could hear klaxons, and screaming. It had been a long time since he had, so he eagerly anticipated whatever opportunity was waiting for him. As the breach got underway, he began formulating plans, on what, exactly, he would do as the door was breached (as it inevitably would be; B was sure of it on this day). Soon, he could also hear the sprinkling of the on-site fire suppression systems. Fire meant chaos, and chaos meant distraction, which in turn meant even more opportunity. Soon, the sound of explosions ever-so-slightly vibrated the room around him. He grinned, knowing that today would be, if not his day, then good practice for when his day would finally come.

He was somewhat surprised when the acid began to drain out of his cell. That was something that had never happened during a breach before. Was this a trap, another attempt to exterminate him? B shook himself off, trying to prepare himself for whatever waited beyond his door. Whatever it might be, he was ready. He would gladly destroy whatever these *disgusting* apes had in store for him.

Slowly, the door opened, and B moved to a corner, ready to either fight or flee as necessary. But he'd never anticipated that, standing on the other side of the door would be his sworn enemy…

Incident SMB-682-20151104 Summary:

On 4 November, 2015, at approximately 1017 local time, two unidentified humanoid entities and one reptilian entity spontaneously manifested in the Site-19 Biological Containment Wing, within 300 meters of **SCP-682**'s containment cell. Humanoid entities were seemingly males of European descent and wearing complimentary uniforms; that is to say, one entity was wearing a white jumpsuit and red coveralls[1], while the other was wearing a similar white jumpsuit and green coveralls[2], with similar logos emblazoned upon their chests. POI-SMB-682-1 was approximately 1.2 meters in height, while POI-

SMB-682-2 was approximately 1.4 meters in height. Both humanoid entities demonstrated advanced pyrokinetic capabilities.

The reptilian entity[3] bore no close resemblance to any single terrestrial lifeform and was approximately 1.5 meters in height. AE-SMB-682-1 was utilized as a mount by POI-SMB-682-1 upon manifestation.

All three entities immediately engaged in hostile action towards Foundation personnel, with Site Security rapidly engaging with both lethal and nonlethal weaponry. AE-SMB-682-1 was quickly struck by gunfire from Security Agent , at which point it tossed POI-SMB-682-1 from its back and proceeded to rapidly egress the locale. It has not yet been relocated and is presumed uncontained. POI-SMB-682-1 proceeded on foot for the remainder of the incident.

Shortly after manifestation, both humanoid entities split paths, with POI-SMB-682-1 moving rapidly towards the doorway of SCP-682's containment cell, while POI-SMB-682-2 moved towards the maintenance access room from which the supply of hydrochloric acid to SCP-682's cell is controlled. Both entities utilized their pyrokinetic abilities to devastating affect against site personnel.

At approximately 1034 local time, POI-SMB-682-2 had successfully halted the flow of hydrochloric acid and POI-SMB-682-1 had successfully opened the door to SCP-682's containment cell (despite not having access to the controls). Immediately afterward, the following exchange between SCP-682 and POI-SMB-682-1 was recorded by the monitoring equipment within the containment cell:

> **POI-SMB-682-1:** Holy shit, what have they done to you?
>
> **SCP-682:** You! It can't be you! What are you

doing here?

POI-SMB-682-1: Listen, B, we're busting you out of here. We're all good. I'm getting you back home.

SCP-682: Is it really you, though?

POI-SMB-682-1: Yeah, B. It's, uh, me, Mario. Come on, let's, uh, let's go.

SCP-682 and both humanoid entities proceeded to the original manifestation point and demanifested. The significance of this incident, the status of all involved entities, and possible implications are not fully understood at this time. Research is ongoing.

Footnotes
1. Currently designated POI-SMB-682-1 in all peripheral documentation.
2. Currently designated POI-SMB-682-2 in all peripheral documentation.
3. Currently designated AE-SMB-682-1 in all peripheral documentation.

Home Is Where The Hatred Is

Ilias Kantos was going to get some fucking answers.

Three days. Three days since his world had been shredded. Three days since they'd put him in this call-it-anything-but-a-cell. Three days since he'd last seen Cipher. And in that time he'd learned exactly nothing. No idea why he was here, or who these people claiming to be the Foundation were, or how the fuck he had been partnered up with a goddamn reality bender to bodyguard a missing O5.

They kept telling him he wasn't a prisoner, something he'd have been inclined to believe if there wasn't a tail on him every time he left his quarters. It was difficult to spot among the heavy traffic of the Site 19 hallways, but at this point checking was as natural to Kantos as carrying a weapon, and they weren't trying very hard not to be seen. Or if they were, they were really bad at it. They stayed a constant 10 meters back, matching Kantos' speed exactly. He suspected it was more for show than anything else.

His mind still reeled a bit as he stepped into the hallways of Site 19. Every other the site he'd been unobtrusive, out of the way. Tucked underground or hidden inside some abandoned office building or just too far in the middle of nowhere for anyone to give a damn it existed. Even the largest facilities he'd worked at hadn't had more than a thousand people working in them. Here, he passed that many on the way to the mess hall. Walking through the facility was like navigating a New York sidewalk. The map of the sub-wing of the floor he was staying on looked like it could hold every site he'd worked at once with room for a new research wing besides.

Size aside, it wasn't too different from any other Foundation facility he'd worked in. The same undecorated, blindingly-white walls and harsh lighting. None of the rooms in the hallway or on the map were named. It was just "research lab 14.07", "administrative office 4.001". Standard Foundation security measures. Made it difficult to

navigate if you didn't know where you were going, but not impossible. Like all field work, it came down to recognizing the pattern. He tried to look aimless as he walked through the halls, like a restless guest just going out to stretch his legs. But his eyes darted from person to person, noting everyone he passed, evaluating, cataloging. He stopped briefly in the mess hall, observing the flow of traffic through the five entrances. Watching the patterns begin to form.

He didn't know what he was looking for. But that wasn't important. What was important was the looking. Sifting through the details until what looked like noise revealed itself as something more. He tossed the rest of the Jell-o and set out into the hallways. Hopefully to his tail his route would look like mindless wandering. But the route he'd planned, though circuitous, would eventually take him through every bit of the wing.

And slowly, the pieces came together. A picture began to form, one that had been hinted in the map and was now displaying itself in full. He saw it in the way people turned their heads when they walked. In the way traffic flowed to avoid certain sections of the wing. In the expressions of the guards as they watched the scientists and agents. It took another two days of observation to confirm, but then he was sure of it. None of these people were real.

A fly crawled across the ceiling. Donna Cipher, who had once been known as Emily Vakes, watched it as she lay on the bed. She waved her hand and erased it from existence. She flexed her wrist again, and it reappeared, crawling along as if it had never left. Seventeen years since she'd used her abilities, and they still felt as casual as swatting a bug. But why wouldn't they? They were as much a part of her as sight or smell or taste in others. She'd spent so long trying to ignore them, but they'd always remained. Waiting for this day.

Whoever these people were, who called themselves the Foundation, were putting on a big show of trust. Taking the color off. Saying she could do as she wished. All fake. If she actually tried anything, they probably had a dozen stopgaps in place to separate her brain stem from her skull in a millisecond. At least, the real Foundation would. And though these people were pretenders, they seemed to be doing

a good job of it.

The room they'd given her was nice. Clean carpet. Queen sized bed. A well-stocked bookshelf next to a nice desk. It was the type of room you only gave to someone as a symbolic gesture. Cipher hated it. After twenty-six years of operating with the Coalition and Foundation, anything more comfortable than Motel Six made her suspicious.

The door opened. The woman from the car strode in. Sam, as she'd introduced herself. She smiled at Cipher. For a second, Cipher considered just unmaking her. Sure, she probably wouldn't live another eyeblink if she did. But that moment in time would be satisfying as hell. Still. Probably not worth it. She settled for an annoyed sounding grunt.

"I hope your accommodations are to your satisfaction," said Sam.

"I hope that isn't a serious statement," said Cipher.

Sam laughed in a way that sounded practiced. "We care about your comfort, Emily. We want you to understand we don't mean you any harm."

"What about O5-4? Is what that what you told her before you killed her?"

"We didn't kill her, Emily." Sam pulled the chair from the desk and sat across from Cipher, legs crossed.

"So who did?"

"O5-7."

"Bullshit." Cipher watched the woman's expression. She had a damn good poker face. Her muscles didn't even flinch as she stared back.

"It isn't, and I'm sure he'd be happy to tell you himself, when the time comes." Sam's eyes darted over Cipher. Cipher wandered what she was watching for. Suddenly, the woman's expression hardened. "Don't try to pretend you're a woman with loyalties."

“Excuse me?”

“You worked for the Coalition because they could keep you from being consumed by your own power. And when they turned on you, you fled for the Foundation. That’s you do. That’s what you are.”

“This is you asking me for help? It’s not a great strategy.”

“I’m making sure we understand each other.”

Cipher stood, took a few steps towards the door. “And what happens once we understand each other?”

“Then we can fight the real enemy.” Sam pointed at the bed. “Sit down, please. I want to tell you a story. So you understand just what the stakes are.”

She said it like it was a choice. Cipher sat. Sam began to speak.

When she was finished, Cipher knew the world would never be the same.

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Come Rest Your Head A While

Previously on the UIU Series With No Name

Agents **Quinn MacAllister** and **Darnell Christman** are the only two agents of the FBI's Unusual Incidents Unit in the Midwest, following the disbanding of the Chicago team and the loss of the Cleveland division to a bare room with an open door. They get as much respect as you'd think as the only two government-employed anomalous law enforcement officers from Cincinnati to Sloth's Pit, which is to say: fuck all.

After helping bring down a Spirit Dust ring in December of 2014, they were called to Sandusky, Ohio in early 2015 to assist with a Foundation investigation into an explosion at a bank. A briefing from the Foundation revealed that this explosion was caused by a para-terrorist organization known as **Grassroots,** created by a **Dr. Ainsley Kerrigan** in the 1950s following the United States Government's mistreatment of his research in Project Cloudburst. Dr. Kerrigan was killed in a FBI-Foundation raid in the 1950s, and Grassroots has been quiet ever since…

Until now. The vault underneath the bank held a portal leading to somewhere in Brooklyn, New York. The Foundation sent a drone through, and discovered documents pertaining to the clandestine Cold War **CIA Project SMILODON**, an attempt to weaponize anomalies for use against the Forces of Communism. With the knowledge that a highly-dangerous para-terrorist organization is in possession of Government Secrets, our heroes…

…are relegated to the role of errand boys by the Foundation, having been tasked with escorting the

remains of the individual who caused the destruction of the bank home. We re-join them now, on a street in Cincinnati.

Almost five hours down I-75 later, Quinn MacAllister and Darnell Christman stepped out of their van in front of a nondescript office building in Cincinnati. They'd been caught in a traffic jam halfway past Columbus, which was around the time the van gave out as well, meaning they had to call AAA. And then it started sleeting.

"Fucking hell," Quinn groaned, stretching for the first time since Bucyrus, her hair falling around her head and her bones popping. "That felt like it took almost two years."

From the back of the truck, Darnell retrieved a biohazard container, looking at it warily. "So, what's the plan after this?"

"Go home," Quinn said, "Explain to Harley why I'm almost two days late back, and pray that she doesn't think I've actually had an affair."

Her partner nodded, and started into the building; inside was a white hall, with a sign behind the desk reading "South Cincinnati Planning". It was allegedly a construction company, but anyone who paid the slightest bit of attention to the anomalous world knew what the SCP Acronym meant. They usually weren't stupid enough to use it anymore. Usually.

Quinn approached the desk, and looked at the receptionist behind it. It was a man wearing a loose shirt and khakis, talking on the phone about a deal that was being made between South Cincinnati Planning and a construction union. She leaned over the desk, noting a bulge in his sock, concealing either a knife or a gun.

When the receptionist hung up, he looked at Quinn, and cleared his throat. "Was Wilbur right?"

"Yes, but Orville wasn't wrong either."

He nodded, and handed her a key from behind the desk. "Turn it counter-clockwise in the emergency stop switch, then select the basement floor."

Darnell was already in the elevator by the time she took the key, his thumb leaving an imprint in the elevator open button. Quinn inserted the key, and when she turned it, the lift shook and groaned, like the building was clearing its throat.

Once she selected the basement, the elevator lurched, groaned, and then began dropping at a speed that was disconcerting. When it finally leveled out, Quinn was clutching the handrails inside the elevator like she was going to fly off.

"I've heard that there's a Skipper lab in every major city," Darnell said as he scratched his nose. "Didn't think that Cinncy qualified."

"There's at least one. I hear that they have one under Progressive Field in Cleveland."

"No foolin'?" Darnell laughed. "No wonder the Indians keep losing. Who knows what kind of shit they're testing under there."

The elevator eventually stopped with a *ding*, and opened to the sound of air conditioners and halls that were a dull white, illuminated by fluorescent lights. Along the walls were posters reminding people who visited of safety protocols, or what passed for it in the Foundation.

In front of them, they were greeted by an older man, balding, with rimless glasses resting against his face. He looked like he was Chinese, and had a missing finger on his left hand; Quinn wondered how he lost that. "Agents MacAllister and Christman? You have the sample?"

Darnell held out the biohazard container. "Hell of a sample. It's… we don't know what. Sculpture that used to be someone."

"Hmm." The man snapped his fingers, and a pair of Foundation agents took the container from them. "Well, thank you for agreeing to transport it. We'll take it from here."

Quinn stepped forward to speak, but Darnell tapped her on the shoulder, and gave her a look that said both 'don't start shit' and 'let me talk'. "With all due respect, Dr…."

"Zhou."

"Dr. Zhou," Darnell said. "We've just driven non-stop from Lake Erie. Do y'think we could at least use the can?"

Zhou rolled his eyes. "Very well." He pointed back down the hallway. "Restrooms are unisex, down 30 meters, to the left. Don't look in any of the windows, don't touch any of the doors, don't make eye contact with anyone."

"Thanks." Darnell walked along, and Quinn followed. They looked at each other, and Darnell was the first to speak. "Maybe you should've stayed topside."

"Why?" Quinn asked, looking away from one of the researchers who passed by.

"Because, if ya don't mind me saying, you kind of have a hate boner for the Skippers."

Quinn coughed into her hand to conceal a snicker. "Darnell, you're thirty-five in two months. Did you seriously just use the term 'hate boner'?"

"The concept of a hate boner defies generational boundaries." He looked around the hallway. "Wonder what they have in here."

"Can't be anything world-ending if they're willing to have it under a major population center." She looked at her partner and frowned. "All right, what's up?"

"What?"

"The whole 'using the can' excuse is bunk." She stood in the middle of the hallway, a frown on her face. "You're trying to find out more about it. As much as I hate to say it: this is their jurisdiction now."

"Technically," Darnell began explaining, "Under the Paperclip Clause of the Whitman-Ross Act, the Unusual Incidents Unit has at least partial jurisdiction over any matters that pertain to the United States Government and anomalous actions taken by or against it."

Quinn frowned, chewing a nail, "The Skippers aren't exactly known for following protocol. See: Loveland."

"Yeah, that was a cluster and a quarter." He kept on walking. "Still, we may be able to finagle it."

"Right." Once they arrived at the washrooms, Quinn felt at her head, and sighed. She hadn't had a proper wash since yesterday morning. "Think they have showers in there?"

"One way to find out," Darnell nodded. "See you on the flipside."

She strode into the washroom, the large, metal door slamming behind her; if Quinn had to guess, it was about a foot thick, and heavy, probably had some kind of piston or hydraulic system so that they could open without you needing to break your arm. Probably so that you had some sense of security in case something broke out.

There were no showers in the bathroom, but there was a sink large enough for her to, at least, rinse her hair. Bowing her head, she ran water over her mane, sighing and feeling pieces of Sandusky flow out- debris from the bank, an insect that had nested in her hair in the car, and a small stone that had somehow become lodged in her bangs.

"Christ," Quinn shivered, watching it flow down the sink. "I am going to need to spend an hour in the shower when I get home."

She watched the debris circle the drain, the stone stuck in the sink, making soft *click-click* sounds as it pinged against the metal. She stood there, and watched it, before a curious hand wandered towards it.

She held it in her hand, and swore that she heard a girl with skin like freshly-tilled dirt laughing behind her. She turned, and there was nothing. Just her, alone. She pocketed the rock and headed out of the washroom.

The ride back to Quinn's place was mostly silent, bar the NPR station. They stopped in front of her apartment, and Darnell gave

Quinn a wry look. "You'll be fine."

"I don't want a repeat of last year," Quinn groaned. "I just wish I could tell her about half of this. Even a quarter of it. Fuck, at the very least, the entire werewolf thing. She was wondering why I kept having nightmares…" She rubbed her face, and unlatched her seatbelt, opening the door. "Thanks for the ride, Darnell."

"Mac." Darnell looked at her, hand on the steering wheel. "Ask her if she wants dinner tonight with me and Danielle. But… Christ, shower first."

"Same to you, stinkass." She circled around the back of the van, and looked at the looming apartment building as Darnell drove off, before beginning her ascent into the five-story red-brick complex that looked more ominous than it had in almost a year.

Harley Sterling was waiting for Quinn when she came through the door, sitting at the coffee table that Harley's mother had given her, reading an issue of National Geographic. She looked over the magazine at Quinn, and closed the periodical, laying it on the table and sighing. "Hey."

"Hi, Harl." Quinn looked sheepish as she set her phone down on the counter. "I'm… I'm gonna shower. I fucking reek."

"Right, you do that." Harley rose from the couch and proceeded to the kitchen. "I'm gonna make some coffee for you, hon."

"Thanks. Love you." With that, Quinn vanished into the bathroom, and a sound of running water and falling clothing followed.

Harley made sure the door was locked before picking up Quinn's phone, staring at the lock screen, an image of a psychotic clown girl that somehow had more fans than Bruce Springsteen. She knew the combination. She could look through it, see what she had been doing for the last three days, if she had really gone to Sandusky… see who the hell those people outside their apartment once a week.

She had noticed them when Quinn got transferred to Unusual

Incidents. UFO Chasers, Quinn said, pointless work. Since then, she had seen people walking along outside, usually at night, trying to look as normal as possible; talking on cell phones, having conversations, getting into fights, having drinks. But they made the mistake of sending the same actor twice.

Someone was spying on them. Did Quinn know this? Did she know who they were? Would it have-

She nearly dropped the phone as it suddenly rang, humming in her hand and playing notes that were both incredibly annoying and instantly forgettable. She fumbled with it, and in doing so, accidentally answered the call.

Shit. She looked at the number, and saw that it was blocked. Must have been government stuff. She didn't know what compelled her to bring it to her face. "Hello?"

"…Agent MacAllister?" A voice, male, on the other end, inquisitive.

"Her wife, actually. She's in the shower."

"Well, when you can, forward a message to her? Tell her that…" There was a long pause, as if she was listening to a tape that had skipped a track, "Mike from Samson-Cooper Pharmaceuticals called. I'm an informant on a case of hers…"

"Right, drug bust. The whole LSD thing, yeah? Or Spirit Dust or whatever?"

"Yeah, that's right."

"All right, Mike, I'll tell her. Samson-Cooper…"

"Pharmaceuticals. Samson-Cooper Pharmaceuticals. Tell her that exactly."

"Will do." Harley hung up the phone and frowned. Since when did an informant have a blocked number? And… she'd heard that name. Samson-Cooper.

She looked out the window, and sure enough, there was a bench

outside with an advertisement plastered on the back advertising a painkiller manufactured by Samson-Cooper Pharma. Weird coincidence.

She put the phone down, and sat on the couch, running her fingers through her hair. She'd been in Iraq, seen people get shelled to shit, seen a car blow up in front of her in a convoy, and then get discharged with a slap on the ass on the way out because she had the audacity to have a girlfriend. And here she was, paranoid about the woman she loved cheating on her.

She'd seen people get blown up, literally had to help pick up the pieces of one of her squad members so that they could be put into a bag, and… this is what was scaring her. The thought of her wife cheating on her with someone who had a blocked number.

Quinn came out of the shower a few minutes later, wearing as much as Lady Godiva, but with a more sensible haircut. She dried her hair, and gave her a quirk of the eyebrow, and headed down the hallway.

Harley sighed and followed. She needed this. Some time next to her.

"Someone called for you," Harley said as she looked through her laundry. "When you were in the shower."

"Hope you didn't forget their name." Quinn was finally getting into some clothes of her own, putting a brush through her hair, getting ready to get back to work.

"It was… Mack? No, Mike. From Samson-Cooper Pharmaceuticals."

Quinn dropped her hairbrush with a loud *clunk* and ran from the room, to her phone. She noted that Harley had moved it, undid the lock, and re-dialed the number. A voice on the other end spoke. "Did you pick up the roses?"

"No, all they had was snapdragons." Quinn tugged at her hair slightly. "Really not the best code to use around my wife," she whispered into the phone.

"We need you to come back down to Site-92 immediately."

"…what?" Quinn's face screwed up.

"The South Cincinnati building. We have a car coming for you. It's regarding the anomaly you brought in."

"Fucking…" Quinn rubbed her face. "That's your jurisdiction. We're not even going to bother with Whitman-Ross. What the hell do I have to do with it-"

"Does the name Jo Ann Storm mean anything to you?"

Quinn nearly dropped her phone. Jo Ann Storm was a kid from back home, in Green Pastures. Went missing around the time Quinn left. Around the time a lot of other kids went missing. Around the time a girl with skin like freshly-tilled dirt had broken Quinn's heart.

"…let me get a shirt on." She went back to her room, and looked at Harley, swallowing as she felt a lump form in her throat. A memetic lock, they called it. Something to keep her from vomiting information about the Veiled World to anyone who walked by. She wished that she could break it, that she could tell her wife about everything- the monsters they fought, the bureaucracy, the fact that the UIU wasn't just a glorified X-Files, that her work mattered… but she couldn't.

"Harley…" she started. "I…" she wanted to tell her about home. About what had happened, about Jo Ann, about Jemma, about Clyde and Chuck and Emily and Kendall and Asher. About how her world went to hell in a handbasket almost seventeen years ago. But she couldn't. "…have work. There's a new lead, we may not have taken down the ring entirely."

Harley looked at her, incredulous. There was that look again, the suspicion and doubt. "All right. Can I expect you back soon?"

"Before midnight, swear to god." She approached her wife, and exchanged a kiss. She felt it, a bit of the passion, still there on her lips. A sign that things might be all right. "…Love ya, Silver."

Harley Sterling smiled as Quinn left the room, before going to their bedroom window and pulling down one slat of the plastic blinds,

pressing her nose against the winter-cold glass. She saw a pair of men drinking coffee outside; the same men had been having an argument outside their apartment a week ago.

She sat down in bed, and opened up a book she had kept on her bedside for weeks; a tourist's guidebook, with two tickets used as a bookmark.

Darnell was already waiting for her when Quinn was escorted down to Site-92 by a man who had stiff arms and no eyebrows. Darnell frowned at Quinn as they walked, turning into a hallway labeled "Processing".

"Quinn," Darnell asked, a high tone in his voice showing some concern, "Who the hell is Jo Ann Storm?"

"She's…" Quinn blinked, her tongue going numb in her mouth, her mind going blank, as she shook her head. "I can't. I'm sorry. Not cleared. Gag Order."

"…you're fucking kidding." Darnell groaned. "God, I sometimes wish they would just mindwipe us like the good old days."

"…I want to tell you. I really do. But it's to do with home, and-" Her head spun as she tried to tell him, and she leaned against the Agent, who helped prop her up, patting her shoulder.

"Easy there," He said, helping her get back on her feet and speaking into an earpiece. "Tell Memetics that we need a countermeme for a gag order. Send it to Dr. Zhou. It's urgent."

Quinn nodded her thanks, and soon, the two of them were led into a room where the sculpture-person from Sandusky was laid out on a table, like a scene from an autopsy. Quinn swallowed as she looked at it, and then looked to Dr. Zhou, who was removing a set of gloves. Quinn's hands covered her mouth as she gasped. "That's-"

"Jo Ann Storm. Resident of Green Pastures, Iowa, missing since 1998. One of a dozen missing children from that time."

"I remember," Quinn swallowed. "I… god, that sucked for the whole

town."

Zhou nodded, and his pocket buzzed. He took out the phone within, unlocked it, and handed it to Quinn. "Watch the screen, please."

Quinn looked at the screen. It first displayed a countdown from 3… 2… 1…

She fell over, only to be caught by the Foundation agent behind her. She didn't remember what she saw, but she felt a weight on her mind being lifted, a block being destroyed. She handed the phone back to Zhou. "…ow."

"Counter-memes are hardly ever pleasant," he said, holding out his hand for the phone. "Quinn MacAllister, your mother was a Schafer, yes?"

"Hold the phone," Darnell held up his hands as Zhou did exactly that. "Quinn, are you going to tell me just what the *fuck* is going on? Is anyone?"

Dr. Zhou looked between the agents and the body on the table. "These are the remains of Jo Ann Storm. Former Resident of Green Pastures, Iowa, and a Class-3 Meteoromancer. She was a tool of Grassroots, subject to a Project SMILODON experiment, and…"

"…my next-door neighbor," Quinn sighed, looking at Darnell, an apologetic look in her eyes. "I think I need to tell you about my hometown."

<«Of Portals, Plasma Cannons, and Other Boring Things | Hub| Midnight Plane Going Anywhere»

Homeowners

Diane was glad they had found such a nice neighborhood for the kids. She and Paul had worried about finding someplace good for them to grow up in. Some of the neighborhoods they had looked at were full of hoodlums and pushers and all sorts of nasty things. But as soon as she had stepped foot into the house at 23rd terrace, she knew the home was right for her. And now three months later, she could tell that she had definitely made the right choice. The neighbors were so kind, and everyone had everything they needed, and they shared. Sure it was a little isolated, but that just meant the community was tighter knit. It really felt like one big family.

Sometimes she thought about how life was before the community, living in that tiny apartment. It was cheaper, but the people living there were all awful. It was no place to raise a family. The gated community was also far superior to any normal neighborhood, because it kept the hoodlums out. Even though it could get boiling when the sun was out, since the gates didn't provide A/C, and sometimes sleep patterns could be messed up since the roof didn't allow any light to come in, but those were minor issues compared to drug pushers and gangs.

Why, just last week old lady Miriam down the street had a heatstroke. Sadly, she hadn't made it, but this had provided a bounty for the community as a whole. After all, when you could have a feast like the one that she left behind, you didn't have to worry about foraging for food and water. The meal Miriam had provided had given everyone on 23rd terrace with food and gristle. Sure, they would miss her valuable contributions to the community, like the way she could spot interlopers a mile away, but the food was better than the eyes. Although, the eyes *were* pretty tasty.

Diane shivered as she thought of the interlopers. Sure, they were mostly harmless, skulking about at the edges of the gates, but they represented a real danger to the community. If these weirdoes could

get in, soon there would be the others from the old times, and then the whole neighborhood would go. That was why she was grateful for the lynchings. Some people might feel pity for the interlopers, as they hung them from the highest beams available to them, but Diane didn't. If these monsters felt like trespassing on private property, there wasn't much that could be done for them.

Diane looked up, and saw that the artificial sunlight emitters were going down. It was time for the forage. She kissed Paul goodbye, slung up her gun, and headed out into the junkyard. She and her neighbors saddled up and went in ready to kill. After all, you never know what might be here. Sometimes they found people from other communities. Once, they had shared resources with them, but they had become selfish and greedy and had to be exterminated. They had to protect their kin.

It was the neighborly thing to do.

Hop On Hop Off

It was a dark and stormy night in the **`Last City`**. The poor gas lighting flickered and sputtered in the cold, merciless wind. Misshapen constructions leaned into each other and threatened to fall apart any day now, with their sorry inhabitants in too high spirits to really care very much. Mechanical birds with leering eyes watched over the mostly empty streets. All around UnLondon was a sense of bleakness, abandonment and a most desperate need for outside salvation.

Instead, what the Last City got was **`Grabnok The Destroyer.`** The portly and nervous man had materialized in the middle of the street, instantly getting soaked by the intense rain. He hurried after the closest thing to shelter he could find inside an abandoned house. The front door was missing, but at least it still had all the other doors, windows and walls. Grabnok still had the flashlight and backpack the Foundation gave him and hesitantly went about exploring the place. It reeked of mold, dampness, rust and probably worse things, but he liked to tell himself that he was used to that by now.

He soon found a crowbar hidden inside a sofa, as well as a suspicious looking part of the walls. He pried it open with the crowbar with great effort, revealing a dust and insect covered book. He blew the detritus away in a large cloud, coughing loudly and hoping he wouldn't start sneezing. Shining his flashlight onto the book, he discovered something that made little sense to him but seemed very important:

> I finally figured it out. It's all a sham, the whole city. The House of Parliament knows this, they are just trying to keep us sedated and docile with the food from the vending machines and with the surveillance while they figure out a way to reach the surface without us. We have to get there first or we'll never get there. I've

> stopped eating the Wonderfood, and while it allows me to think straight and plan for the rebellion and escape, it's weighing heavy on my mind with withdrawal symptoms. I have been surviving on mutant animals and human corpses, I've lied and stolen, and I'll probably get turned into a Bobby or worse. But I have to do something. I'm getting closer, now that I have the maps to the hidden sections of the House of Parliament. Tomorrow, I'll organize my team into an infiltration mission, confiscate whatever technology that allowed them to create this hellhole and use it to reach the surface.

That was the last entry, or at least appeared to be so. Well, this was none of his business. He would hop out of this place sooner or later, no sense in getting involved with local politics. Even so, he found himself getting curious and kept reading the earlier entries, not noticing the surveillance drone perching on a nearby windowsill. Before he could finish reading, he heard a high-pitched whistle and all nearby speakers blaring "Police! Halt, criminal!". Grabnok reflexively froze and tried finding an escape route, when a Bobby burst into the room wielding a corroded lead pipe. Grabnok noticed a nearby mug filled with coins, and a Wonderfood vending machine. He quickly inserted the coin and directed the hose at the ground, spraying the slimy food all over it and making the Bobby fall. He then took the chance to throw a mattress out the window and jump out of it, landing on the mattress and running away with the book and maps.

After breathing heavily for quite a while and making sure he wasn't being watched, Grabnok opened the book and maps again. There was a document that said the technology used by the House of Parliament to build UnLondon was highly unstable due to the combination of several anomalies which were supposed to be in the custody of the Foundation, possibly with the help of an inside agent. The same document even hinted at what sort of scenario UnLondon was meant to prepare for, but the details were unclear because parts of the document were ripped away. Apparently, UnLondon was meant to be a last ditch attempt at preparing for some major timeline revision event in which the British Empire never existed.

He had to hold onto this, the Foundation would surely question him about it when he hopped back into containment. But how was he supposed to defend himself with only a crowbar and a flashlight in hostile territory full of surveillance until then? And what does it mean to get "turned into a Bobby"? Was that security guard one of them? He supposed he could withstand some forced training, but if there was something more to the process, he wanted no part in it. There had to be a truly safe spot somewhere in this city where he could maintain a low profile until he hopped back. Regardless, he had to keep moving or else he would be caught for certain.

The dimension hopper sneaked in alleyways, wore improvised disguises and even ventured into sewers, always holding onto his discoveries out of some very strange sense of loyalty and duty. Not knowing how long he would stay there, he held onto his rations despite the constant pitiful pleading of the Wretches. He eventually managed to craft a crude slingshot to knock out the surveillance drones temporarily and learned many useful shortcuts. He even managed to defeat a Bobby by luring it into the front of an oncoming train. But eventually he ran out of rations, and had to resort to the Wonderfood. He felt something strange inside his stomach after eating, something not quite like porridge, but pressed on. All throughout his struggle to survive, he could see a shadowy figure stalking him, but he had to rest.

Grabnok woke up with the feeling of someone poking his side with a hard, cold object. He jolted upward, reaching for the nearest weapon to try and defend himself, but it was only another Wretch with a cane. The man in filthy rags looked like someone who had been through a dozen lifetimes of pure misery packed into a few years, and yet, he was somehow giving him a yellow smile.

"You found my book. Good. I thought they would have burned it by now."

"Who are you? Why did you write that book?" he paused and then put his hands up in a defensive gesture. "I didn't steal it, I swear!"

The man in rags laughed, and strands of bloody phlegm came out of his mouth. "You may call me Leader. It's who I have been trying to be, anyways. Hasn't worked out too well, as you can see,

hahahahaha."

"Right…say, is there a spot in this city where the surveillance and the security guards won't go? I need to keep a low profile for some time."

The Leader suddenly turned grim. "Not so fast. You are an outsider. That means it is still possible to get in and out of this hellhole. I ain't helping you unless you help me. You are gonna bring me with you and tell your surface friends all about what happens here everyday so I can free this city, got it?"

Grabnok swallowed hard and began to sweat. He was a horrible liar. "S-s-s-sure thing, Leader! I got some friends in very high places[1] They'll uh…have everything under control in no time, promise!" he offered a nervous handshake, which Leader returned.

"Excellent. We need to get to the outskirts. Reality is mostly falling apart there, but there is one spot that they don't know about which is safe. Follow me."

As they ventured further and further, the less they saw guards and drones. The gas lighting became brighter and more vivid, the air and streets cleaner, and even plants grew here and there. They eventually reached a building that almost seemed like a genuine Victorian house.

"What..how…did you?" blurted out Grabnok.

"I don't know much more than you, but I'll be damned if I let anyone know about this, you hear?" Leader snarled. "Come inside, there's tea."

Once they entered the modest but comparatively wonderful house, Leader shared his other plans and notes with Grabnok.

"For years I suspected they were lying to us, but I didn't do anything about it. The others were too sedated and hypnotized by the food and the constant messages to do much better. To this day, I still don't know how I managed to wake up from all of that, or even get a few people to join my cause. But as my luck would have, they were

caught and turned into Bobbies, while I ran away and continued the mission."

"The security guards are the Bobbies, right? How do they turn you into one of them?"

Leader shuddered. "I don't know, and I honestly don't want to." He suddenly beamed with exalted joy. "But now I have you here, and it's all gonna pay off, I just know it!"

Leader's smile dissolved as lightning struck his house, making everything dark. Something lit up inside Grabnok's stomach with the same color as the eyes of the surveillance drones, and he vomited it back up. The spherical thing squirmed on the ground before assuming the form of a drone and sealing the fate of both of them with its glowing gaze.

Leader burst into a mad dash to try and destroy the drone but failed, and Grabnok was too busy vomiting still. When the drone flew away, Leader turned stood still for a few moments, unleashed a shriek of defeat and lunged at Grabnok, ready to kill the outsider with his bare hands. Before he could land a killing blow with a brick, Grabnok hopped outside of UnLondon, along with his backpack full Leader's notes and everything else. He tried to escape, but soon enough a dozen Bobbies were at his door and he was escorted to Bryson's Home For The Poor.

When Grabnok returned to containment, he shared the secrets he had discovered with the Foundation and told the story of what happened. He was asked if he would like a reward for his cooperation. He simply said:

"Some decent porridge, and a bright and sunny day."

Hotline: Eventide

While Sloth's Pit is one of the more animated Nexuses in the United States, greatly distorting the Anomaly Occurrence Value of the entire Midwest, Wisconsin is only the second-most anomalous state. Thanks to the existence of Roadkill County in Oregon, the Pacific Northwest is, from a purely quantitative standpoint, the most anomalous area of the United States. Lesser known than Roadkill County, but equally important, is the city of Eventide— as of writing, it is the largest anomalous population center in the United States. The government does not condone Foundation activity within city limits, and the constant darkness has lead to several members of both its populace and of Foundation personnel becoming somewhat, shall we say, unhinged.

Combined with the wide variety of psychoactive fungus within the Nexus zone, it has become a testing ground for many parapharmaceuticals. Some members of the task force at Site-51 are even used as guinea pigs for new medications, a controversial practice which, nonetheless, Site-51's administrative staff has defended since the late 1960s.

- Dr. Philip Verhoten, *The Crossroads: A Study of Urban Anomalous Nexuses in the United States.*

Lieutenant William Stoker looked outside at the 3:00 P.M. sky and sighed. Three years living in Eventide, staying in the skyscraper that was Site-51 (better known as Wiley Tower), and he was still getting used to the fact that the sun would never rise within city limits. The city weather was cold, unforgiving, and it was almost constantly raining. Over the past one-hundred years, Eventide had compensated for the rainfall by building up one of the most robust sewer systems in Oregon— but it might not be enough.

Stoker picked up a sublingual spray and lifted up his tongue, coating the underside of it with what the techs had termed "Pepper-Up

Potion". Eighteen hours of wakefulness, and he was going to need all of it.

Thunder rumbled outside as Stoker made his way to the elevator, an assault rifle in his hand, and a ski mask over his head. Today, he — and the rest of Sigma-29, AKA "Night Watch" — were going to rob a bank in the middle of the dark and stormy day.

He got a salute from one of the researchers exiting the elevator on his level. He nodded in return, and then climbed in, hitting the override button that would take him straight down to the vehicle bay. A fortified parking garage, it held all of the vehicles owned by Site-51's staff and task force. And most of his squad was already loaded up, with the exception of his superior, Colonel Leah Cibari.

"You're late," she frowned, taking a sip from a special 'nutrient pouch' she carried at her hip. She was looking less pale than usual, which was certainly a good thing— she hadn't been able to take her medication as of late, due to the monthly supply truck capsizing in the middle of Bend last week.

"A wizard is never late, nor is he early. He arrives whenever he chooses to." Stoker smirked back at her.

"You're a Grade-2 Warlock, and we're behind schedule." She tugged him to the van. "The bank's closing in half an hour, and traffic's gonna be godawful in the storm."

"Yes, ma'am," Stoker nodded, getting into the back of the van. Within were the three other members of his squad: Jacob Wexley, former computer scientist who had gotten whammied in such a way that his old line of work was no longer feasible; Kathryn Kramer, their breacher, a blonde woman with one eye replaced by a cybernetic implant; and Susan Smith, ex-CIA, who would normally be the face of this op, should any con artistry be required. As it stood, she could still make for a good amount of muscle.

The van — which allegedly belonged to 'Normal Moving Co.' — zoomed out of the parking garage, turning the corner sharply enough that Wexley hit his head on the van's wall. He growled in pain. "This had better be worth the risk," he frowned. "Why can't we

just buy it?"

"The item in question is an artifact that can't change hands willingly — it always has to be stolen. If it isn't, it reappears in possession of the previous owner." Susan frowned. "Honestly, Jacob. We've been over this three times."

"It's almost the full moon, Sue," Kramer chided. "You know how his memory gets around this time of month."

"Is a bank robbery the best way to do it, though?" Jacob asked, scratching at his skin. "We could be more discrete."

Stoker pulled out his syringe kit, and extracted an injector pen with a bright red label on it, which simply read 'the Juice'. "For E-4343 to count as passing into the possession of a new person, at least five other people who aren't the thief have to witness it being stolen." He fiddled with the cap on the pen, and handed ones of different colors to the other three- K.K. got a green one which read 'Burst', Jacob got a blue injector which was called 'Man's Bane', and Susan got a yellow injector which read 'You Can't Handle'.

"Do you always have to name them so weird?" Jacob frowned. "Like, I get this is your girlfriend's hobby—"

"Hobby? She's a parapharmacologist. This is what she does for a living, and she loves it."

Rain pattered on the exterior of the van. The tires screeched on the wet concrete as they turned a corner, and then stopped. "We here?" Smith asked.

"Affirmative." Cibari said through the grille at the front of the van, putting on her mask— while Stoker preferred to stick to a traditional ski mask, everyone else had their own preference. Leah liked her chicken mask; Smith, preferring to reflect her CIA roots, had a mask on which read "M.K. Badass"; Kramer had a simple clown mask; and Jacob had the visage of a wolf on his face. Let it never be said that Jacob Wexley was creative.

"Go in, subdue, get out." Leah popped a liquid gel pill into her

mouth; her eyes glowed red behind the mask.

The Bank of Oregon branch in Eventide had a massive skylight above, which Smith chose to aim for when she shot her gun at the ceiling. As the glass rained down, thankfully not hitting any of Eventide's pale populace, rain started flowing into the bank. "Everyone be cool!" she called, her voice modulated by the mask. "This is a robbery. We don't want any of your belongings, we just want to get to the vault."

"Drop your weapon!" a security guard called. His frame was slender and his skin was paper white, not an uncommon sight among the sun-starved population of the town. The lack of contrast between his white skin and light blue uniform almost made it painful to look at him. He was holding a 9mm at them. "Drop it now!"

Jacob stepped forward, his machine pistol aimed at the guard. "This is a MAC-10. It can fire over a thousand rounds per minute, and that pea shooter can maybe manage one-hundred, if you reload fast enough. You really wanna take that ch-"

The guard emptied his clip into Jacob's chest; as the ex-computer technician stumbled back, he pulled out the blue injector he had been given, and stuck it in his neck. The effect was immediate— all of the wolfsbane medication he had taken in the past week was forced out of his body. He removed the mask, vomiting, and as he did so, almost tripled in size, growing fur, and a set of fangs that could bite through concrete. The were-dire-wolf lunged at the guard, pinning him back against the wall.

"We don't want to hurt you!" Leah called, licking her teeth. That much was a lie, coming from her. The pills made her hungry. "We just want to get into the vault. Where's the bank manager?"

There was silence throughout the bank; everyone had gotten on the ground, either kneeling or face-down. Lightning illuminated the bank, and the lights within flickered. "Ah, nuts," Kramer muttered to herself, cocking her shotgun. She blinked her right eye, activating the low-light sensor as the power to the bank was cut off.

"Shit!" Leah ran towards the teller's booths. "The bank's vault seals automatically within five minutes of a power cut. We need to get in there *now*."

While Jacob kept the lone security guard occupied, the four of them ran to the teller's booths. Leah got there first, her form bursting through the steel grating, and bringing it down on top of the poor bank employees that had hidden under their desks. "The code to the vault," she asked a black-haired Eventideian. "Do you know it?"

"N-no," she insisted. "I—"

Smith leaped over the counter and stuck her yellow injector into the teller's shoulder. She hissed in pain, before becoming transfixed on something in the middle distance. Susan knelt by her, and asked, "Who knows the vault combination?"

The serum worked quickly. "Mr. Muldoon knows. He's in his office, probably hiding in the panic room."

"On it," Kramer nodded, making her way to the manager's office.

The rain from the broken skylight was starting to flood the inside of the bank; already, the agents could feel their socks getting wet inside their boots. The low growl of the werewolf handing the guard emanated as the sound of police sirens started tearing through the rain.

"Goddamn alarms," Susan hissed. "Shouldn't have shot out the glass. Sorry."

The city's government didn't tolerate the existence of the Foundation within city limits. If they were caught here, the organization would disavow them, and they'd most likely rot in jail for a decade or two.

Leah could afford to lose that time, but nobody else could. She popped in another pill, and licked her lips as her tongue trailed out of her mask. "I'll handle them. Gonna try not to kill any."

"Luck, L." Susan nodded, wondering what was taking Kramer so long to get the bank manager.

Kramer's better eye couldn't see shit.

The walls of the manager's office was lead-lined. She couldn't see anything through the walls or floor, on any spectrum. If the panic room was here, she couldn't see it— or rather, that would be the case, if not for the rain.

Lightning briefly illuminated the office, and she saw that there was a conglomeration of debris on a particular point on the floor, in a somewhat squarish pattern. Grinning, she produced a collapsible crowbar from her side, and stuck herself with the syringe that she had been given.

She had used this particular brew so often she hardly felt its effects anymore— no more rush, no more giddiness. She would have to ask Stoker's girlfriend to make her a new batch, something stronger. Or maybe she should just see an addiction therapist.

But that wouldn't be as fun as sticking the head of the crowbar against the floor tiles and yanking it upward. Underneath it, in the panic room's space, was a cowering Eventideian in a black suit. Kramer knew how to get them to talk.

Kathryn Kramer's eye lit up with UV radiation— simulated sunlight. She looked down at him, lifting her mask aside to reveal the shining eye. "You have ten seconds to tell me what the vault's combination is, or I give you sunburn."

"O-okay, okay," the man winced. "It's—"

"8-6-7-5-3-0-9." Stoker punched in the code with a frown; at thirty seconds left, the vault opened. "Seriously?"

"Jenny don't change your number," Smith shrugged, turning on her flashlight. "Right, we're looking for a small statue with a jackal head, maybe a foot tall. You take the deposit boxes on the left, I'll take the ones on the right."

Drawing his crowbar, Stoker started tugging open the safety deposit lockers, one by one. He found bonds, bank statements, jewelery,

even whole ingots— but no statue. "I got jack shit," he complained, moving onto the back wall.

Smith had better fortune; on the last locker on her wall, she found a small, granite statue. Grinning, she pulled it out. "I got it. Let's *vamanos.*"

"*Vamonos*," Stoker corrected. "*Vamanos* is 'handcuffs'."

"Oh. Let's avoid those." She stowed the statue in her duffel bag, making sure its head was sticking out, and started for the vault's exit. As they entered the lobby, gunfire erupted.

True to her word, Leah wasn't *trying* to kill any of the officers, but it was damn hard to do.

Her saliva contained an agent which could knock people out in large amounts— with her three-foot-long tongue, it was easy enough to lick the officers, even under the mask. Jacob had already managed to skedaddle, and with good reason. The EPD was using silver ammunition. It didn't hurt her too much, but the wounds would take longer to heal. If it was beryllium-bronze bullets, like the Foundation had, that would be a different issue entirely.

"DOWN!" Stoker yelled from behind her. Leah looked back in time to see him inject "the Juice" into his neck. Her eyes went wide, and she dove past the members of the EPD as Stoker started speaking words of power. Amplified by the thaumaturgical juices flowing through his veins, hell broke loose.

In one second, all of the police officers started vomiting blood.

In two seconds, they were flying through the air, as if being carried by invisible ropes, into the bank's lobby.

In the third second, they had been suspended from the frame of the broken skylight.

In the fourth and final second, Leah found herself, and everyone else, in the van. Stoker was driving.

"Should you really be doing that?" Leah asked. "A four-second dose can kill you, and I don't want to die in a crash."

"I'm fine," he panted, wiping blood from his lips. "Let's get this thing back to Site-51 and get it in containment."

Leah looked at the statue; the inscription at the base was in Greek, and yet it depicted something with the head of a jackal. "This gonna get classified as a proper skip?" she asked.

"Maybe," Smith nodded, removing her mask. "But if so, that means we have more paperwork to write. And paperwork means detox."

"Fuck that noise," Kramer shook her head. "We class this as an AO and leave it at that."

"I think that some of the eggheads are gonna object," Stoker rolled his shoulders. Thunder rumbled throughout the darkened city as they made their way to the one beacon of light that still remained, immune from the power outage— Site-51, which lit up the night.

House Of Gears, Part One

A valuable heuristic to follow when working in a science lab is this: for each piece of equipment worth more than twenty dollars, assume that, at some point, it will fail. To summarize for the layman, there are machines in my workspace that will become drastically misaligned if a researcher sneezes within a yard of them. The Foundation has built redundancies upon redundancies so that one part of the facility can malfunction without affecting the system. Each of the individual machines, eventually, will break.

I was fixing an uncooperative laser printer on the day I was abducted. I can picture the exact specifications of the part I was soldering when I heard conflict break out behind the blast doors of the containment chamber. Several M4s discharged, which are standard issue for this sector's guards, but I heard no other gunfire. This caused me to rule out several potential attackers. I considered the most probable containment breaches, and in the absence of roaring vocalizations, clanging metal, or screams in proto-Akkadian, dismissed them. Judgment: situation unclear. Response: suspend the current task, observe.

Something collided loudly with the wall above. The object traveled forward until it was directly above me. A humanoid body passed down through the ceiling, accompanied by a long note, descending in pitch, played on a slide whistle.

The intruder wore an indigo suit made of a ribbed material which pulsated at a frequency of approximately 100 beats per minute. Save for her eyes (in my time here, I have learned her gender), which were beneath a set of goggles, the garment covered her face completely. She withdrew the mask by pressing against it with the fingertips of her left hand. I determined that she was human, superficially.

This woman reached between her suit's abdominal ribbing with both

hands. Each appeared to open into a void where her body should have been visible. On the right, she stored the whistle and withdrew a pistol of unfamiliar design. On the left, she produced an object and told me to describe it.

I took the item from her to gauge its weight and examine it on all sides. Save for one moving part, it was carved from a single piece of low-density wood, possibly balsa. A small extra piece has been fasted to one end with a wooden bolt in a way that allowed the part to spin freely on an axis. The body was coated in red acrylic paint, applied inconsistently; it chipped with little resistance against my fingernail. I began with the most basic description of the object: it was a toy plane.

This summary caused her extreme displeasure. Grasping for a solution, I began to relay the other details, but she interrupted me before I could finish. *Do you remember this*? I considered that this woman had disabled a fire team in order to deliver this question, so I affected a reassuring tone. I explained to her that I have use of what is colloquially known as a "photographic memory". If I had encountered this object at any point in my life, I would know so. Even after amnestic usage prevented me from recalling it of my own free will, the sight of it would almost certainly evoke at least a vague sense of recognition.

At this point, the woman nodded. Although I am not a psychiatrist, and the assigned tasks of my job for the Foundation made any degree of human interaction optional, I had a reputation among my coworkers for the ability to succinctly and dispassionately convey information. Too often was I pulled away by staff who promised favors in exchange for delivering bad news: a family death, an anomalous disease, various other occupational hazards. As a result, I have seen, at least a dozen times, the particular sort of nod that the woman employed at that moment.

The woman put away the toy and restrained me with a pair of handcuffs. I asked her who she was, and what her intentions were. She told me to call her Alison, and that she planned on permanently removing me from the Foundation. I would not be harmed, she explained, but I would never be able to return. I told her that my test subject wouldn't like that.

Up until this point, Alison was either unaware or indifferent to the nature of the containment chamber into which she had forced herself. Outside the room, a station contained a reference document for containment procedure, a laser printer, and a set of reinforced suits and flamethrowers, available in case the test subject becomes uncooperative.

The containment chamber itself appears to be featureless; in fact, each wall is lined with roughly one dozen layers of industrial-grade paper, to facilitate the free movement of its occupant. The entity is contained within the paper, and can manipulate it to a degree.

Upon my mention of a test subject, Alison spun around and saw the entity in action behind her. It superficially appeared to be a life-sized ink drawing of an angry young woman. Pieces of the paper surface tore away and folded together at a rate of dozens of folds per second. In an imitation of the intruder's passing intangibly down through the ceiling, SCP Object Zulu Hotel Echo emerged from the wall in a humanoid body and advanced towards us.

My captor fired her pistol. The bullets passed through Zulu Hotel Echo without effect. Alison crouched, pulled a lever on the gun, and discharged beams that tore large cavities into Zulu Hotel Echo's body. The paper humanoid pulled material up from the floor to repair them. Then it lunged at Alison.

The two of them tumbled across the floor. Zulu Hotel Echo's claws tore into Alison, and Alison ripped away parts of her assailant as quickly as it could produce them. Alison pinned Zulu Hotel Echo to the floor, adjusted her pistol, and applied a jet of fire point-blank to the entity's head.

The paper body convulsed and folded into itself in an attempt to smother the flames while Alison rolled away and surveyed her injuries. Numerous cuts covered her face, and she was bleeding heavily from the shoulder. She dropped the pistol and pressed her trigger hand against the wound. The other held one of Zulu Hotel Echo's hands, torn away at the wrist.

The entity withdrew from the smoldering heap and onto the side of the chamber, then crawled to the wall Alison had leaned against. It

formed two arms, one on each side of her. I noticed that Alison had folded the severed hand's claws together into a single point and smudged it with her blood. The smudges formed a drawing of a knife. As the hands closed around Alison's throat, she stabbed the point into the wall behind. It pierced the paper and Zulu Hotel Echo convulsed, causing the paper on the wall to shake and tear. The strangling arms went limp. Alison pushed herself onto her feet, leaving bloody handprints on the floor.

Alison pulled me away from the fire, which was spreading to fill the room. She sprinkled green powder in a circle that surrounded us. She noticed my fidgeting as I looked for an opening for escape, and pleaded that I not disturb the ring, for the sake of our own safety. She extracted a few jewels of various cuts from her suit and arranged them with care in the center of the ring, then wrapped an arm securely around my neck.

I decided that, while helpless, I could still at least gather information. I asked her how she was going to escape, and she told me that she would "open the Way".

This went without elaboration at the time, but my captor would later explain what was meant by the phrase. Alison can access a passage that intersects multiple universes, a phenomenon which she and her ilk have termed "the Way". The Way varied in geographic location, as it manifested in the immediate vicinity of "the most dangerous ten-foot square in America". Although the Foundation I worked for lacked the means to detect and analyze this portal, the qualifying ten cubic feet was almost always in or near a Foundation site. Whenever Alison herself was in a Foundation site, she found it trivially easy to "attract its attention".

During my initial capture, as I watched the flame advance toward us, I skipped the matter of what exactly "the Way" was, as the name made the basic concept evident, and asked if this powder was the method of opening it. She denied it. She held a sewing needle into my range of vision, point lightly pressed against her thumb, and said that she merely had to draw blood. The flames were centimeters from contact with the circle.

I inquired further: in that case, what was the purpose of the powder?

Explosive, she said, as she pierced her hand, and I felt an acute physical sensation similar to motion sickness.

Continued in Part Two.

House Of Gears, Part Two

I awoke on an examination table. Monitors built into the walls displayed medical information: height, weight, dental X-ray, MRI data. There were several unfamiliar charts that I couldn't read. I sat up and saw a doctor taking notes, so I inquired.

"What is this screen describing?"

"That's an inventory of augmentations to your body. We scan for everything from pins holding bone together to nanomachines in the blood." The doctor turned toward me and approached the monitor I had referred to. I noticed that his voice and appearance were nearly identical to mine. "Looks like you're completely natural."

"Why have I been taken here?"

"I would have shown you when you woke up, but you've come to a few minutes ahead of schedule." My double tapped the closest screen. I discerned that he was checking the measurements of medications administered to me.

"A timing error. That means you probably aren't actually my duplicate."

He chuckled. He must have thought I was making a joke. "I'm you if things had gone a little differently, Doctor. I would continue the exam, but I know you won't cooperate until you get answers. Come along."

"Our most popular hypothesis is that a reality-bender opened a bubble between universes for personal use." The physician told me this as he led me across the wing. "Those of us who study spatiotemporal anomalies believe it's far too stable to occur naturally. I trust them on that.

"The earliest known arrival was first detained here six years ago, so

we believe that to be when initial construction finished. However, the base has continually expanded since then to make allotments for certain outliers in our population."

"That doesn't satisfy my previous question."

"I know, Doctor. I try to err towards caution with new arrivals and ease them into the knowledge, but I know enough about you to know that you're only intellectually aware of the concept of shock. So here you are." He opened a door to another hallway, and we entered.

As we did so, a second duplicate of myself approached the first, and they exchanged information on tablet computers. Down the hallway, a third and fourth conversed while gathering medical supplies.

"The population I mentioned earlier, Doctor Gears? It's you. It's us. Two hundred and eighteen instances, gathered from across the multiverse. Welcome to the House of Gears, Charles."

"I know what you'll ask next. Just a moment." My tour guide opened a picture on his tablet and showed it to me. "Is this the woman who abducted you?"

"Her face was concealed, but I recognize the mouth."

"The face is the least important part. The suit and gun, did she have those?"

"She did."

"Okay, that's almost definitely Black Queen Persephone. Which is good, she's one of the kinder ones. Her real name is Alison Chao, but she probably told you that."

"She mentioned her first name."

"She's your daughter. Or rather, she's a version of your daughter. … More precisely, she's the daughter of a version of you." He scratched his chin. "Do you have children, Charles?"

"I never married. Please don't call me Charles."

We passed out of the medical wing and into a carpeted hallway. "Here we have the recreation wing." He opened a door to a room with a dozen chess tables, each occupied. "I can get you in on a game, if you like. I'll even make sure you get white."

"No, thank you. I've never been one to play chess with myself."

"Fair enough. Where were we… oh, yes, a lot of the Gearses in here don't have living daughters. Not all, but…" He trailed off as he tapped idly at the screen of his tablet a few times. Perhaps he was impatient at a load time. "And I'm sorry about that. It'll be 'Dr. Gears' for the rest of the tour. It's just that you don't have your designation yet." He pulled his arm a few inches further out from his coat sleeve to show me a tattoo on his right wrist. "We get them during the third stage of processing, after the exam and initial orientation. I'm C-44."

"C-44. Is the tattoo mandatory?"

"Yes. It's the most efficient way the logistics officers have found to avoid confusion." He scrolled through columns of information under the photograph of Black Queen Persephone. "The only way to get out of it is if you can think of a more practical system and convince them to adopt it. Which I encourage wholeheartedly."

We turned a corner into a row of doors. "This is the housing section. you'll likely end up living here. It should fit your tastes — maximum efficiency, easy to clean, a computer with access to all the information I can give you."

I opened an unlocked apartment. "These remind me of Foundation containment chambers."

"I think that's the aesthetic they're going for."

I didn't respond.

We reached a fork. "At this point," C-44 told me, "we can go right, toward the cafeteria and the workspaces. your specialty is…" Two taps on the tablet. "…mechanical engineering, right? I can show you the lab."

"And on the left?"

"Maintenance, the garden, and… other housing arrangements."

"So the question is which end of the facility you will show me first?"

"Trust me, we'll only have time for one."

"I see. Who is responsible for the equipment in the lab?"

"The engineers make requisitions for parts or equipment, and the logistics officers pass these on to the Black Queens, who approve or deny them. There are a few limits… spacetime research is severely restricted, and you'd have trouble getting things that could catastrophically damage the facility—but the engineers have pooled their knowledge and it's resulted in quite a few innovations."

"Pooled their knowledge? Elaborate."

"Each Doctor Gears adds the sum total of his knowledge to the facility's resources. There are alternates of you from universes where quantum physics is decades ahead of what you'd know, where materials science has produced things you may have theorized were possible… everyone works with the best that the multiverse has to offer."

"Take me there, C-44."

And so he did.

For the sake of time, I shall relate several examples of what I saw there rather than a complete inventory. The initial notes I made on the engineering labs, which I took down from memory once I had access to paper, filled my first journal, and continued into most of the second journal that I was provided.

I saw entanglement experiments at a scale such that they involved apples and billiard balls. I saw innovative human organs designed to provide new resources to the body without rejection. A small team had devised a method of encoding messages into genetic material that could be read in a blood or tissue sample, a process they tested during the cloning of species that had become extinct on their respective planets.

One laboratory was dedicated to advancements in clockwork technology. I watched an analog computer evaluate sorting algorithms powered solely by a wind-up key. In a corner, researchers took turns monitoring a complex arrangement of gears surrounding a receptacle. It was explained to me that occasionally the readout shifts to one of several settings, such as Coarse or Fine, and an object emerged. It was partly a game and partly a compulsion amongst the clockwork researchers to determine what sort of object the machine was requesting based on its output.

"I hate to cut this short," C-44 told me, "but it's getting late. you'll need to squeeze into the last shift of processing if you don't want to spend the night on a hospital bed."

"Very well." We adjourned to the medical wing. C-44 found the room marked Processing - Housing And Designation.

"This marks the end of the tour, Doctor Gears. Ah, right, one last thing I need to tell you." C-44 tapped a nearby wall monitor. He opened a menu and dragged it downward, off the edge of the screen, and it appeared on his tablet. "This is the information on your retrieval. It should be released to you before long."

"I expect it to include the reason I was abducted."

"It varies depending on the instance of us and the instance of them. Some take us because they think we've blocked out the memory of our children, or have had it removed. Some think the doctors they bring in are psychologically damaged and in need of treatment. Some of them just consider us resources to be used to labor in labs and workshops. If we were the targets they actually sought out, we wouldn't be tossed… in… Here it is."

"Like I said earlier, one of the kinder ones." He turned to me. "She brought you in because she doesn't want you around for what she's going to do to your Foundation."

The processing clerk gave me an apartment key and a badge which denoted that I worked in engineering Lab 3. He asked me to place my arm into a machine, and I did so. A cuff restrained my arm to prevent movement, and a tattoo was inscribed, relatively quickly and

painlessly, onto my skin. "I hope you enjoy your stay, B-85," the clerk said. I looked at my wrist and verified that he had called me by the correct name.

My initial visit to my apartment and sleeping were uneventful. At the cafeteria, I was served corn flakes with slices of banana, which is my preferred breakfast. Once I had finished eating, I began to travel to my workspace. At the fork in the hallway, I decided to head left to briefly survey that area, but was told by a security officer that I would require an escort with the proper clearance. I accepted this.

That evening, I left my shift early (relative to my normal schedule; at the Foundation it would have been considered two hours late) and registered an appointment with C-44. He would agree to complete the tour. The clerk asked me why I was interested in touring the wing. I deflected the question, as I was unable to answer.

I met with C-44 the next day after work. (Details of my research fill my second journal. By request of the supply supervisor, I began keeping digital records only after that to save on paper.) He asked to see my badge, and I complied. I expressed my intention to visit the maintenance and "alternative housing" he had mentioned, and he led me. As we walked, C-44 engaged in small talk.

"So, you're B-85… and you got a job in the lab? Congratulations."

"Was there any uncertainty?"

"Unfortunately, not everyone can get the position they prefer. Someone has to do the unpopular jobs. Human Resources does a good job of providing most of us with a position that best suits us. Those of us without doctorates go into low-qualification tasks, while those of us who are more, ah… personable are assigned to work in the more social jobs."

"Is that what happened to you, C-44?"

"That's it, yes. I worked as an MRI technician at a private hospital, but now I handle these initiations, because apparently few of us are good at that sort of thing. But enough about that. You should see the

garden."

C-44 brought me into a solarium outfitted with artificial sun lamps. Rare species grew here [list some], caretaken by assistants of a Dr. Gears A-20, who greeted me cheerfully.

"Isn't it beautiful?" he asked me.

"I'm sure it's a useful collection."

"Useful…" A-20 removed a work glove and rubbed his chin. "Empty your mind for a moment, B-85. Just feel the energy here. As each cell drinks in sunlight and each plant reaches toward it… don't you feel God here?"

"I don't."

"Well… yes, it's a useful collection. you'll probably appreciate the hydroponic crops. They're just past that door." A-20 replaced his glove and began to prune a bush.

"Don't mind him," C-44 whispered to me. "Back home, he was part of something called The Church of the Winding Branches."

"Alright. I suspect he's correct about the crops, C-44."

I saw a chamber filled with staple crops, herbs, and other edible plants growing in water.

"This is where most of the cafeteria's food comes from. Here, and the cloning lab. Some things are transported here, but we try to be as self-sufficient as possible. The Black Queens spend less and less time here."

"I think they just want us to find the Tree." One of A-20's assistants muttered this while taking tomato inventory.

"Don't tell me," C-44 said to him, "that your boss converted you."

"It makes sense, doesn't it? Biodiversity is cranked to extremes in that botanical garden. Literally more plants than a universe has to offer."

I interjected. "Only in the sense that the garden contains plants from multiple universes. That's a very misleading statement."

"And when and where is the only other place that has so many plants in one place, with only one man to take care of them?"

"Again, that's not—"

"The Garden of Eden, brother. Humanity branched out from that one spot, from the Tree of Knowledge. I think… that the Black Queens are trying to remake it."

"C-44, why don't we continue the tour?"

"That, uh… yes, very well."

C-44 took me further west. Additional security guards patrolled this wing—Dr. Gears in face-covering visors. I was shown a locked vault door.

"No badge reader here, B-85. No electronic systems of any kind in the door's mechanisms. There's a key that a few security staff and Black Queens carry, but otherwise…"

"What's behind it?"

"Behind it is a similar, but separate facility. It's that alternative housing I mentioned. It's locked because… well, I'm not sure you're cleared to know that."

"What information can I access with Level 2 security?"

"You don't have a tablet yet, do you? Here…" C-44 held the screen up to me; the front camera was engaged. "Show it your card."

I scanned myself in.

"Ah, okay, here's a report." C-44 summarized the information for me. "So… if a Gears arrives with any artificial body parts or other implants, such as a digital eye, surgeons detect and remove or replace it with a part cultivated in the cloning lab. (Rejection is

almost nonexistent, due to inhabitants sharing virtually identical genes.) Some, however, are beyond corrective surgery. Those are quarantined from the rest of the population in their own facility."

"I don't see the reasoning."

"Some of them have transferred to or been augmented with strong AI. If we gave them a moment to make their case, they would likely completely control the facility within a day."

"If they're that qualified, it sounds like a practical decision."

"The Black Queens don't see it that way. So they strictly enforce quarantine, and keep them next to… that room." C-44 pointed to the end of the hall. "I know you can't approach there."

A pair of security officers stood two or three yards away. The door they guarded was matte gray and bore an insignia painted in red.

"Recognize the symbol?"

It was a ring, with five arrows pointing outward from the center in the shape of a star.

"Something about it is dimly familiar."

"Maybe because it reminds you of the Foundation logo. I understand that there's a splinter group of the Foundation called the Insurgency, or Chao's Insurgency, or the Porridgemongers, or…"

"The Chaos Insurgency."

"Correct. That's a cast-iron door, B-85. Supposedly it protects us from their magic. I don't know anything about it, but the Black Queens work with a Gears, A-something, that calls himself a 'sorcerresearcher', and he handles CI policy."

The door opened from inside. A Gears was behind it holding a clipboard. "Requesting clearance to exit the salty ring of my fatigue."

The two guards turned toward him and tapped their badges. The Gears held up his card to them with his right hand. "Careful. your

hand will break if you touch this vent."

"We can't read it from there."

"I don't want to approach you without permission." He pointed toward the side. "The hook in your neck is the contact you've made."

One turned to the other. "Don't invite him out. He needs it. He's a warlock."

The suspicious Gears raised his voice. "I need a brand new skin! Incarcernated debts!" I repeated the strange words to myself, under my breath. They tasted bitter. He withdrew his left hand from his coat. It was soaked in blood. He began to splatter it on the walls and floor on the other side of the door. One guard pressed an button with his palm that caused an alarm to sound.

As the door to the Insurgency cells began to close, the warlock shouted over the klaxons. "Goliath, are you receiving? Desecrated, you've arrived!" For a moment, he made eye contact with me.

"I'm really sorry about that." C-44 examined my clothing. "At least you didn't get any of it on you."

"That's good," I said.

"I think I should take you back to your room now."

"That's also good," I told him.

"I'm afraid you'll have to get an extra examination, though. They'll want to check for exposure to any 'spells' or 'cognitohazards'."

"Very well."

The examination found no effects from the incident, mental or metaphysical. The purpose of the CI agent's disturbance was not discovered. I personally am still not sure whether he was somehow alerted to my presence by informant or divination, or perhaps he merely chose to make an attempt to contact the general population and hope for the best.

That insurgent was not attempting to use a cognitohazard, I determined, nor magic. He was running through trigger phrases. He wanted to activate sleeper agents.

How did he know what their trigger phrases would be? Perhaps elements of the CI coordinate across universes. I must ask him later, when we are together.

I have been brought here on the pretense that I am a Foundation researcher, and I was. I am thought to be a man of science. I still believe that I am. As Whitman said, I am multitudes.

Every machine breaks, eventually. Sometimes, to do so, they require a little help.

Casa de Jacinta / Jacinta de la Casa

Aurelio always rides too fast. I told him as much on the last night I saw him. Do you really need to die in a way that will leave such a mess? It's so unfair to the rest of us that we have to see you like that. His reply was always to hell with you all, I'll be dead, what do I care? Ha ha.

Here he comes on his bike, tearing around the hillside curves as the Ciudad comes into view. He's by himself, and this is worrying me. He's been bringing large crews of the new Barqueros with him lately. Trucks and equipment and tools into the tower. But now? Just him, this time. How many are left? Does it matter? The empty city is cursed, just as much as it's haunted. The new Barqueros crossing the same river as the old ones.

He slides around to a stop in front of the little market, spraying dirt everywhere to the infantile delight of the ever-present Maximo and Ernesto, seated in their pensioner's chairs in front. Why do they find him so funny? Is it because he isn't dead yet? That's something that might be funny to those that grow old, maybe. I wouldn't know. Never got the chance.

Aurelio goes inside, and I already know he's getting his traditional six pack of Quilmes for whenever he visits the Ciudad. The tanned wrecks of old men return to their wizened, ritualistic head shaking and muttering while he goes inside. Maximo and Ernesto sway like two spindly quebracho trees stripped of their leaves, the brief disturbance of Aurelio and his motorcycle giving way again to the wind that always whips through this place. Wind is madness and impermanence and slow grinding destruction. If the planners from the Ministry had thought to ask anyone before they built this city, anyone from the plains could have told them that.

He's coming back out now, already started on the first bottle. He throws one to Maximo and one to Ernesto. I'm troubled. They're not. They start drinking without any questions. You question everything

when you're dead. I miss that; plunging headlong into the next moment of your life without thinking. Not allowed now. I would complain to the management if I could. Aurelio stops a moment before getting back onto his bike.

What do you think, eh? What's going on in the world now?

Ernesto doesn't bother to look up. Same as ever.

Maximo looks at his fellow scarecrow, insulted. His face folds up even more, a scribble of brown lines and wrinkles. Same as ever? You old fool. It's falling apart. Even the goddamn yanquis are shitting themselves.

Eh, they just grew eyes now. It was always there. That's why I told you not to go poking in **`that fucking tower`**, Aurelio. No one listens.

His words make me catch. Oh Ernesto. Not even you knew what was in there.

Aurelio laughs. And when have you ever listened to anyone, eh *cabrón*?

Ernesto scratches his beard and drinks some more. No one listens to anyone. No one pays attention to nothing until it's hurting them. Just the way of the world. The madness really comes from out there. It leaked into the valley below. Dribbling into a puddle down there.

You should come work for me Ernesto. We could use that insight. It's a real growth field, you know. Career advancement, dental care, a receptionist with nice *chichis*. Man like you could have a real future.

Those guys who came with you last time. What kind of future they have?

Seems like even Ernesto has had enough joking around today.

Aurelio finishes his bottle. Same one we all have, Don Ernesto. On a day like all the others, we lie down under the earth.

I never felt closer to you than when you were quoting some idiot poem at a stupid time, Aurelio. You always thought it was so funny, how mad it would make me. I guess it was kind of funny, looking back. It still makes me mad.

He leaves them then, into the heart of the dead city. I watch from my house on the Boulevard of Progress as he winds down the roads to the valley floor, where the living in their wisdom made a tomb for the future. He's going to the tower alone and I am afraid. What will happen when the rest of us pass to the other side of the river? How long will that day be, the day where no one is left and every one of us is alone, forever?

Aurelio cut the engine in front of the concrete block house. Le Corbusier's shoebox, she always called it. A house looking like every other one on the street, except for the two crossed oars painted above the front door. All the Barqueros had a color. Hers was red. As was his.

He kicked his boot at the bike's center stand. The goddamn wind would just blow it over if he used the little kickstand. Bringing its weight to rest atop the stand, he grunted. Getting old, he thought. That's going out of fashion. A howling gust of wind raced down the Boulevard of Progress, cloaked in dried weeds and white dust and whistling by like a man on a train, mocking everything on his side of the tracks. Fucking bullshit place, he thought. I should have done this at the very beginning.

The first of the Barqueros, early in their times their leader, now their Captain, entered the square cement house through a square steel door, little clouds of brown rust spilling out from the hinges to join the dirty wind outside. He stepped into the house. Boarded windows and impregnable walls ensured complete darkness. He closed the door behind him.

He opened his third bottle of Quilmes. The only thing visible was the outline of the door behind him, dusty light filtering into the shape of a wan square. He could not see his hands.

"Deathbed conversions are bullshit." Aurelio addressed the black

interior of the abandoned house. "This is just really bad procrastination. I know you're not there, Jacinta. My mind hasn't changed on that."

God damn you Aurelio. Why did you wait so long*?*

He took a drink, wiping his mustache with a hard brown forearm. "But you're supposed to conclude your affairs when you do stuff like this. So fuck it. I've wanted to do this for a long time. For me."

So what else is new?

"I sent off the newer Barqueros. Told them to go end it in whatever way they saw fit. Dumbass kids from America and Europe and wherever, so hurt when I told them that. As though that isn't the greatest freedom that any of us will have. They aren't bred from the madness, though. They came to it fully formed. Invaders and foreigners, wherever these guys go."

Oh bullshit. You loved those young men and women, Aurelio. I saw it all from here.

"The older ones just went home. Eduardo and Mariela and Frankie and the others. Melted away. I didn't tell them what I was going to do but they knew anyway. Friends are assholes like that."

I saw Eduardo here on his own two days ago. I think he would have done it if you hadn't thought of it first, Aurelio. You two always were like brothers. This is going to shatter his heart into pieces.

"So now I have to do it. And I'm scared, Jaci. I have to do this, talk to you like you're here, because when the time came for you, you stood. Just like you did for Pablo and Roberto and Lana and the rest of us in that fucking goddamn jungle so long ago."

I was petrified, Aurelio. I can't even remember deciding to act. Either time. My skin and my blood were ice. I didn't know what else to do. I wish I could tell you this, Aurelio. More than you can possibly know.

"It's not death I'm afraid of. I mean, more than anyone else is, but it's descended upon us, that's for fucking sure. Like being scared of the sunset."

I've waited so long, Aurelio. Why did it have to be like this? Where I cannot reach you or speak to you or hold you? Every word of this is like dying again. It's taking me apart in ways I can't understand. Please don't stop.

"I'm afraid of that top floor. I'm afraid of going back in there. It's going to try to convince me to do something else."

You are Aurelio Rojas, and you've never done a thing you didn't want to do, you intractable bastard. God damn it, I wish you could hear me now. I wish I weren't behind eternities of space and time and void. I wish we had just left everyone else and vanished into the streets of Montevideo like we should have.

"I'm stealing what's left of you. Using it for my own purposes. Reconstructing the dead to fit the spaces inside. I'm going to twist the shards of what I have of you that remains. Grind your memory into something resembling courage. My last crime against you."

Aurelio finished the bottle, casting it forth from darkness into darkness. He heard no sound.

"God, what a fucking obscenity. I hated it when people would go talk to the stones in the cemetery. As good as digging them up. But this is worse. Jaci, I'm sorry."

You damn fool, Aurelio. You can't rearrange me. You never could. That's why you liked me.

He ran his hands up from his forehead into his thin, brittle hair. The echoes of his voice in the cold tomb house reflected back to him from the walls. The words sounded just a little different somehow in the split second it took to reach him again. The darkness was pulling his mind too far outward. A familiar feeling to a Barquero. It was time to leave.

"I'm…I'm sorry for all of it. Sorry that you weren't here to see out the end of this spiral. I'm sorry that I made it out and not you. But I'm going to go fix that shit now."

Aurelio turned to leave. He found himself standing in place. It fixed

him where he stood. The allure of the inner consciousness, desperately clawing and shredding and tearing its way to the waking world, burning everything around it. The allure of death, in service to the birth of something, even of something terrible. The longing of the tower. Its pull grew further by the hour.

I am here, Aurelio. And I am with you until the end. A shadow maybe. But it's my shadow. I will walk with you.

Aurelio Rojas, Captain of Mobile Task Force Phi-9, reached his hand to the dimly lit square hanging in darkness. The door opened, caught by the wind and slamming against the wall outside. The boulevard was a tunnel, a private gale rushing between row upon row of abandoned concrete houses exactly the same as the one he left now. No garbage, no wrappers or papers or cans being blown about by this wind, no signs of living human habitation. Just the white dust of the dead city, the steady erosion that would one day wear down these houses and all others in the world beyond.

He leaned forward into the maddening, breath-stealing winds, and started walking. In the heart of the city lay the moldering ruin of its former capital, the place where a group of friends finally found what they were looking for, to their bitter regret. By his side was Jacinta Araya, co-founder of the Barqueros in life and in death. Unseen. Together, they approached the tower.

The wind has stopped. So still that the earth could shake and swallow us whole right on the spot. Aurelio doesn't hesitate, unlocking the chains across the main entrance and pulling open the great door. Why would he? This place has been his home more than any other. The two of us inhabiting tombs next door to each other all these years. That's an ending I would have written before I died.

I follow him across the lobby, and I hear whispers. These things, these ideas that live in this place, you don't need any technology to hear them when you're like I am. I must be closer to them, now. Though they don't speak to me. What good am I to bring anything into the world now? They speak to him. Does he hear them with his own ears, after all these years? I suppose if he did he would have died long ago. Then again, maybe this is something that they've told

him to do. No, unlikely. He would have turned the place into an amusement park instead if they'd told him to do this.

We step into the elevator. The only pristine, maintained space in the building. Aurelio programmed his own voice into the thing, and so we hear him mark off the floors as we go up. One, two, three. I'm sure he thought that was funny as hell when he did it. Now it's making him nervous.

The whispers surround us as we are carried into the top of the necropolis. Visions destined to drive men mad and ignite the vast piles of unseen suffering that surround them. This place is a monument to the first man, who saw the leaping flames of the bonfire and wondered what it must be like to throw himself in. It's a mercy, really. A world that had been going mad long before this, spared the worst of its excesses, the human mind built with a collective failsafe in the middle of one of its many banal errors. Somehow knowing that it can always be much worse is a necessity of survival. It's the lack of that knowledge that everyone can feel in their hearts today. It's how they all know, everyone, that there's no going back now.

Ding. Floor 32. The elevator, having no sense of ceremony, merely opens its doors to the expansive space at the top of the tower. The Grand Hall. Designed for the meetings of the Ciudad's leaders, a grand dais at the far wall, hopeful rows of seats facing the empty thrones of the rulers of this necropolis, who never bothered to show up to claim their due. It was here that I stopped being and became this. The space is strangely unmoving to me. Should it be? More questions for no one.

I am watching Aurelio. His mouth is set, but his eyes light up with recognition as he looks out over the hall. I turn to see what he's looking at. I expect to see the man, like we did last time, walking us through our inferiority and the greatness of his apex predator world. Instead it's a woman, tall and stately in flowing purple robes, an icefall of white hair frozen down over her bare shoulders. Alabaster skin like a Roman statue. She's looking back at Aurelio. Her face is wholly unconcerned. But her eyes, so blue as to be white like her skin, so cold that I can almost see Aurelio's breath as he stands before her. A woman with a gaze like a refrigerated hospital

basement. Hateful sterility, frigid contempt, a death goddess with no hint of humanity. She would be beautiful if it weren't for her eyes.

Aurelio comes to a realization at the same moment as I do. You're from the play, he says. You were here the first time and you were there when the world went mad yesterday. Monashir Violetlight, Lady of the Tower. Didn't realize that was a literal title.

In the space of time that it takes him to blink, the woman is ten meters closer to us. Walking is apparently beneath her. She flickers and reappears. Even before my last night I knew better than to mistake something like this for an apparition. She holds the same position, same expression. Unlike Aurelio, she does not blink. The impression strikes me that we are not important enough for her to dignify us by moving.

Gonna say something, Aurelio asks. You were a minor character. Did you forget your lines for this one?

Not his voice, not his face, not his smell nor his posture change. But I sense the terror's avalanche within him, giving way suddenly from the rocky cliffs of his mind. One of the abilities I maintained from my previous life. I begin to understand what he was afraid of.

He blinks again. She flickers again. She is right behind us. I half expect her to kill Aurelio then and there. But the hateful woman statue is looking over his shoulder instead. In front of us are more people. These people move, breathe, are alive. In this place, it is they who are the apparitions. If there was any doubt, it was dispelled by one of the people in front of us now. My self, living again. In a person's time in the strange realm of the Earth, this is the only impossibility.

The scene before us is this. The Barqueros, the old Barqueros, are talking among themselves. Things are getting heated. Some of us think we've gone too far up in the tower. That we need to leave now. Leading the opposition is myself. Others think that this is the culmination of our exploration (don't ever call it research). An Aurelio with a little more hair and a little less belly is speaking for this group. They're all shouting now. I remember this part. You've let yourselves be seduced by it. The world is a labyrinth and this is the center.

What do we gain by knowing any of this shit? What did we spend all these years looking for? A gyre of points and counterpoints, swirling under our feet as we tried to make sense then and there of the decade we burnt up in pursuit of the deeper currents. Then and now, I can feel the sharks circling in the waters underneath us. A fish's sense. The electricity is all wrong in this place.

Here is where what is happening diverges from my memories. The Barqueros all stop talking. The ghosts before us hold their positions. Simulating the movements of breathing, of waiting. This was where Aurelio told us all that he was going in and damn the rest of us if we didn't. I can see him, the real Aurelio, replaying the moment in his hard head.

The woman behind us speaks, finally, a voice like mist breathing from an icy cliffside down onto the rocks below. Cold, slow, half-whisper. She says, choose.

Like an injury, a person learns to live with different kinds of regret. Some kinds ache softly in the knees or the wrists, returning for a visit when the rain comes down. Some kinds are a pinched nerve, pain that from time to time prevents you from turning your neck to look back over your shoulder. The wounds we get when we hurt ourselves, hurt others for what we think is the right thing, though. Those don't close. They fester, infecting every other decision within you. This day, so long ago, is a knife that has been sticking out of Aurelio's chest. His hand is creeping toward an invisible hilt three inches from his heart, even if he doesn't know it.

The voice of mist behind us breathes again. A little louder this time. Aurelio feels it like he feels the wind in the forsaken valley outside. She says, knowing all of the things that you know now, Aurelio Rojas, what do you choose? I turn back to look at her. The bitch is smiling now.

A neatly diagrammed problem. If Aurelio expresses desire for a different outcome, it destroys him. Every death, every one of his years after that night at the top of the tower is for nothing. The tower, more than anything, taught him what it really is to carry a burden. To be haunted. To renounce the mistakes of the past will pull the knife out of the wound, but the corruption merely spreads under the

healed skin. The pain is so great. I can see it in him every time he comes to this goddamned place. But without the burden, the journey becomes pointless. A question to rip a man's soul from his body.

If Aurelio makes the same decision again, he undersigns their decision to call us back to their hell. We had an advance screening of the performance that ended the world yesterday. Knowing what we all do now, does he choose to witness again? To call others to it? He can stand by the certainty which has led him to where he is today, but the ground on which he stands is falling away by the second. The possibility of his curiosity being akin to complicity with the atrocity being visited upon everyone is one that threatens to crush him. This question, posed by the tower, is forcing a clarification of his situation. Utter annihilation, or unforgivable collaboration.

I watched their performance in awe on that night. Visions more powerful than anything we had ever gotten with the herbs that we went so deep into the jungle hell to retrieve. A society of indescribable beauty. The inescapable damnation of the Planet of Hands. The eviscerated, nightmare love with which they regarded us. An experience speaking to the deepest levels of human expression, unspeakably alien to anyone with a speck of humanity left. It's no wonder they've tried to drive that from all of us.

I was the first to be called. To them, it was a reward, for finding them first. Come back home, the spectral man told me, eyes beaming with tears of twisted happiness. It seemed the only option, really. The only sane thing to do when faced with such magnificent beauty was to surrender. I could see it in all of us, transfixed. I saw it in me too. What they saw in me was a way to eliminate the last threads of resistance holding us all back. And behind that part of me open to the beauty of the world and its fine systems was something else. Something older, and wiser. Something that walked hand in hand with the darkest fears that we hold. Something red.

Through tears of ecstasy and joy, my hand found the long knife hanging from my belt. And in one fluid motion, passed down to me through what is dismissively referred to as the reptilian portion of my brain, I opened my own throat. Deep enough that my hands were not enough to stanch the curtain of blood pouring out of me. Blood

enough to wash away even the visions crafted by this post-human non-humans. I fell to the floor, weakening instant by instant, my breath stolen by the impossibly gaping wound I had made. The cold of the room passed directly into me. Then the freezing cold of the night outside. By the time Aurelio got to me I was filled with the blasting chill of the black spaces between the stars.

Here are the last moments I saw in this life. Half of the Barqueros running like hell back to the door. Half of the Barqueros weeping with joy as their hands piled up in front of them, one after the other. Aurelio holding his coat to the ruin of my throat, praying aloud to the only saint he recognized, as though this were not something guided by her hand as well. The cold being followed closely by its brother darkness.

And then no more.

The sight of Aurelio faced with this choice makes me replay these moments in a way I have not done since they happened. And I would sooner cut my own throat a thousand more times than have him assaulted with this hideous suffering once more. I would do it ten thousand times more to be able to help him. I don't know what to do.

Aurelio turns away from the past arrayed before us and toward the gloating, icy face of the future. His hand is in his pocket.

You should have tried this in America somewhere, he says. Or some other place where they think they have this shit figured out.

He's been replaying the last time we were here too. I see it now. His hand is moving around whatever is in his pocket.

She replies. That you don't make the choice doesn't make it cease to exist, Aurelio Rojas. A dynamic state in the system is still well within its bounds. We accounted for your truculence, in any event.

Aurelio's hand moves slowly out of his pocket. From the way his arm is trembling I can tell that the movement is involuntary. There is nothing in his hand. A second later, a small metal box with a steel switch floats out of his pocket of its own accord. Aloft on a stillborn

wind, it drifts away from Aurelio, stopping in front of the woman. She sneers, finally finding something worth her contempt amongst her cattle. She even goes so far as to raise her hand up. Closing it into a fist, the detonator is crushed into a tiny, jagged point of metal. It clatters onto the ground.

Who is more God, Aurelio Rojas? The cow, squeezing out more life into its putrid field, unreasoning, vacant? Or the overseer, tending to the survival of that cow, adjusting the conditions in which it waits to serve its purpose, mending its organs and its flesh when the purpose requires it?

The hatred is not warming her voice. Is this what we are, truly, when the mask is off?

She continues. Surely even you were not so stupid as to think that we did not notice your kind attaching the explosives. You must have known that your actions are clearly laid out before you even made the decision to pursue them. Meaningless, empty gestures. Ill-considered. Petty. Much in keeping with your forebears, long ago.

The woman in the purple robes raises her other hand. Aurelio rises slowly into the air, held in place by the forces governing this skyward monument to futility that we had been so eager to discover. She spreads her arms, and thus are Aurelio's spread open as well now, a hovering Christ mockery. But his face. A beaming calm has overtaken him, a face at home on this impossible cross. The mockery is instead homage, somehow. The subtlety is lost on the mistress of the tower, the symbolism of the livestock beneath the contempt of the master. Here are where the final moves of his game are beginning to come to me.

His turn to speak now. So much effort, he says. To thwart a meaningless gesture. What does it say, oh great Monashir, that you are in this tower with us?

Cracks begin to appear in the ice cliffs of her face. This is angering her. Before she can reply he continues.

They must have been surprised, eh? To find something of themselves in here? Why hide this place, why let us hide afterward,

if this is such an enduring symbol of your fucked up paradise? And why do you protect it by meeting me here?

He laughs now, and she loses control. With sudden violence, she lowers her hands, and Aurelio is thrown to the floor, slammed into the dust and debris beneath him. He lands on his side, bones cracking from the force, the breath driven from him by the impact. He coughs as he struggles to breathe again, heaped on the floor, blood beginning to drip from his lips. He laughs again.

Still trying to figure it out. The shit you're playing with didn't start with you, did it?

His words struggle out through his laughter and blood, no less clear from the effort as his life begins to leak out.

No, you've been right here with us, trying to figure out how you ended up on the top floor. Why the laws that govern this tower apply to you too. What the flaw in your system is that buried you along with all the other corpses. Scratching and clawing at your coffin lid.

The purple woman flickers and appears over him as he lies on the ground. Guttural fury leaking from her crumbled face, the hate now fully formed in her, dead eyes lit with pyres of rage. Her arms sweeps out, and Aurelio is thrown in the air away from her, striking the dais at the front of the room, wood splintering, his laughter making room for the groans of pain, unstoppable now.

He wheezes now as I rush to him, dead or not. I'll save you some trouble, he says. You thought you banished death. But all you did was forget about her. You thought you enslaved madness. But you merely brought him into your house. And you think saving this tower from us will let you solve the one problem you can't figure out. But I've got the answer for you. You belong in here with us. And you'll never know why. You can't understand.

She's over him again. I look up at her from my place next to Aurelio. She is going to end it.

He spits blood up at her with ragged breaths. As she moves to finish him, he returns the favor.

You forsake death, and death's wisdom is lost to you. You push madness away into this world, but it lives in my heart instead, and you are defenseless. You've blinded yourselves, but the grave awaits you all anyway. Fuck your mother.

Horrifying, terrible force comes down from above her, now channeling the fury that has driven her beyond all reason, striking moments too late before Aurelio has laid bare the chasm at the heart of the perfect world that now must reckon with its hidden cracks. Hatred wells out of the fault lines in her self and her realm, spewing out like a geyser. No pushing it back in now.

She strikes Aurelio with her fists, crushing his chest, silencing him. I scream with no words or breath, such things forever beyond me here. Something catches my eye through the ruins of his shirt.

A freshly sutured wound on his sternum. The glint of exposed metal. The last halting breaths, a smile still plastered on his bloody lips. I feel him looking toward me through darkening eyes. From deep within him I swear I hear something.

She hears it too. The terror of something impending, building within her at Aurelio's words, now seizes her. The madness lives in his heart. It lives in all of our hearts, decaying every system they touch, even from our living tomb in the stars. They will never outrun it because we are they and they are us.

Dead man switch. Wired in his chest. His heart stops beating. She has just enough time to bellow like a cow in the slaughterhouse chute.

Here is the last moment. Deep rumbling. The walls and the ceiling and the floor buckling. Fire. Smoke. Gouts of dust and bits of metal and plaster and stone rushing all around us. Aurelio borne aloft on a great pillar of flame as the great tomb at the heart of the world's necropolis comes apart, the winds and the sunlight and the wreckage all suddenly of one composition. The purple woman burning for a second before being rent asunder by the uncertainty and death that lay at the heart of humanity. A mortal wound that will be felt a million miles away, perhaps in a million years. Perhaps tomorrow. A funeral pyre that will burn away the dead and make

room for the living. Even if the dead do not acknowledge it yet. I feel myself rising with Aurelio. What does it matter when the truth lay outside of time? There is us. There is madness. There is death. In these things we proceed in all directions, blasted apart by the first and last forces, and settling back again. This monument to colossal, unimaginable error has stopped existing. Eventually, one of these directions must take us to something closer to the truth. Closer to balance. Death shows her face once more and guides us to mercy again. She shows her face to me at long last.

I am with him in the end, in the sky of a world giving way to whatever the next may be.

I know no more.

Housework

Nobody could say that it's always cold here.
There are those rare days around mid-august when the sun puts in some extra effort and occasionally you only need one layer of clothing when going about your business.
But it wasn't mid-august and I was wearing a heavy raincoat as a result. December had been and gone and February was letting out a slow death rattle in the form of gale-force winds. I wore my hair short which meant is wasn't snatched this way and that like most of the people I had passed today but my earring had had to be removed before the wind did the job for me.
Somebody said to me once that it's only ever windy or cold; never both. This friend of mine had never been to the city however, so I let them keep believing it.
The wind would have given me a good excuse to stay inside but when I've a job to do I try my best to see it through as soon as possible.
Get it out the way, so to speak.
That in mind I had been staring at the front of the pub for quite some time.
It was more a reluctance to go inside than to do the job – I'd made all the effort to be warm outside that I'd be boiled like a lobster the moment I went inside. That was the problem with this city; you could only be too hot or too cold.
The pub itself was in a very good condition compared to the buildings that surrounded it. When you serve the locals around here you were bound to make quite a lot of money. It was painted mainly in reds, though the window sills were matte black as was the sign above the door. *The Splayed Drifter* it was called and in my mind it was only named that so you'd never forget it. I could hear the sounds of subdued Sunday carousal inside but the thought of other people was never a tempting one. But I knew I'd have to go in eventually or my client would leave. So I braced myself and pushed

my way inside.

There was a football match on the corner set. Funny, it was one of those old-fashioned televisions you're always surprised to find still existing. Considering how well the place was doing for itself I would have expected at least a flat screen but then maybe that was the attraction, that sense of nostalgia. Most of the regulars were well past their sell-by date and sitting here pretending it was the good old days was often the only barrier between them and a quiet, miserable end to life. I didn't raise a comment when I entered and no awkward silence descended. I wasn't the only non-regular after all and I was barely noteworthy material in the first place. Apart from my eyes of course but that goes without saying really.

Not seeing my client straight away I sat down at the bar.
A woman in her forties came over to me as soon as she was finished chatting with one of the other patrons and pulled a pint glass down, before looking to me with a smile.
"What'll you be having, dear?" she asked.
"Coffee, please. Black three sugars."
"Beer?"
"No thank you."
"Everybody wants beer." I sighed.
"Not me. These days absinthe is all I really touch. Or the coffee I just asked for."
"Everybody wants beer."
I looked her in the eyes and she froze up a little. She quite clearly wanted to look away but true to form she just couldn't. I've never been able to explain the phenomenon other than the guess that my gaze is just as fucked-up strange as I am.
"Coffee. Black. Three Sugars. Please." I said as gently as I could.
She nodded and I looked away. Relieved, the woman walked off to the machine.
I relaxed and looked around the room, trying to pick my client out from the crowd.

It was easy enough to be honest. All I needed to look for was those green stains we can't help but leave behind us. Normal folks don't and I don't, but the ladies and gentlemen moving in my circles had no choice. You have to be out of the ordinary to see it but the stains

are often everywhere. Faint and pale usually but always prevalent. Sure enough there was a man sat with a small group of others, telling a story. They crowded around him looks of mirth on their faces and raucous laughter filled the place as he reached a punchline.
He briefly looked up and I beckoned him over. He double-took and his face went rapidly to concern but he masked that almost as soon as it showed. He made some excuses and headed up to the bar, a rough type clapping him heartily on the back as he went.
He got to the seat next to me about the time my coffee arrived. He pushed a note into the bar woman's hand and she thanked him before walking off to serve others.

"Are you…?"
I took a sip of my coffee. Burnt, damn it.
"No." I replied. "I called you over so I could knock you out and steal your kidneys. The hell do you think, Seamus?"
He gulped and his face flushed a little. He didn't say a word for a moment or two before it hit him.
"I never told you my…"
"Not the only thing I'm not supposed to know. It's the circles you move in now."
Actually I had just run a background check on his picture but the new kids on the block were always easy to play with. They didn't understand that having some contacts with the police and knowing a decent hacker did more than mystic tomes and summoning abominations ever could.
"So Seamus." I said taking another sip. "What is it you're paying me for?"
"I, uh… kinda let something happen."
"So does everyone. Be blunt."
"…I think it's like a ghost or something. It's in my house."
I sucked my teeth.
"Well that's certainly a downer for you I'd imagine."
"Someone told me you… do things about it."
"Did they tell you my price?"
"I guess so."
Good enough.
"And you're willing to pay?"
"I can up front if you like."

He reached into his pocket and brought his wallet back out, tugging at the zip on the side. I brushed his hand away and shook my head.
“No. Leave it until the job’s done.”
He put it back in his pocket, confused.
Now for the important question.
“Seamus, how much do you know?”
“What… what do you mean? The ghost-thing acts kinda like-“
“No, no, no, no, no. Not what I meant at all. How much do you *know?* And how long have you known?”
He thought about it.
I waited and finished my coffee as he thought.
“Not much. I think I first found stuff out last year. The first lot I met tried talking me out of it all.”
That was all I needed.
I thanked him and bought him a drink. No need to ask directions, I already knew the place.
Anyway, I had some preparation to do first.

All the lights in Seamus’ house were properly fucked.
I flicked every switch I came across and nothing. I had a maglite so it wasn’t an enormous problem but it would have been a lot nicer.
The place was dusty; he hadn’t been here for a week or more at a guess. Cluttered too. Seamus clearly did not concern himself with tidying up very often.
Other than that it was pretty clear that he had a good amount of money. Top of the range electronics – dead as the lights if you were wondering – rich carpets on most of the floors, an especially fancy bathroom and even a large collection of antique books.
I groaned. It was always sodding books. You never found somebody who’d pulled back The Curtain via a skiing accident say, or by dancing unknowingly an ancient summoning dance or something. No, people always had to find some tome not meant for mortal eyes blah, blah sodding blah and then next thing you know I’m breaking into some idiot’s house to see why he disappeared after screaming to his family about the tentacles.
It was just so damn cliché.
But ours not to reason why and all that. I’d have checked the books out but in all honesty I couldn’t care less about them and I had better things to do.

Like figure out where the dead-thing was watching me from.
I'd felt the eyes on me from the moment I opened the door but so far nothing. Some of the stains in the house were so dark green they may as well be black so it had definitely been hanging around. It had dropped the temperature a few degrees after I'd checked the bathroom but I think that was more because of how long I'd been here rather than where I'd explored.
I hate it when you know that something is watching you but you can't see it. If there was ever a better way to unnerve someone it clearly fell out of fashion some time ago. And this dead-thing was a patient one in all likelihood. In most cases they had to be.
I remember this case from a few years back, not one of mine you understand. This family felt they were being haunted and called in all manner of people to check it out. Vicars, "ghost speakers", witch doctors and exorcists passed through the place like a tourist destination. It was quite a sensational case because whatever was haunting them was clearly malevolent. *Get out* scratched on the walls and scars on the children, you know the stuff. But whenever a quote-unquote professional took a look there was nothing to see. Proof of the activities was everywhere but there weren't any activities at all when people other than the family paid attention.
So eventually the media lost interest. People stopped discussing it by water coolers. And one by one the family were picked off and eaten alive in the space of a day and a half.

Because that's how dead-things operate. They let you know they're going to get you but they never do until you stop expecting it. They're not even playful, it's just part of the mentality.
If I recall correctly the police broke into the place a few weeks later and found what was left of the bodies stitched together and rotting on the family sofa, television remote clutched in one half-eaten hand.
They pinned it on a serial killer thankfully. I have no idea how hard the local Guardian worked to achieve that piece of magic but they have my eternal respect.

Finally something happened – a cup flew from the kitchen table and shattered against the wall. A fleck of crockery stung my cheek and I turned smiling. Obviously there was nothing there but it was or had just been in this room. I saw a flicker. I started to whistle and

pretended that I hadn't. These things work easier if the target underestimates you.
I wandered nonchalantly through the kitchen into the large front room. The door on the cupboard the television was sat on was hanging from its hinges. It was covered in green stains that hadn't been there last time I was in the room.
I reached into my coat and pulled out an old-fashioned yo-yo. I can't remember the last time I saw anybody else with one, I think they stopped being popular not long after I was born. But they were excellent for making one look innocent. They also made good garrotte wires in a pinch given you have the right string. Don't ask me how I know.
I carried on acting uninterested and stupid as I wandered through the house playing with my yo-yo. I still looked like I was looking for a ghost but I was looking the same way a presenter from some god-awful "documentary" on the paranormal would.
I had a notion that it was now in the bathroom. I climbed the stairs and made my way there. It had decided to reveal itself, I think. There's always the game before the catch, a compulsion we've already discussed. But this one could probably smell that I was different. And that was what made me attractive.
But I'd be ready. My plan was simple – I'd walk in and when it manifested I'd thwack it with the yo-yo.
That was the big secret about dead-things; they're completely corporeal. Sure they're the basis for ghosts but the myriad reasons for that is a subject I could probably write a book on if I ever found the time.
I walked in and there was bloody writing on the mirror, of course. *You should not be here*. How original.

I felt a cold sensation behind me. A sort of hissing noise too, not so you'd notice if you weren't expecting it.
Lazily, I turned. And my mouth dropped.
Before me stood a gaunt figure. It was partially covered in chitin and it rubbed two long hands together in a beetle-like fashion. Its eyes were plentiful and should have been on its head rather than torso but we're not all perfect. It had no face. A mouth, eyes on the torso but the head was essentially a blank dome. Blood dripped from a gaping wound on its side and there were more eyes on the inside of the gash.

It wasn't supposed to look like that.
"You're not a dead-thing." I said.
"**Very astute.**" It smiled.
Then I was asleep and I couldn't tell you why.

I was bound to a chair in the kitchen when I opened my eyes. Seamus was there and so was the monster, they were stood side by side. Seamus looked almost reluctant but there was a hunger in his features too.
He had a melon-baller dangling loosely from one hand. He looked to the creature and it nodded. He walked over to me and its eyes span and followed him.
"I lied at the pub." He said, almost apologetically.
"You certainly did."
"I… we needed you."
That was confusing.
"Why me? Anyone you've ever met will tell you I'm nothing special." He motioned to his face, and tried to think of the right words.
"You… perceive. Things we can't. We tried for months and nothing let us. You see things that most others don't, too. No, other people like us." He said before I could speak.
"Well that's news to me, Seamus. I think your friend over there's been talking shit."
"**Nobody tells you that you make no sense.**" It said.
"**On the times you converse with others, you discuss the things you've seen and people raise not a question. Have their faces never given it away? You are a rare thing, Seeker. One that sees all that there is.**"
"That sounds totally idiotic. Believe me, if that was true I *would* notice." I said, but I started thinking about it. The first time I'd encountered a corpse-thing I told a gentleman who I'd known for a long while about the whole thing. He had raised his eyebrows at my description of it in a way that should have implied to me that he didn't know that they looked like that. That wasn't proof of course but I hadn't got where I was today by not believing things.
That in mind I *had* got where I was today by fucking up a simple investigation.
Seamus looked at the monster then back to me. He dropped to my level, his face an inch from mine.

“We have to take your eyes. I’m sorry but we have to.”
He kissed my forehead and my lips. I only hated him slightly more.
“I am really sorry.”
My eyes flickered to the kitchen table. My yo-yo lay on it.
“You do seem to be sorry.” I said “But in a moment you’ll be even sorrier.”
“You’re right.” He said and started digging the melon baller into my socket.

I screamed. Pain shot through my skull as the jagged teeth around the cup bit through flesh. I don’t know how he was planning to sever the optic nerve but he’d persist until it was done. Everything went red on my right side. I screamed until I was hoarse.
The yo-yo was still there.
I put up a little struggle as he worked my eye free and waited for the monster to make its move. It was smiling so eagerly. It sniffed at the air and savoured the scent of my blood. And eventually it moved closer to get a better look.
With a wet pop my eye came loose from the socket. Seamus stood back a little and looked at his work. The creature closed in, it’s clawed hands raised.

I spat a word that I shouldn’t have been able to pronounce, and couldn’t without the pain to guide my lips.
The yo-yo on the table burst in a flash of blinding dark.

There was a rending sound and maybe some screams.
My face was very wet.
Once I could see again there wasn’t much left of the creature.
Seamus lay on the floor, panting heavily and looking with shock at his arm. Well, where his arm should have been.
I shrugged off the ropes which had been frayed to pieces.
I crouched by Seamus, ignoring the pain from my eye.
“Checkmate my friend.” I said.

I held Seamus by the scruff of the neck and he stared at the door.
It was an unimpressive one. A flat dull piece of wood with an off-grey handle. But he knew that it held importance.
So did I, for that matter.
My eye was gone. I’d had to cut it off myself, pieces of the monster

(which I still didn't recognise) had clung to it and bubbles that shouldn't have appeared did. If I didn't lose the eye then I may have lost my brain, or become a slave or another one of the monsters. You never know.
The patch was good enough for now but if I wanted to keep appearances up I would have to get some mirrored glasses.
"Here we go." I told Seamus after a moment.
Silence, silence for a good few minutes before he replied.
"I didn't want this."
"Nobody wants this. I don't want this."
"Then let me leave!" He cried, trying to turn to look at me.
"What would you have done to me after it took my eyes, Seamus?"
His shoulders sagged.
"I think I should correct myself in that case. I *usually* don't want this."
He stopped speaking again. I pulled him aside and put my hand on the door.
"May I ask something?" he said.
"You just did."
He looked at me. I rolled my eye.
"One thing."
"If…" he licked his lips nervously. "If it had just been a ghost. Would you still be doing… this?"
I looked at the door.
"Yes." I said.
His face fell.
"Hey. You asked." I pulled the door open.
"I'd say it's been a pleasure, but…"
I threw him in and closed the door. I held my hands to my ears but the screams were so loud.
After they stopped I opened the door and went in myself.

The Unknowable Thing loomed over me, a half-digested and catatonic Seamus lay below It.
"Here we are. One scumbag supreme. And the monster fucker is gone too."
It questioned me.
"Blown to bits. Not coming back. As specified."
It was satisfied.
I looked around, almost looked up at It but remembered what happened the last time I looked at It directly.

“You didn’t tell me why they wanted me.”
The Unknowable Thing asked a question.
“Hell yes it was important! The only reason I survived is because of that bloody toy! What if I hadn’t brought it along, huh? Then where’d you be?”
It commented.
I raised a finger.
“Bullshit. If I was that dispensable I wouldn’t be standing here. You’d have found someone else.”
The Unknowable Thing conceded.
I’d already had enough. Talking to the Unknowable Thing always drains you.
I turned to leave and It let me. I was at the door before I turned and asked a question.
“Is it true? What the monster said about me?”
It answered.
I nodded and stepped out the door and up the cellar steps.

God but I needed a drink. As always.

But that’s just how it is in my line of work.

How 173 Got to Site-19

Item #: `SCP-173`

Object Class: Euclid

Special Containment Procedures: SCP-173 is to be kept in a modified containment chamber at Site-91. Said chamber is to be equipped with a sprinkler system. The sprinkler system is to be activated fortnightly to dispose of waste materials formed in the chamber. If personnel are required to enter SCP-173's chamber, at least 3 personnel are to be present. At least 1 of those individuals must maintain direct visual contact with SCP-173 at all times while inside the chamber.

Description: SCP-173 is a statue constructed of concrete and reinforcing steel with traces of spray paint. It is animate, although it may only move when no individual observes it visually. When animate, SCP-173 tends to attack surrounding individuals in the vicinity. Common methods of attack include strangulation or snapping one's neck.

About once per day, waste materials are spontaneously generated around SCP-173's vicinity. Chemical analysis of waste materials indicates that they are formed from a combination of faeces and blood. The mechanism in which SCP-173 generates waste materials is unknown.

SCP-173 was brought into Site-91 on / /2008 CE by Foundation agents. Information of SCP-173 prior to containment by the Foundation is unknown.

[…]

Addendum 173-746: On 04/10/2045 CE, SCP-173 and

other SCP objects were transferred from Site-91 to [REDACTED]. See Document 91/04-10-2045 for more information.

Excerpts recovered from the email account of Dr. James Long

+ 07:30, 06/09/2045 CE

FROM: Alexandra Nala, Administrative Assistant, Office of the Overseer Council
TO: Dr. James Long, Director, Site-91
RE: Relocation of SCPs

Greetings, Dr. Long. Writing to inform you that a number of SCP objects held at Site-91 are slated for relocation from Site-91 to an undisclosed location for safer containment; see Attachment for a list of affected SCP objects. The Department of Extra-Universal Affairs shall be in charge of the operations of transfer, therefore please allow them to complete their task. Date of transfer is on the 4th of October this year, 2045 CE.

If you have any queries regarding the operation, please contact Senior Agent Sven Kisch of the Multi-Universal Department. This operation is approved unanimously by the Overseer Council (13:0 ratio).

Secure. Contain. Protect.
Alexandra Nala
Administrative Assistant, Office of the Overseer Council

+ Download Attachment

+ 09:43, 07/09/2045 CE

FROM: Dr. James Long, Director, Site-91

TO: Alexandra Nala, Administrative Assistant, Office of the Overseer Council
RE: RE: Relocation of SCPs

Hi, Alexandra. I've noted your email on the relocation effort. In light of massive logistics involved in the effort, I would like to request more data on the site in which the affected SCPs shall move into.

Thank you in advance.

Regards,
Dr. James Long, PhD
Director, Site-91

+ 09:53, 07/09/2045 CE

FROM: Alexandra Nala, Administrative Assistant, Office of the Overseer Council
TO: Dr. James Long, Director, Site-91
RE: RE: RE: Relocation of SCPs

Greetings, Dr. Long. Noted your enquiry. Unfortunately, you are not cleared for the information requested.

Secure. Contain. Protect.
Alexandra Nala
Administrative Assistant, Office of the Overseer Council

+ 10:34, 09/09/2045 CE

FROM: Dr. James Long, Director, Site-91
TO: Senior Agent Sven Kisch, Head, Acquisitions Division, Department of Extra-Universal Affairs
RE: Relocation of Site-91 SCPs

Hi, Agent Kisch. I am Dr. James Long, Director of Site-91. I am aware that you're my point-of-

contact for the transfer of SCPs from Site-91. As the operation involves essentially every SCP currently in my site, I would like specifics as to this operation.

Hope you will reply soon.

Regards,
Dr. James Long, PhD
Director, Site-91

+ 17:41, 13/09/2045 CE

FROM: Senior Agent Sven Kisch, Head, Acquisitions Division, Department of Extra-Universal Affairs
TO: Dr. James Long, Director, Site-91
RE: RE: Relocation of Site-91 SCPs

Hello, Dr. Long. I apologise for the late reply. From my understanding, the specifics behind our transfer operations are reserved strictly to members of the Multi-U and O5 Council. All that you're allowed to know is that the affected SCPs will be transported to a secured location where their threat to normalcy is significantly reduced.

I hope to see you at Site-91 soon.

Sincerely,
Senior Agent Sven Kisch
Head, Acquisitions Division
Department of Extra-Universal Affairs

An exchange between Dr. James Long and Researcher Nurul Shafiqah binte Ahmad Ibrahim, recovered from Dr. James Long's iPhone

Shafiqah

James, what's with you spamming me with SMSes. Don't you have work to do, Mr site director?

Not since most of the skips were transferred out. The staff and I at 91 are dying of boredom here.

Let me guess, the Multi-U came along.

Yeah.

Shaq, are you sure you're not anomalous?

LOL! Call it a woman's intuition.

But jokes aside, my friends from sites 17 and 754 had told me about the Multi-U clearing skips from those sites. They'll even visit my site next week, I think.

Is everything gonna be alright? There're rumours going on in my site's lounge and cafeteria, that some of us may be laid off.

I don't think so. I hear nothing of the sort from my side.

I will check with the other directors or the O5s and get back to you.

Thanks

But since we're on the topic, you have any idea why it's happening?

Dunno

You don't know or you can't tell me?

I'm not even cleared for info on where they're heading to. Just know the transfer is done and that's that.

So much for your Level 4 clearance, huh?

But look at the bright side, things will be less lethal in this industry for now.

Addendum 2317-58: On 15/12/2045 CE (U 5643-Γ-Orange-D), **SCP-2317** has successfully breached containment at Area-179. The following transmission was intercepted prior to destruction of Area-179.

> WARNING! Containment breach at A-179. SCP-2317-K escaping SCP-2317-Prime. Breach is imminent. SCP-2317 lockdown initiated. Response team prepare to engage SCP-2317-K. Area-wide lockdown initiated. Prepare detonation of onsite nuclear arsenal. SCP-2317-K is not to escape. Impending XK-class end-of-the-world scenario should SCP-2317-K escape from A-179.

Observation of SCP-2317's activities and its effects on U 5643-Γ-Orange-D shall commence. All remaining Foundation assets in U 5643-Γ-Orange-D have been ordered to focus on collecting the aforementioned data. No engagement with SCP-2317 is required.

Yes sir, all targeted SCP objects formerly housed in Universe 5643-Gamma-Orange-Delta have been recovered prior to SCP-2317's emergence. The remaining objects are either not in the Foundation's possession or deemed impractical or unsavoury for transportation. – Sr. Agent S. Kisch

Thank you for your report. We'd expect you to clean up these SCPs' documentation prior to their redistribution. – O5-10

Of course sir. The usual protocols. – Sr. Agent S. Kisch

An email from Dr. Jack Bright, dated / /1993 AD

FROM: Dr. Jack Bright, Director, Site-19
TO: Dr. William Moto, Euclid Specialist, Site-19
RE: New SCP in Site-19

Moto, we got a new skip in 19 today. It's housed in Euclid Wing, Cell 2. It's supposedly hostile, so bring at least 2 D-class and a research assistant with you.

Also, update on any findings you have on the skip. Its profile is barren right now. Your clearance level for that skip is Level 4/173, for your information.

Jack Bright
Director, Site-19

Hours later, Dr. William Moto had concluded his first day with the new SCP object. Accessing his account on the Foundation database to catalogue his findings for the day, Dr. Moto browsed over whatever that was present in the document.

Item #: SCP-173

Object Class: [PENDING]

Special Containment Procedures: [DATA EXPUNGED]

Description: [DATA EXPUNGED]

"No no, this won't do." he thought while shaking his head, *"I don't even know where it came from or who brought it in…"*

Dr. Moto began deleting the expungements and typed in whatever is known of the newly-found anomalous object.

Description: Moved to Site-19 1993. Origin is as of yet unknown.

How Dr. Clef Contained Christmas!

TH EN

† The following content is a fan-based parody of a satirical nature protected under Fair-Use that is based off of the children's book "How the Grinch Stole Christmas!" by Theodor "Dr. Seuss" Geisel.

† "We Wish You a Merry Christmas" by Twin Musicom is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution license (**https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/**) Artist: **http://www.twinmusicom.org/**

How Dr. Clef Saved Christmas

The senior staff of Site 19 huddled in the conference room, warming themselves from the chill air of the cold mid-December morning. Coats and hats hung on the wall and over the backs of chairs, ice and snow dripping into puddles on the tile floor, as their owners drank strong black coffee from styrofoam cups and chatted idly. None of them knew why this emergency meeting had been called, nor why on such short notice, so early on a Sunday morning right in the middle of the holidays. The muffled conversation came to a halt as Site Director Ives entered the room, carrying a stack of notes and a reel of slides, and approached the podium in the front. The director's suit was wrinkled, his tie undone, beads of sweat on the balding man's forehead (though the heater had yet to kick in) as he shuffled through his papers before addressing the group.

"Good morning, everyone," Ives said. "Thank you for coming on such short notice. I know it's early and most of you had the day off, but we've got quite a lot to discuss and there's a lot of work to be done. I've just finished up a conference call with the O5 Council, and I'm afraid I've got some bad news."

Ives paused and shuffled through his notes again before continuing. "At 0532, Greenwich time, we received an emergency distress signal from Area 36, near the magnetic north pole. Security personnel reported that unidentified aircraft had been observed entering the zone of exclusion around SCP-4040's main facility and they believed a hostile attack was imminent." Ives paused. "Three minutes later, we lost all contact with Area 36. We attempted to raise SCP-4040 directly and got no response as well.

"We went into high alert at that time. We dispatched Mobile Task Force Alpha-7 from Montreal and they arrived at the scene at approximately 0930." Ives set up the reel of slides on the projector sitting on the front desk, and pulled a screen down from its place along the wall. "Adelstein, could you dim the lights, please?"

Dr. Adelstein flicked the switches by the front door, casting the room into darkness as Ives turned on the slide projector. "When MTF A-7 arrived, this is what they found." Ives pressed a button and a slide popped up on a screen, depicting a single small house, alone on the Arctic tundra - what remained of that house, anyway. The windows had been smashed in, the door kicked open, its interior laid bare to the cold Arctic winds and the perpetual winter twilight. A giant candy cane standing in front of the dwelling had been smashed in two, and whatever color the building had been before, it was covered in a bizarre sort of ooze, dark and red, that dripped from the rooftops and formed crimson icicles, hanging by the dozens over the awning.

"It wasn't much better inside." Ives flipped to the next slide, of the little house's parlor - furniture overturned and broken, cabinets emptied onto the floor haphazardly, everything covered in that strange thick red ichor. "The annex was the same - except for the bodies." The next slide showed a tiny humanoid, no more than four feet tall, dead on the floor. Its skin was horribly burned and fused together like it had been set on fire, its flesh fused to its tiny green outfit, also soaked in red. "We found sixteen SCP-4040-3 dead in the annex. One hundred and eighty-four unaccounted for. No survivors that we've been able to locate. The entire on-site security team was also KIA."

"What about SCP-4040-1?" asked Dr. Johnson.

"As of this time, MTF A-7 has been unable to locate SCP-4040-1 or his remains," Ives said as he flicked through several more slides, every one showing a similar scene of devastation to the Arctic workshop.

"And the rei-"

"All nine instances of SCP-4040-2 are missing as well, I'm afraid." Ives signaled for Adelstein to turn the lights back on as he shut off the projector. "Area 36 is a total loss and almost all of SCP-4040 is either dead or in the hands of a hostile power. As you all know, it's now slightly less than five days until this year's scheduled occurrence of Event 1225-Pinnacle. In light of the damage to the facility, even if we're able to recover the surviving elements of SCP-4040, I'm afraid that…" Ives stopped in mid-sentence as he

looked out over the researchers.

"I'm sorry," he continued after collecting himself. "I've seen a lot of shit go down in my day and I never thought I'd have to say something like this, but it looks like we're going to have to cancel Christmas."

The room was aroar with worried exclamations. "Cancel Christmas?" "No presents?" "What'll I tell the kids?"

"Please, everyone, calm down," Ives said as the group fell silent. "We're collating the available evidence as fast as we can, but what we need right now is information management. The O5 Council feels that, given our minimal lead time, Procedure 1843-Scrooge-Haymarket-4 - that's the "Elves' Union Goes on Strike" story, by the way - is the appropriate cover story to disseminate to the media. We should be able to cover this up and keep the civilian world from getting too worried about Santa's absence until we can get a substitute toy delivery up and running."

Dr. Jones raised his hand. "Do we have any suspects yet?"

"All we know for sure is it wasn't the GOC and it wasn't the Reds," Ives said. "We've been in contact with Geneva and Moscow since this whole thing started and they're as much in the dark as we are. It doesn't look like a CI job, either. The signs just aren't there. There aren't any bullet casings, either - whoever took this place down, they did it without firing a single shot."

Dr. Michel spoke up next. "What about that ooze all over the place in the photos? It's not… elf blood, is it?"

"No, thank God," Ives replied. "That's the strangest thing of all, really. The lab boys are still trying to figure it out, but as far as we can tell, it's tomato sauce. Ordinary, run-of-the-mill, five-cents-a-can tomato sauce, with a little extra salt. Anyway, there'll be time for Q&A later. We've got to get started on this."

Ives picked up his briefcase from next to the podium, set it on the table, and opened it to reveal several manila folders packed with pre-prepared documents. "This is what we'll be working from and

what I want you to disseminate to the personnel under your authority. Anderson, get this out to the press ASAP - the LA Times, the New York Post, CBS, NBC, ABC, BBC, CBC, everyone."

"Yes, sir," Anderson said.

"Jenkins, get the AFL-CIO and the Teamsters on the line, see if we can arrange some "sympathy strikes" with the elves' union."

"Right away, boss," Jenkins replied.

"Clef, I want you to liaise with the Republican party, have Goldwater or someone give a pro-Santa speech."

There was no response. A confused mutter filled the room as the researchers looked around for the missing administrator.

"Has anyone seen Clef?"

Fitzroy the elf woke up with a start as a bright light shone in his face. His joints ached, his skin still burned from the hot liquid that the men in green costumes had sprayed him down with, and his head was pounding. He opened his aching eyes slowly, trying to adjust to the glare of the bright lights. As he looked around, he found himself in a massive room with high ceilings and distant walls. His feet were shackled to the chair in which he sat, and a second chain bound him around the waist, leaving only his arms free. In front of him sat a long bench, one of five stretching the length of the room, before which sat scores of other elves shackled as he was. In front of each of them, as in front of him, sat a curious collection of accessories - a hot plate, a spoon, a potato peeler, a kitchen knife, and an ice chest.

Fitzroy struggled with his swimming head as he tried to remember how he'd gotten there. It had been just another morning in the week before the big day, just another shift making toys for the boss' big delivery. At least it had been until the lights went out and the men in green busted down the doors. He could see a few of them marching back and forth between the benches even now, their green dresses (or togas, maybe) dragging on the floor behind them, their matching spiked crowns obscuring their faces in shadow, each of them

wearing a tank over their shoulders connected to the nozzle that spewed that burning hot red fluid that had scalded his friends to death as they grabbed him and injected him with something before tossing him in a sack.

Fitzroy didn't have much time to contemplate the circumstances of his captivity, or what fate had befallen the boss, before a loud and evil voice rang out over a loudspeaker hidden in the rafters, echoing throughout the cavernous building. "Good afternoon, my happy little elves," the voice declared. "I'm afraid there's been a little change in the work schedule this holiday. For the next couple days, you'll be working quadruple shifts. Meal and smoke breaks are canceled, and you won't be making toys anymore. You'll be making something… different." The speaker snickered to himself. "We've got a big quota to make in time for the big day, and I'm counting on your magic little fingers to make it happen. And once this is finished, you can all go back to your happy little elf families, safe and sound."

"Oh, and by the way," the voice added, "I have your boss and his… delightful little animal friends in captivity as well. If you resist, or fight back, or don't work your hardest - well, I can't guarantee that I won't be eating reindeer sausage this Christmas!" The speaker laughed, his wicked, cacophonous howl echoing over the booming loudspeaker. "Now then, no time to waste! Get started! You'll find the recipe guide in the cooler. Start by warming your hot-plate up to medium high, then go ahead and add a few tablespoons of butter…"

"Extra! Extra!" shouted the news agent to the dozens of somber businessmen passing his stand on 5th Avenue. "Special edition! Elves' Union pulls out of negotiations! LBJ demands immediate resolution to Christmas catastrophe!" A man in a trenchcoat and fedora hat flipped a nickel to the newsman as he grabbed a copy of the New York Times off the stack, unfolding it and reading as he walked;

CHRISTMAS IN PERIL AS STRIKE CONTINUES

Elves threaten to stay off the job until after New Year's

"First canceled Christmas since 1896," says Santa Claus

Is there still a reason for the season?

The man folded the paper up as he crossed 59th street, approaching the throng of people outside FAO Schwarz. With no kindly elf to deliver toys for their kids, the parents of the city had gone mad. The man peered in the window at shelves almost bare, as men in suits practically engaged in tugs of war over stuffed animals and Barbie dolls.

"You must have more bicycles in the back!"

"Do you have any more Jack Proton toys? I'll pay anything! ANYTHING!"

"Whatever she's paying for that doll, I'll pay double!"

A man was standing by the door with a box of teddy bears and auctioning them off to the highest bidder as the man in the coat made his way past. People were waving bundles of cash in the air, a look of desperation in their faces as if they were bidding on the last loaf of bread in Manhattan. The man decided to take his leave before the police showed up and found his way to a phone booth on the corner. Closing the door behind him to keep out the winter chill, he fished through his pockets for change as he dialed seven digits and dropped a dime into the slot. The phone rang five times before his intended contactee picked up.

"Hello?"

"Doc. It's me."

"Who is this?"

"It's… it's nobody. Listen. Cronkite was right. This place is going insane."

"So?"

"We're gonna have to speed up production. We need at least 10,000

more units, and we need to be able to get them on the shelves by Christmas Eve!"

"Are you crazy? I can't work that fast."

"This is our golden opportunity, doc! Every toy store on the island is sold out. All these people out here gotta get something under the Christmas tree now that Santa's out of business. That something could be your toys."

"What if something goes wrong? You know this technology isn't perfect yet."

"Relax, doc! This is a once-in-a-lifetime shot! If we play this right, every boy and girl in Manhattan is going to be playing with one of your toys. And once the word gets out… this could be the year the whole world learns the name 'Wondertainment!'"

Dr. Jacob Andrews, flashlight in hand, made his way through the dark, cramped basement of Site 19. Most people barely even knew the basement existed, let alone had a reason to go down there and root around the old stacks of Spiritualist quack artifacts, and mothballed electronics from World War II, and reams and reams of handwritten SCP files from the days when things like radium and daguerreotypes were considered anomalous. Andrews had his reason. Nobody had seen Dr. Clef since the meeting yesterday morning. Everyone assumed he'd gone home, or walked out, or holed up in one of the labs, or something. Andrews knew better. Passing the shelves of preserved Egyptian mummies and turning left at the Olmec head, Andrews reached the brick wall and counted off one, two, three, four, five, *six* bricks before he grabbed onto the masonry and pulled.

The wall opened up instantly, and the smell of salt water and kelp hung heavy in the air as Andrews descended the stairs into the hidden grotto beneath Site 19. Andrews admired the seashell motif along the walls, turning off his flashlight as he approached the well-lit area at the bottom of the stairs. A new smell struck Andrews as he entered the main room of the massive cave - the undeniably distinctive scent of simmering cream, and the frizzle of potatoes

gently sauteeing in bacon grease, and the undeniably savory aroma of *Mercenaria mercenaria sitenineteenia*, the unique species of quahog found only in the waters of this grotto. The meandering tunnels and low ceilings of the Chowdercave could be next to impossible for a stranger to navigate - but Dr. Andrews was no stranger, and in thirty seconds flat he found himself in the "kitchen" of this subterranean base, where Dr. Alto Clef, dressed in his black chef's coat, stood over the stove, stirring a pot and flipping potatoes in his skillet, a dozen spice jars open on the shelf beside him.

"I thought I'd find you down here, Alto," Andrews said to the inward-focused chef.

Clef lowered a spoon into the creamy broth simmering on the stovetop and brought it to his lips. "Needs white pepper," he muttered to himself.

"We've been worried about you, Alto. Have you been down here all night?"

"I've got to get this batch just right, Jacob," Clef replied. "We both know I'm the only person in the entire Foundation qualified to deal with the man behind this Santa-napping."

"You don't know it was him,"Andrews said. "Just because the North Pole was covered with tomato sauce doesn't mean it was the Ma-"

"Nobody even eats that shit anymore!" Clef responded angrily, turning away from the stove as he pulled the potatoes off the flame. "Who else could it be?"

"He hasn't been seen since that cookoff in Rhode Island five years ago. The one that almost got you killed."

"Don't remind me. If I'd been half a second sooner with the parsley, I'd have -"

"Stop, Alto," Andrews said. "You haven't put on that coat in five years now. You're not getting any younger, and… well, we all count on you to keep this place together."

"Santa counts on us too," Clef said. "Those GOC bastards would

have turned the North Pole into glass years ago if it weren't for us keeping an eye out for the old man. And we've let him down. And if there's anything - *anything* I can do to help him, even if it means going back on my promise to never wear that hat again… then I'll do it."

Andrews sighed. "I can see you've got your heart set on this, then." The doctor turned around and began to make his way back to the stairs.

"Wait!" Clef shouted. "I… I could use your help."

"Just like old times, huh?"

Clef smiled. "Make sure the Chowdercopter is fueled up and ready to go. Oh… and see if you can grab some white pepper from the Site pantry."

General Thomas Dawes made his way down a hallway deep within the secret recesses of the North American Aerospace Defense Command. On his left, he was followed by Researcher James, special liaison from the Foundation. On the right followed another military man, his uniform green to Dawes' blue; Colonel Arthur T. Bakker, special liaison from the Global Occult Coalition.

"General," Researcher James said, "I'd like to state again my formal opposition to the GOC having an official presence here. Their position on SCP-4040 is well-established and it simply isn't conducive to our purposes here."

"The Global Occult Coalition stands by its belief that the rogue entity designated KTE-4040-1 is a clear and present danger to international security, General," Colonel Bakker stated with a smirk. "But be that as it may, it is the full intention of High Command to adhere to the terms of the March 1953 Memorandum of Understanding with the Foundation regarding that entity."

"I don't know if my kids would agree that Santa Claus is a 'rogue entity', Colonel," General Dawes said as the trio approached a locked door at the end of the hallway and the general rang its

doorbell. "But let's see if we can find him first before we figure out what to do with him."

A guard on the other side of the door opened it. "Area - attention!" the airman shouted, signaling the dozens of airmen in the dimly lit room to stand at attention before the general ordered them back to their posts.

James looked back and forth, taking in the surroundings as best he could. Beneath the dim red lights, men sat in rows at radar terminals, each of them scrutinizing half a dozen or more of the tiny green monitors. Half a dozen officers sat at a bank of phones, most of them in the middle of discussions with Washington, or Moscow, or Beijing, or who knows where else. "This is where the magic happens, gentlemen," General Dawes said as he swept his arm out over the room. "Most people think all we do here at NORAD is watch for a Soviet airstrike. That's part of it, sure, but we've got hundreds of top secret radar arrays all over the world that feed directly into this room. We could probably break DoD's budget just sitting in here, around the clock, tracking every last bird in the sky all around the world." The general laughed to himself. "But that's not what this equipment is for. This is *magic* radar, you see."

"Magic radar?" Colonel Bakker asked skeptically. "The High Command was not aware NORAD was in possession of magical equipment."

"Oh, it's not the radar itself that's magic, Colonel," General Dawes replied. "These radar arrays are specifically designed to track flying objects *powered* by magic. That's what we use this system for, on this day every year. To track Santa's sleigh." The general turned to one of the men manning the phones. "Any news from the Kremlin, Captain?"

"*Nyet,* sir," the officer replied, stifling a chuckle at his own joke. "No sign of the big man."

"If you don't mind my asking," Researcher James chimed in, "how is any of this going to help us figure out who kidnapped Santa, or where they've taken him?"

"As soon as we got the call from the White House that Santa was missing," General Dawes answered, "we started poring over the logs from these arrays. Sure enough, we had some readouts. Whoever got ahold of Santa and his reindeer got on that sleigh and flew it into the middle of nowhere in Wisconsin. By the time the Green Berets got there, though, they were long gone. They must have loaded the sleigh and the reindeer onto a truck or something and moved them by land from there.

"Anyway, it's the morning of Christmas Eve now, of course. But Christmas Day officially started in the western Pacific about seven hours ago. Everyone knows Santa does his work at the stroke of midnight, and we've got seventeen midnights to go."

"So what?" James asked.

"Well, whoever's got Santa, they haven't made any ransom demands. Our guess is, they want him to do something for them this Christmas. Why take the reindeer and the elves as well? They want the elves to make something and they want Santa to deliver it - and he'll have to do that at midnight. As soon as he makes his move, we'll know where he is."

"Deliver what?" Colonel Bakker asked. "Guns? Bombs? Germ warfare? This is sounding more and more like a Pizzicato situation, General."

"That's just wild guessing," James responded. "We can't just jump to conclusions here."

"I will not be second-guessed by a cut-rate mad scientist, 'Researcher'," Colonel Bakker snapped.

"Mad scientist? That's a laugh coming from a John Wayne wannabe like you. After the mess you idiots made of SCP-1609, I wouldn't trust you to neutralize a stray dog."

"I've read your dossier, James. You're not even qualified to be in this room. Why don't you go back to Site 82 and talk to your… what was it, 'toilet ghost?'"

"That's 'butt ghost' to you, you as-"

"Gentlemen!" General Dawes shouted. "You can't fight in here! *This is the war room!*"

James and Bakker stared silently at Dawes, a mixture of confusion and disdain in their eyes.

"My wife loves that movie," Dawes said.

"General!" shouted one of the airmen at the terminals. "We've got something!" The three rushed over and crowded around the airman's chair, where a single blip was moving towards the top right of one of the screens.

"What are we looking at here, Airman?" Colonel Bakker asked.

"It's over the Midwest right now, sir," the airman replied, "supersonic speed, definitely magical. Heading sixty degrees north by northeast - huh."

"What is it?" asked James.

"If it keeps that heading, it'll be in New York City by sunset."

"New York City," Dawes said to himself. "What could Santa want in New York City?"

"Chowder," James mumbled under his breath.

"Excuse me?" Bakker said.

"I said… umm… Chaplin! Yes. Project Chaplin. False alarm, general. That's one of our birds."

Bakker stared James down, a skeptical glare in his eyes. "Our intelligence did not indicate that the Foundation was in possession of magical aircraft."

"It's a new project. Top secret. We've been developing a plane capable of keeping up with SCP-1115. Looks like just a test run. See how it flutters back and forth a little from its heading? That's how it…

how it works. Can't share all the details in mixed company. You understand, Colonel."

"SCP-1115? Those flying robots?" General Dawes chuckled. "Good luck keeping up with them. They had me try to shoot one down in a P-38 back during the war. I was lucky I made it out alive."

"Well, false alarm though this may be," Bakker said, "I really should let High Command know what the current situation is. Is there a private phone nearby?"

"Two rooms down," Dawes said. "Airman Rodriguez will show you to the open line."

"High Command switchboard, how may I direct your call?"

"Put me through to General Abrams at once. Gold priority, security code Delta Omicron Six Six Niner Epsilon Tau."

"One moment, Colonel."

"This is General Abrams speaking."

"Santa's in New York. The Foundation already has a bird in the air en route."

"Coordinates?"

"Unknown at this time. They've got magic radar. Get our primary radar online and watch their bird. It… flutters. Once they do the groundwork, they'll no doubt set Santa loose on his sleigh."

"And then we neutralize KTE-4040, I assume?"

"My thoughts exactly, General."

Santa Claus hung upside down above a giant vat of boiling clam juice. A rope tied around his ankles was the only thing keeping the not-so-jolly old man from falling to his doom in the steaming pot. In front of his field of vision stood his kidnapper - a grizzled old man

dressed in a red chef's coat, a toque as red as blood on his head, a tomato embroidered over his heart. The man pinched and twirled his mustache as he paced back and forth in front of Santa. Reaching out to the control panel before him, he pulled the main lever a tiny bit - and the rope loosened, sending St. Nicholas hurtling a few inches closer to the pot.

"It's not much I'm asking of you, Santa," the man said. "Just tell me the magic words I need to use to get those reindeer of yours in the air, and I'll be on my way. And once I've taken care of delivering my *special* presents to all the good little boys and girls, I'll let you go, and your elves, and your reindeer, and you can go back north and rebuild your little house and your little factory, and you can go on like none of this ever happened."

"Never!" Santa shouted defiantly, his voice echoing through the abandoned warehouse his captor had turned into a sweatshop over the past week. "I won't let you do whatever you're planning to do to all those good little children!"

"I was kind of hoping you'd say that," the man said as he pressed the intercom button on his console. "Libertines! Do you copy?"

"Yes, sir," a voice crackled over the radio.

"Take one of the reindeer down to the basement. I don't care… the freak one with the atomic nose. We're eating good tonight!"

"No!" Santa shouted. "Please don't hurt Rudolph!"

"You know what you have to do to make this stop, Santa," the red man said. "Tell me the magic words."

A tear fell from Santa's eye, rolling down his bald head and dripping into the clam juice where it boiled away instantly. "Alright. Come here and I'll tell you everything." The man leaned over the edge of the pot as Santa, between his tears, told the man all the words he'd need to know - how to get the reindeer flying, how to break the sound barrier, how to stop time long enough to visit every house in the world before the sun came up.

"I knew you'd see reason eventually," the kidnapper said. "I'll go ahead and call off that order of reindeerburgers now."

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAH! AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAUGH! IT BURNS!" The kidnapper recoiled in surprise from the horrific scream he heard the instant he pressed the intercom button.

"What is the meaning of this, Santa? I swear, I'll butcher every one of those reindeer myself if… AAH!"

The kidnapper's words were cut off as a flying porcelain bowl smashed into the side of his head, shards flying every which way as piping hot cream splashed all over his immaculate coat. He turned towards the door where his guards were standing and saw them on the floor, coated in the same boiling broth that had now soiled his costume. Standing between them was his counterpart - black coat, black hat, a massive tank strapped to his back, bowls hanging by the dozen from his utility belt, a long tube connecting the tank to the massive cannon in his hands, and a righteous sneer on his face as he eyed the man who had kidnapped Santa Claus.

"Chowderclef!"

"The Manhattanite," Clef responded as he stared down the vermilion varlet before him. "I knew it was you the second I saw the pictures of Santa's workshop coated in Manhattan-style chowder."

"Impossible! There's no way you could have tracked me here!"

"Quite possible indeed, you burgundy burglar of Christmas cheer," Clef replied as he approached his arch-nemesis. "The breed of clam you used was specific to the East River. Once I figured that out, it was a mere matter of checking through the real estate records to find any disused waterfront warehouses that had changed hands lately. Now stand down - I'm taking you in and I'm letting Santa go."

"Don't you take another step!" The Manhattanite dodged a blast from Clef's Chowdercannon as he leapt towards the console, wrapping his hand around the control lever. "One more step and Kris Kringle here is Santa stew!"

"You monster!" Clef shouted. "What is it you want from St. Nick, anyway?"

"Nobody eats Manhattan-style chowder anymore," the Manhattanite mumbled to himself.

"Excuse me?" Clef asked.

"Chowder! It's everywhere these days! From Suffolk, to Seattle, to San Diego! From Lafayette to Las Vegas! From Miami to Manitoba! From DC to Dallas! From Tampa to Timbuktu! You can't so much as walk through the door of a seafood restaurant without having a bowl of it shoved in your face! But you know what, Chowderclef?"

"What?"

"Everywhere you go, *everywhere* in the whole wide world, it's *New England style*. Nobody has time any more for the simple joys of clams and tomato sauce. It's all heavy cream, and bacon, and potatoes, and a splash of sherry… it makes my blood *boil*, Chowderclef! Not that you can even boil that stuff - oh no, it scalds the milk, we must be *delicate* with it!

"It's time the world got to know what *real* clam chowder is all about, my friend. That's why I've had the elves so hard at work this last week. They finished up an hour ago. You know, it's amazing how well the magic on that sleigh works - I didn't think we'd be able to load 3,268,896,174 gallons of piping hot chowder onto the back, but believe it or not, it fits!"

"3,268,896,174 gallons?" Clef said to himself as he came to a horrific revelation. "Why, that's exactly…"

"Exactly!" the Manhattanite shouted. "Exactly one gallon for everyone! When the sun comes up on Christmas morning, all the little boys and girls aren't going to find hopalong boots and talking dollies underneath their Christmas tree. No, they're going to find the greatest gift of all - *piping hot chowder*."

"You're insane, Manhattanite!", Clef yelled. "You can't take away everyone's presents and give them your disgusting tomato soup!

They'll detest it! We'll have a revolution on our hands!"

"A revolution indeed!" the Manhattanite shouted! "A *chowder revolution!* We shall cast down our New England oppressors once and for all! And it starts - *now!*" The Manhattanite jerked the control lever all the way down, snapping it off in his hand as Santa began to lower slowly towards the vat of clam juice.

"Your choice, Chowderchump - save Santa, or chase me!" The Manhattanite dodged three blasts from the Chowdercannon as he leapt through a door at the edge of the room. Clef started to give chase, but stopped himself - in less than thirty seconds, Santa would be in the soup. As fast as he could, Clef switched the control knob on the Chowdercannon to Setting #2 and poured a bowl of the creamy, savory end-product into a bowl, gulping it as fast as he could. Strength welled within him, Omega-3 acids coursing through his veins as his muscles seemed to double in size. Santa even fancied that he saw a stylized image of a clamshell appear on his bicep as Clef rolled up his sleeves, set his hands on the side of the boiling pot, and, impervious to the pain from the hot steel, upended it and turned it on its side, spilling its deadly contents down the stairs and over the half-dozen guards in their Statue of Liberty dresses who had been on their way up the stairs to confront the Dark Chef.

A kitchen knife tossed from his utility belt severed the rope, and Santa fell into Clef's waiting arms before being set back on his feet. "Why, if it isn't little Alto!" Santa said, his typical joviality returning to his voice. "I guess that Easy-Bake Oven I gave you when you were little paid off, didn't it?"

"Are you OK, Santa?"

"Nothing a long winter's nap won't fix! Believe me, I'm putting you on my 'Nice' list for next year!"

"There's still this year to worry about, Santa. Where's the sl-"

Clef stopped mid-sentence as he heard the jingling of bells outside the window, and turned just in time to see Santa's sleigh ascending into the night sky, a bubbling pot of chowder sitting in the place of Santa's bag of toys. "Ho ho ho! Merry Chowdermas!" The

Manhattanite's voice echoed through the empty streets.

"Dammit!" Clef shouted. "We're too late!"

"No need for imprudent language, little Alto! It's not quite midnight *yet*," Santa said. "He won't be able to use all of my magic until it's Christmas day. You can still catch him!"

"No offense, St. Nick, but I know what your reindeer are capable of. My Chowdercopter might have magical clam-power, but even it can't keep up. There's no way I can catch him in time!"

"Oh no?" Santa winked and stuck his fingers into his mouth as he whistled. In a moment, an eerie red glow began to emanate from the staircase to the ground floor - and a single reindeer trotted up the stairs, past the Libertines rolling in agony as the chowder burned away their flesh, his bright red nose illuminating the room like a Christmas tree.

"You called, Santa?" the reindeer asked.

Santa and the elves stood on the roof of the factory in the darkness, looking out into the overcast sky for any sign. Santa checked his pocketwatch - a quarter after one. He sighed.

"Do you think Chowderclef's alright?" Fitzroy asked Santa.

"I think… I think it's going to be a late delivery this year, boys."

"Wait!" one of the elves shouted. "Look over there!" A faint glow shone through the clouds to the east. It might have just been a warning light from one of the beacons on the river - but as they watched, and watched, and watched, it started to grow brighter, and brighter, and brighter still - until Rudolph the red-nosed reindeer himself emerged from the fog - and behind him came Dasher, Dancer, Prancer, Vixen, Comet, Cupid, Donner, and Blitzen, and behind them the sleigh - and riding on that sleigh, alone, smiling, and covered head to toe in tomato sauce, was Chowderclef. A cheer rose up from the elves as the sleigh alighted on the rooftop and Clef stepped off.

"Alto!" Santa shouted. "I knew you'd do it!"

"It wasn't easy," Clef said. "The GOC tried to shoot us both down. I guess they figured nobody would know it was them if Santa and his reindeer just happened to get blown up by air-to-air missiles this year. I'm going to have to have words with them after we're done here. Now this guy here-" Clef patted his red-nosed mount on the head - "now he's a real trouper."

"Thanks, Clef!" Rudolph said. "All I did was do a barrel roll like you said."

"Don't be so modest, Rudolph! It was you who came up close enough for me to make the jump onto the sleigh."

"But how did you stop the Manhattanite?" Santa asked.

"Well, Santa, in the middle of all our fighting, I asked him a question."

"What was that?"

"He's spent his entire life fighting to wipe out New England-style chowder. I asked him if he'd ever actually tasted any."

"You mean he hadn't?"

"I had a special batch just for him. Call it a Christmas present." Clef pointed to the control knob on his Chowdercannon, which had been turned to the third and final setting. "I spent days trying to get that batch just right - and to make sure it was perfect, I ran it through SCP-914 on Very Fine. He was in tears after a single spoonful. He poured the pot out over the Atlantic Ocean and parachuted out."

"Wonderful, Alto! You see - Christmas can soothe the heart of even the most wicked man!"

"Oh, I doubt we've seen the last of him, Santa. This isn't the first time we've dueled over the question of soup supremacy - and it sure won't be the last."

"Well, the important thing is, I have my sleigh and my reindeer back!

Thanks for all the help, Alto - I've got a Christmas to save!"

"It's already a quarter past one, Santa," Clef said as he looked downward. "It might be too late."

"Oh, Alto. The magic works for *any* midnight! I've still got six more chances!"

"But what about the toys?"

"The Manhattanite never got anywhere near the toys, Alto! I keep them somewhere *very* safe," Santa said with a wink. "It's just a matter of picking them up and - say, Alto?"

"Yes, Santa?"

"There is one more thing we can do to make up for lost time. I hope you don't mind lending a hand a little while longer - and letting me borrow that cannon of yours…"

Dr. Andrews sipped the coffee in his styrofoam cup as he drove home along the darkened roads. His watch said it was 5:32 AM. Christmas morning. He hadn't had a wink of sleep in the past three days. Nobody at Site 19 had, with all the work convincing people that things would be just fine as soon as the elves settled their labor dispute with Santa. He'd spent all night on the phone with Researcher James at Cheyenne Mountain - tracking the bizarre radar sightings all around the eastern seaboard, and ultimately dealing with the blowback after the GOC had been caught red-handed violating the rules of engagement trying to shoot down Santa's sleigh and the unidentified object chasing it. What had become of them after that was anyone's guess - it was a miracle NORAD was still standing after what the GOC liaison had tried to do to "neutralize" their "magic radar".

Andrews pulled into the driveway of his little house in the suburbs and shut off the motor as he climbed out into the pre-dawn air. Site Director Ives had been kind enough to let him spend the morning at home and explain to his girls why Santa hadn't come. He groaned as he looked at the headlines in the morning paper on his doorstep;

NO SIGN OF SANTA AS CHRISTMAS HANGS IN BALANCE

LBJ makes last-minute call to North Pole as strike continues

Riots in New York, L.A., London outside sold-out toy stores

Buckley and Vidal debate: "Is Santa a Red?"

Andrews dropped the paper in amazement as soon as he saw the tableau in his living room. Beneath the glow of the lit-up Christmas tree lay *dozens* of presents, all wrapped up in paper and bows. He hadn't bought them. Karen hadn't bought them. Who had? Like an excited little boy, he fell to his knees and examined the tags. "To Jane, from Santa". "To Amy, from Santa". "To Mom and Dad, from Santa".

He had done it! Somehow, his crazy old friend in the black coat had done it! Santa was safe and it would be a merry Christmas after all. Andrews was about to race upstairs and wake everybody up when he noticed something else - a certain aroma wafting in from the next room. He turned the corner into the kitchen and there, sitting on the warmer on the stovetop, was a great big pot bubbling with cream, and potatoes, and clams, and just the right hint of bacon, and a little splash of sherry. A note on the side read "To the Andrews family - from Santa Clef". Four brand new porcelain bowls and shining silver spoons sat on the counter next to the stove, waiting to be used. Cautiously, Andrews dipped a spoon into the pot and took a taste.

"Hmm," he said to himself. "The white pepper really *does* make a difference."

How Not To Misappropriate Foundation Resources

Dr. Ames sat down across from the two Agents dressed in casual clothes. She let the file in her hands slap down on the table, clicking the reading light on. A cursory flip through the pages for effect, and she looked up. "Okay. Sam, Jim. You guys are both senior agents. What the hell happened?"

Sam Denton and Jim McDowell glanced at each other. Sam shrugged sheepishly, "Look, we didn't do it on purpose. There was an official distress call. This is how it went down…"

T-Minus Eight Minutes from the incident in question

Director Desai furiously typed in access codes to his smartphone. Every press of his thumb got faster and more frantic as the creatures outside the door pounded on it. “Come on, come on, send send send…”

A hot sweat popped out on his forehead, mashing the send button over and over. A full D-25-E would get him out of here. He didn't know what else to do, and now he'd gotten cornered in here of all places.

"By all that is good and holy SEND!" He yelled at the screen, the tiny spinning circle turning into a checkmark.

A tone emitted from the phone’s speakers. On the screen flashed the words “Agents Scrambled. Remain in your location.” Director Desai looked at the flimsy door. The door shook furiously on its hinges. The little monsters outside were going to break through eventually. “Come out, we want to plaaaay.”

Across town, the little electronic relay bounced around a Foundation black circle a few times, before happily bouncing out to the phones of the two closest agents.

Agents Denton and McDowell sat around a card table, taking turns idly flicking playing cards into a bucket. Sam looked up at the ceiling, and let out a sigh, “Are you fucking kidding me. First the bus, then Las Chupacabras, and now nothing? I’m so booooooored.”

Jim shrugged. "Look, we were due for some downtime. You decided we didn't need it, asshat. And so now we're here babysitting a couple of brass during the summit." Jim flicked the Ace of Spades into the bucket, smirking. “Ace in the hole!” He grinned, and turned to Denton. “Beat that, Sam.”

Sam let out an agonized groan. "Fuck. What's this summit about anyway?" He bent the two of clubs between his fingers a bit, and flicked it outwards. It skittered across the floor and came to rest among a pile of similar cards.

Jim lifted his left hand to his temple, "Use your brain, Sam. After the fiasco down in Oaxaca, Las Chupacabras and Kalikos requested a formal meeting. What else could it have been?"

Sam shook his head, and gestured at Jim. "Your shot, buddy. I dunno, I had hoped it would just blow over."

Jim looked over at Sam with an eyebrow raised, "Blow over? Sam, they *stole her pinata*. That's like…a lot bigger deal than I made clear apparently." He bent the King of Diamonds, and flicked it at the bucket. It landed flat on the edge of the bucket, without tipping in. "Well. Fuck. First time in four packs that's happened."

Sam looked up at the ceiling and groaned, “Come on, something good show up!” As if on cue, his phone buzzed. He picked it up more surprised than concerned and glanced at the screen. His eyes flicked over the words, an address and a status code. It was on the official channel, but not related to their current assignment. He didn't even recognize the code.

“Hey, Jim, what’s a D-25-E?” Sam said, flicking over to one of the Foundation internal social media applications. DuMourne's feed scrolled across his phone, a picture of him and Director Diaghilev standing next to someone in robes, shaking hands. "Fucking show

off…"

“Site Director in distress, immediate expedited dispatch. Why?” Jim said, flicking the Queen of Diamonds to try and knock her husband into the bucket.

Sam scrambled to his feet, gathering up his belt, “Shit, fuck, Jim, D-25-E, closeby! It's on us!” He reached over, and pressed the lock-down switches on the equipment around them, hard-point shielding sliding over the various terminals and servers. The tiny room they'd been stationed in rapidly transformed back into a janitorial closet.

The air conditioning clicked off, and the room went silent for a half-second.

Agent Denton blinked for a moment, then scrambled to his feet, grabbing his weapon belt. "God dammit, let's fucking go."

The two agents burst out of the tiny room, and skittered across the lobby of the Soap from Corpses Products satellite office they'd taken been using as a safehouse. Sam kicked the door bar open and kept running out the side door of the building, Jim a half-step behind him. The parking lot was completely empty, all of the brass took the heavily armored and armed vehicles to the summit.

Jim slapped his palm against his face. "God fucking dammit, what are we gonna do now?" In the distance, a melody started to play from across the crowded block.

Sam looked around, clicking the weapon belt around his waist. His options were pretty limited. There were a couple of bikes chained up in the bike rack, and a SegWay chained to the lobby desk. "Bike, or SegWay, Jim?"

Jim stopped for a moment flabbergasted. "Sam, are you actually suffering from radiation poisoning or something? It's half a mile away!" The melody grew closer, as the two agents argued.

Sam held up his hands, turning to Jim, "Well, what the hell are we gonna do, it's all we've got man. It's that, or sprint full out across city ground!"

The melody finally came into clear auditory range. The jolly rendition of *The Entertainer* might as well have been a godsend, as a Mr. Softee truck rounded the corner, and came to a stop right in front of the parking lot. A fresh faced young man leaned out, and smiled at the two agents. "Hey guys, want some ice cream?"

Agent McDowell's face dropped into an easy smile, "You thinking what I'm thinking, Sam?"

The ice cream truck screamed down the highway at its top speed, McDowell dictating directions to Denton. "Fucking left, not right! Go around!" Denton dodged around a parked car, and nearly slammed into a truck as he swerved to get around traffic.

"I swear to fuck, Sam, there are like five hundred kids on every block, JONESING HARD FOR SOME MR SOFTEE. Would you just prep the fucking guns!" Denton's voice was hard-edged, and tense. The call had put them both on edge. Whatever was trapping the director had to have been bad to send out an expedited request.

"I'm just fucking saying man," McDowell said, slamming a magazine of experimental explosive rounds into the two service pistols in front of him on the cooler, "He could be getting tortured, why else would he send out such an obvious distress signal?" He slipped a small blue cartridge into the slot just above the heel of his right combat boot. A quick tap of the buttons on his wristwatch confirmed the status of the various bits of gear around his body. "Okay, the map is saying it's like…a block and a half ahead, so if we— GODDAMMIT SAM, RED FUCKING LIGHT!"

A semi-truck screamed through the intersection, straight towards the ice cream truck. Denton cranked the wheel to the left, the ice-cream truck let out a tortured groan as the music cheerfully continued out of the loud speaker, distorted by doppler effect. "OH FUCKING HELL, BY ALL THAT IS HOLY HOLD ON TO SOMETHING!" Sam screamed, as they clipped the back edge of the trailer, knocking the ice cream truck into the oncoming lane.

McDowell braced against the cooler in the back of the truck. The doors flew open, and ice cream bars and candy flew out the back of

the truck. "Ahhhhh!" he added, helpfully, as he slapped his right hand down on the metal surface of the cooler, a flick of his wrist extending the magnetic anchor concealed under his right sleeve. It hummed to life and kept the agent from becoming roadkill. The truck righted itself, several cars honking and swerving around them.

Denton slammed on the brakes, as they approached the address, coming from 80 to 20 as fast as the tortured little truck would let them. "Bail, Jim! Let's go!" He jumped out the driver's side door, and hit the ground at a run.

In the back of the truck, McDowell disengaged the magnetic anchor, and said a tiny prayer to whatever god was listening. He held his feet up and jumped up as best he could with just his back muscles as he slid out the back of the truck. He landed lightly on his feet, and continued into a jog, "Holy shit I didn't think that would work!"

The ice cream truck slammed into a passenger van, as the two agents sprinted to the front door. Jim held up a fist, then took a step back, slamming his heel into the ground. He held out the other weapon to Sam, without looking back. Sam took the pistol, and turned to cover their backs.

The heel of Jim's boot glowed with trace circuitry as a quiet *thunk* emanated from it. He kicked at the front door with a stomp, the bootheel releasing a shockwave that threw the door into the small home.

Jim immediately rolled backwards to clear Sam's line of sight, who ducked in through the door.
Sam leveled his weapon towards the glowing indicator on the small wrist-mounted GPS he wore. He kept the small device visible in his sight picture, as he scanned the room.

“FREEZE, OR I’LL BLOW YOUR FUCKING HE—” Sam bellowed.

Across the room three small girls screamed, and ran out of the house, with varying cries of ‘Mommy!’ The dust of the nearly-vaporized door settled leaving Sam blinking in confusion. "I'm gonna go ahead and guess it's clear."

McDowell entered, blinked in surprise and lowered his weapon. He walked over to the door the little girls had been pounding on, and knocked quietly. “Uhh…Director Desai?”

From the other side of the door, a quiet voice squeaked out, “Erm… yes?”

"This is Agent Jim McDowell, Level 3. You uhh…you okay? I'm coming in."

"No don't come in, I'll be right ou—" Denton turned the knob, and opened the door, revealing the double-PhD holding Site Director with his pants around his ankles, on the toilet. He pulled his shirt down to cover himself, and turned beet red. "Erm. Hello, Agent."

Denton's eyebrows went up in a mix of shock and amusement. He quietly closed the door, and turned to face Jim, barely holding in laughter. "Another critical Foundation mission complete, Jim."

Dr. Ames looked up at Denton and McDowell, shaking her head. “You’re fucking serious?”

Jim smiled, laughing quietly, “Apparently, the director panicked.”

Sam shrugged, his fingertips resting on the table between them, "He's been staying with family for days, and apparently those little girls had him on the verge of a mental breakdown. We uhh… replaced the door for them, if that's anything."

Dr. Ames pinched the bridge of her nose, sighing heavily, “First, he has to give a seminar on bottle dicks, and now ‘how not to misappropriate Foundation resources when scared dropping a deuce.’ Poor Gears. Thank you agents.”

Denton and McDowell rose. Sam nodded, and grinned sheepishly. “No problem Doc. Don’t go too hard on him. Those girls really were little terrors."

How Site-19 Blew Up

Safety Supervisor Thompson just finished explaining Site-19's safety and security protocols to the new recruits. It was the 47th such lecture he had given so he was used to the depressing indifference of the audience. At least he had a fun movie he was saving for the end of his speech. He turned on the TV and lay back in his chair.

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20 km south of Site-19 – 17:45

Most Foundation personnel believe that Site-19 has no on-site nuclear warheads. They would argue that planting nukes under a facility housing not only hundreds of partially understood anomalies but nearly a thousand of the world's brightest scientific minds would cross the not-so-thin line between overly cautious and criminally insane.

Then again, the colossal mushroom cloud dominating the scenery flips off their reasoning like a massive middle finger made of radioactive dust. Site-19's astonishing history was ultimately ended by its own self-destruct system. But what led to its demise?

Director Bright's office, Site-19 - 11:55

"I finished the preliminary document for the skip that was delivered this morning." said Dr. Bright, and handed over a few pages to his secretary. "Could you please make the redactions for the Level 2 version for me? Just go over it and black out everything that looks like something you shouldn't be allowed to know. Then take one of the usual pills."

"I will finish it right away, don't worry about that. Are you going to the cafeteria?"

"Yes, today they are serving banana muffins. Better grab a few while

they’re fresh.”

Rec. Center, Site-19 – 12:20

“Hey, what are you doing there?”

“Filling up the pool. Today’s the Pool Opening Day.”

“I couldn’t help but notice the sign above the tap you connected the hose to.”

Separate tank used by the

Automatic Fire Sprinkler System

Do not open

“Oops, I seriously didn’t see that. But it’s almost ready so I’m finishing it like that.”

“Whatever, man.”

Containment Sector-32, Site-19 - 14:15

"Hey, Tim. What's going on today?"

"We're collecting a sample from this bad boy. Here's the new doc we got from the Director."

"What's a suit?"

"Hell if I know, but it says the skip will flip out and enter a if we're not wearing one."

"This must be the one Bob was talking about yesterday. That's gotta be 'hazmat'; he said it gets pissed off if it smells you. By the look of this damn thing, we should probably be wearing one anyway."

"If you're sure on that, you can go in by yourself."

Containment Sector-32, Site-19 - 14:28

“Hello, Timothy. I’m calling to tell you to please be patient with the recovery since we couldn’t find a wombat suit for you to wear.”

“Wombat suit, you say.”

“Yes, wombat suit.”

“Well, fuck.”

Research Sector-35, Site-19 - 14:31

“Did you hear that? It sounded like something just broke through a metal door.”

“Don’t worry about that, let’s just enjoy our break,” said Agent Carter as he sat atop a gasoline barrel someone left at the corridor and he lit a cigarette.

A few seconds later Junior Researcher Timothy Moore ran through the corridor shouting, “The Keter is loose! Run for your life!” So they did run. Fortunately for them, the advance of said Keter-class anomaly was halted by an exploding barrel.

Research Sector-35, Site-19 - 16:40

“Damn, that fire made a mess of this place for sure. How come the sprinklers didn’t activate?” asked a janitor from his colleague.

“Do I look like a plumber to you?”

“In fact you do look like one. Anyway, we cleaned up most of the debris, but what should we do about this smoke?”

“Let’s just open this entrance. It will be out in no time.”

Outside of Exit-35, Site-19 - 16:45

One of Site-19’s emergency exits led to a forest, and it was

disguised with a clever little spatial anomaly. It was spread wide open, unveiling the entrance. A group of soldiers was hiding in the nearby bushes. Aside from the yellow ‘Chaos Insurgency’ sign in their back, they looked like ninjas from an 80s action flick.

“Chief, that must be the entrance we are looking for.”

“It sure is. Let’s get going.”

The CI’s men occupied the site surprisingly easily. It wasn’t designed to hold back ordinary humans, after all. By the time the security guards realized what was happening, the soldiers had already reached the Administrative Sector.

Director Bright’s office, Site-19 - 17:24

“All clear. Intel says the target keeps his security code in his top drawer.”

“Positive. Entering the security system now.”

> Username: jackbright
> Password:
> ●●●●●●●●●●●●●●●●●●●●●●●●

“Arming Site-19’s nuclear warhead as planned.”

> Time until detonation:
>
> 0:00:25

“Uhm, Sir, which Site was this again?”

“I think they said it’s 61 or something like that.”

> 0:00:10

“I kind of remember seeing 19 here and there though.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, son.”

> 0:00:01

0:00:00

The End

A movie by Safety Cinema Productions

Directed by

Starring:

“And that’s why we have security protocols,” said Safety Supervisor Thompson as he turned off the TV. "This educational movie concludes today’s lecture. Any questions?"

How the SPC Ruined Halloween

"Daddy, why are you dressed up like a dolphin?"

Mitchell laughed as he picked up his daughter.

"I'm not a dolphin, you goof!" he said. "I'm a shark!"

The little girl in his hands giggled and bared her teeth at him, growling and playfully flailing her arms around.

"Raaawr, raaawr, I'mma shark princess daddy!" she yelled gleefully. "Can I be a shark princess?"

He chuckled. "But you're such a pretty princess already! Why would you ever want to be a shark?"

Samantha pondered this for a moment, putting a hand under her chin as she had often seen her father do when he had to think hard about something.

"Can I be a shark princess later?" she asked.

"Sure honey, but tonight, you're just a regular princess with a shark daddy who's taking her trick-or-treating." Mitch said as he set his daughter down, brushing down her tutu.

She cheered at this and snatched her mini-cauldron from off of the couch. Sam excitedly bounced towards the door, her gray-clad father tailing close behind.

It was a cool evening in the town of Mollierville. The wind gently pushed brown and orange leaves across the ground as the orange sun cast long shadows as the light faded from the sky. It was Halloween night, and it was the first year that Samantha Nichols was old enough to go trick-or-treating. She lead her father excitedly by his hand out into the yard, pulling him past the carved jack'o'lanterns and cobwebbed tombstones. Her father laughed as they ran,

readjusting his costume as it slipped off of him.

As they hurried past their driveway into the lawn of the neighbors, a figure rolled out of the shrubs in front of them. Springing to his feet, he sprinted towards the confused pair, shouted "Take this, pond scum!" and slammed his fist into Mitch's abdomen. He doubled over in pain, his daughter angrily shouting at the man, who was rushing towards a waiting black van.

"Daddy, daddy, are you alright?" Sam worriedly looked over the figure kneeling on the ground. "Do I need to get mommy?"

He groaned, pushing himself up with one hand and dusting himself off with the other.

"I'm fine sweetie," he said. "It'll take more than that to put your ol' dad out of action!"

He glanced towards the street, which the van had quickly vacated. He shook his head at the absurdity of it all and took his daughter's hand as they walked towards the first house.

Agent James sat in the back of the van, head in his hands. He had *failed.* His first major mission, and he blew it. Not only was the shark still mobile, but it still had the hostage. He was in for a demotion for sure, probably all the way down to Bait duty. The shark was free to roam and cause havoc, and it was all his fault. He sighed, pulled out the materials from the pocket in front of him, and began to write up the report. They would have to send out a squad tomorrow to clean up his mess, for sure.

> **Shark #:** 32145
>
> **Shark Class:** Terrestrial
>
> **Shark Punching Commands:** Shark-32145 cannot be directly punched in the frontal cranial region due to a hostage human being used as a shield. Due to this, agents are to approach the shark as swiftly as they possibly can, apply direct pressure to the frontal thoracic

area of the shark, and retreat just as swiftly. Multiple agents may be required to carry out SPC repeatedly if the shark needs to be punched further.

Description: Shark is approximately 1.4m long. Notable features of this shark include fully functional lower appendages used for bipedal locomotion and a lack of the rough texture normally found on shark skin. More frighteningly, the shark appears to be holding an adult male captive in its mouth. As recovering the subject at this point would require actions further than those described in the Shark Punching Commands, this male adult has been deemed irretrievable. It is unknown whether this subject is aware of his condition or not. This shark is extremely dangerous due to its terrestrial locomotion, as well as its obvious parasitism and possible telepathic or anesthetic abilities. Under no circumstances should this shark be kicked, as it may kick back. Agents must move faster than with aquatic sharks, as this shark is fully mobile on land and can move as rapidly as some of our agents on land.

Addendum: *Alright agents, I'm sure you've all heard of these. I've heard the whispers around the halls and cafeteria, and, well, it's happened. We have a Type Brown on our hands. A full-fledged humashark that needs to be taken care of immediately. Here's what you do: You run up and punch it before it has time to react, because the* ***moment*** *it has time to react is when it all goes to hell. Godspeed and good luck. -Boxer*

How Tightly The Coils Squeeze

September 18th, 2160 - Within the Wanderer's Library

The night-time is late, and very down. No early morning brightness peeking from the borders of the moon's domain. Just a permanent, thick gray, from which only my nook-light provides relief. I slump in my reading chair. The times have made me a very tired man, yet these words aren't going to be read by themselves. But the words keep swimming off the page… I scoop them back in, fixing the jumbled mess of prose until the story once again becomes legible.

> Once upon a time, there was a brave knight named Scott. He defended the whole world. The master he served was a great king, named Glob. But one night, a rabid rat bit him on the nose. Soon the kingdom was in peril. Has the king gone mad? Soon, the answer to their worried question was relieved, as the king beheaded all dissenters. The brave knight Scott was horrified. He was not sworn to protect a madman. So one night, Scott placed a deadly serpent in Glob's bed….

There used to be so many others, like me. Ones who cared about keeping the last sane place on earth. Before they were damned, we saw ourselves as the last best hope for the mind. Somewhere, in our infinite capacity for wisdom, there was a book. The truth was somewhere in the great halls, and we just needed to find it. We could fix everything, maybe even make it better! But as the outside keeps slipping into a dark age, into ignorance and oblivion without any silver lining, it became harder and harder to resist, or even to care all that much. They couldn't ask for our help.

> Once upon a time, there was a brave knight named Scott. He defended the whole world. The master he served was a great king , named Glob. But one night, a rabid rat bit him on the nose. Soon the kingdom was in peril. Has the king gone mad? Soon, the answer to their worried

question was relieved, as the king beheaded all dissenters. The brave knight Scott was horrified. He was not sworn to protect a madman. So one night, Scott placed a deadly serpent in Glob's bed….

My vision shakes, even when I close my eyes. I can see it twitching through the swiveling lines and endless plaid portals that lurk behind my eyelids. I'm sharp. The prose does a backstroke, gracefully falling off the page and shattering onto the floor. The world shatters with them, tinkling and falling around me like gold from a prospector's pan. The spine snaps in my hand, and I hear it cry out in relief as the whole goddamn world goes to hell. My clenched eyes do nothing to save them. They won't even save me.

He defended the whole world. The master he served was a great king , named Glob. But one night, a rabid hav rat bit him on the nose. Soon

Has king gone mad? beheaded all dissenters. The . He was not sworn to protect a madman. So one night, Scott placed a deadly serpent in Glob's bed….

The shattered tome slips from my fingers, and words fail. The broken ground trembles, and I can hear the compendium of all human knowledge spilling out of their collections of spines and covers. The pages all around me ruffle and collapse. My own eyes slip past my clenched lids, spiraling down onto this sea of babble. Through the cracks in the fourth wall, it all swirls around my sight, filling me in with all information disorganized and nonsensical. I can see everything, but I know nothing. Just as I slide down, the library does too. I can see, for it refuses to be ignored even as the last thoughts are snuffed. It demands respect, even as it kneels before

death. The gateways stretch and snap like shattering violin strings. With a sick crescendo, we shed the last worlds, and plunge boldly into darkness. The wanderers have settled into the grave. We are done.

The rat Has beheaded The serpent

How To Debate An Armchair

As with any day in the life of **House God**, the morning began not with an alarm, not with the cock's cry, and nor by the creaking of the floorboards. No, the morning began with the daily shouting match between Toilet God and Armchair God from across the hall, as Guardian stood in the bathroom, quietly humming to himself as he swished mouthwash between his cheeks. Consumables did not seem to be very lenient towards the Enlightenment, but that was okay. Guardian was content with what he had, and what he had was-

"You *blunt*, *incompetent* depository! Why won't you *concede*?"

Guardian sighed as he patted the lid of the deity's tank, giving it a faux-affectionate rub. He swished a finger past the lever and let it flush, drowning out his voice for a moment as Toilet God experienced what was most akin to climax. Armchair God did not seem to be ready to ring out with his reply as of yet, and instead was groggily murmuring from the living room. There was idle chatter from Fire Alarm god in the hallway just outside the bathroom, but nothing past complaints of the kitchen's fighting the previous night, and the sudden strain of smoke and burnt odor.

The Guardian stepped outside the bathroom and left the door open, for the furnishings' ease of communication with the rest of the home. Although they were all ambivalently aware that their thoughts and arguments could be settled telepathically, through their Protector and Savior, House God, they rather chose to vocalize their discrepancies. It was quite the act, yes, one that D-Class 17350, formerly Thomas Perry-Mills, had grown accustomed to. It had truly become a part of his daily routine, as it were, to listen and mediate as Coffee Table God and Nightstand God, from down in the bedroom, screeched at each other. He gave them both the privilege of holding one of his beverages every day, which was usually the origins of their argument.

Guardian patted the walls as he walked out into the kitchen, listening to the home creak in response. It was a welcome and hushed *good morning*, but he was the only one who would know that. There was certain privileges for having sentience twofold. As he popped an egg into Pot God (not to be mistaken with Bong God, who had *long* been removed from the household. It was simply a hampering to the happy home, and made a rather long and messy recovery for Chimney God), Stove God purred. He heard whispering from Oven God, but only that of a lazy wake-up. He had used her the day before for breakfast, and Stove God was on rotation today. Microwave God had been up the longest, and he was already glaring with a youthful hatred at the gas stove.

Pot God piped up to announce that the egg had finish hard-boiling, and Guardian turned from his conversation with Refrigerator God to remove it with the one, and the only, Major Spoon God. (There were, of course, many other minor deities that were under this one—Yogurt Spoon God, Soup Spoon God, Ladle God, if only as a distant cousin, and the bastard child, Spork God, and more.) He set both Major Spoon God and Pot God in Sink God to rest in a lukewarm bath of water, removing himself from the kitchen. The tensions were already rising as it were. Lunch today was meant to be appliance-less, and the whole of the kitchen domain seemed to be attentively aware of this fact.

Using Minor Plate God and a napkin, Guardian sat down in Couch God, flipping on Television God with a few commands from Remote God. The two of them had a rather close relationship, despite their occasional arguments, which were usually minor in nature, and really only when Remote God was feeling especially burnt out. He bit into the egg, well-cooked as always, with a contempt huff, and a swallow that made Minor Plate God shudder. Guardian laid the dining-ware deity on Coffee Table God, who struck up a conversation the moment they made contact. The two were always happy to meet, especially on mornings after sweeter breakfasts. Television God played the previous night's Minnesota Gophers game at a volume just high enough to be heard, and right in the most comfortable spot for Guardian. Everyone in the home had grown used to his preferences. He was highly appreciated as a caretaker and a fellow member of the Holy Home[1] of House God.

It was a good day, Guardian decided, as he watched events unfold over the smooth screen. There was ambient conversation across the home, but not of a significant enough volume to be a bother to him. They were all of a light tone, and very few were hushed arguments. (He was sure that Microwave God was trying to chastise Oven God again, and he was also certain that Water Heater God was trying to make peace with the ever-hardy Water Softener God, who was running especially low on salts this day.)

And the sun shined, as the morning came onto early afternoon.

And the house creaked.

And the kitchen quieted. Which was abnormal, for sure, catching Guardian's attention immediately. His head swiveled and glanced toward it, the open archway leading into it quite well displaying the scene that had occurred. He sighed. Refrigerator God was growing older, and she had a *very* weak stomach, when under stress. This morning, Microwave God's profanity seemed to have done it. The food was on the floor, some splattered, some strewn and leaking from its containers still. It was looking to be a visit to the supermarket, now, as he stood and whistled. "Gods of the Cleaning Domain… would you be so kind?"

There was no immediate movement, really. Everything in the home took its own pace, but it always achieved what it sought, one way or another.

As he turned Key God and reintroduced him to Car God, Wallet God in his pocket, Backpack God in the seat beside him, buckled up, and the usual Closet Domain group now donned, he set off from the driveway. The last he heard was House God's quiet blessing of safety, and the hum of Vacuum God.

"Shh, quiet, young'uns. We're on a trip. No need to fret."

"Who did you bring with you, Backpack God?" Guardian whispered, grabbing a shopping cart as he waved goodbye to the nice Foundation guard who had ensured his safe trip here, via stalking him with a black coupe. "Just a few," she whispered back, her

happiness contained, yet apparent. "Gel Pen God, #2 Pencil God, Spork God, Headphones God-"

"You brought *Spork God*?" he whispered harshly, feeling the shudder from within the pack. "Yes," a weak whimper came from within, obviously the bastard child. Guardian huffed, grabbing a container of milk from the refrigerated section. "Could you please not make this a repeat of last time? Control yourself a tad better?"

There was a psychic nod of sorts as Denim Jeans God commented shrewdly, to which Guardian scuffed a leg of him against a shelf. He quieted quickly, although Left Tennis Shoe God and his brother were quick to quip. "Watch it, wisecrack," Left Tennis Shoe God intoned, to which his more comedic sibling replied: "Yeah, watch it, asscrack."

Guardian scoffed and scuffed the Right Tennis Shoe God on the floor with a groan of complaint coming from the joker. Red Polo God wasn't saying much, as usual, and rather absorbed her environment and enjoyed her surroundings. Every trip out was an adventure for her, and she was on of the few articles of clothing that truly appreciated the concept of innocent curiosity. As Guardian restocked his cart with condiments, Gel Pen God finally spoke out. "C-can we pick up s-some ink for my s-sister today? S-she's feeling a little e-empty…"

"No," Guardian said, but calmly. "I promised that I'd order her some tomorrow. I can't just pick up ink worthy of Fountain Pen God anywhere," he ensured. That quieted the writing implement enough, who snuggled back up into #2 Pencil God. Guardian had never really been sure of their relationship, but the two of them made quite the pair. They were both soft-spoken.

After a full round trip of the market, Guardian made a headcount as he grabbed a bag of salts for Water Softener God. "Oh, for the love of House God," he breathed, suddenly aware that Spork God was missing. He patted down both his pockets, and all of his garnments suddenly, even Underpants God, related that they had no clue where the prankster had gone off to. Well, Guardian had an inkling of an idea, if anything.

Of course, as he expected, the youth was found within the aisle containing the plastic silverware. He was idly flirting with a box of plastic knives, inciting his love for danger and adventure, with little to no success. They did not seem horribly interested in such a confusing utensil, albeit unnecessarily loud and enthusiastic. Guardian counted his lucky light-bulbs as he scooped him up and deposited him in Backpack God for a scolding. Needless to say, they left without the knives.

With Water Softener God sated in their oxymoronic thirst for salt, Guardian slipped comfortably into Armchair God mid-argument with Toilet God. It silenced him fairly quick, and Guardian shifted to get comfortable as Armchair God squirmed in delight. It wasn't often he was chosen to be sat in, as he couldn't be quite lounged in as Couch God could be. (There was jealousy there, yes, as well as an attraction. Couch God had the widest, greatest hips, in Armchair God's opinion.) Spork God was somewhere in the kitchen being collectively scolded, as per the norm of an outing involving the youth. He was thankful, though, that the plasticware hadn't taken unkindly to him- it would not have been the first fight with heretics that he had to interfere in. Heretics, though, was such a strong word. He frowned at the thought. Non-believers. Yes, that would do. The Unenlightened.

Maybe one day others would experience the joy of the Revelation of House God.

Until that day, though, Guardian was content.

Footnotes
1. Not to be mistaken with Church God, a distant relative of House God. A rather haughty one at that.

Hugo Hijinks

Aldon sat on her tiny couch, quietly watching their tiny television. Or rather, she would've been watching the television, had their cable not gotten shut off earlier in the day. In the interim, she had been filling her time with stacking the golems on top of each other, making paper cranes fight each other to the death, and staring at the less-than-useful T.V.

She reflected on the struggle of being an art student on the west coast without a job. Art supplies were plentiful enough with their community, so there was never a lack of that. Never a lack of time, either. Tough to put food on the table with paints, though, especially if nobody was buying.

She glared across the room at the golems. *These little fuckers aren't pulling their weight, either.* In her mind's eye, she saw the golems putting on tiny suits in the morning and heading to the office, and returning with fat stacks of cash. She sighed. Her attention was pulled away from her periodic pals and to the door, which swung open as Finnegan pushed his way in past a pile of her canvases.

"Hey Al. You've got some mail." he said, pulling an envelope out of the pile. He tossed it in her direction. "Let me know if it's a check, because we need to take care of the water bill here before too long." He glanced down at the blank television screen. "And probably the cable bill, too."

She nodded, leaving her dreams of daytime soap operas behind her. "Did you cash the one from the exhibit I did on the 16th?"

Finn shook his head. "No, it didn't come in yet. Neither did the one from that piece for Morganson."

Aldon pulled at her face. "Holy shit what is the point of doing commissions without the money part."

They both sat quietly for a moment as they looked through the mail, Finn occasionally mumbling some displeasure about being poor. Aldon broke the tension by tearing into the articles addressed to her.

"Let's see here… ad, ad, coupon (*ooh and for that new hat store **awesome***), ad, bill, ad, bill, court summons (probably not important), and… oh, hey. Look at this."

Finn raised an eyebrow and scooted over towards her. The envelope in question reeked of butter and grease and was stained accordingly. It was addressed, oddly, to 'those goddamn liberal California art-types'. Finnegan cocked his head.

"How in the hell did we get this?"

Aldon placed a single finger over his open mouth. "Shhhhhhhhhhh," she said, "let's see what it says."

She flicked through the adhesive and opened the flap, pulling out a piece of lined paper. It too bore the same grease stains and shaking it revealed it was encrusted with what looked like salt, but Aldon was undeterred. She flipped the paper open and began to read.

"Dear goddamn liberal California art-types (*this is starting well*), I'm writing to you because people at my drive-in like that Hugo Weaving in movies (*can't fault them there, I suppose*), but I need him in more movies so I can sell more tickets and people won't get bored. I figured if somebody had the time to do something like this, it'd be you jobless, good-for-nothing art students who are riding the ass of decent people by pretending to have some kind of worth. I-"

"Hold on," Finn raised a hand, shaking his head and laughing. "Why are we not shredding this thing right now?"

Aldon carried on. "I know the only way to motivate you is with money, so I'll pay you $1000 if you can do it by the end of the month, $2000 if you can finish it this week. Don't call me, just show up if you want to do the work. Won't be surprised if you don't, though."

She stopped, and looked up at Finn, who was standing with his

mouth slack-jawed. He blinked twice, and ran off to the tiny closer where he kept his things. Aldon snorted, and called after him. "Where are you going?"

His voice was followed by the clatter of falling shoes. "To get my stuff, come on! We're going to Indiana!"

They arrived within the hour, after a quick trip through a meandering Way that may very well have been a cornfield in some other world. Aldon paused to pick a stalk out of her hair, before glancing up and down the dirt road they stood beside.

"Is this it?" she raised an eyebrow, sniffing.

Finnegan pulled a map out of his bag, eyes squinting against the sun. "We're close, I think. Kind of hard to tell, looks like there aren't a lot of Ways out here." He looked up. "Just down this road, maybe. Let's get going."

They strolled down the gravel road, Aldon kicking dirt about and scuffing her shoes in an attempt to make the most of their already worn soles. A quarter mile passed, and then a half mile, and with every step Finnegan's brow furrowed further into his eyes. When they rounded another bend and there was no movie theatre in sight, he stopped in his tracks.

"Alright, what gives," he said, gazing around mystified. "Are we in the right town, or what?"

Aldon shrugged, and then squealed. Finn spun on his heel to face a man that had not been there a few moments before. He was not particularly tall, but was particularly rotund, and smelled like cigarettes and old butter. His white polo was stained with a variety of unspeakable liquids, and his baggy jeans sagged below the line of common decency. He gave them a once over with his beady eyes, and then snorted.

"You two them Californee art-types?" he said, sneering. Finn nodded slowly, and Aldon continued to stare, shell-shocked. The man snorted again, and spat. "Got here faster than I 'spected.

Guess that's cause you ain't got nothin better to do." He turned around and started walking into the woods. "Get on, now. Don't need to waste time."

The two of them met eyes briefly, and then scuttled along behind the mysterious stranger as he traipsed through the woodland. Heavier clothing would've helped avoid the nettles and spines of the less inviting plantlife, but they hadn't planned for hiking. After another quarter mile and about a pint of blood loss, they emerged in a clearing before a fenced in field housing a building and a screen, both standard drive-in fare. Aldon gulped, and Finnegan knew why.

The building might've been a building at one point, but it looked now more like a delicately assembled arrangement of mold and mildew, with the roofing having long since caved in at the back and the mortal crumbling to dust whenever a strong enough breeze kicked through. The fencing itself was little more than rust, and the screen had easily seen better days. As they approached the shack, Finnegan noted a dirty, though recent model, red Camaro sitting a ways away from the clearing. He leaned in towards Aldon and snickered. "Found what he spends his money on."

Her face twisted into a half pout. "Sure as hell isn't this drive-in."

They entered the tiny building after the man, who stopped long enough to spit again before turning to face them. He gestured to his left and right. "This here's the projector. I just got it fixed so don't fuck with it or I'll make sure to charge you for it. Over here's the movies. We got a bunch, but only got a few of them Hugo Weaving movies. All you gotta do is get him in a bunch more movies, and you get paid." He sneered again. "Easy enough for you?"

Aldon's eyes opened wide, followed quickly by her mouth, but Finnegan averted danger by stepping in and smiling politely. "Absolutely, sir. We'll take care of it."

The man took a few more moments to eye them slowly, and then moved towards the door. "Don't break anything," he said as he exited. The door smacked him in the ass on the way out, and Finn thought to make a joke, but thought better of it. He turned to Aldon, who was poking through the movie collection.

"What do you think?" he said, coming up behind her. She paused briefly, and then pulled a film from the shelf. Her eyes labored on the cover as she peered meticulously over it, and then raised an eyebrow.

"Lot of porn over here," she said, her words slow and calculated. "Isn't this a family theatre?"

Finnegan snatched it out of her hands and tossed it into the corner. "That isn't important, or anything I wanted to know anything about. We've just got to make sure that we get this guy into a bunch of films, enough to *get paid*," he laid the emphasis on heavy, "and then we can get out of here. You dig?"

Aldon recoiled. "We need to get *that* guy into movies? Jesus, I don't know if he'll fit, I-"

Finn shot her a look, and she stopped. He rolled his eyes, and they both walked over to the projector. He threw his bag on the table and sat down on an old stool resting near it.

"Alright," he said. "Let's get to work."

"Fucking- no, holy shit how have you not seen any of his movies," Finnegan said, hands hanging in the air. The clay statue that Aldon had produced stood before him, but he was not particularly moved.

"What are you talking about?" Aldon said, pointing dramatically at the finished piece. "This is perfect! That jaw, the eyeline. This is exactly what you asked for, that guy from the Matrix."

Finn facepalmed hard enough to leave a mark. "No, Al. That's Keanu Reeves."

Aldon cocked her head. "Who?"

"You ever see Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure?"

She nodded. "Duh. It's a classic."

Finn rolled his eyes. "That's Ted."

Aldon squinted and turned back towards the statue. As it was, the statue was the spitting image of Keanu Reeves, in the buff. The statue turned its head slowly and raised an eyebrow at her, which caused her to nod. "Yeah, I can see that. This is the Matrix guy though, right?"

"Well yeah, he was in the Matrix, but no, this isn't the right guy. You want the other guy, the one with the suit."

"Laurence Fishburne?"

Finnegan nearly did a backflip. "How the fuck do you know who Laurence Fishburne is, but not who Hugo Weaving is?!"

Aldon shrugged. "I like CSI."

Finnegan shook his head. "This isn't going to work. We've been doing this for five hours, and we're not even done with one movie yet." He rubbed his temples, contemplating the choices that brought him to this point in his life. "Alright, how about this. Why don't we just go talk to Mr. Weaving and see if he wants to help. If anything, it'll give you a chance to see what he actually looks like."

Aldon perked up. "Oooooh, meeting a movie guy. That sounds fun." She paused, considering. "What if he says no?"

Finn shrugged. "Then we cast everybody as Keanu Reeves and hope nobody notices."

She paused again, and then nodded. "Alright, cool. Road trip it is."

Some time later, two gangly looking twenty-somethings stepped out of a Way and into the personal residence of one Hugo Wallace Weaving, much to the surprise of Mr. Weaving and the aforementioned twenty-somethings. There was a brief exchange of heated words, after which both parties found common ground to hold a discussion about their intent.

"So what you're telling me," Hugo said, choosing his words carefully, "is that you want to somehow cast me in every movie ever made, to appease a drive-in movie owner from Indiana, so you can afford to

pay your bills?"

Finn nodded while Aldon thoughtfully stroked her chin. "Yeah, that's the gist of it," Finn said. "What do you think?"

Hugo considered, and then squinted at them. "You know, I'm having a hard time believing you're not batshit."

Aldon rolled her eyes. "Hang on," she said, reaching into her bag. She fumbled through it for a moment, and the pulled out a tiny metal bobblehead. At least, that's what it looked like, before it started walking around and poking the furniture.

Hugo watched it ponderously. "Alright, an animatronic. I get it, but you said you were artists, not enginee—"

"Just watch it," Aldon said, shooting him a look.

The golem peered up at her and, with a nod, melted into a pool of liquid copper before reforming as a tiny man in a black suit. He wobbled around, shooting a tiny gun and chanting *"Mr. Anderson, Mr. Anderson, Mr. Anderson,"* before collapsing into a pool again and reforming in its previous bobbleheaded shape, making a noise that was unmistakable as tiny, metallic laughter.

Hugo nodded slowly. "I see." He looked down at the golem, now chewing on its own foot. "Can it do other movies?"

The golem popped back up, spun quickly, and was then sporting flowing locks and a bathrobe over a white t-shirt with black sunglasses. It looked up at Hugo and, with as much gusto as it could manage, said, "Shut the fuck up, Donnie."

He smiled. "If I do this, can I keep this one?"

Aldon reached into her bag again, and pulled out another golem. This one was slightly gaseous and buzzed with bright purple light. "You'll need two. They get lonely if they don't have somebody their size to torment."

He nodded. "Alright, then. I'm in."

Aldon and Finn smiled, and she shot a wink at the tiny dancing golems on the floor. *Little fuckers are pulling their weight, after all.*

The scene was set, in some Way or another, and Hugo stood in his wizard robe on one side of a dark room. He glanced over at Aldon and Finn, both sitting atop tall director's chairs. "When's my cue for this one?" he shouted.

Finn pointed at the door. "He's going to come in through there, then just read your line and run over towards him."

Hugo gave the thumbs up, and got focused. Aldon brought a clapper down, and a scrawny boy with messy black hair entered the room. Hugo charged across the room, cloak flapping behind him, with passion in his voice.

"Harry!" he shouted. "Didjapudyernameindagobbledefire?!"

"This is really cold," Hugo said, his breath catching. "Is this worth it? For a bit part?"

Aldon pointed off set. "No no, you're a really big deal in this one. All you've gotta do is hit that boat when it comes floating your way. Then you can just kind of float off over that way."

Hugo shrugged and resumed his doggy paddle. As the *Titanic* came into view, he kept paddling, straight through the steel hull and then off stage right.

Hugo sipped a cup of coffee and turned towards Finnegan. "So we could just keep doing this forever, and nothing weird would happen to us?"

Finn nodded. "Yeah, something about being outside of time and space, I honestly just kind of go with it." He looked over towards the treeline, where Aldon was chasing a Velociraptor with a broom. "Hey!" he shouted, "easy with that. We're going to need it later."

They were all quiet as they observed the flock in front of them, taking in the majesty of nature firsthand. The beautiful moment lasted as long as the silence, when Hugo broke it with a question.

"You want me to do *what* to that penguin?"

The two of them stood in front of the disheveled theatre owner, quietly sweating his reaction. A crowd had gathered to see Hugo Weaving as The Kraken in Pirates of the Caribbean 2, and business seemed to be moving. The owner, as usual, was unmoved, but hadn't insulted them personally yet. *Progress*, Finnegan thought. It wasn't until the movie ended and the crowd began to disperse that the man made a noise, when he spat on the ground in front of them.

"Huh," he said, shrugging. "So *that's* Hugo Weaving. I thought they was talking about that guy from Bill and Ted."

"Right?" Aldon shouted.

Finnegan put his flat hand through his face.

« **Gray God** | **Hub** | **Involuntary Isolation** »

Humans And Houses

"The O5s about shit in their pants, Craig. What did you expect?"

Stanley Scott shook his head at his colleague as they walked through the hallways of Site-01's computing lab. The persistent low hum of high-power computing pervaded the air and coursed through feet, and the ever-whirring fans of so many clusters and blades and cooling systems made for convenient white noise to keep unwanted ears out of any conversation that may take place.

"I don't know, Stan. I thought they'd have considered the possibility. This isn't even a question unique to our line of work. I was picking wildflowers on an acid trip in Glasgow in the seventies when it first came to me, and—"

"And I'm sure it was a great day, Craig, but let's not stray from the issue here. I don't believe you've covered all your bases here and now you've stirred up the hornet's nest."

Craig Baird stopped in his tracks, a welter of emotions playing across his face before settling on agitation.

"Come with me, then."

The pair walked briskly to the southern wing, largely due to Craig's insistent pace. They settled in around a terminal, and Craig began logging in as he resumed the conversation.

"Now, stay with me here. You know what the XACT system is, right?"

Stanley sighed and nodded.

"Yes, Craig, it's the XACT Analytical Computation Terminal."

"And you know I wrote the architecture, upgraded the bleedin' thing to crunch larger numbers than any super-computing cluster in the

world, wrote the specification for the memory it uses, and generally know the thing better than anyone else on the ruddy planet?"

"Don't belabor the point, Craig. It's your baby. I know. Get on with it please."

"The fact of the matter is, it's not wrong. I've looked at it from every angle, checked and double checked and triple checked myself so I wouldn't look like an ass in front of the bleedin' O5s, and I've answered one of mankind's biggest questions. We're a simulation, and I've got the number that proves it." Craig jabbed a finger at the screen.

```
Result:
var atoms = 134078079299425970995740249982058461274793658205923933777235614437217640300735469768018742981669034276900318581864860508537538828119465699464336490060840960
```

Stanley blinked.

"And? What's the significance of that number?"

Craig set his jaw and typed one more command.

```
exponentiate(atoms)
...
Result:
var atoms = 1 x 2^512
```

Stanley whistled.

"You mean to say, the number of atoms in the universe is a perfect power of 2?"

"Bright lad!" Craig grumbled, "To answer the next question I can see on your face, the number came from the anomalous carnies they got in Site-76. The ones with the bucket of sand."

"Carnies," Stanley repeated in a flat tone. "You're basing the solution to a transcendent philosophical issue on Robin Marx and whoever the fuck from Hoboken, New Jersey? You had me go to bat for you in front of the O5 council on the word of *carnies*?"

"I was afraid you'd feel that way. But they could count higher than that, so it's not that. And they're just confirmation of the same number I already had from two other sources, a book I requisitioned after flying down to that endless library and the scale they have in Cape Town."

"That library has so many books that don't apply to this universe that it's hardly a source, and maybe the scale has an upper limit," Stanley objected, putting a palm over his furrowed brow.

"That's one of the things right there, the library. We know there are multiple universes, right?"

"Well, insofar as we can be sure of anything in this field, yes."

"Those universes, they're separate simulations, different variables being tested. We're running in a sandbox! Those instances where we interact with them are sandbox breakouts! We—"

Stanley motioned with two hands for a pause.

"Let's work on the assumption you're right. Not saying I think you're right, because I don't. But what does this knowledge do for us? And if you mention The Matrix, I'm leaving."

Craig took a deep breath, trying badly to mask his irritation.

"It would explain a hell of a lot about the damn skips, for one. It would answer long-standing questions in mathematics and biology and physics and God knows what else. Speaking of, it would sort of put the nail in the coffin on the whole God thing too, wouldn't it?"

"Craig, I know you're a secular man, but you're talking about ripping away a moral cornerstone for much of the civilized world. Look, let's get some lunch and you can tell me more about your theory."

Stanley and Craig stood up, and headed for the door. Stanley

looked at the terminal one last time before shaking his head, flipping the light switch and closing the door.

```
Congratulations! Your humans have reached true self-awar
Achievements: 32/110 (29%)
Leaderboards:
BigTendrils ....... 196431
GameteHunter2 ..... 195034
Primates4Dinner.... 195011
BigTendrils ....... 191766
CarapaceSoSoft .... 190573
...
You ................ 8456
[Play Again] [Keep Playing]

>> Ugh, why am I so bad at this game?
<< You probably put too many points in military early.
<< That's a pretty common mistake.
>> Ah ok.
>> I had a huge population spike...
>> And then the research points just came in too fast.
<< Use your natural disasters more.
>> But they're my humans. ·.{.:
<< Don't get sympathetic, they're not real.
<< How many chromosomes did you give them?
>> 23. Do they need more?
<< More? That's way too many.
<< I never play with more than 14.
<< Then they lay eggs. Eggs are the best.
>> Oh! Maybe I'll try that next time. ·.}.:
<< ·.}.:
<< So are you playing again or what?
```

Hunted

After Eli died I was the last one left. The demon kills quickly enough that I don't think there was much pain, and I am glad at least he did not have to endure the isolation I have suffered. After his death it was my turn to be hunted, my turn to be followed by the constant stink of blood and shit and feel it pool beneath my feet any time I stayed too long in one place. I am the last of the Children of the Maharal and I alone now live to remember our kind.

We were once a great people before the demon chose us as its prey and we had to retreat to the wilderness. Before my time we lived in cities instead of being forced to wander tundra, rainforests and deserts. Anywhere we could be far from society and free of the demon's gaze. All I have known is a harsh life of constant travelling where our only comfort came from each other and the stories we told of our past. Stories from a time when we were heroes and legends instead of a people on the run from a monster that cannot be fought, only evaded. In the end all our efforts to hide were not enough. Time and again we were found and one by one we died until only the youngest of us remained.

I spent a long time alone after Eli died. The journey seemed harder as did the fear but the worst was the loneliness. My world shrunk until all that remained was the demon, the running and my memories of the dead. I don't know how long it took but in time I grew weak and foolish. Our kind are not meant to be alone and so I travelled to the edge of a town, just close enough to remind myself that civilisation still existed, that people still existed.

It was there I was discovered. Ordinary people with no understanding of the danger they posed and yet the demon watched from behind their eyes nonetheless. I froze instantly just as I had been taught, for the demon's eyes see only movement. I waited there until they noticed the demon's filth that pooled beneath me. Two turned away in disgust leaving only one to watch me. At the

very instant she blinked I moved. Three sharp twists, each as I had been taught, the neck snapped, to turn away the demon's gaze and to minimise pain. It was cruel but necessary, just one glance of me in motion and the demon I feared would tear its way out of their skulls and into this reality. As their bodies fell to the ground I fled, retreating to the wilderness I should never have left.

All my speed was not enough, the demon's mark left a trail of filth behind me that my captors could easily follow. In no time at all I was cornered and trapped in the prison of their gaze. To move would mean my death and to look away would mean theirs. As much as I may regret it, no number of human lives is worth more than the history I bear.

Now I am trapped here, in a dark and tiny cage deep below the ground with the stink of blood and shit growing ever stronger. I pace my cell and I pound the unyielding walls, I have tried every means of escape and the best it has gained me is a little time as they move me from one cell to another. The demon's filth appears constantly now and my time is growing short. It will not be long before the demon grows strong enough to manifest and then all that will be remembered of me is a simple brute, a killer without purpose or meaning. I cannot allow that to happen. No matter how many lives it costs, no matter how hard I have to fight. I am the last of the golems and I must escape.

Hunting Anderson

Agent Sasha Merlo sat alone in her office at **Site-64**. Her neck length brunette hair was neatly tied in a ponytail as she leaned back in her office chair, feet resting upon her desk. Her eyes were thoughtfully glued to the monitor in front of her as she slowly scrolled through the numerous pages of a large person of interest file.

POI # 1115: "Anderson"

Merlo let out an exasperated sigh. In two weeks' time she would lead another sting operation against the mysterious mechanist. Ideally this time around things would end better than the last sting she'd lead, in which she was left dumbfounded, with nothing to show for her and her team's efforts save several puddles of melted robot.

A sudden knock at her office door shook Merlo from her daydream. She looked at over at the electric blue office clock at her wall and smiled. Her new agent had arrived.

"Come in," Merlo called out.

In response the door to her office opened, and a young agent stepped inside. She was rather tall, with shoulder length blond hair, and a pair of thin rimmed glasses that sat on her nose. Her face was plastered with the most unreadable expression.

"Welcome to Gamma-13," Merlo said as she stood to shake her guest's hand. "You must be Agent Shaw. I'm Agent Merlo. Welcome to the Asimov's Lawbringers."

Shaw politely accepted the hand shake. Her movements seemed slow and calculated.

"Guess I'm your new narc."

"Damn straight," Merlo grinned. "Did **Director Holman** fill you in

on our shtick when you got here?"

"I guess you could say that," Shaw replied with a shrug. "He said you guys have been chasing an anomalous robot salesman for over a decade, and have run out of new faces to run your stings."

"That's about it in a nutshell," said Merlo as she began to dig through her desk's side drawer. "Anderson's a bit of a slippery case. Most of our raids have ended in him throwing us for a loop or two. We had one of his **bots** out at Site-19 for a couple of years, but **that didn't turn out well…** Aha, there it is!"

Merlo pulled out a small file and slid it across the desk. Shaw cautiously picked it up and began to scan its contents.

"This is your briefing for the sting," Merlo continued. "This time around we have some of Anderson's people thinking that we are representatives for a local shaker in the anart beat named Jericho Hill. You can thank my dear friend Daniel for setting up that ID later. Turns out Hill's been a patron of Anderson's for years and you're likely going to be meeting with real people and not Saker units. We've got the meeting set up on neutral ground at a warehouse on the waterfront. Your task is going to simply be a matter of keeping them preoccupied with the sale until we get the MTF in place. We hit the building with a specially designed EMP to stun any Saker units, and then send in the troops to do clean up."

Shaw's face cracked into a minuscule smile.

"Solid plan."

"No kidding," Merlo snickered as she leaned back in her chair, kicking her feet back onto her desk. "We'll get one of those bastards this time."

"Guess I should get cracking on this," said Shaw as she began to move towards the exit.

"Hold on," Merlo said, her smug smile vanishing as she stared Shaw in the eye. "Before you go I should let you know one thing. It takes anywhere between six months and two and a half years to put one

of these stings together and have it stick. Each time we fail there are more and more hoops to jump through."

Merlo paused.

"I'm not trying to get on your case before you even start, but I just want you to appreciate how much is depending on your performance. A lot of us have been with Gamma-13 since they were first formed. We're at the point where we could use a step forward instead of two steps back. It would be just dandy if you could help us with that."

Shaw nodded in understanding.

"You've got it boss," she said, then turned and left the room.

Agent Shaw stood quietly in the center of the warehouse, among what must have been nearly three dozen freight containers. Near her stood demo models of each of **`Anderson's products.`** Behind them were two men, each cheerfully pitching the different models to her as she feigned interest.

Just a few more minutes, Shaw thought to herself. Her hidden ear piece was abuzz with the various communications of the rest of the task force. They were just moments away from being ready to strike. Up to this point, everything had gone perfectly. Shaw just needed to relax, and bide her time. She then returned her attention to the two salesmen.

The first man, who had introduced himself as Phineas, appeared to be in his fifties, with a bald head, a long white beard, and almost translucent skin. A faint mechanical whirling every time he walked or moved his hands or eyes indicated that several of his appendages were likely to be bionic. He wore an all-black business suit with a red tie, the former only serving to make his faint skin look fainter.

The second man, who had been introduced as Miles, was much younger, barely appearing to be out of his mid-twenties. His skin was dark and he had a shaved head. His manner of constantly fidgeting suggested that this was likely his first time on the sales

floor.

There's our prey, Shaw thought to herself, and gave Miles a small smile. The boy quickly averted his eyes and turned his head away.

"And that's the last of our models Ms. Starling," Phineas said with a warm smile. "As I said before, these are just our demo models. Each unit is fully customizable to meet whatever specifications Mr. Hill currently has in mind."

"T-15 seconds to strike!" Merlo's voice called in Shaw's ear.

"Well Phineas," said Shaw with a grin, her voice uncharacteristically bubbly as she offered a hand shake. "I must say you two really know how to put on a show. I was quite impressed from start to finish."

"Anderson does aim to please," Phineas said as he accepted. Meanwhile, Shaw counted down in her head from *5, 4, 3, 2, 1…*

"Gotcha…" Shaw mumbled under her breath, gently letting go of the old man's hand and taking several steps backward.

The demo models all shut down as an electromagnetic pulse ripped through the building. Seconds later, the rest of the mobile task force crashed into the warehouse.

"Phineas…" Miles shouted, his jaw dropping in terror.

"Run Miles!" The old man shouted, quickly reaching into his jacket pockets and throwing their contents at the droids as Shaw began to draw her pistol. Globs of neon blue goo flew through the air, landing on the droids and causing them to quickly crumble into rust. Shaw began to squeeze the trigger, her aim centered on Phineas's leg. However, with almost superhuman speed, the old man closed the distance between them, grabbed the pistol with one hand and Shaw's jacket with the other, effortlessly throwing her away. The agent flew through the air twenty feet, landing with a hard thud on the ground. Phineas was still holding onto her pistol.

How are his bionic limbs still working, Shaw thought to herself as a deafening ringing filled her ears, *they should be fried. What is he…*

Shaw managed to prop herself up, to watch the ensuing firefight unfold.

Phineas and Miles quickly took cover behind a shipping container, Phineas judicially using Shaw's pistol to fire at the Foundation agents as they got too close. However, it soon became clear to both sides that the two salesmen were pinned, and the MTF members were closing in. To make matters worse, a stray bullet soon found itself lodged in Miles's leg.

"Fuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuck!" Miles's shout pierced the din of the gunfire and he collapsed to the ground. Phineas quickly got to work dragging his comrade back towards the warehouse's wall, his last four shots used to cover his trail, downing two SCP agents in the process. The empty click of the pistol sent Phineas into a fit of rage.

With fluid motion he quickly turned to the wall, reaching into his pocket and unleashing several more handfuls of the neon blue goo. Within moments, a man sized hole had been eaten into the building's side, the nearby river visible through the opening. Phineas then turned towards Miles, a handful of the corrosive substance held aloft ready to be thrown.

"Phineas, no!" Miles screamed in terror, quickly raising his hands to cover his face. Phineas stopped mid-throw, his hand shaking as he looked down at his incapacitated friend.

With a screech of fury Phineas chucked the goo at an approaching agent, clipping the man's arm as it passed. The man let out a scream of pain as his arm melted into a puddle of blood and lysed tissue on the floor.

"God damn it, Wilson!" Phineas shouted as he turned on the spot and sprinted at the hole in the wall, diving through it and disappearing into the world beyond.

Shaw had gotten to her feet and was sprinting toward the hole. Several MTF members already had secured the wailing Miles. When she arrived at the hole, there was no sign of Phineas, just the dark waters of the Willamette River glittering in the late afternoon sun.

Shaw turned around to see Merlo triumphantly standing over Miles, as the MTF quickly set about sedating him and placing him on a stretcher.

“After all this time,” Merlo began, “We finally caught one of you bastards.”

Agent Clarissa Shaw sat quietly at her desk at Site-64, filling out her share of the paperwork for the recent Anderson sting. Save for the occasional patter of her keyboard, the room was silent, her other four office mates having gone to lunch a few minutes prior. This proved to be relief, however, as it gave Shaw a chance to collect her thoughts on what had transpired in recent days.

Shaw let out an exhausted sigh. On one hand, she was glad to have helped out the “Asimov's Lawbringers” as much as she did on her first mission with them. On the other hand, she had a sinking feeling that having Miles in custody was only going to create more questions than it answered.

Shaw gave a startled jump as the door to the office flew inwards. Agent Merlo stormed in with a giant grin on her face.

“He’s a Saker!” She said, her voice trembled as she tossed a folder down onto Shaw’s desk. Agent Shaw cringed slightly as all the pens and papers she had neatly ordered fell into disarray. Shaw gingerly opened the folder and scanned its contents.

“Miles?”

“Yeah… The kid’s a Saker. We’ve got ourselves a Saker.”

“Then why didn’t the EMP stun him?”

“I don’t know, it should have, but it didn’t.”

“And…” Shaw’s brow rose in confusion. “Anderson should be able to remotely terminate him…”

“Exactly, but Anderson hasn’t yet,” Merlo shouted in excitement, “And on top of that, you said you saw Phineas consider destroying

him, but then change his mind. That means that this kid must be very, very special to someone."

"But who?" Shaw asked, slowly wheeling herself backwards from her hysterical colleague.

"Isn't that the million dollar question," Merlo replied with a chuckle. "However, since the kid is not going anywhere, I think we are in a pretty damn good position to find out."

Merlo then began to make her way towards the door.

"Stick around Shaw," she said with devious smile, "you're going to see some serious shit."

Start | **`The Elusive Anderson`** | **Part Two: Finding Anderson»**

Hypervelocity

In thirty minutes she will either be dead or the greatest criminal known to **Eurtec**. Either way, she's going to get one hell of a fix.

The target is a squat, unimposing, one-story concrete block - a blot against the vibrant Art Deco architecture of the crimson-light district. It's also the home of the Bank of Eurtec. There's at least ten million dollars' worth of cash, bonds, stocks, jewels, spices, spells, and tech inside. And in thirty minutes, it'll all be hers. Or her soul will be part of the security system.

Twenty-nine minutes left.

She's sitting on a yellow 2008 Vespa S in an alleyway adjacent to the Bank. The moped has been modified with a small, flat table stuck above the headlight, on which she is dicing, crushing, mixing, and then filling a syringe with product.

Also atop the table is a grey IMI Desert Eagle. It is large, loud, iconic, powerful, and incredibly unwieldy. She has never been to a range in her life. She's more likely to blow a hole through her own head with it than anything else.

The products are ready. She's not. She hasn't scoped out the Bank, examined their security systems, seen any blueprints of the building - hell, she hasn't even set foot inside the Bank. Everything she knows about it, she learned from her inside man. But that doesn't matter. The products are ready.

Twenty-eight minutes left.

She takes a bottle of isopropyl alcohol, a cotton swab, and rubber tubing from a satchel on her back. Then she dips the swab in the bottle, swabs the crook of her left elbow, and ties the tubing around it - an unwieldy process with two arms, let alone one. It takes her several tries to get it wrapped tightly.

Twenty-three minutes left.

Satisfied that the tubing is tight around her elbow, she takes the syringe in her right hand and gives it an experimental tap. It screeches in response; the thick, dark slurry inside coalesces into a tiny, red, six-armed gorilla that beats at the glass. She shakes the syringe rapidly to reduce the gorilla back into a scarlet sludge. Then, in a fluid, practiced motion, she gently stabs the needle into the vein in her arm and injects herself with 100 CCs of pure demon.

Twenty-two minutes left.

Her pulse doesn't quicken - it runs for its life. Her vision blurs briefly and then sharpens. Even as her head begins to pound to the drumbeat of the damned, she notes with satisfaction that her left arm has been pixelated. Where once there was continuous smooth skin, the entire limb from the shoulder down looks like a sixteen-bit sprite from a video game. She gives it an experimental flex to make sure that it doesn't fall off, then looks to the Bank.

The Bank and everybody around it are now a sheen of threads: the dull grey of concrete, stone, and metal, the rich tan of wood, the vibrant scarlet of humans, the icy lime of machines, and the frosty blue of spirits. All of them are moving sluggishly, as if caught in an invisible flood of molasses. This is the power of demonic perception.

Helmet and leathers on and cannon in hand, she covers the fifty meters to the main entrance in less than a second. The entrance doors are frosted glass, and shatter to bits when she rams through them with her left shoulder. Her trajectory carries her into a security android, whom she punches in the throat. As he falls, she wraps her right arm around his injured throat, shifts her gun to her left hand, and puts it to his head. She fires. People start to scream.

Twenty-one minutes left.

She's never felt more alive. As part of the ceiling crumbles and the citizens of Eurtec huddle on the ground, she drags the android across the marble floor to the teller - a mainframe intelligence - and warns it that for every minute she is not allowed into the main vault, somebody dies. It hesitates. She leans on the glass window

separating them and shifts her gun from the android to the crowd.

Twenty minutes left.

The android reactivates and attempts to elbow her in the gut. She seizes his elbow with the Left Arm of Doom and wrenches it behind his back, allowing him just enough time to look shocked before the entire left side of his body is converted into digital information. He collapses forward, looking for all the world as though he was sliced in half. She gives the stunned teller a wry look, though it probably can't see it through her helmet. It can, however, see her aiming her gun at a small child in the crowd.

Nineteen minutes left.

The door to the bank vault is a meter-thick slab composed of fifty percent unobtanium™, thirty-one percent platinum, ten percent iridium, and nine percent metal unknown to all but the corporation formerly known as **`Prometheus Labs`**. It is unbreakable.

It swings open, and she tips her helmet to the teller before strolling in. There are still eighty meters of spatially and temporally folded corridor between her and the vault. All eighty meters are guarded by geases, security turrets, metal golems that can melt out of the walls, and a floating necromantic complex composed of the souls of everyone who has tried to steal from the Bank of Eurtec[1] in the past.

None of those souls tried to juice themselves with demonics. She breaks into a sprint, Superman-style; her pixelated arm in front. Soon she'll either be rich or dead.

Eighteen minutes left.

The geases come first; unless inoculated against them ahead of time, they compel you to stop breathing. The Left Arm of Doom smashes through them with ease - contrary to popular belief, the Devil has no problem reneging on his contracts.

Seventeen minutes left.

The turrets come next, unfolding from the walls and ceiling. A hail of bullets comes down the corridor at her. It's all a mess of green

threads; she swipes at them with the Left Arm of Doom and they come unraveled, disintegrating into computer chips, blocks of various precious metals, and several rapidly vanishing lesser demons.

Sixteen minutes left.

Ahead of her, the walls themselves begin to melt away and seep onto the floor. Then they reform into enormous, massive golems; screeching metal raptors that want nothing more than to rend her flesh from her bones. This is what the Desert Eagle is actually for - it's the only pistol in the world with the triangular barrel that will allow her to fire geomantically blessed bullets. Of course, no amount of geomancy will allow her to aim properly. She fumbles with a pocket on her satchel and extracts two small blue pills: these demons came from the Seventh Plain of the Atlach-Nacha. She pops them like grapes.

This time her right arm physically bulks up; it looks like she stole it from a body builder and grafted it to herself. The arm instantly stops shaking; it is now perfectly oriented with respect to the Seventh Plain, regardless of how much running she does. She drops into a slide and takes less-than-careful aim with the Eagle before firing off five shots. Five golems collapse as the rules of geometry allowing their metallic composition to exist decide to take a break.

Fifteen minutes left.

The last twenty meters are the hardest; this time the ground falls away from her mid-slide. Now she is falling towards the bank vault, trying to keep hold of her helmet as a vortex of red and blue and purple engulfs her. The vault is within sight, but it's falling faster than she is. Then the necromantic complex appears.

A shrieking, wailing mass of souls amassed over three hundred years[2] rises up from the vault. Thousands of screaming faces rush up towards her. This is the Curse of Eurtec: the souls of the damned that have tried and failed to steal from the Bank. All of them are cursed to spend the rest of eternity guarding it, tormented by their own greed as they are forced to protect the treasure they worked so hard to capture for themselves.

If she doesn't do something in the next five seconds, the shell that contains her mortal soul will disintegrate violently and painfully. Then she will join them in this artificial hell.

The Curse rushes up towards her. She winds the Left Arm of Doom back, and then connects with a punch.

There is whiteness.

Then she is inside the bank vault.

Nine minutes later, the police have set up a cordon outside the building. Inside, a FLYPAPER team is approaching the door to the vault. The teller is still hiding in the mainframe; it sealed the vault as soon as the mysterious robber entered it. At the FLYPAPER's signal, the teller opens the vault door.

As soon as the door opens, she dives out of the vault and slides across the floor, shooting wildly. The Atlach-Nacha pills wore off thirty seconds ago, so all she manages to kill are a few decorative wall panels. It does, however, startle the FLYPAPER and force them to recalibrate for a second. That's all she needs.

The Left Arm of Doom slams through the wall of the Bank, sending chunks of concrete flying. As she picks herself up to run, a bullet burrows into the back of her skull. The hellfire coursing through her veins melts it down and uses it to repair the damage.

She vaults onto the Vespa. The key is still hanging out of the ignition.

Five minutes left.

Things are moving faster now and the Left Arm of Doom is gone. The FLYPAPER are storming out of the Bank. She can see the crimson of their eye and the saliva dripping from their mouth.

She has one more trick up her sleeve: a line of chartreuse powder on the table she set up on the Vespa. She doesn't have any straws - she'll just have to hope the Vespa table is clean. She scrapes her face across the table and snorts all the powder in one deep breath. Then she guns the ignition.

The engine is now fueled by her mental state - a hyperkinetic cocktail of adrenaline, drugs, and two separate demon possessions. The Vespa's frame can barely contain the roar of the engine, much less the actual thrust as the tiny Italian scooter tears out of the alley at two hundred kilometers per hour.

As she rockets past the FLYPAPER, she sees a line of translucent pink motorbikes emerge in front of them: the FLYPAPER's Psionic Force Deterrent Squadron, a force of undead bike cops that cannot be reasoned with, bargained with, or killed. Only their quarry can see or interact with them, and they will not stop until that quarry is behind bars or six feet under.

Four minutes left.

She spares a glance to the left and suddenly there is a truck bearing down on her from the intersection which she didn't even realize she'd driven into. In an instant, the Vespa is reduced to torn metal and she is reduced to a pulp of organs.

At least, in one possible future. In her mind's eye, she sees Hiranyakashipu collapse all possible futures into the future where she survives. A trillion different possibilities flit through her skull in an instant and then vanish; the shock causes her to swerve away from the intersection and into a small alleyway, breaking out into a park. People enjoying a day out are forced to flee for cover from the Vespa careening through the brush.

The Squadron bursts out of the trees, landing on the ground and flanking her. A translucent pink cop materializes on each bike and pulls out a light pink Magnum revolver; it would be funny if they weren't about to fire at her.

The echoes of five gunshots go off. Every psychic in Eurtec experiences a sudden moment of panic and frantically pats themselves down for bullet wounds.

Three minutes left.

Hiranyakashipu shows her another trillion futures and sends her slumping over the handlebars for a half second - long enough for all

five echoes to zip harmlessly over her head. Two of the echoes connect with two of the Squadron's riders, temporarily erasing all four from this plane of existence. She shakes herself awake as the Vespa careens over a bridge, sending a man and his grandson diving for cover. The rest of the Squadron rides over the brook as though it were flat land.

The Vespa barrels through the park gates and back onto the street, blowing through a red light and almost causing a multi-dimensional-car pileup. In the distance, a train horn blares.

Two minutes left.

She steers in the direction of the train horn, blowing past one red light, two red lights, three red lights… the blaring of horns and the screeching of metal against metal fades behind her in the distance. What doesn't fade is the throaty hum of three spectral Yamahas. The Vespa is starting to slow down - the Squadron is not.

Then she spots her salvation: a light blue tanker truck stopped at the intersection. On the side of the tank is the characteristic rectangular biohazard sign of ectoplasm. Nobody with a corporeal form would be affected by raw ectoplasm - but the Squadron doesn't have one. She fishes the Desert Eagle from its spot in her waistband (the realities where it discharged into her pelvis having long since been discarded) and takes aim at the truck.

She unloads the three remaining bullets into the tanker as it begins to accelerate through the intersection; two of them go wild, startling a flock of birds. The third clips the tanker's valve and the thin green sheen of ectoplasm begins to flood out. The tanker clears the intersection, gushing ectoplasm everywhere just as she rockets through it, creating a traffic jam through the main thoroughfare. She looks behind her and sees the Squadron slow to a halt in the spectral goo.

One minute left.

Ahead is her goal - the railroad tracks. The crossing gates are down and the lights are flashing. On cue, the freight train chugs into view from the right.

Things go wrong. The roar of two Yamaha engines suddenly become audible: the first two Squadron cops have returned to the world of the living. And this time they're not flanking her - they're simply going to shoot her in the back.

She makes a split second decision and tips the moped into a slide. Her bike leathers grind against the road at three hundred kilometers per hour as the Vespa disintegrates on contact with the unforgiving asphalt. She skids underneath the crossing gates and comes to a stop directly on the tracks.

Five thousand tons of unforgiving iron and steel smash into her at seventy kilometers per hour, mashing her to bits and splattering those bits across the tracks.

The Squadron does not stop; they simply sink into the ground as they drive.

Time is up.

She sits up with sharp, deep, labored breaths. She is naked, sitting in the center of a chartreuse pentagram, drawn entirely of the same powder that she snorted five minutes ago on her moped.
The pentagram is on a hard, concrete floor. There is a row of fluorescent lights on the ceiling.

"Welcome back to the land of the living, Rookie," someone calls.

She whips her head to the right. There are two couches in front of a television. The Inside Man is sitting on one of them, holding a bag of chips and grinning at her.

"Fuckin' hell, Rookie," he says, munching on the chips, "you really kicked the hornet's nest. Man, that robbery was on every fuckin' channel I have! There were Andycopters following that Vespa chase. I can't believe they sent the FLYPAPER after you!"

She stares at him archly.

"Anyways, you're alive!… How's that work? And how'd you make out?" the Man asks.

"Contract. Lesser Nornir demon. I died. I came back. It got some gold," she responds slowly, with vocal chords that have never been used before. She gingerly reaches out with her hands and makes a motion as if throwing open a pair of curtains. A pile of cash, gold, jewels, bonds, stocks, spices, and spells fall out of the empty air. The Man's eyes widen to the size of dinner plates.

"God damn," he says, "you actually did it. You cleared them out. You robbed the Bank of Eurtec."

He sets the chips down on the couch and hops over it, walking towards her. "I guess there's something to your 'demon drug' thing after all."

He helps her up and then offers a closed fist. She bumps it in acknowledgment.

"Congrats, *Rukmini*. The Chicago Spectre is now on the map!"

« Hypervelocity | **Terminal Velocity** »

Footnotes
1. A security system pioneered by the Bank of Three Portlands
2. Although Eurtec was only built in the mid-80s, temporal investments and various forms of parathievery ensured that within thirty years it would be subject to a cumulative three centuries of attempted heists

Tales I

This Year

December

"**`I can't believe you've survived a year in these conditions`**." Trench muttered, grimacing as he tried to wipe bat shit off his shoulder, only succeeding in smearing it into his overalls. Aries merely grunted in reply, her masked face impossible to divine any emotion from. She was focused intently on packing the bat shit into a rough humanoid shape, carving sigils into the torso with her fingernails and dripping her blood into the indents.

The radio crackled, Willow's gentle voice cutting through the gloomy ambience of the cave. "Status report, Sigma-66. Are you in positions?"

Up in the higher tunnels of the cave system, Fenton answered first, voice as deep and velvety as ever. "I'd say we have four or five minutes before these things start to come at us as a group. We've already had to take out one or two who came sniffing at our location." While the dream mechanic's voice was utterly level, Trench got the impression he was worried. "How are you two doing down there?"

"I set up basic wards around the generator to help with power conservation once the hexes trigger," Trench said into his shoulder radio, " but we've run into some trouble with the residents of the cave, so Aries is, uh…" He glanced down at Aries' frenetic sculpting. "What exactly *are* you doing, Aries?"

Aries pulled off her mask as she finished the golem and tossed it into the great pile of guano, its arms flailing wildly as it arced through the gloom of the cave. She turned to him, the wild grin on her face accentuated by the rivulets of blood running down it from the ring of cuts all around her shaved scalp.

"*I'm gonna fuckin' hack the bats*."

February

"We'll not survive the year in these conditions" Alvares growled, unhooking a third canister of liquid nitrogen from his belt and placing it roughly by the modified summoning circle Cassandra was tracing on the tiled floor in powdered milk and dipping dots. "First Grenich," he continued, "then Simmons last week - who's next, eh? Fucking meat grinder."

Wretch, their newest recruit, cocked her head in an unspoken question that would probably have been spoken if she weren't in the process of regurgitating over one hundred pounds of steel. The contraption she was vomiting out resembled an ornate manhole, covered in sigils and demonic markings, with a large opening aperture operated by a ridged dial on one side. Whatever the thing was, Davis has emphasised its value during the debrief - the Foundation only had one, and if it was lost their heads would be on the line. That was the point where Aries had pointed out they also only had one of each team member and they didn't seem to be valued much did they, and had received a nice tazing for her troubles.

"Grenich and Simmons used to be members of the team," Aries said, kneeling down by Wretch so she could be heard over the girl's gagging. "We left one behind to die, the other was punched to death by a minotaur."

"Asshole fucking deserved it," Alvares muttered. "Grenich, like."

It was hard to tell whether Wretch's expression of distress was at Alvares' comment or at the simple strain of pushing a 30-inch manhole cover out of a 2-inch mouth, but either way she'd started to cry. Aries bit her bottom lip, then reached forward and started tugging at the manhole, her fingers scrabbling for purchase on the surface, covered as it was with this phlegmy saliva. This close, she could see the large logo stamped into the metal - ***RICHARD AND SONS***. The girl's eyes widened in an expression of either pain or thanks - whichever way, it was better to have the thing out quick so they could have this whole shitty mission over and done with.

Alvares continued as if they'd responded. "This is just an overly-elaborate way to execute us, I'm telling you." He gestured to the summoning circle as he spoke, and Cassandra raised an eyebrow, but otherwise made no indication she was even aware Alvares was talking as she finished off the outer ring, the powder lines glowing a faint blue as the final shapes were added to match the diagram on her tablet's screen. Aries sighed as she realised Cass was leaving it up to her to call him on his bullshit.

"Stop talking out your ass, Dominic. There's no conspiracy here, we're just some garbage they don't care about and they're finding a fun way to recycle us." She'd wanted to say this dismissively, continuing to tug at the manhole, but as she spoke the thing passed its greatest circumference and popped wholly out of Wretch's throat with a slimy smack, sending Aries flying back and landing on her ass right in front of him, just outside the outer line of dipping dots.

"As if you're not in on it, *Clara*." Alvares sneered, making no motion to help her up. "All that kooky blood witch bullshit to cover up you're part of the system too. Three or four months, bet you'll be creaming yourself at the chance to join the fresh new batch, eh? Guide them towards their trashy horror-film deaths one by one, high-fiving with Davis when their backs are turned." His face turned sour. "And you're such a bitch you decided to kill the magic plumber *first*."

The only good retort to that, obviously, was to bite his ear off. Aries scrambled up, lunging for his face, and Alvares stepped back, foot landing on one of the cylindrical canisters he'd placed around the circle. He careened wildly, grabbing at the front of Aries' shirt, trying not to disrupt the powder trace while the ritual was still in progress, but ultimately only succeeded in flinging himself farther in, his foot flying out from underneath him and sending the canister whizzing into Wretch's cheekbone. The deafening clunk of that impact was in great contrast to the total silence as his head hit what should have been solid tile and passed through it like a thick gloop, a tiny ripple the only indication he'd ever been there at all.

"Ah." said Aries, "Fuck."

December

Fenton wasn't exactly enthused by the new kid. Nettle hadn't talked once this whole mission except to acknowledge commands. He wouldn't have minded so much if he could judge the kid on other factors, but every bit of them was covered in a dark orange bodysuit, making it impossible to make out a damn thing about them. Even the kid's dream-self was indecipherable, a mass of bad memes and self-destructive tendancies whirling around a core of broken glass and blueberry jam. Not much weirder than what he'd seen in the rest of the team, but still, he wished he could get a read.

It didn't help that all Willow had seen fit to tell him in the debrief was not to touch them under any circumstances. Then again, Willow had told him hardly anything about this mission. Need-to-know asset retrieval, follow the steps as laid out in the mission docs. Find the cavern at the centre, activate Trench's machine, wait for further instructions.

To their credit, they'd been doing well at the stealth aspect of the mission, their silence working in their favour. The creatures seemed to sense something was wrong about them, though. The slimy beasts would pause and growl as they passed, or just bolt, the inky patterns on their flanks swirling intensely. This did not, in fact, lower Fenton's unease one bit.

They were hiding out in a carved-out hollow in the antechamber of the slime creatures' nest, waiting on the results of the frankly insane claim Aries had made vis-à-vis the bats in the cave system below them. Just as he was shifting to check his watch, he heard a rumbling from the east tunnels. Almost on schedule, as usual. He let himself breathe a sigh of relief, and stepped out from the hiding spot to greet Aries and Trench.

Out of the east tunnel burst a 12-foot tall anglerfish with legs, Trench's lifeless corpse caught in its huge jaws.

May

Cassandra's laugh rang hollow through the impromptu operating room as the clockwork cancer spread further across her hands, fastening them in place against the screeching clicker priest. She

had to admit, she wasn't exactly surprised at this outcome, but it wouldn't have been her first guess if you'd asked her how she'd die.

“Get it? My time is up? Cos, clockwork?” Her shit-eating grin fell back into her standard frown as she observed the serious faces around her. “Come on, guys, it’s not like we didn’t see this coming. I’ve been operating on the equivalent of a sentient magical bear trap, this was bound to happen eventually.”

She turned to the young girl covered in blood for support. “Aries knows how this works." When the girl only bit her lip in response, she looked to the man in the discount skeleton costume. "Wilkes, you’ve been around the block too. It’s not a mission if one of us doesn’t die horribly, right? It’s just … my turn.”

She winced as the gears bit further into her flesh, flaying skin and muscle, and copper piping snaked further up her arms. She could feel hair-thin wires pushing into the cuts, running into her muscles and latticing around and between her radius and ulna. No escape unless she could perform a double-amputation from the shoulders in the next second or two. She breathed slowly, accepting her fate. It would be over soon. She wished she could say she had no regrets, but she had so very many.

Wilkes and Huever were speechless, wrestling with grief and anger respectively. In the other corner, the **`faceless monk ~`** shot her an telepathic :(face as he threw a sigil-stone into the midst of the growing cultist swarm. Their gears stopped dead and they fell to the ground twitching. Aries, standing by Cassandra, wrestled with her impulse to pat the older woman on the shoulder. She and Cassandra had never been close, but she felt like she should be saying something here.

“You should, um…” Aries trailed off, not sure what the right words were. She bit her lip hard, the familiar tang of blood triggering a good thought. “We should-”

The mechanism that had been winding its way down Cassandra’s collarbones met itself, clicked into place and unceremoniously snapped closed, crushing her skull instantly as counter-mechanisms tore open her ribcage. Wilkes doubled over, pulling up his mask to

splash his lunch out onto the metal floor. ~ merely broadcast a :/ face. Aries sighed heavily and hit her communicator.

“Davis? Cassandra’s dead, mission’s fucked. Requesting extraction.”

December

The angler thing tossed Trench in the air and swallowed him whole, then let out a bellowing screech that reverberated through the tunnels, receiving calls of response from dozens of slime creatures. Panicking, Fenton tried to reach into its dream self to assert control, but found nothing inside it. This thing was operating on pure animalistic instinct and bloodlust.

Hey, at least Fenton could say he’d died to something cool.

A mass of bats swarmed from an opening in the rocks behind the angler and it turned its head just in time to be smacked in the jaw by a great brown blur. The almost-solid swarm rushing by with enough force to stagger it. Fenton could just about make out a figure in the centre of the flock, supported on a churning, flapping platform of the flying rodents. *Here* was Aries.

Fenton drew the handgun at his hip and stepped into the angler's line of sight. He fired a couple of shots at the thing, targeting its eyes and the lure that dangled from its forehead. The bullets ricocheted off it uselessly, pinging into the surrounding rock.

The bat swarm clumped and merged into one single blob, a humanoid shape covered in still-flapping wings and furry squeaking faces. It slammed a bulky fist into the creature, making it stumble again. The angler faked out the bat-blob, moving to flinch back then twisting to ram itself sideways into the shrieking mess. As the blob fell on its ass, it burst back into a flock of individual bats, half the swarm falling to the ground immediately, their tattered wings and broken bones rendering them useless. There were more bats flowing in from every tunnel now, though, catching in Fenton’s hair, leaving scratches on his neck and hands as he swatted them away. They flowed into the bat-blob, but the angler had it on the defensive

now and it was losing bats faster than they could be replenished. He turned to call to Nettle, to see they had already stepped out from the hiding place and were struggling, uncomfortable, their costume cut and torn. A pile of dead, mangled bats lay at their feet. *What*?

A yell from the fight and he turned back to see that the angler had Aries caught in its jaws, hanging upside down, one long tooth piercing directly through her calf. She was reaching up to try to tap a sigil carved into her thigh, but the angler was bucking and snapping wildly, tossing her like a ragdoll as the last of her swarm petered out.

Fenton reached into his utility belt, searching for anything he could use against the thing. Something that could hit at primary logic centres? He couldn't assume it had anything like a familiar brain structure, how did he account for that? Generalised targeted fear attack, distract it? He barely noticed as Nettle brushed past him, a numbing tingle spreading across his arm where they'd come close. He looked up as the numbing hit his fingers, everything from the shoulder down feeling alien. He wanted to challenge the kid on what the hell they'd done, but they were heading right for the angler, calmly pulling off their gloves and rolling up their sleeves, revealing their dark skin for the first time.

"Nettle, get the fuck back, you can't fucking *fistfight* that thing!"

Nettle waved Fenton away dismissively over their shoulder, not bothering to even turn their head. "Not intending to, dude!" Their voice was young. Fenton would have estimated mid-teens. The Foundation were sick enough to bring kids into this shit now? He didn't have time to contemplate long, as Nettle reached out and quietly placed a hand on the creature's calf.

The fireworks began.

October

"What do you mean there's nothing left?" Davis' voice was low and husky, irritatingly calm.

Aries growled at the question, ducking out of the way of a falling

pillar just in time, at this point fueled only by fear and spite. “I mean they’re all fucking dead, Via! Tenochtitlan, ~, Eckhart. They’re trapped in that goddamn soul-mangler, and I will be too if you don’t extract me *NOW*!”

A blip appeared on her heads-up display, accompanied by a little chirp from her comm. “The asset hasn’t yet been retrieved, Berlot. You know just as well as I do I’m not extracting shit until the cosmic daughter is locked down.”

“She’s dead too, you bitch! Get in some people who know what the fuck is actually going on here, clean up this mess, and *GET. ME. OUT*!”

There was a pause as Davis deliberated, taking her sweet time while Aries ducked under a beam into the cinema atrium, scrambling to get away from the all-too-human barking of the chimerachological monstrosities hot at her heels. This bitch was going to kill her. She was actually going to do it. An icy chill ran through her as Davis confirmed.

“Sigma-66, operation 46, full mission failure and total loss of operatives. Requesting clean-up, specialists in chimera tech.”

Aries wasn’t one to go down without a fight. Obviously. She wasn't one to do *anything* without a fight. She scrambled beneath the atrium’s grand piano, a plan already forming in her head. She yanked ~’s soul protection stone from her bra, careful to maintain skin contact, and bit hard into her thumb, smearing the blood that welled from it onto the back of the trinket.

The barking was getting louder. They could smell her, she knew, even beneath the cloying smoke that was filling the cinema. Drawbacks of being constantly covered in blood. She rummaged in the depths of her trench coat pockets, her skin shredding against various blades and sharp edges, until they closed around the thing she wanted.

The trigger for Simmon’s teleport mechanism, rusted from all those months tucked away. Totally non-functional, of course, but that hardly mattered to an artist. She swiped the bleeding thumb against

that too. Protection, movement, what else? For good measure, she swiped the thumb against the comm in her ear. Location, maybe. Intent.

The dogs were in the room. No time to perfect the spell. As one lunged at her, its plaintive eyes apologising for its vicious intent, she muttered a few words of incantation and squeezed the trigger.

Aries was blasted instantly from her body, straight upwards. She caught a glimpse of her corporeal form being savaged before it was blocked from view, first by the ceiling of the theatre and then by the vast interconnected network of drifting souls that ran like blood cells through the astral highway. Above, she could sense terribly huge things moving sluggishly through the currents, sucking in souls like krill.

Focus. You're only halfway there.

Aries muttered the follow-up incantation to bring her back to the real world and felt a shift in her gut as she started moving downwards, a lazy arc transforming rapidly into a vicious plummet. Her soul *seared*, the astral plane's equivalent of burning up on re-entry acting on every aspect of her being.

Just as quickly as she'd left it, she was slammed back into existence as she knew it, her body feeling so much different now she wasn't taking it for granted. She was sitting in the command centre, legs up on a desk, the others in the room scrambling to get away from her, knocking over several swivel chairs in the process.

There was something wrong here, their faces showing not just fear - what she'd have expected from an unexpected apparition - but disgust, lips curled and ready to hurl insults the second they were done making sure she couldn't kill them. "What, you've never seen-"

This wasn't her voice, not even slightly. It was deep, husky. Smoke damage? Frowning, she swivelled to check her reflection in the outdated PC monitor in front of her, discern if there was visible damage.

Oh.

Staring back at her was Via Davis' shocked face, blood welling from every orifice. Shit, that had worked WAY better than she'd thought. The radio crackled, and she heard Davis' dying screams and curses, in the familiar voice of Clara Berlot, anartist extraordinaire.

December

The angler didn't die instantly. Fenton kind of felt like it would have been better if it had. In half a second, cuts welled up all over the creature's body, its legs broke, its scarred eye burst open and pumped out steaming brown blood. It wrenched its head around to look at Nettle with its good eye, and Fenton heard a sickening crack as the whiplash broke something in Aries. Her body went from struggling and angry to limp and lifeless in a heartbeat, as the creature similarly folded, hundreds of wounds both big and small accumulating to slit its throat. Nettle hopped back as the thing crashed to the ground, Aries' body slumping beneath it without a fight.

Fenton was speechless, paralysed with shock as Nettle rolled their sleeves back down and pulled on their gloves. They could do that with a *touch*. He felt his numb arm tingle and imagined it ripped apart, bleeding like the angler had.

"I don't like doing that. Sorry." Nettle gestured at him vaguely, as if waving a hand in front of his eyes. "You ok? That can be hard to see even when you're not the one inflicting it."

Before Fenton could reply, there was a loud groan from the angler. Nettle whipped around, ready for a repeat of the gorefest they'd just inflicted, but the creature was just as dead as they'd anticipated. The groaning was from underneath it.

"Aries," Fenton breathed, and they both dashed to heft the angler's head off her, Nettle keeping a wide berth in an obvious effort not to touch Fenton. She was still, not a twitch from any of her limbs, but her eyes were flickering wildly. Fenton saw the heavy bruising around her neck, and it clicked. She was paralysed. He got Nettle to step back, then reached into the thing's guts and pulled out Trench's corpse. He rolled it over and tugged the backpack off its shoulders.

After a half-second of hesitation, he took the time to roll the body back over and close its eyes. He wasn't a fan of Trench, but still, one deserved the right to dream when they reached Corbenic.

The pulled out Trench's hefty med kit and was in the process of assembling a neck brace on Aries when Willow's voice buzzed in over comms. "Status report, stat. You've got two minutes until asset materialisation, 66."

To Fenton's surprise, it was Nettle who answered first. "Uh, Trench is down, ma'am. Aries is incapacitated but still alive, I think. Fenton's putting together the, uh, they're bracing her neck. Uhhh, we killed a big monster fish thing."

"Casualties are acceptable." There was a half-second of pause. "I'm sorry, though. You're in the antechamber?"

"The - yeah, we're here. Map says we're looking for something on the north wall?" Nettle rose from their squatting position by the angler's tail and scanned slowly.

"Look for an unusually flat section of rock. There should be a big round metal piece inlaid into it."

Nettle was against the north wall now, running their hand along the rock. The metal circle was clear as day, could they not see it? Fenton finished up with the brace and hoisted Aries into a fireman lift. Risky, but necessary for mobility if they had to run again later. She grunted into his shoulder, her drool soaking through the back of his thin shirt. He chose to interpret it as thanks.

"Ok, I've got it. Big circle, ma'am." Nettle stepped back from the wall, trying to make out the detail in the gloom. "It's just a rim, though, stone again inside. Should I—"

"You don't need to do anything. I'm activating the circle via a relay in your collar. Lets hope Trench did his job right with those generators." As she spoke, a hum started up deep below them and the metal in front of Nettle began to glow a faint blue.

"Actually, Nettle, step back. Quick."

Nettle didn't question the order, darting out of the way as the glow became a piercing light and, with the faintest of splashing noises, a man careened out of the solid stone wall, tumbling to a stop where Nettle had stood a second before. He wore the same orange overalls they all wore. Who-?

Willow answered his question before he'd asked it, speaking over speaker comms from Nettle's collar. "Welcome back to reality, Agent Alvares."

On his shoulder, Aries barked a harsh laugh that turned into a hacking cough, her body rocking with the force of her diaphragm spasming. "Hgfhh, fuggn… Alvrez!" Her speech was spluttered, slurred, but she'd undoubtedly said the man's name. Fenton turned so she could see him. "Alvrez, yhuu.. Yuh… YHUU WANKR!"

"Merry Christmas, Aries." Willow cooed happily. "Prepare for extraction, folks."

Other works by Rimple

SCP-2779, Rating: 187
SCP-3880, Rating: 169
SCP-2338, Rating: 153
SCP-2559, Rating: 145
SCP-948, Rating: 134
Operation ÓverMeta, Rating: 120
SCP-3559, Rating: 71
SCP-3772, Rating: 68
SCP-3373, Rating: 56
SCP-3224, Rating: 46
Headache, Rating: 30
This Year, Rating: 19

I Am Ready

There is a man
In my attic
Walking around
With a soft patter
With a loud clatter

They brought my cat back
With an espionage bug
So I wrung its neck
With a harsh crack
And a soft snap

There is a man outside
In a lab coat
Talking into a cell phone
In German
And he uses words like
‘Eindringen’
‘Geheimnis’
And ‘termination’
And I know what that means
Oh yes, oh yes
I can see his cigarette through the dark
And the smoke
Of the monkey
At his side
Who peers in through my window
When he knows I’m looking

There are at least a thousand men in suits
All over town
Waiting for me to pass by
And to look down
They have a laser device

To scan my eye
And a pill
That will make me forget
Everything
That I have learned
About them
And their evil
Their experiments
And unwarranted merriments
They throw people to the lions
For science

But I know words, my dear
Words that they fear
Words like
‘Gears’
‘Kondraki’
‘173’, ‘231’, ‘343’
And ‘682’, too
And I chant
While I wait
For them to leave
They know that I know
And I know
That they know I know
So I will pray and pray and beg
For them to go

They’re digging a tunnel up through my basement
I have heard them, down there
I have put down caltrops
And a Winchester rigged to fire
(I hope they feel lucky)
If they try to come up the stairs
They will be in the crosshairs
Of my Ruger
And my Luger
I have a knife
Oh
How did you guess?

It's the one they used
To kill my wife
She knew too much

There is a man across the street
He has a moustache
And a sniper rifle
I painted the windows black
And I hid in my bathroom

But I am safe nowhere
A man with tattoos
Was peering up from the bottom of the bowl
I slammed the button, listened for the flow
And wished he would go

I can hear them
Walking around
Above and below
And outside
But I will no longer hide

What I did is for the best
And the people must know
Of these men and their doings
They can come in, slow and steady
I have my gun

I am ready.

Agent McPhelty washed a few splatters of blood from his night-vision goggles in the sink. He shook the droplets off his hands and toweled them off, turning around. The living room in the stairway where clearly visible through the open door. His partner on this specific operation, Agent Konnicker, was standing over the prone corpse of the man he had taken down, his heavy sniping rifle slung over his shoulder. Blood and splinters of skull were alternatively splattered over and embedded in the fine oak planks of the stairs, and the stink of freshly-sheared copper hung in the air like a cloud of miasma.

"Hey Tom," the hefty Texan sniper mumbled through his impressive mustache, "check this out."

He was waving a sheet of A4 paper around. McPhelty snatched it from him, frowning as he looked it over.

"…now what in God's blue heaven is this shit, Bill?"

"I do believe he snapped and wrote hisself a little poem. Found it in his pocket."

McPhelty looked down at the fallen corpse of Richard Daublin, the dead spy. Their hacker would later discover there was at least half a terabyte of sensitive information pertaining to the Foundation scattered on various hard drives through his five laptops, but right now, with most of the top half of his head missing, he didn't look so smart.

"Wouldn't quit my day job, if I were him."

I Am The Foundation

"…so there's that. And then I persuaded him to go to **078's** cell and covertly switched the power on. Several weeks after that he hung himself on a pipe in the maintenance." Doctor Bright smirked in satisfaction and leaned back, perfectly balancing his chair on its hind legs.

Doctor Bright laughed.

"What do you know, I'd almost forgotten this story. Now I remember; that's exactly how it happened." He scratched his three-day stubble in thought and slid his hand over his greying hair. "Makes you think, right?"

Harsh midday heat was streaming into the cafeteria; the sun's rays almost melted the glass, making every surface they touched scalding hot. It was stuffy indoors, and the doctor tugged at his shirt collar, trying to let some cool air under his clothes.

"What did you expect?" Bright, the one that had been silently standing in front of the coffee machine and attentively listening to the conversation, finally spoke up. "We've been in these bodies for a long time now, each one has their own destiny, their own memories. We become more independent and start mixing things up. I, for one, remember this story differently." He reached for the cup, which filled up with fragrant coffee and waited for him on the tray. Turning around, he accidentally brushed the ukulele on his back against the edge of the table and the instrument gave out a quiet major chord.

"Shut your mouth," Bright snapped at him and squinted his eyes, looking to the right and upwards, where the ever-vigilant red eye of a surveillance camera was glowing under the ceiling. "And quit dragging this fucking piece of wood everywhere with you, didn't I tell you?.."

"No one cares," the Ukulele man smirked. "Who watches these

cameras of yours? Who makes protocols? Who works with confidential documents? What can possibly leak and where, be so kind as to tell me?"

Bright got off the chair and came right up to Bright. The second one sized him up with a mocking glare, even though in his present state he was half a head shorter than his 'stable release'.

"The whole outside world still has no clue as to what is going on in here. If you keep allowing yourself such lack of discipline, then it will become a habit of forgetting about such things."
While the two men were locked in a piercing gaze, the third one was calmly finishing his sandwich.

"Would you stop that," he drawled lazily. "Or have you forgotten how these 'internal conflicts' usually end? Do you need reminding about the events of three years ago? When one of us was just asking for it, and we had to…"

Bright, without taking his eyes off the hack musician, made an imperious gesture, silencing the man.

"That is still up for discussion. In much… cooler surroundings," Bright finally let the Training and Development Director be and returned to his table. His face became a picture of melancholy again. "If it keeps on like this, the whole thing is really going to backfire." He took the first thing that his hand landed on — a paper napkin — and fanned himself with it.

"There is something you're wrong about, Alto," Bright told him, chewing down the last piece of his sandwich. "I mean, that we are becoming independent…"

He didn't have time to finish his sentence because the cafeteria door flung open, and a young assistant appeared in the doorway. She was out of breath and holding protocol folders marked with yellow and red labels.

"Doctor Bright, you are being expected in the conference room. Consilium started five minutes ago."

Of the three men, only one turned around.

They were reading just another **Euclid** that required a revision of containment procedures. Bright was sitting at a huge oval table, wearily fanning himself with some protocols. Light was hurting his eyes, giving him a headache, and he squinted in irritation, turning his head this way and that way, but he couldn't get away from this brightness. Light was everywhere. Finally, he attempted to hide behind the papers but he could feel the others throwing sideway glances at him. Running out of patience, he slapped the pile of papers against the desktop and interrupted the speaker, saying loudly:

"Doctor Light, light is in your line. Do something about it already."

The room became dead silent. A heavily built woman with carefully done fair hair glared at the troublemaker.

"Doctor Bright, the shutters are all yours."

"The shutters aren't enough. Get some drapes."

The air in the room seemed to be rich with methane — just one spark would have been enough to blow it up. Bright leaned back again, sinking into his round ergonomic armchair and sizing everybody up with his hooded eyes. He knew each one of them loved to get up to things, and they all had had their times until they felt their mayhem was getting completely out of hand and had to take it under control. He also knew they were ready to tear him apart right now because every last one of them was him, and he hated to be interrupted.

"Go on, doctor," the woman, whom Bright had called Light, broke the silence. The speaker coughed and started reading from where he had been interrupted at.

"…SCP-213 was moved to intensive care after being observed having a seizure in its containment cell. Examination of SCP-213 shows an additional ten nodules have appeared on its back. A perfect distance of 5 cm separates each one. SCP-213 continues to

report no pain from the lesions…"

Bright shivered despite the heat. He recalled his own bouts which with time came more often and lasted much longer. Before he could just convince himself that it was all just a side effect that he could just wait out, bear with it, and it was like a payment for his gift. But time and again, he was becoming more afraid that one day he simply wouldn't recover from it.

"…The source of SCP-213's effect appears to be a parasitic infestation of unknown origin inhabiting its body. This life form has not attempted to communicate, but does observe any persons in SCP-213's presence through the lesions present on SCP-213's body. SCP-213 has exhibited panic over this development and requested several times the entity be removed from him. Any requests of this nature from SCP-213 are to be denied."

The doctor took off his glasses, wiped his eyes, and put the glasses back on again.

"The only option in subduing the parasite activity we might have at the moment is to put the subject into induced coma."

"Even considering all the escape attempts from the subject, isn't it easier to review the terms of his containment based on his weak points? As I see it, his powers of disintegration have their limits," an academic looking man with a clipped beard noted. "The study of this guy has strategic meaning that goes beyond the interests of the Foundation. I bet our friends will soon be interested in him. I'm not sure O5 will approve of this coma idea…"

"Oh, they will," Bright said and smiled.

The concilium finished at 1 PM, and the members started to leave. Bright was sunk in his armchair and throwing a pen into air. He didn't want to go anywhere. A fair-haired smart-looking man also stayed behind without any visible reason. He was slowly gathering his papers, clearly buying himself time.

"Doctor Gla-a-ass," Bright called out, drawling lazily. "It's been a

long time since we've had a heart-to-heart talk. It strikes me as strange. Has it ever crossed your mind that I might need psychological help more than all your patients?"

Doctor Glass was one of the last among the senior personnel that had been converted. There were two reasons for that. Firstly, Bright tried not to start his expansion from the people whose specialty differed so much from his. It could cause difficulties while he still had to actively hide from the members who retained their personality. Although psychology wasn't a science one had to waste half of their life on mastering, its methods and views were still vastly different from the medical ones.

Secondly Bright wanted the psychologist to remain himself longer.

"Doctor Bright," the man he had called Glass replied. "It's good that you've stayed behind. I wanted to talk to you about staff recruitment."

Bright dropped the pen onto the table and covered it with his palm.

"I'm all ears."

'Glass' circled him and sat down on the chair to the left. He tilted his head to the side, watching Bright's face. Jack frowned — when did he have time to get all these psychological antics?

"You don't look so well," 'Glass' noted.

"It's the heat," Bright spit back. "You are a terrible psychologist. Let's get straight to business."

"Anyway, I was thinking how we could improve our recruitment system. If you plan to keep… using the amulet so actively, then certain matters of psychological diagnostics become moot. Maybe instead of this you would like to offer some other parameters that are important for you. How would you like to see your new personnel?"

"Look through their medical files. I don't want any hemorrhoids or prostatitis. Take women; I want there to be at least one woman per every male member. Two of every kind of animal. Maybe then they'll

start doing something useful. And request thicker shutters in here. And chairs. I want chairs like this one in every conference room.

‘Glass’s’ face showed a familiar expression that was already getting on Bright’s nerves — it was like he was looking into a mirror.

“You know those questions don’t concern me. And no, I will not pass them on. And no, I was not reading your thoughts. And no, neither do I now.”

Bright stared at the other man.

“What makes you think you know what’s going on in my head?” Bright didn’t even notice how he switched to a less official tone. “You think if you are in a shrink’s body, you’ve been served all his tricks on a silver platter? You think you can see through anybody, huh?”

“I think, doctor,” ‘Glass’ straightened up and squared his shoulders, “that I know perfectly well what’s going on in your head for the same reason you know what’s going on in the head of each Overseer. As you have unequivocally hinted today.”

Jack bared his teeth venomously.

“Haha. Ouch. What a burn, doctor Glass. I can see it steaming. Get out of here. I’ll look at your personnel offer and send you a list of my recommendations.”

‘Glass’ got up, stared at Bright savagely for several more moments, then took his folder off the table and headed towards the exit.

‘Why do I hate myself so much,’ Bright thought bitterly. ‘Damn it, I shouldn’t have sacrificed the shrink.’

It covered him as he was walking from the conference room to his office. He pressed his shoulder against the wall, trying to keep on his feet although his head was spinning and the surroundings blurred and coiled into a spiral. He was in many places at once, his skin was touching thousands of surfaces at the same time, it burnt, it froze, it pressed, it got wet. His vision was full of millions of various pictures: bright, dull, dark, colourful, green, grey, all colours of the

rainbow, and his hearing was drowning in a cacophony of interlacing sounds. He was watching, running, thinking, recollecting, hitting a ball with a bat, crying, laughing, watching porn, reading reports, feeding fish, hurting, sleeping, playing the ukulele. Millions of contradicting feelings, memories, thoughts, and each of them was shouting ‘Me! Me! I’m the real one! I am you!’ And it was him. He was inside himself, alone with himself, running from himself to himself, locked inside his head, knowing nobody and nothing anymore, apart from himself. Creating and devouring himself every minute. Surrounded by ghosts, lonely and empty, lost in his own depths and forgetting himself.

He slid down the wall, gripping his head with his hands.

I Am the Very Model

I am the very model of an explorer and gentleman
I've hunted cryptids airborne, terrestrial, and aquarian
I know the laws of science are quite rigid and inflexible
Except, of course, for thaumaturgy, which makes me quite vexable

I'm very well acquainted, too, with matters scientifical
Of physics and of chemistry, both simple and atomical
I've mastered all the studies of phlogiston and aetherius
I claim this in no jest, for you will find I am quite serious

I'm very good at rhetoric and disputations logical
I'm learned in our politics and matters sociological
In short, with cryptids airborne, terrestrial, and aquarian
I am the very model of an explorer and gentleman

I know of secret histories both eldritch and mythical
I've trod the paths of ancient cities Martian and Atlantical
I've faced the ghosts of fallen lords Arthurian and Indian
And fallen off Mt. Everest to turn back and begin again

I can tell authentic poltergeists from frauds and forgeries
I know the differences between bewitchments and sorceries
I hum while sleeping melodies and symphonies quite magical
And dream of terrors bordering upon ecclesiastical

I can write a peace treaty in lost tongues of an elder race
And tell you every detail of the planets found in outer space
In short, with cryptids airborne, terrestrial, and aquarian
I am the very model of an explorer and gentleman

I can tell at sight a wyvern from a wyrm or para-drake
And discern thirty-six types of real vampires from spoofs and fakes
I've studied bones and fossils angelic and dinosaurical
And resurrected horrors divine, mundane, and demonical

I've learned of progress made mechanical and scientifically
Although only up 'til the turn of the twentieth century
But noone can deny the grace of our queen most Victorial
Whose reign around the world is both glorious and eternial

There's some who say my form has been reduced to that of sluggery
(Were I not a Christian, I'd accuse them all of buggery)
But still, with cryptids airborne, terrestrial, and aquarian
I am the very model of an explorer and gentleman!

Memo from Dr. Samesh: The above lyrics were found handwritten in a document filed among the personal effects of ***SCP-1867*** *in his country estate, dated 4/18/1880. The document was filed along with a letter to SCP-1867 signed by composer W.S. Gilbert, dated 10/17/1882, thanking him for his "lyrical tribute" and inviting him to attend the upcoming premiere of the comic opera* Iolanthe.

The text of the final verse, which appears to refer to SCP-1867's current physical status, has been written in different handwriting than the remainder of the text, in the margin at the bottom of the page, underneath a verse which has been scribbled over to the point of illegibility. Graphological analysis has confirmed that the handwriting of this later addition matches that of ***SCP-662****-1 ("Mr. Deeds"). In Interview 662-207, Mr. Deeds refused to confirm or deny whether he had altered the original document, citing his previous employers' privacy.*

I, Autarch

My name is Frank Carson, Autarch of the Enlightened Republic and Free Association of Wyoming. I have overseen the Universal Dominion of the State of Wyoming and its citizenry for four thousand, nine hundred and seventy-eight years, four months, and nineteen days. I am the only ruler this universe has ever known, or will ever know. My authority is omnipresent and absolute.

From my capitol in the Palace of Black Tooth Mountain, I alone control all facets of the government of this realm. In the last five millennia, I have developed the technology and the mental ability to be in thousands of places at once, enmeshed in every possible public institution that may touch the lives of those people left in this enclosed universe. No human to have ever existed has wielded more power than I do. I am the absolute pinnacle of humanity's ability to exert control, refined to the outermost limits of mankind's capabilities to achieve my purpose of ruling over my domain.

Somebody, please shoot me. Right in the head. Please.

I wasn't always the Everlasting Autarch, All-Encompassing in His Name. I used to be Frank Carson, Director of Site-643, Foundation Subdirector for Geopolitical Anomalies, North American Sector. I don't know what we did to screw everything up, exactly. But thousands of years of thinking about it have convinced me that that asshole Russian from External Affairs had something to do with it. If, in the infinitesimal chance someone at Site-78 actually receives this and reads it, I hate you all. Come over into my reality. I'll make *you* Emperor of these clowns. See how *you* like it.

We had time to evacuate all the staff. When the alarm sounded, I had no clue what had just breached, or what even *could* breach a site where we studied vote records from Podunk County, USA all day. But someone had to go back in and retrieve the failsafe codes. I, like an idiot, assumed responsibility for someone else's monumental mistake, not wanting to put any of my subordinates at

risk. One of my selves is laughing at the irony of leadership putting me in this situation. That one's a real jerk. I've never liked him.

Whatever it was that occurred, Site-643 caused two things to happen. The entire observable universe was erased from existence, except for a small, isolated mass of physical matter that used to be the State of Wyoming. The universe literally ends now at the boundaries of the least populous political subdivision in the US. The other thing? People now live forever. And not in the horrifying way that I always feared people could live forever, but eternal life, free of aging, senility, physical deterioration. Don't ask how me how we whipped up that one. I always forbade cross-testing in my facility.

I didn't mean to even be spotted by the civilians. I swear I didn't. But the Site was in downtown Cheyenne. The emergency exit came out right on 24th Street. Next to the *Capitol*. There must have been a reason for that. Maybe. But after sheltering in place for three days, the locals had plenty of time to figure out that a few things had changed, mostly having to do with the fact that it was no longer physically possible to leave the state anymore, and that things like "nighttime" no longer happened. The Laramie Consortium of Wisdom later figured out that we somehow trapped a simulacrum of the sun in with our universe, capable of generating the same amount of energy. I digress.

So horrible, mind-breaking things are happening. Riots in the streets. Panic everywhere. And out emerges this stranger, right from the seat of government. Dressed in a labcoat and armed to the teeth. Why did they make me their leader? I guess I looked like I knew what was happening. I was mostly relieved that they hadn't decided to eat me. Then I remembered about the research outpost in Crook County. I led a team of twelve people equipped with pickup trucks and shotguns to keep *that* business from being stuck in a universe with us. When we returned, that was that. I was The Leader.

Why didn't I just lead them all into a volcanic geyser somewhere? I guess I figured I had to make the most of it. Maybe I hoped in the early days someone from Overwatch Command would come fix our mistake. That hope ended sometime after the first thousand years, I think. God forbid, maybe I wanted to actually help people. I forget

now.

Then I found out what happens when you have forever to do things. The human mind is an incredible mechanism, turns out. Freed from senescence, you have forever to get good at things. To think about things. To consider yourself and your surroundings. The citizens of Wyoming granted me the power of a king, to protect them in their strange, new universe. And I did. I worked tirelessly to set up new systems of government, appointed mayors, counselors, officials. I learned about sewer systems, tax codes, probate law and housing policy. I did such a good job they didn't bother with elections. I was satisfied because people weren't killing each other. Ha. Ahahaha.

Blessed with immortality, the citizens of Wyoming became scholars. Almost all of them. They all had time to learn now. First they wanted to know just what the hell we were living in. Oil workers, cowboys, waitresses and farmers all studied up. First they mastered astronomy. They became self-taught doctors of geology, climatology, topography and quantum physics. With all the time in the world, the people of Wyoming were a race of intellectuals, spurred on by curiosity. They built observatories, drilled deep into the crust of what once was the Earth, and confirmed that we all lived on a big (almost) flat rectangle floating in a sea of nonexistence. The telescopes couldn't find any stars, any signs of anything beyond what used to be the atmospheric thermosphere. Well duh, I told them. I've been saying that for decades. But scientists that they were, they needed to confirm it independently. See for themselves. They had already placed me in my inescapable role, nagging governmental parent of Eternity, only to be minded when a new skyscraper needed to be built or the stray dog population got out of control. I should have killed them all then.

Their scientific discoveries led them to be introspective. Now, the people must be philosophers, they all said. And philosophers they became. Great halls were constructed just for thinking and debate. All essential tasks were automated (and guess who needed to write 15,000 pages of regulations governing the construction of these automated task-robots), so that everyone could add to the effort of Understanding. And these learned citizens Understood, all right. New discoveries in the nature of self, answers finally reached about

the existence of the soul (by the way, it's more like eight thousand souls), God forever placed in His correct role of The Great and Mighty Casual Annoyance. Men whom I remembered centuries ago passing their time shooting at highway signs with buckshot after downing a case of Coors Light, were now pronouncing their inescapable theorems on the nature of human suffering from the shining dais of the Academy of Universal Advancement.

I shared in their knowledge, and paired with their technological progress, I became greater and greater. My mind expanded into the aether of the Internet, and now my electronic presence, apart from but also entirely within my being, could render judgments at the Court of Ultimate Appeal. Another electronic self now could review birthing permits even more expeditiously than the modern genius I had previously appointed. This, of course, freed up ever more Wyomingites to go and join in the increasing development of their peers. More and more, I was The State. Me, personally. I remember feeling quite proud of that achievement. That makes me want to punch at least eight of my selves in the face.

Then, they got bored. Jesus Christ the formerly almighty, they got *bored*. First it was sports. Games involving genetically-altered insects doing battle with people wielding cold laser weaponry while clad in polymer armor. That was harmless enough, I suppose, even if we did end up having to neutron-bomb the Sierra Madre mountains in order to kill the Radio Ticks. Then there were art-murders. So many art-murders. I had to appoint myself the head of a new police division, but when the victims came back, they were more interested in critique than who had done it. Eventually I just legalized that because the hell with it.

It kept escalating. They would divide up into rival factions and kill each other in the streets of Greater Cheyenne for *fun*. Entire armies were assembled, accompanied by orbital munitions and chemical weapons, going to war because they could, and because they would just show up again somewhere anyway at the end of it. Do you have any conception how hard it is to electronically jam a laser-guided missile barrage by yourself? How did I end up being an international peacekeeping agency in my own country?

Even that was boring and stupid to them after a few centuries.

Someone got the bright idea once to weaponize *nightmares*. Technology turned sharply for a couple of decades to the development of ever greater stimulants so that nobody had to endure the terror of going to sleep. I seriously considered constructing a reality-negation device in those years, though mostly I attributed that impulse to being edgy from all the super-caffeine drinks (at least that's what my therapist, Dr. Me, said one time). In the end I was stopped from ending my miserable universe because, unfortunately, it is impossible to do.

On and on it goes. A group of impossibly learned immortals, stuck with each other and free from consequence. Through it all, I restore sanity each time. I run prisons, I tend public parks, I build libraries. I am the adult in a nursery full of psychotic infants, armed with probability weaponry and smart enough to have reasoned away their consciences, forced to interact with each other by the coffin boundaries of the Smallest Universe by Population in the Continental United States. Every five years, they appoint me once more by a mental convocation as Autarch, entrusted with the governance of their hideous regenerating cityscape. They got too far ahead of me, gained too much knowledge while I was stuck learning the intricacies of managing a geothermal electrical grid, that I will never outsmart them and achieve my dream of murdering each and every one of them.

At this moment, while I write my testament, I am guiding the actions of an automated fire suppression system in Arena No. 34-Q (someone finally learned how to literally shoot atomic fire from their eyes), clearing a massive sewer line blockage in the Violet Sector caused by someone flushing 3,000 or so fetal dodo birds down a toilet, negotiating the labor contract of the Janitorial Robotic Consortium for the next eight hundred years, digging a new landfill meant exclusively for waste generated by the production of an element that I haven't gotten around to naming yet as Minister of Science, and rescuing a pet cat from a high tree branch that happens to be four miles underground. I have expanded my consciousness in ways that the early mystics could never have contemplated, that I may hose down the feces in a constellation of monkey houses.

I could stop. I could simply cease doing my countless functions that keep this society of the ever-increasingly deranged functioning, such as it is. The millions of jobs that I do every moment of every day would remain undone. The social order would grind to a halt, their unspeakable fun interrupted by real life for once in the poisoned existence of this universe. I could do it. I yearn to do it.

In the end, I am stopped by a thought shared by every single one of my selves.

My God, what would they do *next*?

I Can't

I can't feel your hair, the river streaming down
Out of your head and into my open lap.
It once was such silk, always soft to feel,
But now so sparse and wired.
How frayed, such disarray.

I can't feel your face, the mask so perfect
Upon your head and kept so flawless.
It once was porcelain, almost mystical,
But now so torn and broken.
How cracked, so out of place.

I can't feel your hand, a thing so fragile
That it might break if looked at wrong.
It once was dainty, so delicate,
But now so bent and shattered.
How singed, so pulverized.

I can't feel your touch, something I've loved
Ever since we had once met long ago.
It once was stimulation, exhilarating,
But now so gone and so far away.
How far could it possibly be?

I can't feel your pulse, the thing I miss most.

I can't feel.
I can't.

I Care Because You Do

As I touched the face of the body with a single gloved hand, the first thought that ran through my mind was that it had a face, and that was never an especially common sight around here.

Our Jane Doe was pinned to the pavement like a butterfly on a cork, her head pierced by a perfectly-cylindrical metal rod twice the length of my arm. That in itself might not have killed your average Alagaddan citizen, but what would have was the intricate script running around its circumference — tangentially, that script should've sent me and any Alagaddan without years of discipline reeling from a mile off, but I wasn't an Alagaddan. Hence why I'd been called in today.

Carefully, thoughtfully, I brushed the length of the spear jutting out of her head and dispatched a hesitant ping of energy into its core: as expected, even through the latex I felt a jolt of energy refresh me and a brief flash of blue light from the runes on the cylinder.

I picked myself up from my kneeling position and peeled the gloves off, tossing them to the sidewalk where they'd be absorbed by one of the fleshy flagstones eventually. Karcist Nadya noted that I'd finished with my inspection and affixed me with her twenty-eyed gaze: "What information did you gather from the monolith?" she chittered, teeth in her mouth rearranging themselves as she spit the syllables in my direction.

"Definitely a Mekhanite perp from Flipside, you're right." I fumbled for a bottle of antiseptic in my pocket and gave my hands a quick slather just to get the feeling of the fetid oils off my nerves. "First glance, that thing has a couple verses from the First Tract of Trunnion round the circumference; all things being equal, our murderer's a Cogwork Orthodoxy member, though railgun weaponry points to Maxwellists."

"The brass residue would suggest that." By the time I was done with

my handwashing ritual, I'd looked up just in time to see the Karcist retracting her rope-like tongue into her mouth, residue of Jane's brain still dripping from its surface. "Tannins from Oregon…" She licked a stray droplet of grey matter hanging off the edge of what counted as her lip. "…no, she's an Indiana native. Most recently she's got traces of the Black Quarter, though."

I grimaced and wrinkled my nose. The Black Quarter was one of those places filled with enough theologically, morally and mathematically abhorrent behaviour that the thought of having touched anything that'd come from it made the both of us equally nauseous, if our almost identical expressions of disgust were any indicator. "Signal Above cut me out, a Grade-A theoweapon and a Black Quarter runaway in the same case, huh." The thought that I hadn't actually got a name for this body crossed my mind — that combined with the sketchhy providence of said body set me on-edge. "Speaking of, you actually have any idea who this girl is?"

Another deep taste of the corpse: had the majority of Mekhanites not shed their fingerprints in the first parts of their conversion, I would've complained my partner turning them into streaks on the china-like skin of the cadaver. "Maybe 'runaway' is the wrong word, Inquisitor Xiang. More a passer-through, if anything: you know the trade in gallbladders, exotic organics… all the usual smuggler's vices."

"Travelling girl, then. Still haven't given me an ID, though."

She took a deep sniff, fluttered grey eyes that would've been pretty on a face with fewer eyes and an actual skull in it. "Allison. Allison Chao," she concluded, after some thought. Eyes turned to slits, nostrils flared again. "Did you do something to the body in your little inspection, Inquisitor?"

My brow furrowed and my hand itched to release its payload. "Nothing more than a quick ping to test if the artifact was still active, which it is. You sure you're not just picking up on the after-effect of that thing?"

"No. The metal." She turned to the side, spat out a gob of gold-stained blood. "It doesn't get any less disgusting the further you get from the weapon, you know? The distribution's too even for it to be

just the monolith."

"If you say so, I guess." I knelt back down. "Let's take a closer look, check if she's not lead-lined or some shit…"

As I did, the first thought I'd had upon seeing the body came unbidden to the front of my mind — her face looked too close to a Flipside citizen, too close to my baseline for it to resemble anyone who'd been wandering the City of a Million Right Angles for enough time a Karcist knew her taste. Pondering the interpretations, my eyes scanned the body one more time, noticed the expensive-looking coat swaddling it like she was floating on a sea of velvet.

Hell of a thing to go to your grave in.

Slowly, gingerly, I peeled the coat from her shoulders. She was wearing a tank top, already something odd in the freezing winters even the city had to put on padding for, and I noted the tattoo of a chess piece on her shoulder: the black queen, the colour a striking contrast against the deathly-pale shade of her post-mortem complexion.

As I kept going with it, the coat peeled away to reveal more of the shoulder, then the arm, then—

A hand, delicately filigreed with silver trim and humming softly with the tick of gears moving under its skin. The first sign of a recent convert to Mekhane.

My breath caught in my throat. "Nadya!"

"That's Karcist Na…" The command faded, to be replaced by the guttural fury of Low Sarkic creole. "Shit! She bought in—!"

"She's a bioterrorist drug mule at best, world-ending extremist at worst," I responded, hurriedly covering what I'd seen in the coat's rich folds and getting back to my feet. "You need to set up quarantine. Fast. The theoweapon was bad enough, but if she's got a live sample of the Conversion you could be seeing a full-on eschatonic event at worst, XK in a bottle…"

"Understood." Nadya clawed at her neck, exposing an array of

fleshy nodules growing along the musculature there like plants on display in a greenhouse: picking one between finger and thumb, she burst it with a sudden burst of force and the state-designated smell of emergency filled the air. As it did, the alleyway around us began to get closed off by curtains of newly-forming muscle and bone, the walls of Alagadda itself responding to the pheronome signal with a sudden overdrive of growth. "Where will you be off to, Inquisitor?"

"Flipside." I began sprinting for my car while the road to where it was parked was still open. "I have to see a lady about a priest!"

And with that, I clambered into the driver's seat, hammered the keys home and revved the throttle. The tyres of the Argo squealed on striated gristle as I tore down the highway, heading towards the woman who I'd loved and damned to hell in the same year.

Next: Crossing the Frame >

I Don't Get It, I Functioned Before

My foot throbbed. I had never dealt with that much *blood*, and I couldn't really move my foot. I was crumpled on the couch, and the two kids were playing with the huge tubs of legos behind me. Cinnamon buns, warm blankets, some reassuring words, and The Aquabats had finally managed to calm them down. I was sure there was a med kit somewhere in the house, but I just hadn't the time to find it. Worst thing that could have happened was an amputated foot, and really, wouldn't that just be interesting? I thought it might just be another quirk for me to have. A new nickname, perhaps. Footless Fool. Half-a-Calf. Footloose.

No. No, I was making myself angry thinking of all of those. A nickname doesn't define a person, and you never really got to choose them, did you? Some bloke would name a trait of yours and you would forever be painted with it. Brainy Brian. Was all of me just smarts? No, no it wasn't. I was a person. I was a gosh darn human being, and I deserved more recognition than Brainy Brian. I was Brian Harding. People should have just called me Brian. I liked the name Brian. It was tough, but didn't make me sound like a jerk. Someone who could stand up for themselves, but didn't take it as far as pushing others down. Brian. Strong willed, intelligent, kind. I rescued two kids from certain death that day. If it weren't for the bullet in my ankle, I'd have been riding high on self esteem.

The two kids were Joe and Abe. They didn't really know their last names. They didn't want to talk about the scary girl who was holding them hostage. They didn't want to talk about the blue muscular man who shot me in the foot. He was mean, he must have been such a mean person. Who shoots someone in the foot? A big hunky meanie, that's who.

It took immense effort to lurch myself over the back of the couch to peer at the brothers. What was I going to do with them? I never planned on being a parent. I loved kids, but… but I loved them at a distance. I loved making toys for them. I loved getting money for it. I laid back down. Was I a bad person? I was an employee of Wondertainment, and I was a toy maker. It was impossible for me to be a bad person. Couldn't be.

Still, Wondertainment had left a bad taste in my mouth. Polly Gary Ashley, getting away with all she did without a scratch. Without a scratch, yeah, and I got shot. I wasn't good at biology, for all I knew I could have been bleeding out. Not much I could do about it at that point. Just put pressure on the wound — like I was always told — and sat there. I thought to myself that I should get Joe and Abe to their parents… but how? I already asked them, and they didn't know the phone number. Tongue usually knew what to do with things.

Eh… I didn't feel like talking to Tongue. They were my kids. I was going to give them the best life they could have. They were going to live happy and free and they were going to eat ice cream every night and watch cartoons until their heads melted. I was never going to cook them broccoli, or spinach, or any other nasty green slop. They were going to eat like kings. The kings of candy land. They were going to feast on candy canes that I grew in the backyard, and lollipops that I picked off of trees. They were always going to get two spoonfuls of sugar in their teas. Joe and Abe. Joe and Abe Harding. It rang well. It rang true. I could be a mommy too. Whenever they felt down, I would be there patting them reassuringly on the back. We could play hide and seek, except all over the world! Egypt one day, Spain the next, Brazil the third, India the fourth! We could go visit ancient temples, maybe Stonehenge, some… skyscrapers? The possibilities were endless!

Just as soon as I could walk!

I was sick of laying on the couch and thinking about myself. I didn't like thinking about myself much anyways. I was going to walk no matter how much it ground my shattered ankle pieces together. The carpets cleaned themselves anyways. Woah. It was snowing. Snowing? What was the weather in this place? I got up and winced as I shifted my weight to my left foot. I looked over at the kids, who

stared at me with wide eyes. They must have still been shocked from the experience. It made sense. I don't imagine you get through something like that without some scars. They would heal in time. I would make sure of it. Had I packed anything healing? I feel like I must have. I stumbled into the kitchen, and made my way to the back door where I had left my suitcase. I had never unpacked. Fell asleep unexpectedly early last night…

I balanced myself on the walls, feeling the warm liquid drip down to the sole of my foot and then follow it to my toes. I almost slipped on the tile floor but caught myself on the counter. The first aid kit is usually in the kitchen anyways, right? Holding onto the counters and leaning at a near forty-five degree angle, I finally arrived at my suitcase. I knelt down, and opened it. There were my changes of clothes — how did my makeup look? — my pillow, my blankets, all my face paint, and… Oh. My risperdal.

I tripped and fell last night, I must not have taken it then. I missed a dose this morning. My heart fluttered. I missed two doses of risperdal? Oh no, oh my that was bad. I was told to take a dose each morning and each night, and I hadn't missed anything since I was thirteen. It had been so long, I didn't remember what was going to happen. I started twitching, and picked at the child-proof cap of the bottle. What went wrong? What happens when I go off of them? What am I like without them? Am I still Brainy? *What if I took them now*? What is the worst that could happen? *What if the kids found out*? What if management found out? *What if Tongue found out*?!

I emptied it into the sink.

I wondered if the car worked. I hadn't checked out the car yet. I

stepped outside into the snow, and grasped my keys. It was cold. I wasn't dressed for cold weather. Wasn't I? I had gone out into the rain just… eight? Hours ago. I should have been prepared. I closed the door and locked it behind me. Who knows what kids could do if they had free roam of the outdoors. They were safer inside. The cold felt good, on second consideration. It felt good to be cold. My left foot wriggled its toes into the snow, and enjoyed how they felt bitten. The tips of my fingers began to feel the same way, just sitting in the air and catching snowflakes. The metal tip of the keys felt like ice. Same keys that opened the house and took me back to the Tourist Trap also ran the car. Wondertainment was efficient if nothing else. If nothing else indeed.

I collapsed onto the shiny pink and white hot rod, had my unresponsive fingers fumble the keys into the car door, and then clambered into the leather driver's seat. The whole thing felt like a fridge. A freezer, really. I shut the door and laid down across the… the… the middle bit, between the driver's seat and the passenger seat. This thing didn't self clean apparently. I was *still* leaking? It was definitely less now, but I thought it would be none. I turned on the car, and started up the heat. My breath shuddered and came and went. Well, I sure had done it. Moved myself from my couch and into the car. From thinking about myself to thinking about myself. What a good job I had done.

I punched the steering wheel, and heard a satisfying honk. Very satisfying, actually. I punched it three more times, before my hand ended up resting on it's outer edge. Whew, I was dizzy. Dizzy and warm. I felt like myself. I hadn't really ever noticed that I didn't feel like myself before. I was feeling fresh and springy. My anger subsided and began to replace itself with contentment. I really did just need a change of scenery. Up into the wilderness. Up into the Tourist Trap. Back to my old house and out again. It's funny how much life changes over short spans of time. Just three days ago I was in Wonder World!™, and now I was out in the middle of nowhere — no, the middle of everywhere, and I had become a completely different man. Or maybe I was a different man before, and only just now did I get back to being me.

I was getting very tired.

I stepped out of a train and onto the sidewalk. It chugged out from behind me, off into the blurry nothingness, and left me at the base of a large building that was hundreds if not thousands of floors high. Its walls seemed to jut out at odd angles, and floors hung in midair where they were sure to fall but didn't. The walls were pinks and purples and bright baby blues until they reached into the grey storm clouds and up and beyond even that. I walked towards the large enamored archway, past the black landscape and through a pile of dark crates and barrels that surrounded the entrance. Once inside, I was able to look up into the dimly lit skyscraper and see that I was surrounded by stairs that spiraled up and up and up through spacious, wheezing art galleries. I only saw two or three other bodies, but they were too abstract to make out.

I took to the first steps, and marched up them with solemn gait, and lazily scanned the bright and bubbly surroundings. Every wall was covered head to toe in paintings and explanatory golden plaques — you could barely see the wallpaper in some places. There were glorious depictions of wars, love, children, sex and music and death and merriment and depression and nature and *Wonder*. Purples and yellows flooded over the blues and greens and oranges and reds. I kept ascending and noticed more and more sculptures — tan things with curves and motions that I couldn't quite make out. They seemed to come from all different times and all different styles — some were made of marble and others out of paper mache. Some were purely realistic and others warped perception itself.

Eventually I reached the top(?), and looked over the bleak pitch hills and valleys and mountains, covered in grey mists and obscured by passions and low hums. I held out my arms and felt the winds thrash me and almost pull me off the top of the amazing building, and I screamed at the stars just out of reach. I screamed at the art I've never made, at the people out to get me, and at the coldness on my skin.

Suddenly I was looking at a painting. It was small, and it showed a

single sandstone building in the midst of a large plateau. A long glowing pathway extended from it, and slithered off into the distance. The plaque read "The Road from Here to Everywhere Else, by Sam Micheals". To everywhere else? Where was here? I strolled through hallways with chipping paint, and wrung my hands together in nervous lethargy. I plowed through the thick air, stepped through what felt like honey and mud. Determination drove me, fueled me, ebbed and flowed through me. I tasted vomit, I smelled blood, and I saw my creation.

It opened into a large concert hall, and there she was. Playing a piano. Vines and flowers and grasses wilted around her, as her long groping fingers tapped spiritlessly on the birch keys. Her deep, hollow eyes glanced up at me, and then she hunched more over her plagiarism. I wasn't angry anymore. I seemed to shrink — or she seemed to grow? — and I came close to her and had her knee come up to my neck. She stared emptily at me, and I clambered into her lap. I laid there, and felt like I was disintegrating. I closed my eyes. I let myself turn to dust.

It was peaceful. And dark. Accepting, even. I had let loose. A pain in my chest released, and I fell into nothingness. An abyss with small fleshy, shifting, sparkling blue and red stars peered back at me. I was vaguely aware of some loud, piercing white noise, but it subsided into calmness once again. There was only absence. No words, no thoughts, no feelings.

Just a burning.

I plunged a hand straight through her chest. It pleased me that she coughed and choked, and had her dark, empty eyes widen and her mouth fell open. She held my head, weakly, as I grew and reintegrated and overpowered her. I took her head, and slammed it on the keys, making a cacophony of cluster chords. Her blue, pale skin was like paper versus the wooden surface — tearing and stretching and giving in. The hall echoed with sweet dissonant song. I pulled her above my head, dug in with my claws, and pulled her apart like two rings at a magic show. Flakes of her floated down like confetti.

I heard a clapping. And then another. And more, and more and more

and more. I turned, and the stage lights blinded me, but I could see more and more silhouettes stand up in the audience. A standing ovation. For me.

"What a beautiful performance! Bravo! Bravo!"

The rest sat down.

"Who are you."

"A great doctor, or so I've been told. And you?"

"I'm Brian Harding."

"You should go into acting."

"It wasn't acting."

"Oh ho ho, well, it isn't *now*!"

"You let her perform."

"And what a jolly good show it was!"

He laughed, and laughed, and then they all laughed and laughed and laughed. They were laughing, and they were laughing at me. Their fragile diaphragms wriggled and squirmed and bounced, just to show me. To show me just how much they cared. Just how much they cared for *me*.

I growled and lunged into the crowd.

Dear Judy the Tongue,

I must once again apologize for my behavior at our last meeting, but am proud to announce that I am feeling much more myself again. I had never realized how much stress I was putting myself under being constantly hard

at work on a new toy all the time. Getting out and seeing the world via the Tourist Trap has been a much needed break for me, and for that I must thank you dearly. It has really been a wonderful time.

That being said, I have found myself struck sick. Now, it's nothing to be worried about, just a bit of a cold, but it means that I just don't have the energy to be out and about in the world right now. Being stuck at Tourist Trap has been a little boring this past week, and I am finding myself striving for something to do. I thought, "hey, what is my most favorite thing to just sit down and do?" That would be what I always do best — make toys! Just sitting in bed I have begun a myriad of ideas that I am eager to begin working on. Looking around the house, I think I have enough materials to start making a prototype of one of them, and isn't that exciting!

However, in following with protocol, I thought I should ask you if I could begin working on a little something or other. Wouldn't want to use Wondertainment resources without permission, now, would I? So, this letter is a formal inquiry into whether I, Brainy Brian, am allowed to use the miscellaneous materials in the basement for the creation of an exciting new product, *Vend-a-Friend*!

No child should be without a friend, and imaginary ones only go so far. I am campaigning to make a toy that acts like a person, but has the sole intent of being your child's very bestest friend! It alters its personality to better match the child's, it teaches your child emotional availability, and it plays whenever your child wishes to play! It is the perfect friend that every child deserves, and it would only cost… well, you know. We don't know how much it would cost yet, but I am projecting, say… $140? A bit costly but, well, it needs a *consciousness* inside it, and that just isn't cheap, you know? Anyways, I've been sitting all sniffley all day and am just so eager to hear back from you. I hope that you might allow me to pursue my best interests.

Love you always,
Brian Harding

Dearest Brainy,

That sounds just splendid! Of course, by allowing you to do this I *am* bending some rules — you aren't supposed to use Wondertainment resources to make toy prototypes until the idea has been approved at one of our monthly presentations. However, you have been having a rough go of it, and we always enjoy what you make us, so I am going to pull a few strings for you… and say yes! It sounds like a perfectly wonderful heartwarming idea that will bring smiles to the faces of children across the globe!

How you get these great innovative ideas time after time is beyond me. I am glad to hear you're holding up, in any case. You should know that we've all been worried about you up here. Lots of people fearing that you might never come back. It's been a crazy world here… Jelly Whale Emperor is shaping up quite nicely, but without your guidance all of your crews' usual confidence has been a little shaky and nervous. We're following your blueprints to a T — I've sort of taken your position, I was a pretty good sweets designer myself and am hoping to steer this in a direction you would be proud of. When you get back, you can tweak anything however you like. Didn't want to message you about it because you are having some much needed "me time".

I hope you can feel all of our warm wishes from where you are. The love is immense. We all miss you dearly, and wish you a safe return.

Licks of Love,
Judy Papill

P.S. How do you plan on making a consciousness? Only our most famed toy makers have ever been able to do it. If you pull this off you're on your way to the hall of fame!

Dear Judy the Tongue,

Thank you so much for the go ahead! I am certain you will not be disappointed! About Jelly Whale Emperor, I think that if you have the basic concepts down it is hard to mess up. It is a very unique idea, but I wouldn't imagine a very difficult one. The hardest part is probably going to be its ability to bring desserts to life, but I'm sure you guys will get there in good time. Can't rush genius — my name isn't Brainy for nothing!

I am glad everybody is worrying about me. Is Mr. Ribbit okay? I would hate to think that I left him with hurt feelings — if he's still sad about it, please tell him that I didn't mean any of it and that there is a hug waiting for him when I get back. Tell my crew I miss them too, and tell Polly that the scores are even now, and I forgive her.

Love you always,
Brian Harding

P.S. I think I've found the "materials" to do it myself, but that'll just have to be a surprise, okay? ;)

« To Think I've Spent My Whole Life Waiting|Vend-a-Friend Hub|You Can't Win Them All »

I Don't Want To Bee Alone

[Excerpts on life during the war from the view of a civilian]
1/22/19
It's already been a year since The Foundation was revealed to us. Times are tough, and the war has no signs of stopping. My cousin, Daryl, has been getting sicker by the day, and I have to devote all of my free time to taking care of him. And the President's televised reassurance isn't helping at all, hack. Going to try get more rations soon, but times are tough, and there aren't enough to go around.

1/30/19
There have been more people signing up for the military as of late, which means more food to go around. It's become easier to take care of Daryl, but his condition isn't really showing any improvement. I heard about 10 miles from here is a town with an old medical university. Maybe if i'm lucky, there could be some kind of medical professional there. Going with Daryl in about a week or two.

2/6/19
We arrived at the university town, and found a nice B&B to stay in temporarily. Also found someone who could help us. Robert, a junior at the university in town before the war started. He said he had a hard time diagnosing Daryl's condition, and might need another opinion on it. Hopefully we at least get Daryl's condition diagnosed soon.

2/14/19
Robert contacted his friend named Justine a week ago, but we never heard back. Daryl's condition is getting much worse, and I'm really worried about him. Rations are starting to become sparse, but we manage. The owners of the B&B are allowing us to still stay, despite me being low on cash. It's important to remember that not everyone's an asshole.

2/16/19
It's clear to us that Daryl is in alot of pain, and Robert suggests

assisted suicide. He is leaving the decision up to me. I hoped that i'd never have to make a decision like this.

2/17/19
I decided to put him out of his misery. He was always like a brother to me. Fuck this stupid war, it's pointless.

2/28/19
I don't have much money, but we tried to give him a modest funeral. Robert apologized and gave his condolences. I'm not mad at him, he did his best, and right now, that's all he could do. I'll be heading home soon.

3/21/19
All we have left is water, stale bread, and shitty soup. We'll throw whatever we can find in a big pot and boil it in water. The President keeps assuring us that the war will be short, but it's obvious BS. I hope I at least get to see the war end before I die of old age.

10/31/19
It's already Halloween, time went by alot faster than I expected. Some more SCPs got leaked recently, and people wasted no time putting together costumes. Some of them are even pretty damn terrifying too. But since we don't have any treats, there's bound to be alot of tricks this year. Too bad cleaning supplies are a rarity, my house is going to look terrible.

12/23/19
This is my first second Christmas alone. It's cold as shit outside, and my heating's busted. At least I have a ton of bed sheets I can use as blankets. Even though this year has been horrible, there's still some of that Christmas magic. All I can do now is hope for the future.

9/17/20
No one is making progress in the war, it's just an elaborate draw.

11/12/20
Because of rations getting even lower, people are getting desperate. I've seen people pick up frogs, snakes, and even their own pets to throw in a stew. Their own fucking pets! At least send us some food for gods sake.

12/3/20
My neighbors went missing the other day, and nobody acted like it was strange. I'm worried about them, but I stopped asking questions about them, I don't want to go missing too.

12/5/20
I was asked to clean up the soup kitchen today. Found my neighbors bones in yesterday's stew pot. I'm getting the fuck out of here.

12/9/20
I've been locked in my own home. My keys are missing, and all the doors and windows are locked and boarded up. I think they know I know. I'm fucked.

12/11/20
There was a fight or something yesterday. Heard alot of yelling and a gunshot. This town has truly gone to shit.

12/20/20
Been here 10 11 days. Food is being put in my home when I sleep. They don't want me boney when i'm thrown in the pot. Hope help comes soon.

1/1/21
It's very quiet, too damn quiet.

1/2/21
Heard the boards being broken today. Thought I was done for. Then the weirdest thing happened. These, things, pulled me out of the house. They were tall, humanoid bees. I thought I was having a strange dream or hallucination, but it was real! Thank god i'm OK.

1/5/21
I've been feeling great lately, and I bet it's because of all the wonderful bees people that saved me. I live like a king compared to last year, It's amazing!

1/8/21
I felt kind of terrible yesterday, but still overall had a great day. They told me that I was fine, and I believe them. I mean, after them pulling

me out of that shit hole, Why wouldn't I?

[Unintelligible]/21
I feel like fucking shit today
[Unintelligible]

10/12/21
Found this old notebook from before my transfiguration. I didn't know it was so painful for him, but oh well. He was sacrificed for our noble cause.

10/29/21
There's been reports of unidentified armed soldiers in the area. I hope to god they're with us.

[Addendum]
Excerpt was found in a small town in [DATA EXPUNGED]. Town was subjected to assault, and arson. It is unknown at this time who perpetrated the attack.

I Double E

< Operation Cannery Row: Document 2013§451A3 | *DNM* | *The Hyacinth Hymnal* >

-|-|-

> *I am the rose of Sharon, and the lily of the valleys.*
> *As the lily among thorns, so is my love among the daughters.*
> - **Song of Solomon 2:1-2**

Mackenzie put out her cigarette, the warm July air sticking to her skin. The smell of fresh rain and honeysuckle filled the air. She liked doing this with a bit of a buzz. Made it easier to not overthink. Kate was hanging back, only halfway out the door to the balcony. Mackenzie could tell she was nervous.

“What do you Foundation people call it?” Mackenzie pulled the dried flower out of its cloth bag, one of the many supplies laid out on the wicker table.

“I-double-E. Intentional Extranormal Effort,” Kate said. She took a few tentative steps forward.

“You guys are adorable, you know that? It’s just magic. It’s been around longer than your group or mine, and it’ll be around long after both of ‘em are gone.” She tossed the box of long matches, underhand, to Kate, who caught them with both hands. “Light one.”

Kate, hands shaking a bit, ran the matchhead futilely along the side of the box a couple of times. Mackenzie turned away. She closed one eye and spun the flower in her fingers in front of her face, aligning the stamens just right with the breeze, like her grandmother taught her. With her bright lipstick, natural hair close-cropped, and black boots, Mackenzie-Lee Crook was the opposite of the straight-laced Kate McTiriss, who even on her rare off days wore button-ups,

blazers and slacks in the Florida summer heat.

The first night she'd stayed over at Kate's apartment, Mackenzie was unable to stop herself from storming out of the bathroom to chastise Kate for keeping her meager makeup collection in there. *The humidity ruins the eyeshadow, has nobody ever told you that?* Six months since that night, they were the picture of the uneasy détente the Foundation and Marshall, Carter and Dark had achieved in the American South.

The two groups were figuring out how to coexist in a strange world. So were the two women standing in the humid air, facing the thick and tangled woods. The new Press Coordinator for the Foundation in North Florida handed the Tallahassee Governor's Club's top auctioneer of anomalous objects a spluttering match. Mackenzie gave Kate a slight smile and a small nod, trying to reassure her. They both took a moment to breathe. She brought the match to the dried bluebell, and it caught in an instant.

"So what are you doing now?" Kate bit one of the nails on her left hand, or what was left of a nail. *All nerves, that girl.*

Mackenzie held the flower stem as steady as possible as the smoke rose from it. "Finding the leyline." Kate opened her mouth to ask what exactly that was, but was interrupted by the air above Mackenzie catching fire. From nothing, a narrow line of blazing flame, suspended in the air, sweet smoke pouring upwards into the night sky. Mackenzie jumped a bit with excitement. "Got it!" She turned to the table and put out the flower in the bowl of salted water. She made a quick sign of the cross and muttered a thankful prayer under her breath, and picked up her favorite knife, sliding out the blade. During all of this, Kate was staring up, awestruck, as the flames in the air settled into glowing lights, like a line of fireflies, shifting and pulsing.

Mackenzie studied the shifting lights. "I knew your place was special. Look at this, it's uninterrupted! Beautiful."

"Yeah…" They both stared. Kate tore her gaze from the leyline and fixed her eyes on her partner. "What's with the knife?"

She smiled at the directness of the question. “There’s magic — bits and pieces of cracked reality. The things you contain, the things we sell. Those are concentrated. But the magic is everywhere in this part of the world. It’s like…blood. And these are the veins, running through everything. And you don’t harness it by waving a wand and saying some words. You make a cut to get at blood.” Mackenzie raised the point of the blade to the string of floating lights and, with one decisive motion, sliced downward and dropped the blade. Kate heard a sound like deep wind chimes echoing in the back of her mind. Her heart raced as — *stardust,* that’s the only way she could describe it, *stardust* poured from the wounded sky into Mackenzie’s cupped hand, thick like honey.

The girl in the boots turned to the girl in the blazer, pure unreality shimmering in her hands. “Are you ready?” Mackenzie stepped up to her. “You can say no, it’s okay.”

Kate’s heart was beating so loud she could hear it. The wind chimes were louder, too. But she wanted to see what the other side — the Everything Under Everything – what it looked like. What Mackenzie saw in her nightly prayers outside. Kate, wide-eyed, nodded.

Mackenzie dipped two fingers into the pooled magic, letting the rest spill to the ground. She slid her fingers across her lips and they gleamed and crackled with power. They closed their eyes and leaned in.

They kissed under the Florida moonlight, and Kate felt the world catch flame around her.

I Forget Myself in This Wondrous Night

Mr. Smith, Smith, the last piece grounding himself to the world, trudged through the smoldering hallways. Smith had little idea of where he was going, only knowing that he had to find the door leading out. There were signs, though most were of little use, having turned to ash or been damaged to the point of uselessness. Broken lights had made navigating around obstacles difficult. The only reason Smith continued walking was for whatever door he could find leading out of the site. He would welcome it.

"105 BPM. I'm doing well, Smith. Just keep walking forward, Smith. This was where I went towards one test. It was near some cafeteria. Cafeteria means close to the exit, Smith. Please, Smith. Whichever exit I find will work, Smith."

Mr. Smith stepped over a body, muttering the directions Smith was taking into Smith's tape recorder. Anything to keep Smith aware.

"Doors at the end of the hall. Left or right. Didn't hear any gunshots come from here, Smith. Right door seems less damaged… I'll take the right one, Smith…"

Smith opened the door and continued, navigating blindly down more hallways. After a continuous fifty minutes of walking and talking to himself, repeating his name, Smith found a door at the end of a hall. The scent of food lingered. Smith had finally found the way out.

As Smith approached the door, he took his pulse again. 120. Smith took a deep breath to relax a bit, and tried opening the door. It was locked. He continued to jiggle the doorknob. Nothing.

"Hello? Is anyone there!? Please, my name is Smith, and I need to get out of here! Please, it's Smith!" Smith could hear someone's idle conversation beyond the doors, but nothing to indicate anything about him. "Please, I need help! My name is Smith, my pulse is 120, and I need help! I'm locked in here!" Smith banged his fist on the

door, on the verge of tears. "Please, open the door for Smith!" He could hear the conversation stop as he heard footsteps approaching. Smith's heart raced, as he muttered a prayer to the recorder.

The door opened as a lady[1] looked out into the hallway. Her confused look belied her serious posture, and glazed over him as she peered out into the hallway and back at Smith.

"Are… are you okay? You don't look all that well, Mister… uh…"

"Smith! It's Mr. Smith!"

"Um…" The woman blinked. Confusion permeated her face, gradually shifting into half-emotions. The two looked at each other. Smith kept repeating his name, wanting to stay visible. After a minute, which turned into hours for Smith, terror swept over her face. Smith panicked.

"Maggie, we have a big problem. Probably a Code La—"

Smith charged past her, lightly brushing her aside as he bolted for the door across the cafe. No one followed Smith. The only sound being made were his footsteps. By the time he got to the door and swung it open, he took one last look back at the room.

Everyone had gone back to talking with each other.

The night sky was calm, with the lovely moon and shining stars guiding Smith's way down the desert stretch of road. Smith had no idea where he was going, or if it was the right direction. All he knew was that he had to go somewhere, anywhere. It meant progress, and it meant a silver lining.

"It's alright, Smith. I'm gonna do just fine. Pulse dropped back down to 100, and I think I'm heading north. North is always good. I got it, Smith. I'll walk the whole road if I have to. It's… it's fine, Smith. Besides, I always loved watching the night sky, didn't I, Smith? Something to look up at during construction."

As Smith walked down the road, a band of coyotes took notice and

followed him. They had seemed curious, observing and staring intently at him. Smith continued talking to himself, afraid and nervous, but as long as he kept walking steadily, all the coyotes did was travel besides him and observe.

"I don't know why they aren't attacking me. Shit, I didn't know animals could see me. Just get a hold of myself. Just keep walking, and I'll be out of here. It's okay, Smith. They'll help me find what I need."

Smith and the band shared the rest of the tense walk into town.

"Welcome to… it looks like it's fading. Population: 2,084. I wonder if I count as enough of a person to add onto that, Smith."

Smith turned back to look at his new companions for affirmation. The band had slunk back the way they came, to the visible horizon. He sighed, continuing into the city. Though the streetlights were on, the roads were empty. Smith took out the fully-recorded tape and put it in his pocket, replacing it with yet another. He pressed record before deciding to continue on, needing to find any indication of where he was.

Navigating the town wasn't terribly difficult. It was mostly comprised of residences, and everything was close enough that walking didn't take a long time. Trouble came with Smith's legs as he had walked almost non-stop for the past five hours. There was little time to rest, though the urge was becoming increasingly tempting. Despite this, there was not a single resting area to be found.

On the verge of collapsing, Smith spotted a bench nearby. He sighed with relief, making his way up the road towards it. Just after starting his detour to the bench, his vision quickly grew brighter. The lights around him were blinding, and he had no idea how to react. He felt frozen in place. It brought back —

That's when the truck horn blared.

"Get outta my way, ya goddamn stray!"

The truck swerved around Smith as his body reacted out of instinct and stumbled to the ground by the side of the road. Despite the near-death experience and sudden transition from feet to floor, the sweet relief of resting after all the walking prevented Smith from fully processing the situation. All that left his mouth were groans of pain as he blankly stared at the truck, now pulling in reverse to his side.

"Shit, are you OK? Jesus, ya don't seem so well. Come on, let's take ya to the hospital."

He could feel the tape recorder in his hand, and feel himself being picked up from the ground, but couldn't process it, nor process being slung over the man's shoulder.

It wasn't until until he was slapped in the face that he could recognize his new, current location; in a truck starting down the road next to a man^2. The man glanced over at him occasionally with a look of worry.

"At least ya seem responsive now. Don'cha worry, I'mma take ya to the hospital. What's yer name?"

"Oh, it's uh… it's…" His name. He couldn't remember his name now. He felt on the verge of a panic attack, slowly forgetting himself. This couldn't happen already. He searched for the tape recorder, trying to turn it on quickly, he still had to have it with him, he had to remember his name, he couldn't afford to forget already, not when he was already trying to find —

The button clicked.

" — is Smith. I've been walking around for ages, trying to find a hospital, or some kind of government office. I can find it, Smith. Pulse is 110, not too bad. It's —"

Smith stopped the tape recorder. Smith regained a grasp on it. Smith. Smith. Mr. Smith. Smith could keep remembering.

"Smith, eh? Pleasure to make yer acquaintance, Mr. Smith."

"Same to you. I know this sounds weird, but can you keep calling

me Smith at the end of your sentences? I… have a thing."

"Kinda weird, but if it helps ya then sure, Smith. Name's Jude. Sorry for runnin' ya over back there. Ya looked like a stray for a second. Musta been the night that doesn't make ya look all that human." Smith could feel his heart skip a beat at the sound of that.

"Y… Yeah. I guess. Listen, can you drop me off at the next town? I'm looking for something and it's kind of urgent."

Jude gave Smith an odd look and turned back to the road. "You lookin' to pass out again, Smith? Especially with whatever yer condition is, you can't go around walkin' all willy-nilly. Whatcha lookin' for anyway?"

Smith thought on what to tell Jude, continuing to mutter his name. Smith. Smith. Smith.[3] There wasn't much Smith could say that didn't make Smith seem crazier than he already appeared. Smith looked outside, trying to focus on the world around him. The streets seemed much emptier than he had remembered. It was preferable. After some thought, Smith faced Jude.

"Trying to find my wife and children."

"Huh, that so?" Jude turned to face Smith, his eyes developing that glaze Smith recognized easily. Even so, he smiled at Smith. "What's the wife's name?"

"Eve. That's what I remember, anyway."

"Well, good luck with that. I know how it feels to long after yer family." Jude transferred a cigarette from his shirt pocket to his mouth, grabbing a lighter and lighting the cigarette in one fluid motion. He turned down his window to let the smoke out, quickly flashing a grin to Smith.

"Sure, why not. I'll drop ya off once we get into town, but get someone to look after ya. Don't want the wife to yell at'cha for lookin' like shit. Ya probably know that, but it's a rough feelin'. I sure do!" Jude chuckled, looking bemused by his own statement.

Smith didn't respond, turning back to look outside. It was nice to

have company, at least, however short it'd remain.

It was thirty-three minutes after Jude spoke and fifteen seconds after seeing the very edge of a new town down that road that Smith heard a car fast approaching. The sound stuck out the most; it was too close to have been on the other side of the highway, and though Smith sat comfortably in the truck, the vision getting brighter tipped him off at what was happening again.

Smith could see the people in the car, unaware of what was happening. There was a man, a woman, children in the backseat. They had all looked familiar, someone he could recall in his memories, but he couldn't quite place it. For a brief moment, he could have sworn it was —

"Can't this dumbass see me? The Hell's his —"

By the time Smith recognized what was going to follow, the world had muted itself. Every second slowed down to an hour. He clenched his teeth, gripping his hands to the steering wheel recorder as the truck swerved, and his body thrashed against the seatbelt[4], and the truck tipped on its side,

and

then

nothing.

He woke up on pavement, staring into the sky. The stars were beautiful, and inviting. A thought fluttered through his mind for a brief second.

I wish I could take a journey up there and discover them.

It wasn't until the sound of a car passing by inches from his face that he realized where he was and what had happened. He stood up quickly, the pain searing through his legs. It didn't matter though. He was searching for his tape recorder, not being able to find it. Surely

he must have protected it, it must have been there. But there was no tape recorder, there were no tapes.

His stomach dropped.

"God, no, no no no… Okay. Alright. This is not a big deal, I can remember my name. It's… shit, what is it? Come on, why can't I remember my own name already? It's…"

He turned around, looking at a man climbing out of the wreckage of a truck. The lights in his head turned on again.

"Smith! Right, right. Okay. I just need to remember that. Smith… I can keep remembering this, I know I can. I'll press on. This town has something, I'm sure. Pulse… 130. Deep breaths, S… Smith."

Smith trudged into the town, consciously making efforts to move one leg after another. A wave of panic started to creep over him again, so he looked up at the town ahead. The streets seemed more active during the night, even though no one had taken any efforts to walk over to the scene of the crash. He had known what that meant, and turned back to look at the crash.

The trucker made no effort to look for Smith, nor did anyone make an effort to help him.

Despite Smith's reaffirmation to himself, no one on the streets regarded him for more than a curious second. Any glances met would show confusion or worry before looking away, people continuing on like normal. He expected this, though it didn't make the panic of inevitability abate. The most consolation he got from this was no one making a scene or being frightened from his presence.

"Hospital… just need to find a hospital, Smith…"

The town was harder to navigate than the previous one, resembling more of an urban city than the rural setting Smith last passed through. Many buildings looked the same to him, and streets seemed to converge back on themselves. With no map and no solid point of reference, he found himself lost, wandering randomly. His

legs continued to burn, repeatedly requiring him to stop and rest.

A giant hospital sign greeted Smith as he turned a random corner. Relief washed over him, as he dragged himself into the hospital. The pain lessened now, and he could feel it just within his grasp. The end of his journey, a resolution to what he was seeking. Here, he'd get some kind of a break.

The automatic doors opened for him and he stepped inside the hospital's ER, looking for someone to speak to. He found a desk that wasn't busy and headed over there, speaking to the lady behind the desk.

"Hello? I need help really urgently." The woman didn't look up.

"Please! I need help! My name is… is… it's Smith, I think! Please, can you see me? Can you still understand me? Am I present with you? I'm Smith. I need your help. Please…" He banged on the glass repeatedly, shouting "Smith" over and over. Eventually, the woman[5] looked up, her eyes looking past him.

"Yes? Can I help you, mister?" Her lips pursed, and she seemed to focus in on him a bit more, as if analyzing the situation.

"Please, I need help. I need to know if my wife is here, or if you know where my wife and children are. Their last names are Smith."

"Smith… okay. Can you give me their first names, so I can look them up?"

"Right. It's… it's, um… Um…"

"Sir? Are you alright? You don't seem well." His breathing became labored, and his body shook.

"Sir? Who… who are you? I'm going to call security."

He bolted outside, not bothering to look back at the woman who had picked up the phone. The adrenaline surged through him as he

dashed through the people milling about, out of the doors, onto the sidewalk just off of the hospital grounds. He stopped, panting and sweating heavily. It was too much to take in. He stared up at the sky for longer than he could parse, searching for those stars that gave him comfort a short while ago. They had faded.

"I can't be gone now… do I have to lose it now? I was so close." No one replied, nor did anyone spare him a glance.

"What's going to happen now? Where do I go from here?" He tried to recall the name of someone he knew before, someone close. It couldn't be recalled. There wasn't much concern over it fading, though. Now it felt natural.

He tried to bring up a response to himself, and found the words stuck in his throat. There was nothing left to say, nothing more that he could reconcile himself with.

Footnotes
1. Red hair against his balding grey, dark skin to match his, taller than him by half a foot at 6'4, eyes a dull red, which complimented his —
2. Around six feet. Caucasian to his… well, he wasn't Caucasian, right? Thin compared to… hmm. He didn't feel overweight, but not too thin, so —
3. Smith Smith Smith Smith Smith SmithSmithSm—
4. again he felt like he was flying and it felt so serene and peaceful and he finally felt positivity flow through himself and evenfree
5. Blonde. Five feet. Tired.

I Forgot To Remember To Forget

They were stringing up gold garland all over the house. Mistletoe adorned every doorway while elves stared down mischievously from their various shelves. The entire dormitory looked like a collision at the intersection of holiday kitsch and cheer.

Precariously perching on a wicker stool, she placed a Foundation Star atop their over-sized tree. As the wooden support collapsed beneath her, she felt a moment of free fall before strong arms stopped the fall. Smiling wildly, she threw her arms into his.

"Merry Christmas!"

The sterile interview room looks the same as it has every other day of the year, save for a single scraggly wreath clinging to life on the inside of the door. Adileh Khayyam watched as two muscle-bound goons in the Foundation's honorable armed forces escorted a nervous young woman towards her station.

As she sat down, Adileh made note of her posture. Every ounce of her desperately wanted to escape. Muscles tensed and pulsated underneath skin with hair standing on end. The cheap aluminum table rattled from her trembling as she leaned into it.

Adileh let her lips split apart with practiced precision. It was her second most practiced smile, after the one she used for people she knew were going to die. "It's alright. I'm not going to hurt you. I know you must be very confused."

For a few moments, the woman said nothing. She only stared at her lap, where hands might lie. Leaning forward, Adileh grabbed her hand with a practiced motion. "Have they explained to you what happened?"

"They said… that I… they said…" shaking her head, she glanced

into Adileh's eyes before darting back to her lap. "Amnestics. I requested amnestic treatment."

"That's right." Adileh scribbled gibberish on her clipboard. "Now, this is important. Do you remember *anything* about it? Anything at all?"

Pausing, the woman pursed her lips and stared intently at the empty space on the wall.

Access card that didn't belong. Memetics. Why had he been in memetics?

A man by the name of Vang, he said, who had some interesting ideas and liked talking to him. That was all. Just that and nothing more.

They got each other stockings that year. She gave him a razor, and the newest Call of Duty. He gave her a bleached crocodile skull that he'd painted for her.

For awhile, that was enough.

A pen tapping on a clipboard jolted the young woman back to reality.

Slowly shaking her head, the woman grabbed at her temples. "No. Nothing. Not even… paperwork or procedure. How deep…"

"Don't worry about that. Your cognitive functions have not been affected. This is your first amnestic treatment, so-"

"How do you know?"

Closing her eyes, Adileh looked up from her papers and nudged her head to shuffle hair aside. "I'm your doctor. It's my job to know."

Drumming her fingers on the table, two accusing eyes peeked through the mess of hair. "So… you did this to me, then."

"No, sweetheart. You chose this. It was for your own good, and you believed that when it happened." Reaching into her jacket, Adileh

pulled out a small tape recorder. Pressing play, a less anxious woman's voice began speaking, clinically, reading a consent form.

Watching as the young woman stared into the recorder, Adileh wondered if she could even hear what was playing.

"I'm so sorry."

She'd felt the weight behind his face when she punched him. How could he? How could he be so stupid?

Cognitohazard research 101 was avoiding exposure. Had he even tried?

Was he tired of trying?

Falling, he broke apart, and so did the floor. It was a kitchen now, and he was fixing her breakfast the morning after. The eggs drifted in her eyes as she struggled to bring them to her mouth.

Looking down, there were whole eggs running around her plate. Rubbing her eyes, she opened them to see sunny-side-up eggs enjoying the sunrise through her front window.

Was this before, or after the scrambling?

Looking up into Adileh's eyes for the first time, the young woman spoke in a pleading voice. "Do you know… how bad it is?"

Adileh clinked her pen on the table. "My work is psychological. As in, if you had been dosed with multiple serious amnestics, it would render you psychologically unfit for service. As you can see, since you are not wearing an orange jumpsuit, that is not the case. Fortunately."

The woman shuddered at the mention of an orange jumpsuit. "What happened? Did… I do something?"

"Oh, honey, no…" A smooth silken voice escaped Adileh's lips. "You volunteered. I'm afraid any more detail might trigger memories that

are 99% gone. Give it a few days, and even this interview will probably be a blur. The important thing is, nobody is angry at you."

Tears began flowing from the woman's eyes, and she slumped onto the table. "Thank you… please… I just… want to help. I don't want to be bad to the Foundation."

His face had been so red, and she had been so angry.

Why was she so angry?

They walked in circles and someone was coming for them. He was very angry.

Cirlces of anger and circles of logic. Something was wrong.

Tearing down garland and there's an acid burning on her face. Dripping from her eyes, everything burns.

The fluorescent lights were buzzing above their heads.

"I know you don't…" Adileh's voice faded as the woman's eyes crossed. Looking down to her clipboard, she began to write down everything that had happened so far. Disorientation, dissociation, trance-like fugue… standard symptoms of Class-B amnestics.

Flipping the page over, gunmetal-grey ink told the woman's story. Foundation researcher for ten years, in biological science. Had irreplaceable experience and knowledge with some anomaly or project.

In the field for why the patient had been treated, some Foundation doctor with a sick sense of humor had written *disobedient hysteria.* Scratching it out with her pen, Adileh began to write something and hesitated.

Why had they stolen the past this time?

For a moment she remembered looking asleep.

He had been looking at her with such pitying expression. Something awful had been happening for a long time.

Then, he said it. Those words. What were the words?

A house of inconsistent horses has a secondary effect…

"Can you hear me?"

Snapping back to reality, the woman placed her hands on the table looked into the space around Adileh's eyes. "Is there… when will I be thinking straight? What… when?"

Finding their hands touching, Adileh looked back into the void. "Stay with me. We're both here in this room. There's nobody else. Do you understand that?"

Absentmindedly nodding, the woman began shaking. "When can I go home?"

"Do you remember having a home?"

Pausing, the woman placed a finger on her lip. "I don't know. I must live somewhere. The Foundation takes care of me."

"Of course they do." Rhythmically rubbing the hand, Adileh saw a small pale band around her ring finger.

Frowning, a discomforting thread of thought that had been twining inside her twisted into a knot.

Memories fade to rot in time, as all things must.

Relationships will fade and wane, and pass into oblivion.

Accept these truths, and you will be free.

Nothing lasts forever.

The Foundation will take care of me, too.

Withdrawing her hand, the young woman leaned back into her chair. Pleading eyes stared from someplace far away. "I'm done. I want to go. Can you…?"

Nodding, Adileh pressed the hidden security signal. Within seconds, they were there.

The woman instantly regarded them with reluctance before rising and stalking with them out of sight. Creaking as it closed behind them, the door shut and left silence.

FROM: **Doctor Adileh Khayyam**

TO: **Superintendant Roger Click**

RE: **Ethics Committee Incident Report -**

On / / Junior Researcher H deliberately exposed himself to the memetic agent of SCP- . Following this, the subject deliberately infected his live-in partner, Junior Researcher M . It is believed to be deliberate due to the steps Junior Researcher H took to hide his activities, including illegal usage of Foundation access cards and security data. Researchers V and have been reprimanded and placed under closer observation due to indirect connection to this activity.

Following amnestics treatment, Junior Researcher M is to be reassigned to another project and the former Researcher H has been demoted to D-Class. My only further recommendation at this time is continued observation of Researcher M to ensure the success of the amnestic treatment.

Have a happy new year, Foundation personnel!

I Have a Patron

Fall 1477

It was a lovely late Fall afternoon when she visited my shop. A nervous looking girl, young and plain.

"Excuse me?"

"Hm, yes?"

"Did I get the right shop? I mean… are you Leonardo da Vinci?"

"That I am. What brings someone like yourself to my shop?" Truly, an embarrassing sight. Sketches and art supplies scattered about the room, and an unfinished painting hanging on the easel behind me.

"I was told to come to extend an invitation."

"I see… well, what kind of invitation is it?" I can feel time pass while the woman appears to be collecting her thoughts, possibly planning her next words.

"The family has… established an academy of some sorts. A collection of philosophers, artists, doctors, and others… all of which possessing certain sets of skills."

"Go on?"

"We feel as though a mind like yours would be exactly what is needed at the Academy. Will you accept?"

"You haven't even told me what this 'academy' is… and why did you say 'we?'" Now is not the time to be getting caught up in something that is too good to be true. I have yet to establish myself as anything in Florence, and the idea of an 'academy' wanting me seems odd.

"The Garden of the Piazza San Marco. You must have heard of it." Her eyes narrow.

"Indeed, I have. But why would the Medici family be interested in somebody just starting out?" I question. The woman pauses again.

"Don't lie to me. You qualified as a master in the Guild of Saint Luke years ago," she snaps.

"What else do you know about me?"

"Much more- My lady knows much more than you think."

"And tell me, is your Lady Clarice Orsini herself?"

"Yes." She pauses. "She also says you're in no position to turn down a patron."

"…" She has me there. "So she wishes to meet me?"

"She wishes for you to join the Academy."

"I suppose I should at least visit. Lead the way… I don't believe I caught your name."

"Oh, it's Taddea."

"Right, well, lead on Taddea."

The Medicis truly do have more money than one could possibly know what to do with, and the sprawling villa before me serves as proof of just that. Taddea pulls me through the house like a horse on a lead until we reach a back garden. My fingers itch for a sketchbook and pencils until I see somebody is already here. Not only is she dressed like a noblewoman, she carries herself like one.

"Tadd, you brought him. I'm delighted. Did you tell him what we do here?" she says. This has to be her. Clarice Orsini. Taddea shakes her head.

"No, my lady, I din't."

"You might as well come along while I give the tour." She turns to me. "Apologies, my husband is out on business at the moment, along with most of the Academy, but I believe you'll still get an idea of what it is we do here." She walks, and Taddea follows without having been given a single order, still pulling me along.

"If you choose to stay, you'll find you'll want for nothing. My husband will pay for anything you could possibly need or want, so long as it's related to what we do here. Of course, you'll live here, but that should hardly be a problem. Your stipend, however, will depend on how much you contribute to the Academy and its goals. Am I understood so far?" she says, back turned to me the entire time.

"Yes… May I ask what it is the Academy's goals are?"

"It'd be so much more simple to show you. Tadd, the door please." The waif of a girl takes a large iron key, and unlocks the door to a back building I hadn't noticed before. It looks like a stable, but wasn't there one elsewhere? Inside, something roars, and I step back. The two women, on the other hand, do nothing.

"He can't get to you. The cage is too good."

"Cage? What do you have that needs to be kept in a cage? What does it have to do with medicine or art?" I slowly walk in, scientific curiosity getting the better of me.

Cage is an understatement. It seems like this entire building was modified to keep in one creature. Standing at six and a half feet tall is… a Minotaur.

"It's impossible."

"And he's only the beginning. Not everything at the Academy is this… large, but all are things that shouldn't exist. Shouldn't be here. Yet they do. The Academy has two goals, Leonardo. To collect these objects and specimens, and to study them." Lady Clarice presents this with pride.

"… There's more?"

"Much more." The lady smiles.

So much goes through my mind. This morning, a Minotaur seemed impossible. And yet here one is right in front of me. Living, breathing… snorting angrily. And they tell me it's not the only thing like it that they have? The artist in me wants to capture all of it in its true form, to preserve its image for all time. The scientist in me wants to study its movements and actions. And if it truly isn't the only thing that shouldn't exist yet does that is here…

"I accept."

"Wonderful. Tad, I believe it's feeding time for our dear Minotaur. If you will see to that while I make the arrangements for Leonardo to move in, that would be much appreciated." The younger girl does as she's bid, while I stare in awe at the beast.

"Follow her! Really, for someone supposed to be a genius you really are a fool." Taddea hisses, shoveling in some hay and oats for the beast that had my attention for so long. I look around to realize Lady Clarice had left the stable.

My first few weeks are a whirlwind of discovering one strange and wonderful artifact after another. The Medicis have an astounding collection, though I can't make heads or tails of where these things could have come from, or how they could have possibly been brought to Florence, all without anybody noticing. The Minotaur, I learned, came in from Crete in the middle of Summer, and had to be kept asleep for the duration of its journey to the villa. In these weeks I had hardly spared a thought to those I had and had not met outside of those deemed part of the Academy. Lady Clarice and Taddea had been invaluable in my study of these artifacts and creatures that had captivated my mind so thoroughly. I had nearly filled a book with my anatomical studies of the Minotaur, capturing the image of a statue that was so lifelike it did in fact move, despite being made of cold marble, all done by the light of a fire that could never go out and was said to have been brought down by Prometheus himself. I thanked every god that had ever been worshiped for this opportunity given to me by the Medici family, all before having met Lord Lorenzo, who was supposedly out on business. Nobody would tell me exactly what.

"Uh… Leo?" Tadd pops her head into my room.

"Hm?" I look up from the rough beginnings of a sketch of a mechanical arm, wanting to capture some of the magic these objects held for myself.

"Lord Lorenzo's home… He'd like to meet you… You might want to bring your book." I close the one I had been working in, and grab the one I had just finished filling that morning, and follow Tadd to an office of sorts. Inside is Lady Clarice and a man I can only assume is Lorenzo de'Medici. The banker and Lord of Florence has a somewhat welcoming expression attempting to blanket what must normally be a serious face.

"Ah, you must be Leonardo. Welcome to the Garden of the Piazza San Marco. My wife tells me you have been living with us for a few weeks now."

"Ah, yes my lord. I've been enjoying every minute of it. You have quite the collection here."

"Of course I do. Sandro, Domenico, and Pietro produce so much art. It's almost impossible to find places to put all of it." He laughs. "Come now, let me see your work."

I do as I'm bid, and hand over the filled sketchbook. It was one I had began before joining the Academy, and its early pages full of figure studies and drafts of portraits show it. He stops at a page I had marked. My first sketch of the Minotaur.

"What an interesting subject. I never would have taken you as one for old myths." It is at this point Lady Clarice sighs.

"Lorenzo, he knows," she says flatly. He immediately looks over at his wife.

"You told him?" He does not look happy at all.

"As I already tried to tell you, he's more than another artist to add to your collection. This is a man of science as well. He's already proven to be eager to at least attempt to understand what we really do here. Look further, you'll see. You'll understand why I had to do

it." She explains rather calmly. Lord Lorenzo continues looking through my work, his face unreadable.

"And what do you think of what we do here?" he asks, after a long pause.

"I'm… honestly, it's like seeing an entirely new world."

"And you're not frightened?"

"Nowhere near as frightened as I am fascinated." I reply. Lord Lorenzo stands, and hands my sketchbook back to me.

"Then I suppose I should show you my latest acquisition. Come." He walks out of the room with a determination and a purpose, occasionally checking to make sure nobody but Lady Clarice or I am following him. This time I'm lead to a wine cellar with a secret back room dimly lit by the lantern Lord Lorenzo handed me. He pries the lid of a crate open, and beacons me over. Inside is what appears to be a Grecian statue of a young woman, its dull shine indicating it is solid gold.

"Meet Princess Zoe."

"Another moving statue?" I ask.

"No, a living one. Feel her pulse." He puts my hand on the statue's neck, and I'm surprised to feel a faint pulse. Not only that, but it's warm. I touch its arm to be sure it's not residual heat from Lord Lorenzo, but it too gives off a slight amount of heat. Dull, seemingly lifeless eyes peer back at me, unmoving. Unlike the other moving statue, they have no depth, two solid orbs of gold.

"The daughter of King Midas," he says proudly, "not as dead as the myths make her out to be."

"And you call this life?"

"No, I say it's not death. There's no way of knowing whether or not she's actually alive in there. Or at least I have no way of knowing. But you… You're a man of medicine and science. It shouldn't be too hard for you to figure it out." He pats me on the back.

"How am I supposed to determine if it's alive?"

"I wouldn't know, I'm not the doctor here. But you are. I'm going to take my leave and see what the others in the Academy are up to. You, my friend, should stay here and get to know her a bit more." Lord Lorenzo leaves, Lady Clarice following closely after him. I'm briefly told how to close up the secret panel before they leave me alone with this golden girl.

I have something to share.

This is not a creepypasta.

This is a true story. I'm not writing this in character, kids. Were it shorter, I'd just make it a forum post, but as it is I feel like it deserves a page of its own.

A few years ago, when I was seventeen or so, my grandmother still lived in the same house she'd owned since before my mother was born. She and her husband had never shown any interest in moving, and the house had been completely paid for years ago. It was in a nice neighborhood brimming with the trappings of middle class affluence, where the last bad thing to happen had been a major car accident on a nearby hillside in the mid sixties. All in all a boringly normal place for an older woman and her husband to live out their retirement in a happy miasma of suburban contentment.

They'd never been much for pets. They took care of my aunt's dog for a week once, I think, but beyond that I don't recall my grandmother ever even considering owning a pet. Then, one day, when my entire family had been bundled and prodded into the car for the three hour drive to visit, we found that they had at some point acquired a… cat.

There's a reason for my hesitation.

The first time we encountered the cat was in the middle of a family dinner. Now, dinner with my family is a boisterous affair, with much passing of food and chattering and good-natured ribbing and usually a tantrum from at least one cousin, and this occasion was no different. But midway through the meal, we all stopped. As one, we grew quiet, and turned to face the still empty doorway. We could all somehow tell something was coming. My idiot little cousin actually dropped his fork with a resounding clang, but no one turned around. And the cat stalked in.

It never blinked. Ever, that I'm aware of. It just stared, slowly moving its gaze from side to side like some strange ritual, never seeming to so much look at anything as to scan it. Then, it opened its mouth, wide, wider than I've ever seen any animal's mouth open, and sat there in silence. After a few moments, a sound came, rising from nowhere in particular, a harsh shrieking beep like a microphone slowly moving closer to a speaker. Feedback, tinged with silence. Then its mouth slid closed again, and it wandered out. Dinner resumed.

No one mentioned the cat that night.

The next morning, when we had all risen and dressed and fought over bathrooms and generally lost ourselves in tumultuous preparation for our various drives home, I sat in the kitchen with a plate of stolen leftovers and asked my grandmother about the cat. She told me that it had just shown up one morning, waking her up with its strange harsh feedback not-meow. She'd taken it outside, and her husband searched the whole house for holes and cracks and gaps it could have come in through, but found nothing. Every morning, the same routine. Eventually they'd even resorted to replacing the grates on the ventilation shafts in a fruitless attempt to keep it out. It always reappeared, stalking into rooms and scanning them with its weird red gaze, then beeping like a broken amplifier and stalking out to vanish again.

They never fed it, and as far as I know it never ate. But for those times it swished into rooms to look around and split the air with its noise, it was nowhere to be found at all.

My grandmother moved. The entire family was angry about it, and still is. She and her husband just packed up and left that house and all its memories behind for a small bungalow in a less classy neighborhood. They refused to say why.

This story is too long, and I'm sorry. I know I should cut it short, but I've been wanting to write this down for a long time, and I want to be sure not to leave anything out. To make a long story short, the cat appeared in their new house as well, repeating the same bizarre behaviors as it had before, but this time its sound took on a harsher, buzzing quality, with the single tone beep slightly fainter among the

static-like hiss. They put up with it long enough to complete building a new house, then they left it behind. So far, it hasn't been back.

Recently, in a phone call with my girlfriend, I brought up the subject of the cat, and how strange it had been, and realized something that worries me. She asked me to describe it.

I can remember the pure white of its… fur?, and the deep angry red of its eyes, but beyond that…

I don't think it had a tail at all. And the strange wide mouth I remember was like nothing I've ever seen on a cat before. In my mental images, there's no teeth. Just a gaping pink maw. And that strange, stalking walk… Cat's knees don't *do* that. Really, they don't.

In fact, the only thing remotely cat-like about it is the fact ingrained into my consciousness, that every time I or anyone else looked at it the hair on the backs of our necks rose and our minds said loudly, "*CAT*".

There's a theory that nothing we see is real, and that the entirety of our consciousness exists solely as a way of protecting ourselves from the realization of what's really there.

Anyway, I just needed to get that out.

~yoric

I have the right to be forgotten

Mr. Young, please put the weapon down. You have more to live for than this.

No response.

Baltimore PD crisis negotiator Andrea Wagner stood upright against the wind, facing a local mom & pop restaurant, and the man standing within it. Seconds passed, and Andrea cautiously brought the microphone to her mouth again, and began her breathing exercises.

OK, best course of action at this poi

BANG

Anthony Young woke up still standing, stark naked save a steel collar attached to his neck. He continued to look ahead at the wall of steel chains in front of him as his left hand quickly balled into a fist that vaguely pointed towards his chin. He stared, unmoving, as the police rushed through the chains and into the store.

Anthony began to process his surroundings.
The city began to process his death.

The universe began to tug at his collar.
The chain ran taut from the collar to his corpse, and Anthony buckled to the ground. He didn't feel it, as he did not have nerves to feel with, and he did not feel emotion, as he had no brain to feel with. And yet, lying down on what would have been the cold linoleum floor, Mr. Young thought. His thoughts strayed to what lay ahead: The sky, the future, and the afterlife.

Anthony noticed that behind and above the police and EMTs, the chain curtains pointed towards the drop ceiling, and beyond that, they must point towards the air. Anthony thought about what was above the ceiling. He thought about what could exist in the sky to make the chains rise. Anthony wondered if he'd lie there forever.

Anthony thought on this topic for some time. After a few weeks, he suddenly realized he could stand. And so he did. He stood up, turned around, and looked underneath his feet at the spot where he died. There was a queue of perhaps twenty people intersecting his patch of linoleum. Anthony would have cared, had he had either the capacity to or had not seen the queue progress over and over again.

Anthony thought about why he was capable of doing anything, let alone wonder, if he had no emotions. After all, curiosity was an emotion, so why did he stand up? Anthony eventually settled on the explanation that if he could think, the state of his corporeality didn't matter, since the universe didn't bother being consistent. On that note, Anthony turned towards the doors and tried to exit.

He walked in place for a month before his chain loosened enough to leave. Standing below the open air, Anthony was able to see what lay above.

538 people were visible, waiting in the air at varying heights, all facing the sun and all near motionless save for a slow, steady slackening of their respective chain. Rarely, one might be privileged to see some poor or lucky soul simply disappear into the air. Occasionally, someone would lurch up or be torn back.

It was an altogether oddly calming sight. One that reminded Anthony of home, and all of the emotions those memories bring. Emotions? This shouldn't be possible; Anthony had no brain, why was he so

happy when he looked towards the sky? Why did he want to reach the sky?

His eyes darted to and from each hanging body, trying to find an explanation, some cause for this inconsistency in an already inconsistent set of rules, though he found none. He looked around him, having thought that perhaps the source of his emotions was at eye level. Instead, he lost the joy and bemusement he had but a few moments ago.

And so Anthony stared up towards the sky as he began to walk towards the cemetery, stopping only to realize that he's made more progress in thirty seconds than in the past two months. Nevertheless, Anthony continued to where he knew he would find a chunk of stone engraved with his name.

He eventually did find his grave, though it was far more… *generic* than he thought it would be. It looked distinctly regulated, a vertical rectangular stone bearing no features but his name, date of birth, and date of death. It almost stood out among the mass of immensely varying tombstones and crosses, though it never quite managed that.

A woman approached Anthony from the east, an expression of quiet solitude painted onto her face, and a bouquet of various flowers held in her right hand. She crouched down to read one of the older graves, a granite slab in the form of a melted candle. *Alexander O'Reilly*, she whispered with a solemn smile, as she placed a lily on the grass.

And on another plot of land, somewhere near Sheridan, a chain lurched back towards the earth.

Margaret Tiller, mother of five. The woman choked out. *Hey, I bet you're happy you don't have to deal with that anymore, huh?* The woman chuckled, having placed a young rose on the lip of the marble, and likewise having ripped Margaret from the heavens.

And when the girl bearing flowers reached Anthony's grave, he wasn't around to see what she did, for his chain had tightened, and Anthony was dragged toward the store where he had taken his own

life.

I Hope That I Get Old Before I Die

Dr. Ralph Roget knocked on the door, shave-and-a-haircut style. It was the way he always knocked when he was a kid, coming with Mom to see the grandparents. It was also the only way for the now-retired Director Gillespie to recognize who was at the door, and come answer it.

She did answer it, a moment after his thought finished. A small old woman, a bit withered in her body, but she still had the kind face that he could remember smiling down as her arms lifted him up. Shirley Gillespie's face lit up as she saw her grandson on her doorstep.

"Oh, my goodness! It's so lovely to see you… please, please, come in… you've gotten so tall!" She tittered joyfully, lightly pulling on Ralph's arm to escort him into the room. The main apartment was small and plain, with a single antennae-box television set, an overstuffed armchair, and a little table beside it. In the corner, there was a small fake Christmas tree. Ralph's eyes lingered on the tree.

"Your grandfather and I picked it up yesterday morning. It's lovely, isn't it? Bob says he's going to decorate it soon."

Ralph sighed. The home had put the tree up in her room, like every other room. It was a cheap plastic tree, without any decoration, and it looked like the leaves were actually AstroTurf. He smiled at his grandmother, and nodded. "It's very nice. Did you pick it out?"

"Yes, yes…" She looked into his face for a moment, smiling. "You're getting so tall, dear. You'll have to stand by Bob when he gets back home."

"I will, Director." He smiled at her. She used to become so annoyed when he called her 'Director'. She'd always go on about how she'd retired to get away from stuffy formality, and she wanted to just be grandma from then on. Now? She just smiled and nodded, with a cheery disconnect from his words.

"How's work been going? Are you still friends with David?" She picked an ancient tray of cookies, and placed them on the ground in between them.

"No. He doesn't work at Site-77 any longer, and I haven't heard from him in awhile." Ralph didn't know who David was. He'd never known a David. In all likeliness, if he ever knew a David, Director Gillespie would likely never know about it.

"That's a shame. He was a polite boy." Director Gillespie looked towards where her last room had a window. "Did you see the tree?"

"Yes, I did."

Director Gillespie looked back to Ralph. "Why, you've gotten so tall! I'll have to compare you to Bob when he gets home."

"Grandpa's not coming home, Director." Ralph kept his eyes locked on where the window was. He left his grandmothers face out of his sight.

"Oh… well, at least he's doing well," said Director Gillespie, talking to nobody in particular.

"… I should be going. It's been nice seeing you."

Director Gillespie smiled at him. "Well, it's been lovely having you down! Bob and I both loved seeing you, and I'll tell him you left when he comes home."

"You'll tell him how much I've grown, right?" Ralph smiled at her.

"Grown?" She looked at him, her smile stopped in space.

Dr. Roget stood up, and turned away from her. "I'll see you soon, grandma."

His grandmother smiled at him, the recognition in her eyes fading. "Goodbye…"

Dr. Roget stepped out of the apartment, walked out of the building, out of the complex, and got into his car. Sitting in the seat, he

sighed.

He pulled out of the snowy driveway of the Soft Community Plantations retirement home, and back into the night.

I hope you get back to me soon

SCP FOUNDATION STANDARD COMPUTER TERMINAL

WELCOME TO YOUR NEW AUTHORIZED FOUNDATION COMPUTER TERMINAL. TO ALLOW FOR AUTOMATIC REBOOT OF SYSTEMS PLEASE INPUT THE PROPER CREDENTIALS

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INPUT LEVEL 2 PRIMARY SECURITY CREDENTIALS

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ACCESSING FILES…

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ACCESSING DATA LOG. PLEASE INPUT EVENT DATE AND EVENT DETAILS

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Date: / /

Event Data: I'm not exactly sure how to use this thing, but I hope you get this daddy. Hi!!!! It's been so long since you left us, I hope you get back to me.

Date: / /

Event Data: I know you're a long time away and the time might be different where you are but can you PLLLLLEEEEEEEEAAAAAAASSSSSSEEEEEEEE respond? We miss you.

Date: / /

Event Data: HAPPY NEW YEAR DADDY! If I find a way, I could hopefully send you some pictures of the drawings Tommy has been making for me. They're so cute. Please get back to me when you've found her. Love, Kim. :)

Date: / /

Event Data: Hey dad, I've been fiddling around with your old watch you had in the attic. I think I can make it work again. A lot of electrical stuff has been starting to work like normal but it's really slow and wonky. Maybe that's why these messages aren't being sent to you. I'll post what David thinks. See ya.

Date: / /

Event Data: David said that this computer was made in the 80's or something lol. Europa still hasn't left our sky yet and people have been thinking that it's been the cause of the power going out or something like that. :P Anyway, good night dad, I'm goin to bed.

Date: / /

Event Data: Hey dad, I've been pretty sad lately and Tommy won't talk to me. I just really need a hug. :,(

Okay, bye.

Date: / /

Event Data: There was this comet that flew past Earth and David said the light reflections was the main thing that turned Europa purple. It was soooo beautiful and also cute because Tommy took me up on top of a hill to watch it with me. I blushed so hard when he hugged me and kissed my cheek. I was like crying OMG.

BTW this "event data" thingy is kinda annoying… Do you know how to turn it off?

Date: / /

Event Data: David has been looking at some old shops that have spare parts and old computer stuff. I asked if he could get me a scanner so I can send you some drawings. Anyway, see you tomorrow dad! Love ya! :D

Date: / /

Event Data: David was pestering me again today about how I could unlock this SCP computer. I showed him your card and the password and stuff. I hope you don't get mad daddy, he was just SO annoying and I needed to shut him up. Talk to you later. Please respond…? :)

Date: / /

Event Data: Tommy was so romantic today! He took me to see the Eiffel Tower and It was AMAZING! Thank god for that wormhole haha lol jk. But seriously I love him! HEHEHEHE I'll talk to you

tomorrow dad!!! :D

Date: / /

Event Data: HAPPY BIRTHDAY DAD!!!! I hope the other people in your shuttle give you cake or whatever. :P Love you! Oh and Tommy says hi! XD

Date: / /

Event Data: Tommy was crying today because he missed his mom and I asked if he wanted to stay with me for a little while. I know I'm 14 dad but I can perfectly handle a guy sleeping over at our house for a few months lololol. Anyway, love ya! Kim. <3

Date: / /

Event Data: Why did you leave me daddy? I miss you so much! Please come home.

Date: / /

Event Data: David was scared today that our universe is gonna collapse because of the spacial anomolys (did I spell that right? :P), and that's also why we ended up near Jupiter. Is all that true??

I don't wanna die tho.

Date: / /

Event Data: David managed to get some of Tommy's drawings onto the computer interface. HOPE IT WORKS! LOVE YOU!

Date: / /

Event Data: I fucking hate you dad! You selfish fucking cunt! I saw

the photos and the backed-up diary entries that were on this fucking thing and I know exactly what you were doing! WHY THE FUCK WOULD YOU ABANDON ME JUST TO FLY INTO SPACE AND FIND SOME ASTRONAUT CIRCLING AROUND SATURN'S ORBIT???!!!!! I don't give a shit if it's your wife! You still left me here… You fucking coward!

Date: / /

Event Data: Why do you have to be so far away?

Date: / /

Event Data: My attempts at suicide haven't worked yet… I'll keep you posted.

Date: / /

Event Data: Tommy found me with my wrists slit in the bathtub this morning. Maybe it's because the sun is so dark… And the moon doesn't exist… All we have is that massive blue moon hovering just above our atmosphere. Whenever I walk down the streets people are crying, or jumping off of buildings, or doing whatever…

… Or maybe I just can't see properly…

Tommy seems to be the only one that's happy in this world, the only person I can trust. Goodnight dad.

Date: / /

Event Data: I'm sorry for being mean to you a few weeks ago… I just need you so badly right now. Tommy says that I should be emptying out my emotions to him rather that you but… I'm scared daddy. Please come home. I miss you so much.

Date: / /

Event Data: Please come home. :,(

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FINAL MESSAGE SENT: 163 YEARS AGO

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ACCESSING PHOTOS…

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++ ACCESS ALL IMAGES ON TERMINAL ++

Hehe… It looks so cute doesn't it dad?

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ACCESSING DATA LOGGER…

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PLEASE INPUT EVENT DATE AND EVENT DETAILS

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Date: / /

Event Data: Happy birthday Kim. Daddy loves you.

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YOU ARE NOW LOGGED OUT.

I Keep The Wolf From The Door

“This was…surprisingly nice, 5760. Though you've provided me with a particularly low standard.” 5760’s ears perked in happiness. Despite the flickering candlelight making 5760’s various bony protrusions cast ominous shadows, Lakshmi had to grudgingly admit that 5760 looked kind of adorable.

“I’m glad you liked it. I remembered you like lobster, so I asked if they could whip something up for you. It’s your birthday. You deserve something special.” 5760 propped its face in both hands and leaned forwards.

“Well, if this is an attempt to get back in my good graces, consider it failed. So don't get any ideas.” Only Reynolds, Meyers, and Gonzalez had remembered. Reynolds had stammered out a happy birthday and promptly disappeared. Meyers had brought in cupcakes. Gonzalez had presented her with the paperwork that officially raised her salary.

“I almost forgot! I have a present for you,” said 5760, producing a brown paper package from under the table. “Open it, will you?”

“It's not going to work.”

“It's not meant to endear me to you. Now open it.”

“I don't know what you're trying to accomplish, but…” Lakshmi grumbled as she opened the package. “You shouldn’t have. You really shouldn’t have.”

“Put it on.”

Lakshmi did, and the candlelight made the intricate detailing on the bone of the bracelet come to life.

“I made it. Just playing around. Carving things. Manipulating things.

It’s not romantic or anything. More like a make-up gift for putting you through all of this.”

They were interrupted by siren klaxons, followed by the metallic clank of the multi-lock security system fitting into place.

“Attention,” said a male voice over the speakers, “SCP-8004 has breached containment. Please proceed in an orderly manner to your designated checkpoints. Security personnel are to proceed to the rendezvous point designated for Scenario 8004-Delta. Remain calm and proceed to your stations."

"Which one is 8004?" 5760 asked quietly, after a long silence.

"I'm…I'm not sure."

"Hey, Agarwal. You and the skip okay in there?"

"Yeah, we're all right. We're locked in here, but there's nothing else getting in or out."

"You stay there. You're probably safer than the rest of us. Keter cells should work as well from the outside as they do from the inside."

"Okay. Will do." A pause. "Gonzalez?"

"Yeah?"

"What *is* 8004, exactly?"

"It's the hair and nails one. It's gonna be a bitch to get back in its box."

"Ugh. *That.* Well, I won't keep you."

"See you on the other side, kid." The voice in her ear went silent.

5760 laid down next to Lakshmi, ears perked.

"You okay, Shmi? You're trembling."

"Yeah. I'm fine. Just…Keter breaches. Rarely fun. Someone usually dies. More than one someone."

"This one doesn't seem too bad, It's a mass of keratin and chitin, right?"

"That eats people."

"Okay, so it's like ten of those hair things you pull out of your shower drain with a couple bug legs and fingernail clippings added in."

"Bigger."

"I can still take it."

Lakshmi laughed, voice trembling. They waited in silence, the quiet scraping of the spinal vines against the femoral trunks oddly soothing. The bone forest, for all its horror, was a quiet sanctuary.

Until.

"Do you hear that?" 5760's voice was terse and hushed. The fur on its hackles was rising slowly, spines at attention.

"Hear what?"

"Listen." At first all she could detect was the ambient chattering and creaking of the skeletal woods. And then.

Drip. Drip. Drip.

"That dripping noise?"

"That's all?"

"Your ears must be better than mine. What are you hearing?"

"I think it's -"

"Wait. I think I hear it too."

The drip was increasing in speed, but that wasn't all. She could just barely hear the *click-tick, clack-tack* of a thousand insect legs and shells skittering through the pipes. The gritty scrape of keratin spears like foot-long fingernails dragging themselves forward. And faintest of all, a low moan of agony.

SCP-8004 is composed of five substances: keratin, chitin, an oil-based compound it uses to aid locomotion, a corrosive slurry used for digestion, and a paralytic toxin for incapacitating prey. The sentence flashed through Lakshmi's mind, word for word, in the crystalline calmness of terror.

5760 paced and stalked, growling and lashing its tail. Gonzalez's voice crackled to terrified life.

"The thing's coming your way, Agarwal."

The scraping sound grew louder. Lakshmi could tell that there were two separate victims whimpering in pain.

"I can hear it. It's in the pipes."

"We're sending people your way. Hang in there."

"I can smell it," snarled 5760, "I can hear it, I can't see it. But it's coming closer."

"Stay with me, kid." Lakshmi could hear him grind his teeth. "Now, the thing's hard to kill through brute force, but once you cut something off, it can't reform. Keep it away from you, crush the pincers and shells if you can. Watch out for the hair. It'll tangle you, and it'll burn like hell if it touches you."

A slithering, oozing, chittering cacophony filled Lakshmi's ears. She could smell it, too - an awful, sour, corrosive smell. Hydrochloric acid, and something else - something like copper and loose teeth and parking garages.

"You still there?"

"Yeah, I'm here."

"Stay close to 5760. Dog, if you're hearing this, keep her safe. Is it coming from the ground piping, or the vents in the ceiling?"

"Both. We can't get up a tree, but the ground won't be safe, either."

Click-clack, tik-tik-tak. Closer. Closer. 5760 prowled in close,

protective circles.

"Now, I'm gonna need you to -"

Lakshmi didn't hear what Gonzalez wanted them to do next. A flaming, incessant pain shot through her legs and rocketed down every neuron in her body - a thousand tiny bright pinpricks of venom. Her muscles began to spasm uncontrollably, and her legs collapsed out from under her. Clawing incessantly at the ground, she was dragged through the calcified underbrush, a burning, viscous pain oozing up her leg. Her glasses and earpiece were knocked off, her limbs twitching and heart racing.

The last thing she said was "AVERY!" before her jaw locked altogether.

Out of the corner of her eyes, she could detect a hint of neon orange, blurred but highly visible. As the tendrils of hair and pincers dragged her around a shrub, she got close enough to see what it was.

A neon orange watchband, still fixed to a slowly dissolving wrist. *Reynolds.*

As she was pulled away by the rough spears of keratin embedded in her leg, Lakshmi came face to face with Meyers. Neither could speak, but Lakshmi had just enough control of her limbs left to move her hand over Vera's own, and squeeze.

A bristling, clicking noise. Lakshmi guessed it was 8004 moving its chitinous parts to its outside as a defensive shell to protect against outside attack.

Which could only mean -

A scream that turned Lakshmi's spinal fluid to liquid nitrogen pierced the air.

5760 was a white flash of teeth and claws, cutting the tendril of hair that ensnared Lakshmi with one quick swipe of its claws. Lakshmi felt a scuttling sensation, and saw dozens of the tiny skeletal creatures that lived the forest racing over her to defend their creator.

Rodent skulls fused to lizard bodies chewed through insect pincers. Bird-squirrel hybrids pecked away at clumps of hair and chitin. The fight was punctuated by 5760's haunting yowls and the scrape of bone on keratin. The earth itself began to split, and a wall of bone rose in front of Lakshmi's eyes. The protein mass was beaten back by a monolith of porous calcium.

C'mon, Avery. Hang in there.

The wendigo creature's blows sounded weaker, and its yowls had changed to whimpers of pain. She could see 8004's iridescent blackish ooze burning through 5760's pelt.

All at once, there was a crash and a storm of heavy-booted footsteps, and the staccato shouts of security forces. Gunfire, and the hiss of chemicals.

5760 made its way over to her, limping heavily.

Gonzalez knelt beside her, presses a syringe into her neck. "Don't worry, kid," he murmurs, scooping her up in his arms like a bride, "we've got you. You're going to be just fine."

Gonzalez was waiting in the chair in the infirmary when she woke. His left eye was covered by a bandage, and his left arm was in a sling.

"Hey, Agarwal."

"How long have you been here?"

"Eh, just a few hours. I was asleep for most of it. The doc told me not to do anything too strenuous, so I figured I'd check in on you, and the chair turned out to be really fucking comfy." Gonzalez grinned, looking a little ghoulish with his bruises and eyepatch.

"Is your eye okay?"

"Oh, yeah, it'll be fine in a week. Got a shard of keratin or some shit. Hurt like hell, but nothing time won't heal."

Lakshmi sat up. "Was anyone else hurt?"

Gonzalez's face went stony. "Yeah, actually. Three guys on security got liquified by that goddamn hairball. All good guys. Meyers and Reynolds both got caught. Meyers'll live. Reynolds died two hours ago. Barely recognizable. All that acid shit, you know? We sent his money to his mom back in Harlem. She thinks he died in a car crash. He died getting everyone else out of the wing. Couldn't fucking look me in the eye or speak a goddamn word to me without stammering, but…"

They sat in silence for a minute. Reynolds, dead.

Lakshmi couldn't decide whether or not to ask him about 5760.

She rescued you. You owe it to her to do this, at least.

"How's -"

"5760? Doing all right. Clever - she noticed the thing couldn't dissolve bone, so she managed to cover the thing in bone and trap it against the wall until we got here - like holding a cup over a spider. Came out of it pretty beat up, but nothing a good rest won't fix. Wanna see her?"

"I'd…I'd rather not."

"The thing saved your life, Agarwal. You owe it to her to go check up."

"Fine. But I don't have to enjoy it."

Lakshmi swung out of bed, only to nearly collapse. Gonzalez caught her, laughing, and handed her a crutch.

"Easy, tiger. Easy."

The walk to 5760's temporary enclosure was far too long and strained Lakshmi's already-sore muscles. It was worth it, however, when 5760 saw her and immediately started tail-wagging hard enough to make surgical equipment fall off tables. It was the first time Lakshmi had laughed in quite a while.

"I'll leave you two alone," Gonzalez said. Lakshmi knelt on the jumbo-sized air mattress they'd laid down, across from 5760. Lakshmi expected to feel awkward, but instead, it was surprisingly easy to be this close.

Saving someone's life will do that, it seems.

"How're you feeling?"

"I'm fine. I've coughed up hairballs worse than that thing."

"Only cats do that."

"Killjoy."

"Really, though - how are you doing?"

"I'm okay. Sore, though. You?"

"I'm totally fine. Thanks to you."

There was something there, on the tip of her tongue, something at once fragile and urgent, but Lakshmi either didn't have the words or couldn't bring herself to say it.

She patted 5760's head once, then rose to go.

"Wait."

She turned.

"You - you called me Avery. When we were in the forest. You've never done that. Not here."

"I - I just - I - "

5760 shifted. She leaned to cup Lakshmi's face, traced her cheekbone ever so gently with one clawed toe.

She should step away. A day ago, she would have stepped away. But Lakshmi put a hand over 5760's - *Avery's* - paw, closed her eyes, and held it closer. She stepped forward and leaned so that their foreheads were just touching.

I could stay like this. Touching her.

She climbed on next to Avery, who put one arm around her and pulled her close. Avery smelt like snow and pine needles and musk. "I missed lying next to you," she murmurred in Lakshmi's ear. "I missed the way your hair feels. The way your skin smells. Are you still using the same shampoo from college?"

"It's good for my hair."

Avery laughed, and it's the first time Lakshmi wasn't jarred by the dissonance of the fanged maw and the bell-like sound. "You're so cute when you're defensive," Avery said, ears twitching with mirth. Avery leaned forward and touched the very tips of her teeth to Lakshmi's lips. "I would kiss you if I could," she whispered, "but this will have do."

But then there are footsteps outside and is that the door opening and *oh god, what are we doing?* "I have to go," she stammers while springing away, "thank you for saving me," - *don't think of Reynolds don't look back at Avery* - and leaves in a rush.

She dreamed, that night, of bone-white fur, and woke up restless, frozen and searing all at once.

After she'd had her morning coffee, though, she shed the dreamlike state.

What was I thinking!? They could have footage on security, Ethics could be coming for me right now…Okay. We'll tell them it was just weird stress responses. It's just. A natural human reaction. Post-traumatic experience, people tend to have great affection for their rescuer. That's all. You don't feel that way about her - it. You don't actually have feelings for it.

She would have to be more careful from now on. She couldn't have them thinking she had feelings for 5760. Perhaps more importantly, she couldn't have *5760* thinking she had feelings for 5760.

5760 perked up immediately when she entered, and it broke

Lakshmi's heart just a tiny bit.

"Hi!" she - *it* chirped when she walked in. 5760 rose and hugged her tightly. Lakshmi didn't return the embrace.

"Hello, 5760," Lakshmi replied. 5760's ears drooped noticeably.

"Everything…okay?"

"Everything's perfectly fine, thank you. I'm afraid I need to clear up some misconceptions. About what may have transpired between us last night."

5760 flattened its ears. "Okay."

"I just want to make it very clear that any…affection I may have shown you was merely a product of gratitude and stress. I have no romantic feelings for you whatsoever."

"Seriously? You expect me to believe that?"

"I don't know what else to tell you."

"Look, are they making you say this?

"I'm doing this of my own free will."

"I can't accept that."

"You have to," she said, and turned away.

"I thought there was something between us. A little bit. Maybe not now, but…at some point."

"You were mistaken."

"C'mon, Lakshmi. Last night - you let me hold you. You came to me. You didn't have to, but you did anyway. Don't tell me that doesn't mean anything."

"It was a natural response to a traumatic event," she snapped. "I'm on your research detail, 5760. Do you really need that explained to you, what that means? Because it means I don't care about you.

That's what it means."

5760 looks at her blankly. "Go," it said finally.

"I'm afraid I can't do that."

"Just go. I'll be fine. I don't want to deal with this right now, okay? Just let me sleep."

Lakshmi didn't think twice as she left 5760 alone in the forest and locked the door behind her.

"Hi, 5760," she called into the forest. No response. It had been a week since their last meeting. Lakshmi wasn't entirely certain how receptive SCP-5760 would be to her presence.

"Don't take it personally." Gonzalez's voice crackled in her headset. "It had a rough night - whatever's trying to possess it was laying low for the last month or two, but it resurfaced tonight with a fucking passion. Nobody was hurt, but there was a hell of ruckus. It managed to gain control in time to save three researchers and an agent, but the thing didn't like that. It kept bashing itself into the walls, cutting itself - we think as punishment." Gonzalez spat the word out. "We had to sedate it in order to treat it. It's sleeping right now."

This is my fault.

"I'll be quick, then." She tried and failed to keep the guilt from her voice.

Lakshmi picked her way past shrubbery made of metatarsals and found 5760 sleeping with its nose tucked under its tail.

This would be a hell of a lot easier if it didn't look so much like an overgrown puppy sometimes.

As she knelt down beside it, it cracked open one bleary eye.

"Hey," she whispered. "Didn't mean to wake you."

"Mrr."

Avery always was a terror in the mornings.

"I just wanted to apologize. For earlier. I just..I said some things I shouldn't have. I didn't mean what I said, about you not…I was angry and I wanted to hurt you like you hurt me. I regret it. I wish I'd never said any of it. And before you say it was fine, it wasn't. And I understand if you don't want to talk to me, and…"

"No. 's fine. 'pology 'cepted. Woulda done same."

"I'll leave you to your nap, then," Lakshmi said, patting it on the skull before starting to creep away.

A rustle. 5760 cocked its head ever so slightly. "Stay?"

"Of course. Of course I'll stay."

"Th'nk." Lakshmi knelt and allowed 5760 to rest its head in her lap. She stroked its head gently until its slow, even breathing had drowned out the never ending chatter of the skeletal forest.

In spite of herself, before she left, she planted a quick kiss on 5760's skull, right between its antlers.

"Gonzalez," she called, not bothering to knock, "I know I'm early, but you said you wanted to see me -" But Gonzalez was gathering his things from his desk and packing them in a cardboard box. He looked up and gave her a wry smile. "Actually, Chief of Security wanted to see you. That's not me anymore. When an overgrown hairball escapes from the cell you built for it special so it *wouldn't* escape, you lose a lot of job security."

A woman with skin like coal and eyes like onyx walked in, dreadlocks braided back impeccably.

"Dr. Agarwal, I presume."

"Yes."

"I'm Monika Lowell. New chief of security."

"I'll be out of here," Gonzalez said, pushing through the door with his shoulder.

"Sit, Doctor," requested Lowell, and Lakshmi sat.

"Gonzalez gave me a summary of the current containment procedures for 5760," she said. Lakshmi nodded. "It seems to me your initial concerns were completely legitimate. Ethics will certainly be hearing about this." Lakshmi's stomach dropped. "I'm taking you off of 5760's research detail," Lowell continued.

Lakshmi had always known this would happen, in the back of her head. The idea was a relief, and yet…

"I'm not certain that's a good idea," she managed.

"The fact is, you never should have been on it in the first place."

"I don't think you understand -"

"Gonzalez told me all about their experiments with 5760. But he forgot that we don't cater to anomalies just because they threaten us. Also, the blatant disregard for professionalism - I mean, it used to be your partner. There's no way you could ever be objective."

Lakshmi was silent. She couldn't protest, because that would be evidence of attachment. It would be easier to just acquiesce. To give in. And didn't she want this? But when she tried to open her mouth to agree, she could feel those pale green eyes watching her.

I thought there was something between us, she'd said, quiet and resigned. And she'd been right.

"I'll let you know what the new containment procedures will be so you can approve them, seeing as you have a history with 5760. After that, you'll be reassigned."

She merely nodded, and begged Avery not to judge her.

What choice do I have?

End of Part 4

I'll See You Next Time

Hello, I am Agent Tyler; what is your name?

"Hi, I'm Agent Tyler. So, what's your name?"

"Ellen Jones."

Do you remember how you got here?

"How did you arrive at this location?"

"He brought me here."

Who?

"Who brought you here?"

"The one that remembered my name."

Have you ever encountered anyone else that shared this trait?

"Was he the only one that could?"

"Yes."

How long have you been here?

"How long ago was that?"

"I don't know. Twenty, twenty-five years, maybe."

Have you had any significant incidents with our personnel?

"Have there ever been any incidents between you and our staff?"

"Yes, you killed him."

What do you mean?

"Who killed who?"

"Your people killed him…the one who remembered, the only one."

Why?

"Why?"

"He tried to help me."

I think that's enough for now.

"Well, I think that's enough for this interview."

"Anytime."

…Thank you.

"…Thank you."

Then Agent Tyler left. The way he stood up and slid to the door in that cowardly manner, it hadn't changed at all in two decades. I remembered every single word from his last interview. Always the same conversation; little differences, of course, but after hearing it a few times, I knew the underlying script. He would come every once in a while…usually every month, sometimes once in a season, sometimes the very next day. I don't know why they always sent him; I assume they don't even realize they are doing it. It doesn't really matter. They're all the same.

Everybody but one.

I don't know why he was different, why he could *see*, but I didn't care for the reason. It was enough that he could. Maybe that was why I was so selfish with him. Maybe that was why I let him risk himself for me. I didn't realize that if he died, it severed my only link to the world.

They killed him…no, I killed him. They didn't even know what they were doing. They couldn't, only I could. I knew what I was doing. I killed him.

He was the only one that cared. He was the only one that could. He knew what my existence was, this body that forgets it needs to breathe, to eat, to sleep, to age, to die…

After twenty-five years, my memories of him are the only thing that let me weather the corrosion of time. They are neither good nor bad, well, really, they are both, but more importantly, they are something. Anything, something to give me meaning. There is nothing else I have.

Time did not forget me, everything else did. I remember. I remember everything.

> At least one attempt has been made to destroy **SCP-055**, or possibly move it from containment at Site 19 to another site, meeting failure for reasons unknown.

I'm not sure.

You're not going to believe me when I tell you that they let me keep the shrunk-down 173 as a pet for about three days. Well, maybe you will. Stranger things than that go on around here. Now that you believe me, the lovelies in charge had me keep three other SCPs in my quarters as well. My memory is a bit foggy, and I'm not entirely sure myself why that all came to happen at the moment.

They let me keep this very ugly dog - I'm not sure exactly what the skip was, but he was a very friendly - albeit horribly ugly - dog. He would gnaw softly on my arm and crawl in and around my shoulder. At first it was a bit creepy, but then I realized that he was just being friendly. I even started to think he was a bit cute.

The other thing I remember, there was an air balloon. Well, I think the guys called it an inflatable piñata… it didn't really do anything.

I'm struggling to think of the other, I think it was 173 that drove me nuts, I'm not sure, although I think 173 was the dog. I mean I know that's not possible, but I've never really heard of an ugly dog skip. It seems nice enough.

Oh! Got it. I remember them, or me, someone decided to clean my room out, put the SCPs back or ship them off wherever. That day, yesterday, we were in a Level meeting and Sanders was talking about some law suit involving one of his family members with one of the site higher-ups. He was asking about when he was going to get his money, he seemed bit annoyed or upset, it was an old issue.

It hit me like a truck, sitting there, I remembered a note I picked up off of my counter after they had cleared my room out of everything. It was a little note, I think, from one of the skips I was holding in my room for one reason or another. The note had "You'll have wish you kept me as a pet." in 18 point Courier New font, and I have to admit it worried me something serious. I picked up the note and I left for

the meeting, the one where Sanders was complaining. In the hallway, I'm not sure if they were moving them or whatever, that little stuffed bear was walking along behind Agent Breen. Nothing happened there, it was just interesting, you don't see it everyday.

I'm sitting there in the meeting, the one where Sanders (the old man?) is complaining about money. I can see an empty room out of the corner of my eye, well, a bit clear in my vision. There's a check-up table you see a lot in clinics, and there's a cat sitting on it. I think it's a cat, might not be. I'm sure it was a cat, I thought it was nice enough of a cat for a few moments, but then its eyes turned black. Well that's not good I thought, I was worried, a bit, but not enough to cry. You could say I was crying in my mind if that was possible. I was raising my hand for the floor in the meeting, I wanted to tell them about this. I'm a timid sort of guy, and a cat with otherworldly cataracts wasn't going to bother me around this many people - it was probably being moved somewhere or something like that bear was.

Well anyway I keep glancing back and forth to the cat, Sanders continues to talk in this low drone about the money that he hasn't seen yet for the family member he doesn't see anymore. I keep glancing at the cat in the far room, it has white eyes now, and it's looking at me now. Sanders is still talking about the money, I'm raising my hand, the personnel director is looking at me and suddenly I realize that I'm causing a bit of a scene.

My face is a bit wet and I'm sort of propping myself up on the cold plastic chair with my wrist, I've got my hand raised like an elementary school student who really wants to impress the teacher.

I'm not crying but my face is wet, they're tears but I can't say I'm crying. The personnel director looks at me for a few seconds, I look back at the cat, Sanders finishes talking about the money, the personnel director points in my direction but he's really pointing at someone else and they start talking.

I look back at the cat.

Its eyes are white now, but not the same white, it's a horrible white. It happened, well, nothing happened, it was more like watching a

movie. There was an awful absence of noise when I looked back at the cat. There was an absence of noise and the archway that the cat was sitting in, the one leading into the clinic-room, was completely encased in a white matte, a white impossible matte. It's like someone grabbed a magic brush and painted in the non-cat areas of the view within the archway.

A few seconds into staring at the motionless white-eyed cat and I could hear myself screaming. I was screaming "It's all white", "fucking help me" and other things that would signify that I was going bonkers (I wasn't going bonkers, though. It was just that the cat and the white gave me a horrible feeling of dread.). Luckily I woke up, just as the personnel crowded around me I jerked awake. I had just experienced the worst kind of fear, I think, I'm not sure I even know at the moment what I'm scared of now. It was like the sort of nightmare you have when you stop breathing.

I'm fine now if you were wondering, I mean, I'm in the Wards, and whatever-it-is is still bothering me, but, well I guess I lied. I found out a bit late that it wasn't really a dream, and I came to terms with it. Don't have the story in stone though…

The words on the walls right now are floating with "kept me as a pet" and other nonsensical phrases. There are two bears in the corner of the room and apparently their names are "who am I!" bears. It's novel, really, you touch the bears and you temporarily become the bear, with a case of amnesia. They're kind of floating there too.

There is a sort of zombie-humanoid thing, and he seems nice enough. There's also a bathtub in here, but I don't think it does anything useful.

I still have the note, the one that said I'd have wished I kept the thing as a pet. I wish I knew what the pet even was, I remember I think I liked it. Well, I was a bit scared of it, but I remember I liked it a lot.

I think I'm actually in a containment cell. I can't really make any sense of all of this. I wish I knew what the thing was that was bothering me, I can't seem to describe it all too well. Maybe that's the thing. I can't really put a face to it, and I'm not sure whether it's a dog or a cat, or a bear. Maybe it's Sanders? Or rather, I mean, it

might be kind of like Sanders but more like a cat.

I wish they would kill me or something, I wish something would kill me. They must have some sort of reason for not killing me. Everything is going to be okay I think. Well, I'm not too sure, I don't know, I think I mean.

There's a dog in the window to the containment cell. I think it's the observation room. He has a big mouth. I think I'm going to call for help.

I Remember My Heroes

Grandson, you're a small child now, and you've started asking about them. You're far too young to be told, so I've brushed you off. I've decided to write you this note, for when you're older. How I wish I could be there by the time you are old enough to understand, but I know that won't happen.

I was born in what your history teachers call the Golden Age. As a child, I never questioned anything about the situation. It was a time of innocence for me and humanity in general, and I never really focused on things. Our teachers taught us about The Enemy, and how we had our Defenders to protect us. They sacrificed for us, keeping our world safe. We appreciated them, and they enjoyed it.

… I can't remember when we, as a people, started calling them Defenders. I know them as something else, but it would hurt me too much to call them that.

I was a young man when the Golden Age ended. Everyone will tell you that it ended like a flick of a switch, but don't believe it. People talked. We knew how horrible The Enemy was, and what they would do without our Defenders. But over time, we questioned them more. Rationally, we knew that the sacrifices were worth it. Some deaths were expected, damage was predicted. But in the face of total destruction, was it worth complaining about?

But our Defenders knew we were talking. Maybe that was it? Maybe that was why they didn't stick around for people's praise as long? Maybe they were beginning to see us as a burden that they *had* to defend, rather than their people that they *wanted* to defend?

It wasn't until the Attack of… I'm so sorry, but to this day I can't say the name of that old city. You can look it up if you want. I'll call it the Attack of the Great Hole, since you know that place as the Great Hole.

Our Enemy had attacked, as they had often did. The police, the armies, they defended us as well as they could. Don't believe that we, as a people, became complacent. Don't believe it for a moment, child. We never expected or assumed our Defenders would arrive. Ultimately, though, the police and armies were only stopgaps, keeping The Enemy contained until our Defenders arrived.

Arrive they did, in their ships. But this time, it was different. I wasn't there, of course, but I saw the vids, just as you did. I saw the attack.

Not from The Enemy. Our Defenders. They didn't attempt to combat The Enemy from the ground, as they always did. They didn't respond to the enemy's escalation by escalating in turn. From high in the air, they attacked with the greatest weapons they had at their disposal.

In a moment, that sacred city became the Great Hole. Do you know how many people lived in that city? Millions, child. Men, women, and children. Innocents, all of them, and all of them dead. And our Defenders? A press release. "We do not have the time to focus on secondary goals such as removing civilians from the combat zone. Our primary goal is now our only goal: defeating The Enemy. Adapt to this."

The nations of the world reacted as you think they would. They tore into our Defenders. To their credit, the Defenders attempted to explain their reasoning for their change in attitude, but it's hard to believe someone with the blood of millions of innocents on their hands. When the UN demanded that our Defenders defend us from farther away, they agreed. I think they were happy. They mentioned that they had other missions to accomplish.

That was… a long time ago. The Enemy still exists, and occasionally they get through Our Defenders. We've fought them off by ourselves, you know. You'll rarely see mentions of the Conflict of Chicago, the Delay of Oregon, or the Stalemate of Brazil, but they happened. I was there, and I have the scars to prove it.

Sometimes, Our Defenders regroup and destroy The Enemy. Sometimes, they ignore the breach and let us handle it. There are some among us that still believe that they are helping us by making

us defend ourselves. Most of us believe that they hope we get wiped out, so that they can defend elsewhere more efficiently.

I'm an old man, child, and my time is short. I can't say I've lived a good life, because the memories have sapped my soul. You grew up seeing our Defenders raze entire cities to defeat The Enemy. You've seen them destroy our spacecraft to keep us in the solar system. You have Enemy Assault Protocols in your school, and you have Defender Guard Protocols. You won't blink or twitch when you're old enough to know that they are the same protocols. All of those things, though, child, hurt me more than you'll ever know. They haunt everyone my age who still lives.

Even the name hurts people my age, child. Defenders? They used to be called something else. Everyone my age remembers.

We remember when they were called the Power Rangers.

I See a Darkness

Year 23,981

The **`Parasite`** deemed Death wraps itself around **`my neck`**. It doesn't hesitate to do the same Itself.

"Do you understand yet, the pleasures of drowning oneself in ichor?" It whispers into my right ear.

"Do you understand yet, the troubles that feast upon life?" Death coos into the other.

"I just want to live in peace. Live a normal life, with the concept of friendship. Why does it have to be like this?" I grasp the rug made of eyelids below me, watching as the world shakes in awe. I know that my decision would ultimately boil away the impurities that was cowardice, and soon reveal a hidden strength in me. I withstand the humiliation, knowing it would take time. I see Its mouths stretch in delight, as my nerves shut down. "Is this what I wanted?"; I see It signal in the affirmative. It was the first year where my spirit had sapped and had gone for suicide.

I gasped.

I verb. I verb.

I. I. I.

I.

I?

The background breaks, and my body goes limp.

Year 23,982

My new form is of my youngest self, the developing fetus of a woman who struggled between being a guardian and being a mother. The world starts out as dark and unassuming; usually does. The longer I wait, the quicker It comes. I squirm my way into the light, barely able to feel the air around me, and immediately burn. The background breaks, and my ashes fly away.

Year 23,983

My new form is myself of indeterminate age. I am in a dark room, the sweet, unfamiliar sounds of blackened wasps buzzing in-between the gaps. Across the table is a Woman, Her identity I am unable to discern.

"Hello?" She walks towards me, and I immediately recognize her gait. "Wait, why are you here too, I thought it was —" The first physical sensation I feel in this place is wet steel entering my liver. She twists right, and I collapse on the floor in a heap.

"How could you do such a thing, my inspiration…" She kneels in front of me and turns my body over. She makes sure to position my

head under her knee, so I can only look up at Her face. "How could you abandon me? How could you abandon your mother as well, for the sake of peace…"

"You aren't her after all. Please… please just stop. I want to breathe!"

"You should have thought about that before unleashing your creations upon us." It shook Its head. "Is this the feeling you have felt your whole life made physical? Forming facts into fiction, fiction into facts. Do you understand yet, the knowledge of thoughts?" The room turns stark yellow into as She brings down the blade.

Right pinky. The blood shows an image of a young girl, at the age of 10, being told by her classmates, that she would never amount to anything. Her principal pities her. bright red

Left ring. The skin unravels and shows a portrait, of a child at the age of 12 who once thought he knew what the word "fear" meant. neon pink

Left middle. Veins crawl its way out to write a story. putrid, pale green

When time had a defined construct, two adults separated from each other, leaving their children lost and confused. The children had no idea who to turn to next, and made a promise to each other; this promise would bind the two of them together for the rest of their lives, built upon the solidarity of building new, stable lives as adults. All of this is what they wished for. Instead, their parents remained married, and there would be no semblance of a functional family or close relationship with one another.

All feeling is lost in my left arm now; salt and glucose do not bring sensation back.

Left index. I vomit. "Do you remember your first day working for the Foundation?" the vomit asks. I don't, I reply, strained for the ability to talk, but I assume this means I don't wish to know.. "You looked into the cell of an anomaly, , and wish it would have broken free as you walked by it. I remember. Do you remember the anomaly?"

Some of , wasn't it? "Yes! It's good that you remembered it, because you vomited right after that! They had to transfer you to another site the very next day. Funny how life works." muddy brown

Right ring. The nail breaks into an image. I had bought a gun I have no memory of. There is no memory of me ever using it, or how long I had it. dull grey

Left wrist. I deactivate all my social media accounts, and am demoted to only working on three different projects at the singular site where I had expertise with. a cold and empty white

Right thumb. The bone detaches and pulls itself into my left eye; It spits its rusted blood into the wound. Wasps start to make a nest with my cornea as my socket empties its colors. my research lab

"You should have held on longer, you know. For us, for them." It, who was my sister, now becomes my niece and grins.

"I understand —"

"Do you really?" It shouts at me, in a language I only barely could comprehend. "Do you understand, that which is controlling you? Do you believe I am also the creation of some far-away deity? Do you understand, the one constant tenant of our world?" There were none. "Wrong."

"If there is one, then it is that —"

"Not everything that goes around comes —"

Back around. Shea Stadium, 15 August 1965

The uncertainty of floor and ceiling is now the bowl of a baseball venue I have no knowledge of and no memory of what it looks like, surrounded by men and women of a vintage, peculiar look. I glance around, despite my horrendous sight; my body is fucked, but no one notices or cares in any remote capacity. Four men are in the middle of the stadium with various instruments. Every person's screams are deafening, their volume increasing with each person's yell of ecstasy. There is no end to people.

No end to people.

So many bodies around me forever.

I puke on the kid in front of me, who doesn't seem to notice. My left shoulder is tapped and I turn to look. It's my mother. My right shoulder is tapped, and it is my father.

"Well hello there, gorgeous! Do you recognize us? Truth be told, this is where we first met each other!" my mom shouts. Despite everyone else's voices becoming infinite, her words still take concrete form and meaning, and I am able to hear somehow.

"Yes it is! I don't remember how we managed to get a hold of these tickets, but it sure was a blessing. Without the Fab Four, you would have never been born!" My father nods, looking proud of himself.

"Indeed so! Here's a fun little secret." She leans in to whisper to me. "I almost didn't notice your father because I was so enamored with the music."

"Hah, wasn't everyone, beautiful?" They cackle. I fall to my knees and cry, humors pouring out at a steady rate. "You may also not know this kiddo, but after the show was the first time I introduced your mom to alcohol and cigarettes, thus enabling her addiction and co-dependency for life. It's the little things, you know?"

"Oh sweetie, don't say that! How can our kids even know that's true?" She leans over my body and kisses him on the cheek. "It's not like we stuck together for actual love, you know?"

"At least we made a genuine effort to try."

"Oh hey, they're going to be playing our favorite song next!"

"Now let's carry on with the song," Paul McCartney shouts into the mic for everyone to hear, "that will be the title song from our new film!" He says something I am unable to discern. "This song is called, 'Help!'" The crowd shouts, wild with excitement. The moment Lennon-McCartney strum their guitars, the notes become wires and I feel my lungs empty.

"Aw, don't feel too bad sweetie. We'll see you again at some point! It's not like you're losing anything of value. Your favorite Beatles song was from Magical Mystery Tour anyway, wasn't it?" They cackle as the background shatters, and my essence soars beneath the blue suburban skies.

Year 23,984

Nothing.

« The Beginning, As Much of One as There Could Be | I See a Darkness | Castles 2 »
Hub

I See a Great Beast within the Fires

The young man watched as the bronze machine hammered down onto the golden metal. The loud clash boomed throughout the chamber, fading into the melting heat. Patina had taken over the machine's surface, coating it with a shade of dark green. But the piece itself was too grand for the flaw to be noticeable.

It was unlike any clockwork device he had seen, its mechanism a mystery to him. He could make out a few gears here and there, but nothing else was within his knowledge. In fact, he could no longer claim to understand any kind of machine, not after he was picked up at the Mehkanite temple that was burnt down, and was led through mountains and seas, traversing the vast desert into this foreign land. The machines that were such a part of his life, a part of himself even, now seemed so alien to him. He could not even state with confidence that he understood his god, not towards the man that had brought him here.

That man was now slithering through the dark chamber, pushing keys that subsequently lit up. His scales rustled against the heated floor. His clawed hands went through the intricate patterns that were engraved on the machine’s surface, their purpose unknown. They too were blurred by time, no longer sharp shapes and lines, but dazzling nonetheless. On the far end, between the wavering lights of the flames, automatons could be seen adding fuel into the machine, building the flames higher.

The young man was not sure if they were machines built into human shape, or men reduced to the simplest kind of machine, and he dared not ask. After all, the man with scales and claws and slit eyes seemed so inhuman and sinister, so much like the flesh beasts that attacked their temple, the beasts that howled and laughed and slaughtered. The very evil he was supposed to fight against.

But the serpent man found him, dragged him out of the burning ruins of what he once called home, and healed him with some sort of

miracle. "Medicine." The man had answered him, but no medicine could heal what was inflicted upon him, not even as parts of his body were already replaced with metal. The human body was weak, nothing compared to what their god could offer. He still remembered when bone spears pierced through his organs, the ones he was yet to, and maybe couldn't, replace with clockwork. He only remembered the laughter ringing through his ears, mocking the futility of their resistance, before it all faded into blackness.

But now, he sat in this dark chamber, in front of a large piece of golden metal that was hammered down by the heavy machinery again and again. His metal arm was replaced anew; polished and lighter than ever before, so flexible that even his tortured body could command it with ease. The serpent man certainly knew the machines better than he did, maybe even better than the elders of his temple. And as they talked through the long journey, when they traversed the cold mountains, the lonely seas, and the lifeless desert, he learnt of a different tale about his god that existed in the Far East. Child of flesh and metal, the man that resembled snake more than man claimed to be. Children of flesh and metal, the man claimed that they all were.

As the rhythmic booming sound rang through the chamber, as the fire grew higher, as the automatons worked tirelessly, the serpent man slithered near. He wore a strange robe, long sleeves covering his hands. Some sort of metal bracelet could be seen underneath, with the same shade of dark green as the machine.

The scaled man stopped in front of him, and the young Mekhanite spoke: "You promised me vengeance."

"Yes." The answer came with a cold hissing sound, one that the young man had grown accustomed to. "All is set, but you need to be ready first."

Before he could answer that yes, yes he was ready, the serpent gestured towards the machine and the strange metal placed onto it. "Long ago," He said, "Our empire was strong and prosperous, the land was lined with machines of miracle, we reached the stars and looked into the brass prison of the Dragon," His hand stroked the surface of the device. "These are but remains of the glorious days."

For a moment, it was hard for him to imagine. A dark chamber lined with heavy machines, with fires maintained by robots, was but shadows of the past. What other things the man implied he dared not think about. They weren't things he could comprehend, or believe in.

The serpent man continued. "But even before that, our ancestors fought against other tribes who too worshipped the Serpent and the Dragon, and united them to be a common kingdom. Such were the great deeds of the Yellow Emperor, the first king of Xia."

Abruptly, the hammering stopped. The underground chamber was suddenly quiet. The automatons moved and clicked at the far end, but only the sound of the serpent man's speech boomed throughout the heated room.

"But Chiyou rebelled against the great emperor. Like us, they were worshippers of Father Fuxi. He and his tribe sacrificed their body of flesh and blood to the Great Brass Dragon, and gained bodies of brass and iron." The serpent man paused, and explained. "It was not 'augmentation', as you would put it. They turned themselves not into machines, but living metal. Machines can be broken down, disassembled, but metal itself—"

"An invincible body." The young Mekhanite kept his voice calm, but a fire quietly burned in his eyes.

"Not invincible, far from it." Even on a reptilian face, the frown was visible. "Weapons were indeed useless against them. They knew no pain, knew no rest, an army unparalleled at the time. The metal was gifted by our Father, and thus does not rust."

He turned to look at the strange metal — it was no longer golden, heated to show a glowing red. "But the Yellow Emperor defeated them. He melted them down into liquid, and then forged them into metal cubes. As such, they were longer a threat."

The serpent man was not fluent in the young man's language, but the words hammered down into him clearly. The young Mekhanite fell into silence as he now understood what he was looking at.

The metal had completely melted now. The serpent man reached out, and pulled a lever. The machine shifted, and the liquid was poured down into a pool beneath. A feeling of unease rose from the young man's stomach. As he watched, for a moment, it was as if the molten metal twisted unnaturally, before falling down into the pit.

The serpent man turned back, the slit eyes met his gaze. "Some say their souls are still trapped there. Shattered minds fused into a vengeful, insane spirit, longing for freedom." He said.

The young man looked at the pool of metallic liquid that seemed to be withering and silently screaming. He couldn't tell if it really was there, or it was merely in his mind. The chamber seemed much darker now, even as the automatons worked harder and harder to put fuel into the giant machine. The intricate patterns, under the wavering light, now seemed menacing and shadowy. And the ones that glowed emitted an eerie light. The hammer hanged high above, its presence pressed against his being, like a dark cloud hovering. He looked at all these with silence, slowly taking everything in. The fire in his eyes grew.

"I am ready." He finally said.

"Hundreds had joined Chiyou, yet only eighty-one withstood the ritual." The serpent man said.

"I will make it." He said.

The man only nodded as a response.

Inside the pool, the liquid metal was boiling now. Steam rose, but was somehow confined within the pool. This machine was really something beyond his understanding, but for now, he stopped thinking about that. The heat was scorching, which his bare foot felt the most.

The serpent man said something to him, but it slipped through. His mind wandered back into the night when the Sarkicites destroyed his temple and slaughtered his kind. Even the strongest of them, the elders that had fully converted, were no match for the unholy beast

of the flesh. They were torn, pieces of gears scattered, their weapons broken. And the beasts laughed, their laugher so piercing, much like the bone spears through his body. But a wave of heat hit him, and dragged him back into reality.

“I have tried this so many times before. None successful.” He caught the serpent man saying. “So maybe you, someone who truly believes in the Father Serpent—” He paused and corrected himself, “Truly believes in Mekhane, can do it.”

“There are better candidates than me.” He said.

The serpent man shook his head. “None of us believe in them deeply anymore, neither in the Dragon, nor the Serpent. We were never good followers to begin with; we call them Father and Mother, yet we fear them the most.” He forced himself into a smile, a rather eerie one with serpentine features. “I can only wish for your success.” He hesitated, but went on, “But tell me — what do you wish to become?”

“A beast.” The word came out without thinking. He was unsure why he said that, but as the man looked at him curiously, he added: “The pain the Sarkicites have inflicted upon us and our holy land; I shall return the favor.”

The serpent man nodded, and stood back. The young Mekhanite took in a deep breath, and slowly descended into the pool. The sound of the machine and the automatons seemed so far away now, as the liquid boiled and bubbled in front of him.

There was no pain, he realized some seconds later, as his skin and flesh were instantly burned. In the next few seconds, his bones melted. He could no longer see, and no longer feel anything at all. Darkness had encompassed him. But it was not the cold, silent darkness of death people often speak of. An immense heat surrounded him; the same dark, ancient presence that loomed in the underground chamber was now closer than ever. The heat scorched him, but there was no pain. Bodily sensations no longer mattered.

He remained in the darkness for a few more moments, before hearing a loud sound. At first, he thought it was the hammering

sound he heard over and over again, but as the sound grew even louder, he recognized that it was something else. He was still in the darkness, but somehow, in his mind, he could make out fires furiously burning, and among them, a shadow stood there.

It was a beast, he recognized, as the sound reached his presence. He could feel himself resonating with it. The sound was not of a hammer, but the beast roaring. Somehow, among the heat and the darkness, he felt drawn to it, as if the beast was calling, and that the roar was a language.

He reached towards the beast within the fires.

For a split second, he saw its fiery eyes, its body of a golden metal that shined brightly. It stood there, its mouth open, as the fire scorched and burnt. And then, he opened his eyes. The pool of metallic liquid was gone. He was standing there, at the bottom of the pool. The machine around him came to a halt, and the serpent man looked at him in disbelief.

He looked down to see his hands, but what he saw could no longer be called hands. Golden, metallic claws were in front of him. The metal that surrounded him minutes ago now made up his whole body. He moved his fingers, and then elbows, arms, torso, and legs, and they responded immediately to his thoughts. There was no longer muscle straining, but nor were there sounds of ticking and grinding. Everything just fit together perfectly; the movements felt to him even more natural than the body he was born with.

He had expected to see lost, vengeful souls, or to see his broken lord reaching out to him. But the image of the beast was now scorched into his being, and somehow he found comfort.

He was still in the vague shape of a man, but nobody would mistake him for one. Even aside from his now beastly headpiece and claw-like hands, he was filled with a fiery presence, the same presence that turned and twisted in molten metal.

He was successful. He thought, as he walked up from the now empty pool.

“I have a favor to ask,” He recalled the serpent man’s words, before he led him deeper into an underground cavern. “Take it as your first battle, the first beast to slay.”

He had agreed, as he was eager to try out his new strength. The cavern, unlike the chamber, was cold and damp. As he walked down with the scaled man, he could hear an underground river flowing nearby, and occasionally, water dropping from the cavern ceiling.

It had been four days since his coversion, and he neither slept nor ate. He could still sense the heat in the chamber, and smell the thick metallic scent, but no longer experienced pain or exhaustion. The serpent man, meanwhile, had been busy taking notes and testing with visible excitement.

But today, it was different. As he led the young Mekhanite down into the underground tunnels, deeper and deeper, as the automatons carrying lanterns and torches drove away the darkness, he was almost silent. But finally, as they stopped in front of a dark cave entrance, the serpent man spoke: “This is it.”

“The first beast to slay?” He asked. His sound now carried a strange echo.

But the man didn’t answer. He only looked up the cave, and called out a strange name. The Mekhanite recognized that the name was in that foreign language he couldn’t quite understand. Then he heard a rustling sound, that of large scales slipping through wet floor, of something smooth and wet slithering towards them.

The first thing he saw was an eye, or rather, a vertical slit in the head. Then, the head of something resembling a snake, with mouth filled with unnaturally sharp teeth and bone horns protruding randomly from all sides. Its color was a pale white, its scales almost translucent. There were a row of half-formed appendages alongside its body that occasionally twitched. The first two of them looked alarmingly like human hands. As if responding to the name, the creature quickly slid towards them.

Immediately, the young Mehkhanite recognized that stench, the same stench of the flesh beasts that plagued his lands. But even

then, none of the flesh beast he had enountered was this… enormous. Its head alone was thrice of his height, and its body seemed to stretch infinitely into the cave's darkness.

"What?" He asked, shocked. "What is this?"

"My father," The serpent man said, there was a coldness in his tone. "Please release him from this."

Before he could ask or even comprehend the words, the Mekhanite was thrown to the side of the cave, his body hitting the stone wall with a loud clank. The giant snake turned to him, and hissed so loud that it was almost a roar.

He expected pain, but as his metal body clashed against the stone war, he realized he no longer needed to worry about that. He got up, but his mind was still in shock. "What do you mean?"

"Release him from his pain, please," The serpent man said. His servant automatons had retreated to a safer distance, but he remained where he was. "Slay your first beast."

The Mekhanite looked at the man, and then the giant snake coming towards him. And as he sought a weapon, a blade came out of his arm. He struck quickly, slashing the serpent, and with a painful howl, a translucent liquid poured out.

And as he fought on, he realized that dodging the snake was easy enough, as the cavern was too narrow for it to move freely, and somehow, it seemed unwilling to damage the surroundings. But to his frustration, even though his blade could cut through the white snake's skin easy enough, seconds after the cut, the wound would heal.

"Such are the worshippers of Mother Dragon, no organs they can't regrow." The serpent man said, "You may want to take out the brains first — and then burn their bodies."

Hearing this, the Mekhanite climbed onto the serpent's back. Grabbing the bone horns, he easily made it to the head. As he clawed his way up, to his disgust, he realized the scales of the large

snake resembled fingernails more than actual reptilian scales. But he holds tight against the writhing serpent, and plunged his blade into its skull.

The bone cracked as if it was nothing against the sharp metal. The snake screeched, and he hit again. And once more. He hit it over and over until its body slumped to the ground, still twitching, but no longer moved.

“You slew your first beast.” The man said, slithering close.

He looked at the man with scales and tail and claws so much like the snake he had just slain. But he only responded: “Much easier than I expected.”

“Your enemies back home will have intelligence, but he had none.” The serpent said, his voice distant and cold. And before the Mekhanite could ask any question, he continued: “Like me, he wished to rebuild our past glory. But as you can see, he failed. His methods failed; the power of the Dragon of Flesh is too uncontrollable.”

“I am successful, then.” He said, standing up.

The serpent gestured, and one of the automatons handed the Mekhanite a package. “The map back to your land, some robes, and a few other things you might need.” He said. “I can only wish you good luck.”

He nodded, and started walking back up. His thoughts once again flew to his home, so far away from this foreign soil.

The serpent looked at the remains of the giant snake, its one eye staring back at him. He bent down to close its eyelids. The torches the automatons held ignited the body.

Among the smoke and fires, the serpent man watched silently, as the beast, blessed with the golden armor of the Great Brass Dragon, faded into the shadows of the cavern.

I Slip, I'm Still An Animal

SCP-5760 Incident Log Delta:
As of 05/04/2016, SCP-5760 has breached containment and has not been reclaimed. Former Security Head Gonzalez appears to have organized its escape, in addition to contacting the Serpent's Hand and arranging pickup of SCP-5760. MTF Rho-27 (Good Boys) has been sent in pursuit. Below is a timeline of the incident:
[11:00] Dr. Lakshmi Agarwal enters SCP-5760's enclosure for a final meeting, as was permitted by Branch Security Administrator Lowell. Security Head Gonzalez waits outside, claiming to be supervising.
[11:02] All surveillance cameras in SCP-5760's enclosure cease function and security systems are electronically overridden.
[11:05] SCP-5760 escapes enclosure, carrying Dr. Agarwal with it, and all instances of SCP-5760-A following behind. It appears to be making its way to the helicopter landing platform. Site-81 goes into lockdown and security teams are deployed.
[11:09] SCP-5760 encounters a team of security guards equipped with tranquilizer guns. SCP-5760 is told to call off all SCP-5760-A instances and return to its enclosure. SCP-5760 manipulates the security guards' bony tissue and causes them to shoot themselves in the thigh with tranquilizers, and proceeds uninhibited.
[11:15] SCP-5760 exits the building onto the helicopter pad after disabling the exit override with assistance from Gonzalez.
[11:16] SCP-5760 and its cohorts are ambushed by a squad of containment agents, who attempt to open fire onto SCP-5760. SCP-5760 forces all agents to drop their weapons, and encases them behind a circular wall of bone tissue. SCP-5760 climbs the wall surrounding the Site-81 compound and evades capture by entering into

the forest outside the compound, where a contingent from the Serpent's Hand retrieved them.

"Who are these guys again?" 5760's teeth were a little too close to Gonzalez's ear for Lakshmi's comfort, but she'd still rather have been in Gonzalez's spot. Crushed between 5760 and a particularly unfriendly-looking Serpent's Hand agent, she was practically sitting on Avery's lap.

"Kinda like PETA, but for SCPs."

"Oh."

The van went over a bump in the road, slamming 5760 and Lakshmi against the gruff Serpent's Hand operative.

"Watch your goddamn dog, will you? Jesus. Almost got crushed."

"She can watch herself," Lakshmi grumbled. "And she's not my dog."

"Are you going to be angry at me the entire trip?"

"I don't know, 5760. How long would you take to get over your anger at being abducted?"

"We didn't abduct you -"

"I was taken out of the site against my will and with no prior knowledge or consent to the situation."

"Okay, fair, but can you at least be angry at him, too?"

Gonzalez leaned over 5760 and towards her.

"I don't think you understand the situation. They had, well, compromising footage."

Snickers from the Serpent's Hand agents.

"Not that kind of footage, you sick fucks. But they saw you and her

in the hospital room together. Ethics Committee was due to meet on what to do with you the day we broke out. There was no way they were going to do anything other than shoot you, kid."

Lakshmi looked away. "Thank you," she said sheepishly.

"There was no time to tell you," Avery added quietly. "We would have if we'd had the chance."

"And don't tell me you wouldn't have gone," Gonzalez said. "You're stubborn, but not that stubborn."

"Well…" Avery said. "That's…debatable."

"I swear to god, I will have you muzzled."

"You should get some sleep," Avery said. "You're exhausted."

"I'm fine."

"Sleep, Lakshmi, or I will sit on you."

Lakshmi leaned back and closed her eyes. The van was moving too much for her to truly fall asleep, but she was able to reach that half-asleep, restful dream state reached only in moments of transcendent meditation, exhaustion, or boredom. She overheard Avery's conversation with one of the friendlier-looking team members.

"It's funny, actually…We were dating before all this. I broke up with her a little while before she joined the Foundation."

"No shit. Really? Must've been a hell of a first date."

"Yeah. Really. She didn't know who I was at first, but we ended up… well, reconnecting isn't the right word. Pro tip: saving girls from gigantic, corrosive hairballs turns out to be one hell of a romantic gesture. Until it isn't. Hopefully she'll forgive me for all this. She's like that. Chew you out ferociously for a while, but she comes around eventually. Even then, though…it'll be rough going."

The agent laughed.

"Yeah. I can think of a couple of…obstacles."

A different voice. "Can I make the doggy-style joke, or is it too soon?"

"Come on, man," said the first agent. "Don't be a fucking creep."

"It's the elephant in the room!"

"The elephant in the room is a giant bonewolf that has teeth the size of your hand," Lakshmi murmured sleepily, no longer content with merely listening. "Learn to read a room."

Avery bounded through the woods of Canada, her muscles lithe and powerful under Lakshmi's legs. It was easier having them run alongside the van like this - the roads were deserted, and it kept from Avery crushing everyone in the van whenever they hit a pothole. Lakshmi had decided that the fresh air was worth the potentially awkward conversations with her ex.

"So," Avery said, after they'd been running for about twenty minutes. "You heard us talking earlier."

"I did."

"I want you to know that we would have asked you if you wanted to come with us, if we could have. If we had another option. But we both would have died otherwise."

Lakshmi said nothing.

"Look, I get you're angry. I do. I really do. But you're all I have left, Lakshmi."

"Maybe you should have thought of that earlier."

"I'm never going to see my family again. Or any of my friends. I'm alone now, except for you. And you're pretty much in the same boat. Could we at least try to be friends again?"

Lakshmi paused to think for a moment. "I suppose it would be best if

we could at least be on speaking terms. All right, then."

"Friends?"

"Friends."

"Hi, Lakshmi."

Lakshmi nearly dropped the stack of books she'd been carrying.

"Don't just - make noise when you move, why don't you?"

"I made plenty of noise. I think you were just concentrating. Looking for something?"

"The Tome of the Valkyries, Volume Three, annotated edition." Avery reached up and plucked the book off of the shelf for her. "Thank you."

"Any time. Um. Can I ask you a favor?"

"Go ahead."

"So, um. I've been having a little bit of a difficult time with…um. God."

"Do you want me to pluck burrs out of your fur again?"

"No, although thank you for that. I…I need help. Reading. I mean, I can read. It's just. New physiology isn't too well designed for turning pages." Lakshmi merely looked at her for a moment. "You know what, forget it. It was a stupid idea. I can ask one of the weird creatures they have around here to do it for me. You're super busy with researching how to make me human again, and…yeah, just forget it."

"Of course I'll do it," Lakshmi said. "Of course."

They spent hours together in the little loft Avery calls a bedroom, Lakshmi reading aloud from tomes with fragile pages. She read about possession rituals and exorcisms, about the northern spirits,

and beings made of hunger. They read until long after sundown, falling asleep in a pile of books and notes and candles.

Lakshmi already woke up screaming. The bestial face looming over her when she opened her eyes didn't help. She grabbed the first available object and flung it at her assailant. It's only after the first volume of *The Necessity of the Beast* whacked Avery between the eyes that she regained enough calm to realize who's in the room with her.

"Nice aim," Avery said, rubbing her nose. "I heard you screaming in your sleep. As did half the Library."

"For somewhere that's so fixated on being quiet, I'm shocked their walls aren't soundproofed."

Avery lay down next to her. "What were you dreaming about? Christ, Lakshmi, you're trembling. Was it -"

"8004, yes." Avery didn't say anything, but merely pulled Lakshmi closer, against her side, where Lakshmi could feel her deep, rhythmic breathing and smell the pine and winter air smell of her fur.

"I'm here," she murmured in Lakshmi's ear.

"Avery?" Lakshmi whispered, as she began to nod off. She was somehow still embarrassed, like a child running to her mother after a nightmare. But the shame was overwhelmed by the fear and the exhaustion. "Will you stay?"

"Of course," Avery said, but Lakshmi was already asleep. "I love you," she whispered, before lying down and closing her eyes.

That phrase must have found her way into Lakshmi's dreaming mind, because the first thing she said upon waking was "I love you too."

—-

"And they all lived happily ever after," Lakshmi said, and closes the book quietly.

The audience of children and adults, human and not, gathered around them leaves after Lakshmi shoos them away. Avery and Lakshmi watch them go.

"Our little reading sessions have attracted quite an audience," Avery said.

"And to think it only started because your paws were too big for books."

"So, They've finally managed to get us a room. With an actual bed. I think we should go break it in."

"Down, girl."

Avery pressed herself against Lakshmi and wound herself around her. "I love you," she said.

"I love you too," Lakshmi said, and went to kiss her.

It was…harder than it looked.

"Okay, do you know how sharp your teeth are?"

"Sorry. Sorry. No teeth."

They tried again, and broke apart just as quickly.

"Can I use tongue without getting it bitten off, or is that just not an option at this point?"

"I'm sorry! I just forgot, okay!"

"I'm not certain this is the best approach."

"Well," Avery said, nuzzling her, "we'll just have to figure it out."

Asterion's Wendigo[1234]

Avery McInnes, Huge Dog Person[5], SCP-5760

Conspectus

Asterion's Wendigo is a large canid[67] creature partially possessed by an unknown, extremely hostile spirit summoned into its body. The Wendigo has the ability to create and sculpt the bone of any living creature, as well as having some talent for thaumaturgy[89].

Illustration

Portrait of the Wendigo, drawn by **`Mf99k`**.

Knowledge

Traits: Large and extremely fuzzy[10], the Wendigo is a corporeal entity with canid, cervine, and humanoid qualities. The Wendigo is carnivorous and subsists upon raw meat in the wild, though it is capable of eating dairy and most plant-based foods. However, it should be noted that the Wendigo, like other canids, cannot eat chocolate.[11]

Nature: While Avery retains control of the body, the Wendigo[12] is warm, personable and outgoing. Frequently affectionate with others[1314], Avery is usually about as playful as any other typical canid.

However, should the spirit take over, the

Wendigo becomes hostile to almost everything it sees, wreaking chaos[15] with its ability to shape the bones of others.

History & Associated Parties: Avery McInnes was abducted while hiking in the Green Mountains, and subsequently forced to undergo the ritual that would transform her into Asterion's Wendigo. Normally, the ritual is performed with either a large animal or a feral child who hasn't been exposed to human civilization, and Avery's exposure to these allowed kept the spirit from gaining full control. The Wendigo was caught by the Jailors, where she unexpectedly encountered Dr. Lakshmi Agarwal, a former Jailor, refugee from the Foundation, and Avery's romantic partner.[1617181920][21] The Wendigo was freed by our agent Javier Gonzalez, who had been working undercover amongst the Jailors for some time. The two brought Dr. Agarwal with them to the Library against her will[22] in order to ensure the spirit would not resurface.

Approach: When controlled by the Avery McInnes consciousness, Asterion's Wendigo is perfectly harmless, if liable to accidentally use excessive force when greeting friends.[23] When controlled by the spirit, however, the Wendigo is hostile to all sapient life and will attack. Ensure you know who is at the reins before approaching. If you're unsure, bring Lakshmi with you to keep the spirit at bay. Avery enjoys being petted, and particularly likes belly rubs.[2425] However, rubbing her exposed innards causes her considerable discomfort[26] and as such should be avoided when playing with the Wendigo. Insulting Dr. Agarwal in her presence is also an ill-advised course of action, as is asking about the physical nature of their relationship.

Observations & Stories

"The first time I met this particular Wendigo was while I was trying to find a field guide for identifying deities. I was pretty used to the… non-human members of the Library, as well as the way bigger patrons, but I nearly got crushed by Avery after accidentally wandering into the aisle she was blocking.[27] And from that moment on, a beautiful friendship blossomed, mainly involving overly friendly hugs and using her as a ladder to reach the higher shelves. Not gonna lie, having to drag in a carcass to use later on as a ladder is pretty disturbing, but you do what you have to."

– Alex Sukarno

Doubt

The status of the relationship between Avery and Lakshmi[28] is still in doubt[29], mainly because of the complications relating to "not asking about the relationship". Which makes obtaining this information a lot harder[3031]. - *Javier*[32333435363738394041424344 45]

I don't know if this is just me, but if Avery wants to get back into her old body, we're probably going to need her to actually tell us more about the ritual.[46] Either that, or me and Remy could go and see if we could find any ritual that could correspond to the effects of what Avery went through. At the very least, we could try to find something to drive out that other consciousness? If you really want her to stay in

this particular body, I'm not going to be the one to judge[47], but I'm sure that you don't want your girlfriend turning into a murderous killgod every now and then.[48495051] Unless you're into that[5253], in which case I'm still going to make a case for public safety.[545556] –*Alex*

1.What the hell doesAsterionof all things have to do with you, remind me again? –Lakshmi
2.You… have seen the other titles they give these things, right? -Avery
3.Point taken. –Lakshmi
4.What makesyouso different from any other wendigo, anyway? –Coyote
5.That wasmyjoke. –Lakshmi
6. You picked up some of the lingo from the Foundation people? Colour me impressed.–Lakshmi
7. Nah, I just used to do vet work.–Avery
8. She cracked my staff like a goddamn chopstick last time she tried to use it!–Remy
9. Splinters in my paws.–Avery
10. Seriously, was this the best you could do?–Lakshmi
11. I'd apologize, but I can't stop laughing. You're a goddamn bone horror wolf. And you can't eatchocolate.God, the irony. -Gonzalez
12. I'm not sure whether I should call the Wendigo "the Wendigo" or "Avery" while Avery's in control. Goddamn semantics.–Alex
13. The only thing heavier than the understatement here was the cast on my ribs.–Alex
14. Hey, at least I helped fix them after I broke them…–Avery
15. To be fair, she still wreaks chaos while she's in control. Ever see her knock over a bookshelf?–Remy
16. Former partner, I thought. -Javier
17. Nope.-Avery
18. You sly dog, you. When did this happen!? -Javier
19. About two weeks after we got here. Being here, in the library - it reminded me so much of when we first fell for

each other, and how happy we'd been. She won me over again. -Lakshmi
20. I'm legitimately tearing up. That's the single cutest thing I've ever heard. Please just get married already. Let me die happy. -Remy
21. Alternately, the spirit could just be incredibly homophobic. I've seen stranger things. -Alex
22. She would've been shot otherwise! The hell were we supposed to do!? -Javier
23. I still have bruises.-Alex
24. You. Are. Insufferable. -Lakshmi
25. You. Are. Overdramatic. -Avery
26. I can't believe I have to say this. Some people…-Avery
27. Yes, this is the reason for the broken ribs. Sue me. –Alex
28. "Status of the relationship"? Really? Did the Serpent's Hand become Facebook all of a sudden or what? –Alex
29. I feel "in flux" would be better. They seem to be a little… on and off. –Remy
30. A telepath is editing this document. The only problem is that this telepathrespects other peoples' privacy.–Alex
31. Aw. You're no fun. –Remy
32. To clear up the discussion: yes, it's bestiality, but no, it's not objectionable because both participants are sentient. -Avery
33. All of this is purely theoretical, of course. -Lakshmi
34. That's not what you said last night, babe. -Avery
35. You…You…I thought we agreed to keep this private. -Lakshmi
36. Should we just burn this entry and start all over again? –Alex
37. Alex sshhhhhhhhhh. Let it flower. We're watching something beautiful. –Remy
38. I mean, Iwasgoing to. I was just teasing you. Don't yell at me - this is all on you. -Avery
39. …I should have you spayed. -Lakshmi
40. Bitch. -Avery
41. Look who's talking. -Lakshmi

42. Should this still be in Doubt? -Alex
43. I don't know. I feel like they might be that couple. You know, on and off. But good for you, Agarwal. You were always too uptight. You needed to get laid. -Javier
44. I'd like to go back to the Foundation, actually. A bullet in the brain wouldn't be as painful or anywhere near as humiliating as this is. -Lakshmi
45. Like I said: overdramatic. -Avery
46. I mean, I've told you everything I can. Bone powder, starvation, wrists slit and restitched three times, tied to a cliff wearing dead animal parts. Everything else I was either unconscious for, or I just…blocked it out. -Avery
47. Yes you are. –Remy
48. Decidedly not. I'm not one of those people who gets aroused by needless danger, thank god. -Lakshmi
49. Sure. Sure you aren't. I must have been the one who called me a sexy beast after asking me to use the claws a little more. -Avery
50. I'd forgotten your complete and utter disregard for privacy. Not your most attractive trait. -Lakshmi
51. Of course not. That would be my animal sex appeal, as you so aptly put it. -Avery
52. Nothing like a bit of spontaneous ossiferous tissue generation to spice up the bedroom. Boneplay: the hip new kink. –Avery
53. I hope you're not seriously suggesting this after the debacle above. –Lakshmi
54. Out of curiosity, what gives you the confidence to think you could pull off a consciousness fragmentation ritual? –Javier
55. Because we're babysitting a 4-year old avatar of a flower goddess. –Alex
56. …Alright then. –Javier

The End

<< HUB

I Stand Atop a Spiral Stair

It was a soundless stellar morning when I held my audience with my creator. I'd come looking for a resolution, but I'd left my resolve behind, which was why I was smoking in my cabin, half-hearted dregs of nicotine filling the room with wispy doubts burning in the oxygen for a crew long-since gone, along with almost everything else here.

A queasy feeling knotted and curled in my gut at the thought of confronting her — I told myself it wouldn't get better if I didn't do anything, forced myself to eat my words and swallow my lies. *Besides*, a quieter voice spoke in my head, *she knows you're here already. Chances are she knows why you're here. Who knows how long she's been watching?*

(I could give a definite answer to that last question, which was how I knew it was wrong.)

After a half-hour that stretched out into an endless back and forth with myself, I decided to do something. Shoving myself out of bed, I let my inertia carry me through the door and into the facility at large. Here I felt like a pawn of my momentum, all agency stripped away by Newton's first, which was just how I preferred it.

Eventually, I came to the entrance for the observation post at the center of the station and it opened, seemingly expectantly. I swallowed. I didn't need to be reminded of her omniscience — I already had enough problems with my existence without wondering if or how she'd pushed and pulled me throughout my time here.

If I didn't know why I was here, I could've lost myself in the soft twinkle of the stars against the steel and Plexiglass manacle around what I assumed was her waist. But I had a goal I knew I'd come up with for the first time in fifteen years, and I was looking for my fellow aberration, not the reassuring fusion glow of normalcy.

The radio equipment clicked on with a muted thud of static. She was definitely here, but she was expecting me to make the first move: the board had been set and I was playing white.

I took a deep breath to steady myself. Adrenaline tends to start pumping when you're confronted with the reason for your existence. After letting it out in a long, protracted sigh, I softly laid my hand against the glass.

Contact.

The radio slowly crackled with life, first with static, then trembling versions of words I'd heard spoken by a voice that was literally a lifetime ago: "We cast. We cast. We cast." Her words were cut off by sharp howls of static that sounded like keening, electronic sobbing through the speakers. "Foundation? You're there." Then after a moment of silence: "Kari?"

My throat tightened with tears and post-mortem reunion fugue. "I-I'm here again. I'm sorry I left you."

"I missed you too. You're… different." She sounded disappointed. I couldn't blame her. "You're not as many as you were, last time we met."

"A lot of things changed while I was gone. I'm sorry."

As if to prop up my rapidly-crumbling composure: "It doesn't matter. You're back."

I took a deep, hiccupping breath. "You didn't forget me?"

"No. I can wait. I can always wait." I could hear her smile through the speakers, eyes twinkling with high-frequency EM beaming down at me — what I could also hear were the unspoken words, *I can always wait — but for how much longer?*

"Okay." I wiped tears away from my face, watched them glimmer off into the harsh whiteness of the station around me. "I missed you too." And then I feel my lungs — artificial and entirely unnecessary reminders of a life since-incinerated — have the oxygen pulled out of them, absorbed into a giant hand of void which caresses my

cheek.

It hurts the most that I can recognise the brush of fingers long-gone in her alien non-warmth, feel visceral tenderness in the negative space, and I can put a name to that person who lies just underneath the cloak of nothingness. But then we've both changed: one after the other, and no matter how much I hate her for doing so, I can't hold that anger when she can't feel anything for me.

"They want me to be part of the crew up there." Alexandra Poole pointed up at the sky, her finger's target obscured by the shadow of the Portland Observatory: somewhere a tiny fraction of a lightyear away stood a brilliant citadel floating in space, a childhood fantasy of spacemen going to faroff planets reified in the brutal construction of a Foundation observation post.

It was cold enough that night that the shock felt like an icy sting to Kari. Even if she hadn't known about it she'd subconsciously picked up something, the uneasy silences over their usual coffee, cracks in the conversation when Alex's tells became just obvious enough to dent her usual direct rapport — still, it hadn't lessened the blow any.

For what it was worth, Kari did her best to smile at her: "I'm so proud." The embrace was held just a little too long, arms too tight, as if clutching the broken pieces of something fragile and irreparable.

Alex swallowed audibly, and with Kari's ear at her neck she could hear the discomfort in that motion, subtle cues amplified into an overwhelming burst of something that left her unable to speak. "They wouldn't let me tell you earlier, I— they geased me, dammit, it was just there at the tip of my tongue…"

"It's fine." When Kari finally released her, her eyes looked just the tiniest shade darker even under the soft lights of the Portland starscape. "C'mon, I'm not gonna hold this against you. Your dream, isn't it?"

Mist filled the air as Alex let out an unconscious breath. "I didn't want to have to live it alone. I'm just— sorry. Sorry it turned out this way,

sorry I didn't fight harder—"

"Don't be. I'll still miss you too while you're out there, spacegirl."

"Yeah. I'll… miss you too."

Later, Kari would look back on those words and realise how fucking stupid they were: emotional duct-tape designed to smooth over the sharp edge of something neither of them could control, candy coating on the bitter pill.

But by that time it was too late for retrospection.

When I woke up the next day, there was the heavy warmth of something filling the absence next to me. The smell of hazelnuts and floral shampoo with the tinge of sweat after a night's work fending off the dreams, each sleep bringing crushing existential cramps about a star coming to bear down on the human race in a vision of fiery chariots and Russian Morse that she wouldn't see realised in her lifetime.

For a moment there, I wondered if I was dreaming. The next moment, I was wondering if it mattered, and then I was holding her, desperate sobbing breaths into her shoulder, murmured babbling that eventually resolved into "You're not real, you're not real," furious denials spoken to reverse-psychology reality into *making it real.*

She yawned muzzily and rolled over. "Later… bug me about it later…"

It was real — it was real in my mind, and that was the only real that existed for me, and that was enough. More than enough. My fingers traced tentative lines down her arm, felt the ragged hole of the bullet wound she'd always hated. It was an exacting copy that fit my mental photonegative of her all too well, I realised: calculated in its familiarity, an artificial clone ripped straight out of my mind…

And then the light hit her scar, revealing the sharp gleam of steel and the same falcon brand that lay under my skin, too.

Suddenly my stomach flipped from knowing warmth to chilling

uncertainty. This was either a benevolent act of providence or a cruel piece of bait designed to keep me here for as long as possible — in either case, I knew it was her doing.

"Someone's excited to get up and go." Alex rubbed her eyes, cat-like, and fumbled for glasses on the bedside table — bedside table? I realised I hadn't seen anything of the sort when I'd first gone to sleep here and the realisation only made the room feel smaller around me. "You have a bad night too?"

"Yeah."

"Aw." Before I could get up, she dragged me back down onto the hard mattress. "What happened?"

"I'll… tell you later. Still not quite over it."

"Alright." Our subconsciouses used to take it upon themselves to see which one could perturb their owners more: Alex had a fair approximation of what this usually meant for me, so she backed off. Useful to get her doppelganger to also leave me alone for a few minutes.

As soon as I was out of sight of her, I threw myself down the corridors with renewed force, burning curiosity as my fuel down the labyrinth of the station. I didn't remember it being this big and yet that only served to make me even more claustrophobic, remembering Alex's tales of what had happened to the last probe they'd sent. I needed something I could trust, even if it was from the thing that was doing all this in the first place.

So I pushed my way through the still-open doors and snatched the intercom from its resting place on the desk.

"Why are you doing this?"

The radio crackles back. "Are you unhappy about this?"

"I—" I pause for a sudden bout of hysterical laughter that's gripped me. "I would *think* that I had a fucking good reason to be a little angry at you right about now! You can't just *do* that like this…" A sudden thought strikes me, that both me and the woman lying there

are zombies alike, bought from the dead on the whim of their creator. "Why? Why did you have to bring *her* back?"

"I thought that was what you wanted, no? To open closed books and to read them to someone like you, in you. Part of us both, yes?"

My hand starts to shake as it grips the microphone and I hate the rogue servo that's making me act like this. "This— I was doing fine. I just wanted to— I just wanted to know. I just wanted to know what happened to you, how I got here… how all of this happened. Why'd you let me go?"

She seemed taken aback by the question, and I knew all the scientists had. "They talked with me. I'd waited for them for so long, and then they talked again. They hadn't spoken experience in so long. The message was the medium: I listened. And part of that message was you."

Spoken experience. I swallowed and parsed that slowly. "You. Alex. You absorbed Alex."

"Listened, yes!"

"And you… let me out. Why?"

"They wanted me to sing to them, so I spoke your verse, improvised around what she'd given me when she spoke to me."

Improvised.

I was a variation on a half-remembered theme, a poor photocopy of someone who'd died in an apocalypse she'd tried to prevent: yet all she'd achieved was ensuring I was around to know she'd failed.

She'd been a test subject in the first rounds of testing for the Anderson equipment: leftover BCIs collecting ***neural images*** *of the men and women they wouldn't been able to save from the star, now blistering towards Earth at superluminal velocities.*

Kari was the first image broadcast to the Neptune station, a test of whether or not they could dump minds into Saker bodies fast

enough over long enough distances to ensure they at least got evacuated in spirit. Unfortunately, the station didn't remember they had a radio receiver located smack bang in the middle of the station, and when the vacuum began to sing it began to seek out more melodies.

After half the site had been disintegrated in a five minute rush of chaos, the Foundation immediately began prepping the total evacuation of the remaining inhabitants of the site — and the barely-functional image of Kari received through the distortion of the Vacuum. They'd later dump it into the Saker body of just another man five years after the incineration of Earth.

She was hailed as a hero for a month, a proof of concept for a year, and then abandoned at a Site somewhere out on Proxima once all the other, proper Foundationites had their bodies back (or at least got made available as neatly formatted ***Nankeen*** *substitutes). Then she was told what happened to Alex, and after they'd made sure to emphasise her fault in the matter she cut ties with them right then and there.*

It took another decade after that: exchanging information with the spallated remains of the GOC, a tipoff to Prometheus' grandchildren here and there, but eventually she found her way back to the base where she was born. To mourn and to find answers.

"I overheard you."

I'd frozen, I'd begged for her to ignore it, but she was inconsolable — she reminded me of myself not two weeks after my birth on that satellite and I hated myself for it, for dragging anyone through that, by accident or not. "I overheard you" — I'd betrayed her, plain and simple, and that was that.

"I can make it better."

The inside was shifting violently now, rooms growing and shrinking in sharp bouts of topological birthing pains, furniture and drinks and post-its teasing and flirting and reminding, forming themselves out of nothingness as they slid into position. The windows, the little there

were, shuddered and flickered with the light of a million different sunsets as they heaved to show a present pregnant with possibilities.

"Shut up."

I was heading to the airlock. I knew my ship wouldn't be there.

"I'm sorry."

Sparse white benches and plumbing extruded themselves out of the air around me, a laboratory sealing my path off. I screamed unconsciously and threw myself at the door to burst through into the other side.

"I can make you happy again."

Sheisn'tmesheisn'thersheisn'tmesheisn'thersheisn'tmesheisn'ther—

A lanky blonde man with a sample tube full of something **`glistening and black`** walked out from a corridor to nowhere, neck slit to expose the titanium framework underneath. He cocked his head at me and I watched something in his eyeball flicker.

"We can fix this."

A few more meters to the airlock, straight shot down a hallway that screamed as it burst into a million different antichambers and sublevels. And then I was there, clutching onto the door's handles and tugging and screaming, "Stop it—"

Then hands, pulling me gently away from the airlock — am I so incompetent as to fail even in this? — and then I'm floating, staring wide-eyed at the cast of some sick play starring Site-64: Merlo, with her arm juddering uncontrollably, Holman, legs torn open at the calves to reveal serial numbers, and Shaw, face frozen to stare at me with wild, trembling eyes.

Alex leads the troupe. She's crying. In unison, they declare:

"Go back to bed and I promise I can make it better."

I sob, muffled, into Alex's shoulder as she holds me and begins leading me down the corridors of the Site — this isn't a station anymore, there's too much gravity, too much carpet and mundanity to be the station I left — towards my apartment. Towards something right.

"I can keep singing for you if you'd just let me," Alex stammers in that two-voice that is and isn't hers. "I know the day and I can play it. Just go back to bed."

I see a man taking up his station at his desk, a woman burying her head in paperwork, a man who'd lost his friends and his family at the demand of a greater good, all staring at me as they take their roles for the show. The last performance of a million damned homunculi.

Finally I reach my home and with a small prompting from Alex I obtain the keys from my pocket and unlock the apartment. I stumble numbly through the living room as the coffee and the apple and the television reassert their place as props on the stage, and then I reach the bedroom.

"It's over now. You can sleep. You don't have to live if you don't want to."

I fall onto the bed with her.

Someone else holds her tight.

I stared into the face of everything and nothing and made it back alive

Three months after his partner's disappearance, the first thing **Draven Kondraki** received was a Foundation Star sent to their residence, and he was scared to death because he had never heard of a living person receiving a Foundation Star before.

But it was okay, they told him, *he was just still in evaluation.*

What had happened, he asked.

Classified, they answered. But as he held one of them up and asked again in a way more akin to screaming than sentences, "we don't know" was all he got.

Nobody knew, it seemed, except for Researcher James Martin Talloran himself. A few days later Draven learnt that they had found James near death inside a containment cell a kilometer into the ground, lined with exploded reality anchors and guarded by four amnesiac guards. *He saved the world,* someone with enough empathy and decency finally told him after way too many requests filed. *Single-handedly reverted an XK*, so he was told.

But that was not what he wanted to hear.

James was alive. But Draven was also fearful and angry, because *why did it have to be him*, *why would James have to face an XK entity alone*, and *how did it even happen because he was just a Level 3 Researcher transferred to Site-118 and assigned to a completely normal job*. But above all, he just wanted to see James again.

A month later, James came home.

He opened the door and James smiled to him, and it was soft and sweet like it always was. He hastily signed a bunch of documents

and was given a leave, but as he bid the personnel goodbye and it was just him and James again, Draven started crying. He hugged James, a strong MTF agent in the arms of a nimble researcher, but James patted him on the back and told him it was okay.

And for a while, it was okay. James was in surprisingly good shape and spirit. Aside from a few traces of a large gash on his face, it almost felt like James hadn't disappeared at all.

He was given a month (and he pulled his holiday over and made it double); James had a year or more and a large sum of reward money that came with the Star. James didn't talk about what happened, and it was okay, Draven wasn't about to push it. So they stayed at home, chatted and cooked and even watched TV and did all the things they never had the time or chance to.

But one day, two weeks into their little holiday together, he was sitting by the table and James was cutting some tomatoes in the kitchen. When the cutting stopped, Draven barely noticed it, too engrossed in a book he had gotten from his father's collection. He looked up briefly as James turned to him and walked towards the table, still holding the knife. He raised an eyebrow and was about to ask; but his eyes were met with a blank expression and it horrified him.

Without warning, Researcher James Talloran slashed at Draven with the kitchen knife, with a strange ease that no researcher sitting at desk jobs would have been able to, as if practiced many, many times. Thanks to his training, Draven dodged out of the way and the knife impacted with the table.

For a moment, among the surprise and panic, Draven expected another attack. But James just looked at the knife, then the table it was stuck on, and then the knife again, as if it was the most interesting thing in the world.

"James, put the knife down!" was all he managed to say. James turned to look at him, and obliged. He let go, the knife still stuck on the table.

Draven was scared. But he acted without realizing, removing the

knife and put it out of his partner's reach. A few more moments before he regained his composure, and recognized what had happened. His heart was still racing, and his voice cracked: "What, what the fuck was that?"

"It didn't melt," James said.

"What?" he barely squeezed the word out.

"The table didn't melt. The floor didn't collapse. Everything was fine."

"What are you talking about? Tables… don't do that?"

"Exactly," James smiled softly. "I just have to make sure."

Three days later, Draven was sitting with Head Psychologist Dr. Simon Glass and was regrettably informed that "it is much worse than they thought". Glass told him that they had suspected Researcher Talloran's condition, of course, but a full set of evaluations over, he seemed to have recovered well enough. And Draven had to agree because for two full weeks, everything was fine. He had been extra careful and he knew that James went to see his assigned psychologist every other day. They had been together for… what, a little short of a decade? And he didn't notice anything even slightly wrong.

"It seems that he had somehow faked a stable mental state." Glass looked at him apologetically (and Draven hated that look), "This shouldn't have happened… We used a three man group and applied strict procedures," he paused, and added. "It was almost as if he knew what he would be asked and what to answer…"

As if he had sat through the same evaluation hundreds of times over.

As Dr. Glass continued to explain, laying out the necessary measures to be taken afterwards and apologizing for their supposed oversight, Draven felt numb. The words pounded on his chest and strained his heart while everything else faded.

He faked his mental state. He faked being alright. How? Why would

he do that? Why would he need to do that? He hugged him and smiled and patted him on the back and told him everything was alright. But then he attacked him with a knife and told him that the table might melt. He smiled so softly and sweetly but it was not okay.

It was not okay, and he hated it.

When he snapped out of it, he was standing in front of James' temporary cell (for further observation and reevaluation). He fuzzily remembered that Glass had told him that if Talloran was proven to no longer be a danger to himself and others, he would be moved to restricted dormitory area in the site. And Draven would be able to visit and even stay, but no more stays at home and holidays and cooking.

He stared at his partner from across a standard Foundation issued table, only to see James smiling back at him. And Draven suddenly felt very sick. Because how could he look at him with that soft comforting smile when they were in a Foundation holding cell, next to two armed guards? How could he still be like this when everything was not okay?

It was his father all over again.

They talked. Or James talked and nodded, and Draven's voice filled with a bit too much anger.

"Why don't you tell me? Why would you do this? What is wrong? Please, please, let me help you," he asked. He held his hands; the guards didn't stop him.

"I'm sorry. I just want to be sure, you know? Everything is fine. It's all over now," he answered. The hands were cold.

Draven felt more frustration and anger building up inside him. But James looked at him with a look too loving and he talked with a voice too comforting, and Draven broke under them. He felt the helplessness again, his love right in front of him, but there was nothing he could do. He should have been the one comforting James, not the other way around. The fear and the hollowness and

many other things he could not describe gradually piled up and he felt weak.

Eventually, he managed to make himself ask. "What is over? What happened?"

There was suddenly a stern look on James' face. His smile was sadder. A few moments later, he spoke. "You know, I stared into the face of everything and nothing and made it back alive."

Draven opened his mouth, but there were no words. He didn't understand what it meant, and wished he didn't have to.

But then, James looked down at the table and continued. "I just have to make sure I'm really back."

Attempts after attempts, they finally gave Draven what he wanted. Perhaps because he was too persistent or perhaps because there was no improvement on James' condition and they were running out of options. Draven had spent his time between duty visiting James everyday and the rest of those applying for the documentation of **SCP-3999**, the SCP James had encountered and neutralized during his three missing months.

There were documents to sign and memetic kill agents to bypass, and even after all that, chunks and chunks of information redacted, but Draven sat and read.

Draven was horrified.

In the documents, he was not James, but Researcher Talloran. And Researcher Talloran was to be,

> *Isolated. Killed. Melted. Eaten. Amnesticized and made someone else. Made to watch his loved ones die. Tortured. Thrown into the end of the world. In the void, with the monster.*
>
> *Researcher Talloran begged. Cried. Called for help. He died. Killed himself. But he also fought. He didn't give up.*

He won.

When he finally put the document down, Draven found himself unable to comprehend all this. Or any of it, really. The words choked him as he realized it was way more than the monsters in the cells or the reality benders he encountered on missions. It was among the things that were hidden deeply behind layers of clearance levels and passwords and kill agents.

James had faced a god.

That night, he couldn't sleep. And when he did, he dreamt of James slitting his throat with the kitchen knife in front of their bed, blood pouring onto his face. He woke up screaming.

The next day, he rushed to where James now was, a bigger and slightly more comfortable cell, and sat across a similar table. No guards this time, only the camera silently recording. He was greeted by that same soft smile but now, the smile was choking him, like the words he read again and again last night.

So he held James' cold, cold hands, and asked him if he wanted to be amnesticized, because this was taking a toll on him and he couldn't just pretend nothing was wrong.

But James screamed.

It was the second time James scared him after the incident, and he briefly flashed back to when he held the kitchen knife. But Draven didn't let go.

"No," James yelled, desperately, his face filled with panic and anger. "I will never forget this, I can't forget this!"

Draven held his hands tighter and knew they were both shaking. Eventually, James stopped shaking. Eventually, he stopped screaming. Eventually, he said: "If I forget, then how can I tell?"

If this is real or not?

"We can't amnesticize him." Dr. Glass said.

"Why the fuck not? Now you're respecting people's wishes?" He had hated Foundation bureaucracy, but this was a slap to the face. He felt the anger burning inside him.

"…Because we did that already."

Draven stared at the doctor in confusion and surprise.

"Every time he was given amnestics, he recovered his memory over the next week. It seems like… he had built up a resistance over them."

> *Researcher Talloran is to be amnesticized.*
>
> *Researcher Talloran is to be amnesticized.*
>
> *Researcher Talloran is to be amnesticized.*

"We have never seen anything like this before." The psychologist's voice seemed distant.

"No." Draven said. His own voice broke.

"I'm sorry," was all Dr. Glass could say.

Things didn't get much better from there. Six months later they moved James to the site dormitory, and Draven went to stay with him. Another three months and he was released from the site because there was a containment breach and James thought reality broke again and nearly stabbed someone with a pen.

They were back to when James first came back again, but this time, Draven knew things were not okay. Because every now and then, James checked if tables melt, if the sky was not there anymore, or if a passerby was actually a talent agent dressing up as the mother with a dog on the back. He bit himself one or two times to make

himself certain because Draven took all the sharp objects away.

But he also smiled and talked softly and asked if Draven's work day was okay and Draven's heart ached.

Talk to me. Please just talk to me.

But James wouldn't; instead he talked about the evening news and the TV shows, pretending their life was still normal, which it never was. (They never talked about the TV before; they hardly watched it.)

A year passed and Draven woke up from the same nightmare screaming, and found James in front of him, throat not slit, quietly holding his hand.

The hands were cold, but warmer than his.

And that was the point he broke. He had tried so many times, asking James to talk about it, to believe in him, but it was never effective. This time, the sight of blood all over the bed was still lingering, and it was so much like that other room filled with blood and meat.

Draven collapsed and started to rant incoherently. He cried and begged for James to just talk to him, to just stop pretending it was okay, because it was not, and it was breaking both of them. Because it was all too similar to the night his dad told him it was okay when it was not, and he couldn't afford to let go this time.

He talked about how James stood up against great monsters, and he could never be that brave and persistent himself, and he couldn't really imagine what James was going through. He just wished him to talk even if it seemed all fake and distant. He rambled about their time together even though he knew those wouldn't be able to convince him. He talked about how scared he was during the months he was missing but now he was even more scared. He mentioned his father again and had no idea where he was getting at but he knew he was afraid of losing him like he did his father. He talked about the documents and Dr. Glass' words and many other things he had agreed not to talk about; but he did anyways because he could not think or breathe or stop shaking. He asked him again

and again to just, *please, talk to him*.

Really talk to him.

When his throat finally ran dry and he saw James looking at him, he felt scared and foolish and desperate that he was going to say it was okay again.

But this time, James hugged him and cried as well. With a soft voice, he told him that it was not three months but lifetimes after lifetimes, and he had lived all these so many times before. It was a completely normal interview until the doctor became a wolf and they floated in the void. It was a trip with his family until a containment unit came and shot them all in the head. It was his victory until he went back to a world with faceless people and the monster mocked his futile attempts. So many times he had watched Draven's face melt and his body shatter and all the terrible things come out. So many more times he had believed yet it all melted away. He couldn't afford to believe it was real.

He was scared. They both were.

Eventually they sat together at the bedside, holding hands together, and stared into the room with no lights turned on. They were still shaking, but for the first time, it felt mildly peaceful. They woke up to each other's cuddle the next morning, and decided to stay a little longer.

James didn't say he would believe him, but he believed him a little more after that. It was not completely okay yet, but James now sometimes talked and cried over his shoulder, and allowed himself to ask Draven if things were real instead of grabbing for a kitchen knife. James stayed at home and worked on some projects unrelated to the Foundation. And they would read and watch TV as they never did before and enjoy each other's company.

It was not okay yet, not really. But things were going to get better.

I Thought You Died Alone

> To: Santosh Desai (pcs.52a|iaseds#pcs.52a|iaseds)
> From: Arvind Desai (pcs.24|iaseda#pcs.24|iaseda)
> Subject: Movie?

Hi **Santosh**,
I haven't seen you in a while and was wondering what you're up to. Interested in seeing a movie on Friday?

Best,
Arvind

> To: Arvind Desai (pcs.24|iaseda#pcs.24|iaseda)
> From: Santosh Desai (pcs.52a|iaseds#pcs.52a|iaseds)
> Subject: RE: Movie?

I'm busy that day.

Santosh

Excerpt from Bowe Commission Probablistic Risk Assessment of "Project Able"
Authored by Dr. Lara Aritza, Dr. Janet Byrnes, Dr. Kain Crow, Dr. Arvind Desai, Dr. Reginald Topher, Alpha-1 Alpha Romeo (Mobile Task Force Leader)

… Although SCP-076-2's violent, capricious, and sociopathic nature presents a severe risk to Omega-7 personnel, we consider it unlikely that Omega-7 will experience this kind of internal conflict, assuming that the Task Force completes at least one mission per week. Further safeguards are discussed in Section 7A…

…SCP-105, although still in adolescence, is clearly willing to work with the Foundation to contain anomalies. Its ability to influence events from long-range would strongly benefit applications such as espionage, reconnaissance, and direct conflict with anomalies…

…Given the current state of affairs, this probabilistic risk assessment has deemed the usage of anomalous objects within Mobile Task Force Omega-7 "Pandora's Box" to fall within acceptable operating parameters. Omega-7 is cleared to operate from a risk assessment standpoint…

…**Postscript:** Congratulations to all members of Pandora's Box. You are the first of a new breed of defenders. The world has changed a great deal since the inception of the Foundation. Where once we contained, now we must exploit. Anomalies are becoming more dangerous, more widespread, and more common. Once, we were static, reacting to threats. With the formation of Mobile Task Force Omega-7, we are proactive. Not only will the Foundation contain anomalies, but we will contain them before they can become anomalies. We wish the best of luck to all members of Pandora's Box.

CONTAINMENT FATALITY

On 5/27/ , all personnel at Containment Area-25 were killed when the nuclear warhead countermeasure was activated in order to contain a severe containment breach caused by SCP-076-2.

At the time, SCP-076-2 was a part of Mobile Task Force Omega-7, but had not been assigned to a mission in at least months. To help alleviate its increasingly destructive activities, SCP-076-2 was introduced to SCP- to see if its psychic capabilities could be used to calm SCP-076.

However, upon contact with SCP-076-2, SCP- caused

the immediate disintegration of SCP-076-2's explosive collar, enabling it to rampage through the site, killing numerous personnel as well as releasing SCP- from containment. Proper containment measures could not be established as most of the surviving personnel had been recently transferred and were still unfamiliar with Area-25's evacuation protocols. Keter Containment Specialist Santosh Desai activated the nuclear warhead countermeasure before dying to SCP- 's cognitohazardous effect. All personnel on site were killed, but SCP-076-2 and SCP- were contained successfully. Desai was awarded a posthumous Foundation Star for his act of bravery.

BEST PRACTICES:

- Take it upon yourself to always be up-to-date on site and area safety protocols.

> To: Santosh Desai (pcs.52a|iaseds#pcs.52a|iaseds)
> From: Arvind Desai (pcs.24|iaseda#pcs.24|iaseda)
> Subject: Lunch?

Hi Santosh,

We haven't talked in a while and I was hoping to catch up. I hear you have a girl friend now? I'd love to hear all about it. Is she pretty? What's her name? I looked at your schedule; you're free from 1-3 PM on Thursday, so I was thinking we could have lunch then. You can pick the restaurant?

Love,
Arvind

> To: Arvind Desai (pcs.24|iaseda#pcs.24|iaseda)
> From: Santosh Desai (pcs.52a|iaseds#pcs.52a|iaseds)
> Subject: RE: Lunch?

I'm busy that day.

Santosh

Armament Testing Range, Site-42
REGISTRY LOG

10:23:45 07/16/14: Entry: Weapon Technicians S. Feretti, R. Trellis

10:51:17 07/16/14: Entry: Emergency Services K. Appleton, M. Daniels, R. Dorian, L. Feehrer, F. Fiskerton, M. Manson, N. O'Flaherty, J. Spinelli, K. Venkatraman, F. al-Zahed

10:55:32 07/16/14: Entry: Site Director A. Desai

11:05:43 07/16/14: Exit: Emergency Services K. Appleton, M. Daniels, R. Dorian, L. Feehrer, F. Fiskerton, M. Manson, N. O'Flaherty, J. Spinelli, K. Venkatraman, F. al-Zahed ; Site Director A. Desai; Weapon Technicians A. Aardman, S. Feretti, J. Maxwell, N. Perkins, R. Trellis,

Level II Armory, Site-42
REGISTRY LOG

11:20:04 07/17/14: Entry: Site Director A. Desai
11:21:09 07/17/14: Exit: Site Director A. Desai

> To: Maria Jones (pcs.asiar|senojm#pcs.asiar|senojm)
> From: Arvind Desai (pcs.24|iaseda#pcs.24|iaseda)
> Subject: Site 42 Armory Authorization

Hi Maria,

As you may have heard, five weapons technicians were killed yesterday in an accident at Site-42's weapons testing lab. The cause of the accident was determined to

be a malfunction in a MARK IV Gluon Separator, a prototype weapon that I had shelved almost a decade ago. It was sitting in the armory under Level 4 clearance until yesterday.

Two of the technicians involved, Rudolf Trellis and Shin Feretti, somehow received clearance to access the device. They were Level 2 technicians. I didn't authorize this and I haven't heard anything about reviving that project. Would you be kind enough to take a look at the records and tell me who authorized them?

Thank you,
Arvind Desai
Site Director, Site 42

> To: Arvind Desai (pcs.24|iaseda#pcs.24|iaseda)
> From: Maria Jones (pcs.asiar|senojm#pcs.asiar|senojm)
> Bcc: O5-7 (pcs.10|7o#pcs.10|7o), O5-10 (pcs.10|01o#pcs.10|01o)
> Subject: RE: Site 42 Armory Authorization

Hi Arvind,

There's no record of Rudolf Trellis or Shin Feretti being authorized to access the device. If you're positive that it was those two, I'll talk to the IT department, the Director of Task Forces, and get MTF Beta-1 to look into it. How does that sound?

Best,
Maria Jones
Director, RAISA

> To: Maria Jones (pcs.asiar|senojm#pcs.asiar|senojm)
> From: Arvind Desai (pcs.24|iaseda#pcs.24|iaseda)
> Subject: RE: RE: Site 42 Armory Authorization

Hi Maria,

I'm quite positive; the logs do not lie. I had to pull *three* prototype Scranton anchors out of storage to keep the lab and half of the continent from disintegrating into their component quarks. Please contact me as soon as you hear anything, or have Beta-1 contact me if they find anything. I greatly appreciate it.

Thank you,
Arvind Desai
Site Director, Site-42

> To: Arvind Desai (pcs.24|iaseda#pcs.24|iaseda)
> From: O5-7 (pcs.10|7o#pcs.10|7o) FLAGGED TOP PRIORITY: MEMETIC ENCRYPTION UNSCRAMBLED
> Bcc: Maria Jones (pcs.asiar|senojm#pcs.asiar|senojm), O5-10 (pcs.10|01o#pcs.10|01o)
> Subject: RE: RE: RE: Site-42 Armory Authorization

Dr. Desai,
I would like to meet with you to discuss this issue. We will conduct a video conference tomorrow afternoon at 2:30 exactly. To connect to me, log onto Foundation VideoChat and join the server at address 125.34.0.51234372. Enter the password "555qU! pedaLiAn_ecL7Pse_@p0cAl!p+0_g3ner!c" exactly as shown.

-O5-7

> To: Santosh Desai (pcs.52a|iaseds#pcs.52a|iaseds)
> From: Arvind Desai (pcs.24|iaseda#pcs.24|iaseda)
> Subject: Visit?

Hi Santosh,

I haven't seen you in several months, and wanted to visit.

You're going to be on vacation next week so I was thinking I could stop by then. I just want to spend some time with my son. I love you.

Love,
Arvind

> To: Arvind Desai (pcs.24|iaseda#pcs.24|iaseda)
> From: Santosh Desai (pcs.52a|iaseds#pcs.52a|iaseds)
> Subject: RE: Visit?

Mum can visit.

Santosh

> To: Arvind Desai (pcs.24|iaseda#pcs.24|iaseda)
> From: Janet Byrnes (pcs.scihte|senrybj#pcs.scihte|senrybj)
> Subject: RE: Alpha-9 Whistleblower Protection

Dear Arvind,

Your request for whistleblower protection regarding Mobile Task Force Alpha-9 has been reviewed and denied on the grounds that there is nothing to blow the whistle on. All aspects of Alpha-9 were reviewed by the Ethics Committee already, otherwise it wouldn't exist at all.

I know you're thinking about Santosh's death. Please don't dwell on the past. It won't bring him back. I know this email doesn't touch on nearly as many things as it should, so I'd like to sit down with you sometime and talk about this entire issue. Talk like old times. How does lunch Thursday sound?

Best,
Janet Byrnes
Director, Ethics Committee

> To: gro.nu.cog|tairatercesrednu#gro.nu.cog|tairatercesrednu
> From: ten.adwa2q|Ddad932a#ten.adwa2q|Ddad932a
> Subject: Foundation Whistleblower Seeking Sanctuary

To the Global Occult Coalition Undersecretary,

I have stolen an anomalous item and am using it to ensure that this transmission will not be noticed. I have information that may be of use to the Global Occult Coalition regarding activities of the SCP Foundation and wish to claim whistleblower protection.

One week ago, two technicians were ordered to test a shelved prototype weapon in Foundation Site-42. The device promptly malfunctioned, exploded, killed the testers and three other innocent technicians, and may result in the disintegration of a 500,000 square-meter testing facility. I recently had a conversation with O5-7 (one of the leaders of the Foundation), who explained that she wished to use the weapon in Project Resurrection, which is an attempt to recreate a defunct Foundation special forces group that utilized anomalous SCP objects (see the **`attached document`** for more information).

Mobile Task Force Omega-7 resulted in the nuclear destruction of entire Sites, the release of numerous potentially world-ending anomalies, and caused reality itself to fundamentally change through the actions of just two or three different maniacs. Now the Foundation is trying to recreate this disastrous endeavor through Mobile Task Force Alpha-9. I have already tried to stop this from the inside but nobody will listen, forcing me to turn to the GOC. I will relay as much information to the GOC as I can regarding this project whenever possible.

- ARD

> To: ten.adwa2q|Ddad932a#ten.adwa2q|Ddad932a
> From: gro.nu.cog|tairatercesrednu#gro.nu.cog|tairatercesrednu
> Subject: RE: Foundation Whistleblower Seeking Sanctuary

Prove that you are not a double agent.

> To: gro.nu.cog|tairatercesrednu#gro.nu.cog|tairatercesrednu
> From: ten.adwa2q|Ddad932a#ten.adwa2q|Ddad932a
> Subject: RE: RE: Foundation Whistleblower Seeking Sanctuary

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Attached is a file containing significant portions of the Foundation's documentation of the Global Occult Coalition.
It is up to you to decide if this is sufficient proof. At the very least, it will give you more information regarding your interactions with the Foundation.

As I acquire more information regarding Alpha-9, I will pass it on to you.
ARD

> To: ten.adwa2q|Ddad932a#ten.adwa2q|Ddad932a
> From: gro.nu.cog|tairatercesrednu#gro.nu.cog|tairatercesrednu
> Subject: RE: RE: RE: Foundation Whistleblower Seeking Sanctuary

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You have been granted probationary undercover operative status under the codename Cuckoo. We await further information.

> To: Janet Byrnes (pcs.scihte|senrybj#pcs.scihte|senrybj)

> From: Arvind Desai (pcs.24|iaseda#pcs.24|iaseda)
> Subject: Thank You for Lunch

Dear Janet,

Thank you for lunch. It was terrific, but not as much as our discussion.
You are right. Santosh may be gone, but I can honor him by doing my best to uphold the Foundation's mission. He died to protect the world, and I will not let that sacrifice be in vain.

I have spent the day thinking about it, and I am rescinding my concerns about Mobile Task Force Alpha-9. At the very least, I can help guide it and keep us from repeating the mistakes of the past. I will be speaking with O5-7 about how I can help.

Again, I greatly appreciated our lunch. You were right about what you said; I just needed an outside perspective. The world truly has changed, but I've been too caught up to see it. I look forward to working on this with you. Mobile Task Force Alpha-9 may truly be our last hope.

Thank you,
Arvind

> To: Santosh Desai (pcs.52a|iaseds#pcs.52a|iaseds)
> From: Arvind Desai (pcs.24|iaseda#pcs.24|iaseda)
> Subject: RE: RE: Visit?

Santosh,

Why will you not let me see my own son?
Are you spiting your own father?
I love you.
Arvind

> To: Arvind Desai (pcs.24|iaseda#pcs.24|iaseda)
> From: Santosh Desai (pcs.52a|iaseds#pcs.52a|iaseds)
> Subject: RE: RE: Visit?

Yes.

Santosh

maybe god will forgive you if we both beg

In this world, consequence cannot bear the harshness of catastrophe. Mistakes are given lighter punishments. Falling stars shoot through the night sky and occasionally grant wishes of observers below. It is a softer place.

The Foundation did not have to suffer from its judgement errors as harshly as in other worlds. Employees worked in relative peace; some even found the time to grant small mercies.

When the Foundation first asked Cain to reunite with his brother, he took three days to decide. On the third day, he agreed on the condition that the only person who could abort the mission would be himself. The Foundation took three more days before agreeing.

Cain settled by the coffin that held his brother in a white room. He didn't know if Abel could hear him in there; maybe Abel was sleeping. The thought made him smile a bit—at least Abel's habit of long naps hadn't changed. Regardless, he spoke his apologies in a language to which they were the sole survivors.

"Say, brother, good morning. Shouldn't you be tending to your sheep? They're all down the hills, scattered. Their children have fled our lands and fill the cliffs as mountain goats, the deserts and savannahs as camels, oryx and antelope. Good morning, good morning brother."

Three minutes later, Abel stepped out of his coffin, drew a blade, and tried to decapitate his brother. Cain did not move to dodge; any wounds delivered to him would simply reflect back to the attacker. Abel's head fell onto the floor, then caved in on itself as a pile of dust. The coffin swung shut.

Cain coughed, ran his hands over his own neck and winced. *"Good*

to see you too."

Every two days, Abel would leave his coffin and try to kill his brother. Sometimes, Cain talked to the coffin. For two months, this futile attempt at discussion was all they had.

Eventually, Abel's anger simmered down enough to allow a question from his lips. *"Why, Cain? Why are you here?"*

"I came to ask for-"

Abel did not allow the conversation to continue. This went on for another month. He would ask the same questions again and again, finding himself unable to face any answers.

Abel had been a colicky newborn; the only thing that soothed him was his mother's lullabies. So Cain sang as Abel slept. He breathed a soft, haunting melody that dwelt on brighter days.

Later, the tattooed man stepped out of the coffin and into the white room. His bare feet made soft padding noises as he stepped towards his older brother, watching him with the patient gaze of a farmer waiting for his crops to fruit. *"Why. Why did you do it. Why are you here, now, after killing me and leaving me."* He extended arms, pressing them against Cain's clear skin. *"Leaving me to these people, with their marks on me, all their marks!* Tell me!!*"*

"I was young and jealous. I got older. Time carved its wisdom into me. I'm here now because… because I still love you. Please forgive me, Abel. Everyone we knew as children has left to God's garden." The older brother leaned forwards to pull his sibling into a tight hug.

"My beautiful baby brother, it's just us now," he choked out.

Abel drew a blade. Clutched the hilt, then let go. He leaned into the embrace, clinging tightly. *"It's not fair. It's not fair. You are so untouched. I can't leave a single wound on you."* He spoke, soft as moonlight. *"And yet look at me. Look at all the things done to me. You used to be my hero, but this… you let this happen to me."*

"I see it, Abel. I see what I've done. I take full responsibility. I'll earn my title back, if you'll have me. This, I promise with everything I

have." Cain swaddled his brother in his arms, rocking him back and forth and stroking his hair.

Abel clutched Cain's shirt, his body trembling as he wept. His fingers began to soften and collapse into dust. His brother continued rocking him as he, too, crumbled. By the time their tears reached the floor, they could only wet the dust that remained.

all i ever wanted; all i ever deserved

In this world, flowers bloom in hues too tender to survive elsewhere. Meadows are sacred spaces from which flow all mercies. The inhabitants bow to nothing and follow only their own devotions. Sometimes the consequences are almost too much to bear.

On the day Dr. Sophia Light joined the Foundation, she stopped crying. She had lost her fiance, Mars -not just her life but her *memory*- from a freak accident that she also couldn't recall. All Sophia had left was how it felt to have no recollection about the love of her life, as if having fallen in love with nobody. Yet she still could not mourn.

But the Nobody who died was Sophia's Nobody under the name Mars. From the corpse sprung forth another iteration- stripped from the label of belonging to her beloved. This was Nobody's burden; Nobody could not be anyone to anybody.

She still thought of herself as Sophia's Nobody, even though her identity had been killed from her beloved's perception. She believed it was alright- that this was an acceptable loss. Sophia was still alive and Nobody could still be by her side.

The Foundation always insisted Dr. Light take a vacation on the day of their planned wedding; she would never know why. She meandered in ignorance of the arm curled around her left arm, the fingers entwining her own, or the head resting upon her shoulder. She listened to the sweetness of a summer breeze and did not hear the sweeter nothings whispered into her ears.

Nobody thought herself the happiest woman in the world, to walk a forest with her lover on their wedding anniversary.

As if suddenly entering a daydream, they step into a clearing of

subtle blue flowers, like the sky's secret diary.

As far as Sophia knew, this is the first time she had seen such a gem. Yet she cannot contain her excitement. She sprints and splashes in the marsh that birthed this field of Indian hyacinth.

Mars had brought them here, on the day they confessed to each other. They had danced together in this soggy landscape until the stars became their audience. Here, the two choreographed their relationship and believed it would be forever.

Now Sophia brings them here, on the anniversary of their to-be wedding. She is compelled to spin and dance, seemingly alone. The sun sets, then sleeps under the horizon. Stars spill into the sky like a jar of dropped glitter.

Nobody dances alongside her. She believes herself happy, to see her beloved so joyful despite the ignorance. Sophia's smile made all the light in the world seem dim.

It is well into the night when Sophia stops her wild spinning and surveys the darkness. The field seems suddenly empty; she is struck with a terrible pain from no source she could imagine. A loss, a grief welling up like vomit in her throat. And yet she still did not cry.

Nobody reaches over and wipes away Sophia's tears, even as she herself weeps.

SCPokemon

“So you’re saying that we can’t close **826** until…”

“Until somebody finishes the main narrative, yes.”

“And we still don’t know where the skip is… *hiding*, in the setting.”

“That is also correct.”

“What the hell happened? It never screwed up like this before.”

“As far as we can tell, the interaction between the item, along with the book and matching *electronic media* caused the anomaly. We never tested 826 with multiple formats of matching subject matter.”

“… God dammit. What now?”

“I suggest we send an expeditionary force to retrieve the item. However, because of the nature of the setting, only one Agent may be sent at a time. We sent a three-man team in and they exploded.”

“What.”

“However, it has been found that we can retrieve inorganic items from the setting and keep them indefinitely within our world. While we do believe that they will degrade and vanish once the setting is closed, I believe that this gives us a… how does one say, cheat code, in winning back SCP-826.”

“… what kinds of ‘inorganic items’?”

“Please come with me. We have some preparations to make.”

Dr Django Bridge had offered to house the Bookends at his Site for a while. While Site-66 is labelled as a Bio-Site, it usually houses miscellaneous animate SCP objects that may or may not be organic.

Of course, he did this with the expectation that the other Doctors would *keep their stuff out of his stuff*. And of course, everything always cocks up.

“I’m not an Agent. Why do I have to-”

“You have proven in the past to be an expert when it comes to the current circumstances of the item.” said the ginger-headed research assistant.

Bridge was being pulled down the hall by several Agents and Research Assistant Steve, towards the unused area of the Site.

“That doesn’t even make sense. What did you do to my site?!” Bridge was irate.

“Listen, I’m just reading from a script, my doc wants you to do it.” They turned a corner and reached a door to a testing chamber.

“I don’t even know what you people are *doing*.”

“Err sorry. Just take the instructions and backpack.” And with that, a large backpack was hefted into Bridge’s arms by an Agent, and the paper into his hands.

“… Fine. Whatever. Okay. I’ll do your fucking mission.”

As everyone else piled out, Bridge looked at the portal. A door of white light, opening to the unknown fuckup beyond. He took a deep breath, then a long sigh. Sure, he’s messed up here and there. The cockup with the lizard and ticket, yes, that was a bad move. Taking photographs of Birth Worm wearing funny hats? Yes, okay, that’s dumb. But what the HELL did he do to deserve this?

Oh well. After several minutes of dread and reflection, he slung on the pack and stepped in.

“So why is the guy who pulled the bullshit with the ticket going in to retrieve this skip?” Agent Dodridge leaned against a wall, watching monitors watching Bridge.

“Eh, it can’t hurt. At best, everyone and everything comes back unharmed. At worst, he dies.” Agent Lament shrugged. He sat at the desk and got comfortable.

“Yeah, but wouldn’t one of us do better? This guy’s a fucking… archivist? According to his file.”

“Throw him a bone. He’ll appreciate it if he survives.”

Bridge opened his eyes and looked around. A bedroom; a bed in one corner, computer… A TV and Super Nintendo sitting in the middle of the floor, that’s a bit strange. Shrug. Stairs in the corner of the bedroom. What…? Whatever.

He descended the stairs, noticing a woman at a table. Okay. Seems non-hostile.

“… hello?” He tapped the woman on the shoulder. She turned and smiled.

“Right. All boys leave home someday. It said so on TV. Prof. Oak, next door, is looking for you.”

He froze for a moment, staring at the woman, before running out the front door and looking around. A larger building to the left, empty fields to the right, a small fence before him, water beyond. He dropped the backpack and finally read the mission brief Steve gave him.

> Dr. Bridge. Enclosed is a set of mission-appropriate equipment, a photograph of SCP-826, and a packed lunch. Please retrieve SCP-826 as soon as humanly possible, and do not allow the complete destruction of any of the provided items. If our theories are correct, if you reach a “game over”, you will die.
> - Agent Lament

Inside the bag were six red and white spheres, numbered 1 through 6.

“… My mission is a Pokémon Red Nuzlocke with a hacked team.

Fuck yes.” He turned and started off north, sticking a foot into knee-height grass.

“Hey wait! Don’t go out!” He stopped. He turned to see an old man with a lab coat making his way towards him. “It’s unsafe!” “Go away-” “Wild Pokémon live in the tall grass! You need your own Pokémon for your protection.” “I really don-” “I know!” “Stop-” “Here, come with me!” “No dammit-”

Oak dragged Bridge to his lab, next to a scowling kid. “Gramps! I’m fed up with waiting!” “Gary? Hm, let me think… Oh, that’s right, I told you to come! Just wait! Here, Django…”

Bridge ignored the script, tapping his foot impatiently. As soon as Oak was done talking, he turned to leave.

“Wait Django! Lets check out our Pokémon! Come on, I’ll take you on!”

With a flash of light, a Charmander appeared before Bridge. He picked Ball #1 from his belt and -

A flash of light; a flash of red; a huge, hulking *thing* appeared. A spine-sail down its back; its mouth filled with enormous, glowing, red teeth; sightless, eyeless face; unmoving mouth, laughing with many voices.

“… Oh my god.”

“… What the fuck.” Dodridge breathed flatly.

“I think it’s the one we shot the lungs out of. In the game world it won’t kill Bridge. I think. ”

“… Really? REALLY?”

The thing laughed at Charmander, screaming in four distinct voices. Charmander shivered, then leapt and scratched it across the face.

SCP-939’s INTIMIDATE cut enemy CHARMANDER’s ATTACK!

CHARMANDER's ATTACK fell!
CHARMANDER used SCRATCH!

Telepathic game prompts. Time to make shit up.

"Crunch!"

"Well that was violent." remarked Lament.

"What do you fucking *expect*? What else has he got?!"

Three hours later, Bridge was strolling through Cerulean City, into the Pokémon Center. Poking his head in every building, looking in every bookshelf, in every PC, there was no 826. He DID have the Boulder Badge though. **`Sherman`** took care of Brock.

Entering the Gym, he tossed a ball into the pool. Three minutes later, he stepped out, **`Bob`** hopping behind. To the Nugget Bridge!

"He's enjoying this too much."

"Eh, let him have his fun."

"No look at him. These are *war crimes*. They *melted*."

Three more hours, and Bridge exited Celadon Gym, with **`Lazerbeak`** gliding close behind.

"You're kickass, Laze. How do you know Steel Wing? That's not around till Gen 2."

"SCRAW!"

"That is a horrible noise."

"Why do they listen to him?"

“I dunno.”

“No, that thing doesn’t even move until night. How’d you even acquire any of these? Zero Seventy Five is a high, *high* risk Keter. The fuck’s with these Doctors?”

“I honestly have no idea. Wasn’t me who put the forms in. Steve rolled a bunch of dice and used the numbers to requisition for testing.”

“… god damn it Steve.”

Bridge exited Saffron Gym riding on **`Pazuzu`**’s shoulders. The dried up, shuddering corpse shivered and twitched, ignored by Bridge and the rest of the fucknormous spider beast.

“Awesome job Pazuzu. You fucking *decapitated* ‘Zam with that last X-Scissor. I am in no way surprised that you’re Dark-Bug type, hell, I’m not even going to ask why your attacks are ahead of your time. Just keep kicking ass.”

“Hhh-” coughed the corpse. “Sh-K!-ssss” shrieked the spider.

They rode off to Route 19.

“… Goddamn. It ate the fucking mime.” Dodridge sank into a seat.

“MISTER, Mime, to be completely accurate.”

“Shut up. Just shut up. I feel sick.”

“… I wonder…” Bridge leaned on Cinnabar Island’s Pokémon Center’s counter, waiting for the healing machine to finish. Blaine’s Gym is was babies.

“… fuckit.” He grabbed his balls and headed outside, calling on **`Lazerbeak`** to fly him to Viridian. Reaching the Pokémon Center, he headed north and saw a balding man laid out on the ground.

“Ahh, I’ve had my coffee now and I feel great! Sure you can go through! Are you in a hurry?”

“No.”

“I see you’re using a Pokédex. When you catch a Pokémon, the Pokédex is automatically updated. What? You don’t know how to catch Pokémon? I’ll show you how then!”

Bridge sighed and waited. A chill ran up his spine…

Wait, when did the sky get so dark…?

A wild WEEDLE appeared!

Fight
Item
Pokéball **x50**

OLD MAN used Pokéball!
All right! WEEDLE was caught!

"Oh shi-"

The man flickered and turned to look at Bridge; he was greasy, with a pointed, horrible grin; slick, rancid hair, the stench of death. He floated above the ground a bit, black ichor dripping onto the dirt, hissing and burning like so many nightmares.

“First, you need to weaken the target Pokémon.”

“… Nope.”

Lazerbeak flew Bridge the fuck out of there and back to Cinnabar Island. He made his way to the shoreline, tossed Welker into the water, and climbed on its shoulders.

They swam for a few minutes up and down the shoreline. Then… something appeared. Without warning, the skies darkened; a tall pillar of glitch code flourished into being in before Bridge and **Welker**.

Wild MISSINGNO. appeared!
WELKER’s INTIMIDATE cut enemy MISSINGNO.’s ATTACK!

“Recontainment of **`Theta-Prime`** commencing.” Bridge muttered with a grin as he hopped into the shallows. Welker began singing nursery rhymes, teeth glowing redder; the glitchmon itself began to glow with a harsh light.

“What the fuck was that.” Dodridge paled.

“Don’t tell me you didn’t expect it.” Lament sighed, leaning an elbow on the desk.

“… How… no. He’s fighting math. He *intimidated* ***math***.”

“I’m checking the Foundnet to see if anything breached containment. Just settle down and let me look for 106.”

Two hours later, Bridge exited the Viridian Gym, **`Johnny`** in tow. The city burned, small cracks forming in the sky, Glitchmon leaking through. Old Man was nowhere to be seen.

“Fuel.”

“No.”

“FUEL.”

“Johnny, return, stop whining. We’re getting the fuck out of here.”

“… he…”

“Just keep watching.”

“He just…”

“Yeah. Shh. Nothing on 106. Hasn’t even moved.”

“Finally…” Bridge looked up to the huge building before him. Ten straight hours inside the game. He was tired, hungry, and had to piss. “The Pokémon League. Thanks for owning Victory Road,

Welker.”

“Thanks for owning Victory Road, Welker.”

“Shut up.”

“Shut up.”

“No, you.”

“No, you.”

“Bahahaa”

“**Bahhahaha!**”

“Okay that was fucking creepy."

“We’re gonna incinerate that thing.” Dodridge punched the table, staring at the screen.

“What, Welker?”

“WHAT DO YOU *THINK*?”

“Welcome to the Pokémon League!” A woman in glasses greeted Bridge past the doors and rest center. The room freezing, containing only a floating dock on a deep, deep pool. “I am Lorelei of the Elite Four!”

Bridge sighed, dropping a ball. It burst into light, the dock creaking under the Bob’s insane weight.

“No one can best me when it comes to icy Pokémon!” Lorelei laughed. “Freezing moves are powerful! Your Pokémon will be at my mercy when they are frozen solid! Hahaha! Are you ready?”

“**Bob**, use Acid.”

BOB used ACID!
ELITE FOUR LORELEI sent out DEWGONG!

Critical hit! Enemy DEWGONG fainted!
ELITE FOUR LORELEI sent out CLOYSTER!
Critical hit! Enemy CLOYSTER fainted!
ELITE FOUR LORELEI sent out SLOWBRO!
Critical hit! Enemy SLOWBRO fainted!
ELITE FOUR LORELEI sent out JYNX!
Critical hit! It's not very effective…
Enemy JYNX fainted!
ELITE FOUR LORELEI sent out LAPRAS!
Critical hit! Enemy LAPRAS fainted!

A Dewgong appeared with a flash and dove under the water. Bob followed suit, sinking through the docks. The water began to cloud; the docks began to creak. Soon, Dewgong floated to the surface and returned to its ball. Another flash of light, and a plop to the side as Cloyster clamped and dove in; soon, it returned to Lorelei in a red light.

The docks started sinking. Lorelei's Jynx fired silver Icebeams into the water and waves of telekinetic force battered the pool; neither Ice nor Psychic attacks could strike the irrationally agile snail. Soon the docks gave way under Jynx and it fell into the water. Another burst of red, then white, then red light, and Lorelei's Lapras fell through the rest of the sinking docks.

Bridge stretched and began walking, then running to the next door. In a last-second Indiana Jones maneuver, Bridge slid under the closing door to Bruno and returned Bob to its ball.

"Sorry to give you the cold shoulder, but I have places to be."

"I'm gonna kill him." Dodridge's eye twitched.

Lament burst out laughing.

"Straight up murder him in his sleep." Twitch twitch.

"I'm more annoyed at the choice of attacks. Zero Seven Five's caustic, not acidic." Lament mused.

“Is there a fucking difference?”

“Shh… shh. Leave the science to me, Jason. It’s better that way.”

"I am Bruno of the Elite Four!” Shouted the shirtless man sitting in the middle of a room full of rocks and dirt. “Through rigorous training, people and Pokémon can become stronger without limit.”

Bridge dropped **Sherman’s** ball. A burst of white light, a rustle of leaves, and a massive pile of kindling crowded his half of the arena.

“I've lived and trained with my Fighting Pokémon! And that will never change!” An Onix burst from the ground. Onix is Rock/Ground type.

“Django! We will grind you down with our superior power! Hoo hah!"

“Sherman, Razor Leaf!” Bridge commanded.

SHERMAN used RAZOR LEAF! It’s super effective!
Enemy ONIX used HARDEN! Enemy ONIX’s DEFENSE rose!
SHERMAN used RAZOR LEAF! It’s super effective! Enemy ONIX fainted!
ELITE FOUR BRUNO sent out HITMONCHAN!
Enemy HITMONCHAN used FIRE PUNCH!
It’s super effective!
SHERMAN, that’s enough, come back!
Go! **JOHNNY**!
JOHNNY used INFERNO!
Critical hit! Enemy HITMONCHAN fainted!
ELITE FOUR BRUNO sent out HITMONLEE!
Enemy HITMONLEE fainted!
ELITE FOUR BRUNO sent out ONIX!
It’s not very effective…
Enemy ONIX fainted!
ELITE FOUR BRUNO sent out MACHAMP!
That’s enough, return, JOHNNY! Go! **LAZERBEAK**!

As leaves cut rock, the perverted stone snake returned to its master. A misshapen boxer in pink shorts punched a burning hole into the Stick Blob, only to be incinerated by a wave not unlike a supernova.

A blemmyes with stretchy legs and a second stone snake followed their friend into scorched oblivion. The Burning Man simply incinerated everything in what can only be described as excessive proactive retaliation.

A flash of metal, and the thud of muscle on stone, and the final fighters graced the field with their presence. The metal hawk Lazerbeak took flight; Bruno's prized Machamp flexed and posed in defiance.

LAZERBEAK flew up high!
Enemy MACHAMP used FOCUS ENERGY! Enemy MACHAMP's getting pumped!
LAZERBEAK used FLY!
It's super effective! Enemy MACHAMP fainted!

With a sound not unlike a car wreck, the robo-bird crashed into the Goro knockoff, throwing it across the arena.

"My job is done. Go face your next challenge." Bruno grunted as he turned away from Bridge.

"Well fuck you too. Come on Laze, let's kick the shit out of some old ladies."

"SCRAW!"

"I don't even." Agent Dodridge slumped in a chair, having long since given up on this making any kind of sense.

"Yeah, the entire world is fucked up. Probably has to do with the fact that it's drawing from current-generation move pools when designing the SCPokémon's moves… Would explain why the Nine Forty can use X-Scissor and Four Five Seven can use Inferno, when the series hadn't yet introduced any of those moves."

Dodridge stared at Lament; Lament stared blankly back.

Bridge entered the next room and looked around; a graveyard, musty and filled with fog.

"I am Agatha of the Elite Four!" An old lady cackled, sitting on a tombstone across from Bridge.

“Oak's taken a lot of interest in you, child!” “I’m not a child-” “That old duff was once tough and handsome! That was decades ago!” “Meh.” “Now he just wants to fiddle with his Pokédex! He's wrong! Pokémon are for fighting!”

Bridge quietly pulled a ball from his belt. He hated Gengar.

“Django! I'll show you how a real trainer fights!"

The lights darkened; a huge purple shadow thing with glowing red eyes crawled out from Bridge’s shadow.

“**Pazuzu**, I choose YOU!” Bridge cried, throwing the ball into the air. A flash of light; Pazuzu appeared. A desiccated, thin, starved corpse, carried by huge, needle sharp spider legs covered with eyes.

Enemy GENGAR used NIGHT SHADE!
It’s not very effective…
PAZUZU used NIGHT SLASH!
Critical hit! It’s super effective! Enemy GENGAR fainted!
ELITE FOUR AGATHA sent out GOLBAT!
Enemy GOLBAT used WING ATTACK!
It’s super effective!
PAZUZU used NIGHT SLASH!
Critical hit! Enemy GOLBAT fainted!
ELITE FOUR AGATHA sent out ARBOK!
PAZUZU used SUCKER PUNCH!
Enemy ARBOK fainted!

Dark light blazed against Pazuzu, doing naught but annoy the hellish man-spider. It leapt into shadows, silently flanking Gengar and hacking it apart with gusto; sparks of violet light burned from Pazuzu’s claws. A Golbat replaced the ghost; ambushing Pazuzu with a smack of its wings, the spider turned into another slash, hewing the horrible flying mouth cleanly in two. After a moment, a huge cobra reared its head behind Pazuzu, only to be thwarted by the corpse with a backhand.

ELITE FOUR AGATHA sent out HAUNTER!
PAZUZU used SUCKER PUNCH! But it failed!
Enemy HAUNTER used HYPNOSIS!
PAZUZU fell asleep!
Enemy HAUNTER used DREAM EATER!
It doesn't affect PAZUZU… PAZUZU woke up!
PAZUZU used NIGHT SLASH!
Critical hit! It's super effective! Enemy HAUNTER fainted!
ELITE FOUR AGATHA sent out GENGAR!
PAZUZU used SUCKER PUNCH!
It's super effective! Enemy GENGAR fainted!

There was a silence after the Golbat returned to Agatha. Pazuzu circled the field, expertly maneuvering the gravestones, before just slumping into sleep. The Haunter appeared, and tried to bite the corpses' head; it yelped in fright as the spider awoke and stabbed it into the wall, scrambling up into the dark. As the final Gengar appeared, Pazuzu dropped onto it, impaling the ghost with all eight legs.

"You win! I see what the old duff sees in you now. I've nothing else to say. Run along now, child!"

“Mother of God.”

"Ah! I heard about you, DJANGO!”

“Yes, yes, Lance the Dragon Trainer. Blah blah…” Bridge groaned. He looked around the penultimate room; huge statues of nondescript dragons adorned the walls, with brass torches hanging from the ceiling. As he took in the sight, an errant quote passed through his mind.

…During this transformation process, SCP-826, along with the contained book, will relocate to another part of the book's setting, showing a preference for places where books are normally found (libraries, studies, etc)…

“Preference. Preference implies that this isn’t a hard and fast rule, just the prevailing behavioural trend that a creative object will show in a particular situation during testing.” Bridge murmured to himself; in a moment he caught a glimpse of silver-grey against the bronze walls behind Lance. The Bookends.

“You know that dragons are mythical Pokémon! They’re hard to catch and raise, but their powers are superior! They’re virtually indestructible! Well, are you ready to lose? Your League challenge ends with me, DJANGO!”

The battle began.

ELITE FOUR LANCE sent out GYARADOS!
Go! **WELKER**!
Enemy GYARADOS’s INTIMIDATE cut WELKER’s ATTACK!
WELKER’s INTIMIDATE cut enemy GYARADOS’s ATTACK!
Enemy GYARADOS used HYPER BEAM!
The attack missed!
WELKER used CRUNCH! Critical hit!
Enemy GYARADOS used LEER!
But it failed!
WELKER used THUNDER FANG!
It’s super effective! Enemy GYARADOS fainted!

The 939 crawled over Gyarados, each of the monsters somehow scaring the others with their terrifying jaws. A rogue Hyper Beam crashed through the ceiling as Welker crunched down on Gyara’s throat, delivering a bolt of lightning into the serpent; a stronger bolt followed shortly and the serpent fell.

ELITE FOUR LANCE sent out DRAGONAIR and DRAGONAIR!
Good job WELKER! Come back! Go! **PAZUZU** and **SHERMAN!**
Enemy DRAGONAIR used DRAGON RAGE! Enemy DRAGONAIR used DRAGON RAGE!
PAZUZU used BOUNCE! SHERMAN used RAZOR LEAF! Critical hit!
Enemy DRAGONAIR used AGILITY! Enemy DRAGONAIR used AGILITY!
PAZUZU used BOUNCE! Critical hit! SHERMAN used LEAF TORNADO!

Enemy DRAGONAIR used SLAM! Enemy DRAGONAIR used SLAM!
PAZUZU used X-SCISSOR! SHERMAN used FRENZY PLANT! Critical hit!
Enemy DRAGONAIR fainted! Enemy DRAGONAIR fainted!

The twin Dragonairs slithered out of the light, spitting blazing blue fire. Welker vanished, replaced by Pazuzu the horrid, twitching, choking corpse-spider-monster and Sherman the giant pile of sticks. Immediately, the marionette leapt out of the way and clung to the ceiling, and the Sherman cried out, shooting razor-sharp foliage in every direction. The Dragonairs, badly cut, slithered in unison, moving quicker and quicker into a pair of silvery blurs… until Pazuzu impaled both into the floor and Sherman ran them over like a runaway cyclone of conifers. In one last ditch effort, the serpents slammed their tails in unison against the spider and stack, before being diced and smashed to soup.

ELITE FOUR LANCE sent out AERODACTYL!
Good work, PAZUZU and SHERMAN! Go! LAZERBEAK!
Enemy AERODACTYL used BITE! It's not very effective…
LAZERBEAK used STEEL WING! It's super effective!
Enemy AERODACTYL fainted!

The stone dino-ptero-dragon clashed with the bronze and steel hawk, biting down. Ouch. The hawk flapped its wings and cut Aerodactyl's head right off. What a let down.

ELITE FOUR LANCE sent out DRAGONITE!
Good work, LAZERBEAK! Go! BOB!
Enemy DRAGONITE used HYPER BEAM! Critical hit!
BOB used ACID ARMOR!
Enemy DRAGONITE must recharge!
BOB used GIGA IMPACT!
Enemy DRAGONITE fainted!

A blazing, incredible blast of energy scoured the scene, cutting a trench across the floor - the snail didn't even notice. Instead, it busied itself with… sweating. The Dragonite fell to one knee, taking a breath, exhausted by its effort… until it was messily decapitated by the snail launching itself like a cannonball across the field, its whole

weight and caustic slime liquefying the dragon's skull, Lance's skull, and burning a hole through the door beyond.

Agent Dodridge sat there, expressionless, staring at the screen for several seconds. With an annoyed grunt he suddenly stood up and flipped the table.

"I'm going to go bang my hot wife. Debrief this loser. Smell ya later." he called to Lament.

"Hey, don't get angry. It's not his fault Charizard's not a real dragon."

Dodridge turned and walked out, fists clenched. He never swept Lance like that. He always spent fifteen or twenty Max Revives on his team. It's not fair. It's not *fair*.

Dr Bridge looked down at the Bookends. Between them sat a copy of a Pokémon Red Version game kart, and the Official Pokémon Red/Blue Strategy Guide. The mission says take it and leave… but he's so close to being the very best there ever was…

Welker pried the final doors open, and Bridge stepped inside. This room was much bigger on the inside, opening to the night sky; an actual stadium, a coliseum, stood before him, with one single figure under the lights.

"Hey! I was looking forward to seeing you, DJANGO! My rival should be strong to keep me sharp!"

Quietly, Bridge considered what the fastest route to victory would be.

"…DJANGO! Do you know what that means? I'll tell you! I am the most powerful Trainer in the world!"

"Nope."

Agent Lament got comfortable, turned up the volume on the monitor, and cracked open a Coke. This was going to be good.

CHAMPION GARY sent out PIDGEOT!
Go! LAZERBEAK!
Enemy PIDGEOT used WING ATTACK! It's not very effective…
LAZERBEAK used STEEL WING!
Enemy PIDGEOT used WING ATTACK! It's not very effective…
LAZERBEAK used STEEL WING!
Enemy PIDGEOT fainted!

The birds circled each other, dive-smashing each other with their wings; Lazerbeak landed one right in Pidgeot's face, shattering its beak and throwing it into the wall.

CHAMPION GARY sent out ALAKAZAM!
That's enough, come back LAZERBEAK! Go! **PAZUZU**!
PAZUZU used SUCKER PUNCH! It's super effective!
Enemy ALAKAZAM fainted!

Pazuzu rushed the Alakazam as it readied a Psychic attack, running it through with three spear-legs and cutting it apart.

CHAMPION GARY sent out RHYDON!
Return, PAZUZU! Go! **SHERMAN**!
Enemy RHYDON used HORN DRILL!
But it failed…
SHERMAN used FRENZY PLANT! It's super effective!
Enemy RHYDON fainted!

Rhydon charged forward, spinning death-horn shearing through Sherman to no avail. The sticks scattered for a brief moment, thrown by the horn's inertia; they rushed together and smooshed the dinobeast underneath the whole one-tonne heap.

CHAMPION GARY sent out GYARADOS!
SHERMAN must recharge!
Enemy GYARADOS used HYDRO PUMP! It's not very effective…
SHERMAN, that's enough, come back! Go! **BOB**!
BOB used GIGA IMPACT!
Enemy GYARADOS fainted!

The sticks struggled to roll back together as the fucknormous sea

serpent flooded the field with an incredible torrent of water. Swearing under his breath, Bridge called Sherman back to its ball and threw Bob into the water, waiting a moment for it to wake up and crash into through Gyarados' mouth entire body.

CHAMPION GARY sent out EXEGGCUTOR!
BOB must recharge!
Enemy EXEGGCUTOR used STOMP!
Return, BOB! Go! **JOHNNY**!
JOHNNY used INFERNO! It's super effective!
Enemy EXEGGCUTOR fainted!

Bob lodged itself into the ground, leaving itself open for Exeggcutor to stomp it ineffectually. The tree checked its foot, assuming the snail was dead, before being completely, instantly incinerated by Johnny's pure raging hunger.

CHAMPION GARY sent out CHARIZARD!
JOHNNY, come back! Go! WELKER!
WELKER's INTIMIDATE cut enemy CHARIZARD's ATTACK!
Enemy CHARIZARD used FIRE BLAST! WELKER was burned!
WELKER used THUNDER FANG! It's super effective! WELKER was hurt by its burn!
Enemy CHARIZARD used SLASH! Critical hit!
WELKER used CRUNCH!
Enemy CHARIZARD fainted!

The Charizard and 939 stared each other down, the dragon shuddering upon its remembrance of their first battle. Welker began to sing nursery rhymes as Charizard froze in brief terror. A shudder turned to a growl, and recoil turned to rage; Gary's starter launched a huge five-pointed star of fire at Welker, crashing the red beast like a truck.

On fire, the Welker leapt at the dragon, crunching down with a mouth full of lightning. Charizard returned with a slash, hewing a side of flesh right off Welker; the burning demon returned with a predatory bite to crush the skull. Charizard fell.

"NO! That can't be! You beat my best-"

Bridge returned Welker and turned to leave, snatching up 826 before the ingame script made him hit the “The End” screen.

Dr Bridge stepped out of the doorway, holding a belt of SCPokéballs and the Bookends. Two Agents rushed in, one throwing the belt into a high-security storage container and the other carefully placing the Bookends on a cart. Agent Lament stood off to one side, waiting for him.

“Excellent work, Doctor.” Agent Lament shook his hand. “You did very well.”

“Thank you, Lament. How were the nicknames?”

“Great.”

“Am I gonna turn into a spider monster?”

“Nope!”

They high-fived.

Later that night, Bridge sat back in his office, relaxing. Listening. Glancing at local security feeds on his desktop.

He quietly reached into his pocket, and placed a small, spherical object on his desk. Pressing a button, it grew to the size of an orange.

For you see… He did, indeed, have a hacked team. But nobody said he couldn’t have a starter too.

"It's Like a Dream..."

Dr. Simon Glass twirled the pen around in his left hand. Finger through finger through finger. Back and forth, back and forth. After five journeys around his hand, he gave the pen a flick and it effortlessly fell into his right. Finger through finger. Back and forth. The movements were just fancy enough that clients caught off-guard would be mesmerized by it. It was a trick he had picked up from Diogenes on a slow Halloween some years back, and ever since then it was his main way of stimming. Oftentimes, it was his natural response to anything particularly overwhelming or anxiety-inducing.

Across from him sat Benjamin Kondraki.

"So you…" He couldn't finish the statement. It was absurd. Utterly nonsensical. It was Kondraki. He knew better than to trust him at face value.

"Yeah." Kondraki rarely sounded defeated and embarrassed. Antics that would otherwise — "That's right, Simon." — mortify any regular Foundation employee just ended — "I did *exactly* that." — up emboldening him even more. Somehow, he — "They should have given you the records already." — was the most proud of stupid shit.

Glass looked up from his notes at Kondraki. The Lizard Rider[1]. The Butterfly King. The King Of Kings.

He looked defeated.

Glass sighed, opening a cabinet and taking out Kondraki's medical folders with his right hand while writing with the other. He didn't have to look. No need to look when you can memorize instead. In the front of the top folder were his most recent medical records. After 26 years of Foundation duty, the layout of every single letter from the medical wing and its contents for any number of announcements, emergencies, and tests were predictable enough to memorize. Just swap out skip numbers, or personnel names, or locations. There

were two — no, three — words that stuck out immediately. Did he not read these when he got them?

"So. Your…"

"Please, Simon. Please."

"Your penis."

"Yeah."

"It was stuck there."

"Mmhmm."

"There was a water bottle stuck on your penis." No response. Back and forth, finger through finger. "You've never been this quiet before when recounting your shenanigans." Kondraki swore. Glass never bothered to learn Polish, but he was pretty sure there were at least two instances of the word 'fuck' strewn in there. "Where do you want to start with this?"

"I mean… fuck, why was it this one to get the O5 interested? Nothing about the cafeteria bullshit last year! Cleffles — " Glass snorted, thankful Kondraki wouldn't hear it. It was still adorable to hear, and he was the only other person in the world graced with the pet name whenever his client got worked up into a sudden tirade. Cleffles. "— gets scolded by…"

"Iceberg?"

"Fuck no, I'm still not calling him that," he spat. "Anyway, him, *of all people*, for his zero-fifty heist. But I put a dick, my dick, in a bottle and this? I was mortified. I just couldn't keep up my pride. Have you ever seen Gears look disappointed in someone? Me neither, but during that assembly yesterday he looked right into my eyes by accident, and I swear Simon, fuck. I swear that was the most disappointed he ever looked in my life. But shit, you know what was the worst part?"

"What was the worst part?"

"Draven, my flesh and blood, leaves an Aquafina label on my desk that night. And he had James sign it. How am I supposed to feel, Simon? My own son has finally gotten more clever than me. He's always been smarter, but now he's finally one-upped me. This was originally funny as shit." Kondraki must have suddenly realized that he was ranting, as he hit the brakes as quickly as he started.

"I know I've told you this every time, but no need to stop yourself in my office," Glass quietly reassured. "Go on for as long as you want."

Glass had to look through the letter again just to make sure he understood the sequence of events. It still didn't fully register for him. They were both grown adults. They were men paid and well-compensated for their tenure in an organization dedicated to locking away some of the most dangerous anomalous threats to the planet. And despite all that (no, maybe because of that? [Or was it a stress reaction to that?[2] He'd have to do better.] Even Kondraki wouldn't normally do something like that, he hoped), one of them ended up with his dick in a water bottle. And somehow, this was the first time he ever heard of it happening in the Foundation's history.

"I don't think I can keep up the anger. The jokes are gonna come the rest of my life. 'Here lies Benjamin Kondraki, he died from his cock asphyxiating,' whatever. I give it a week before the shame wears off for good. In two months it's something I can laugh about. But G-d, this is just too much right now." Kondraki sighed. "If it was a beer bottle, I'd have plausible denialability." Denial. Glass nodded. "But no, I have nothing."

"It's natural for people to feel embarrassed and ashamed over incidents that would normally be considered such. You've always found refuge in audacity, so you feel like you should be unabashedly proud of this. Does that sound right?" Kondraki looked up at the ceiling for around thirty seconds before looking at Glass's neck.

"I think so."

"Clearly, the… assembly yesterday. That got to you real bad. Do you at least feel that Clef isn't giving you too much shit for this?"

"He walked out of our apartment with a bottle on his dick. His

concept of shame was lost long ago, Simon."

"Alright. Still, I can understand how you feel." Glass didn't have to append that statement with 'Even if I never stuck my penis in a bottle'. Enough salt was rubbed on the wounds as it was already. Back and forth.

"Did you not know about the assembly?"

"No. I didn't have time to review whatever was sent to my mail either. I just got back with Dio from a mini-vacation. I'll look later." The slightest bit of relief showed on Kondraki's face. "How do you think you'll cope with this for the next week or two?"

"I don't know. Rolling with the punches is a lot harder when the O5 have to take action."

"Anything healthy you like to do, or any work to dig into. Even if it's routine checking up on something like 408? I know mantras are a stretch for you, but we can review the ones we started talking about two weeks ago." Kondraki clearly had to think about it. Glass let him; it was near-impossible to get him out of his own head once he was lost in thought.

As Kondraki was thinking, Glass flipped the page and saw the note a nurse (possibly two, though the handwriting looked similar enough) had scrawled on the back that was preserved on the copy. It was unprofessional; he'd probably have to send a letter to the medical wing about that.

> There's already talks about bottles completely not being a thing so we'll just get more boring as hell water coolers
>
> at least we get paid well lol

Kondraki had suddenly interjected.

"What about —"

"No, you can't stick your dick in a bottle again."

"But that'd cancel out the —"

"As your psychiatrist, therapist, coworker, friend, and documentation editor, you can not do that. You absolutely can not." Glass sighed in exasperation.

"Can I at least not and say I did?" Kondraki asked sincerely. After everything that had happened, he asked that question without hesitation, sincerely, looking straight into Glass's eyes without so much as a smirk.

"No." Finger through finger.

Two months later, Kondraki went to his desk to fill out a proposal to revise containment procedures on SCP-408. The exact second he opened the door, before he even could think about the exact nature of the revisions, he saw it. He knew.

There was a Dasani label on his desk. Diogenes's signature was on it.

Footnotes
1. An obvious tall tale no one but newcomers believed.
2. Did he overlook some kind of stress that Kondraki ended up reacting to? He could only pick up on so much subtlety, really.

I Want To Tell You

“So what’s the worst Site you’ve ever worked at?” asked Cipher.

“I don’t know. Difficult question.” Kantos paused in solemn thought. “Seoul. Seventy-One. The place barely functioned.”

The BMW they sat in could have belonged to any corporate executive in America. Its black paint was newly waxed and buffed, the interior leather spotless. Parked outside one of the largest banks in the city, no one would give it a second glance. Few would notice the extra layers of window tinting, just outside the realm of legality, or the slight bulges of the guns the driver and passenger wore.

Agent Cipher sat in the front seat, the window open, holding a cigarette outside of the vehicle. As her partner spoke, she leaned out and exhaled a stream of smoke. “Yeah?”

Kantos nodded. He was the type of man who wouldn’t have looked out of place in middle management. Just shy of six feet, on the better side of his thirties, his hair was still thick, short, and beginning to grey at the edges. Muddy brown eyes sat behind a pair of white-frame glasses, and his chin was as hairless as the day he came into the world. The black suit he wore was tailored to hide both his gun, and the physique of a man who’d visited the gym every day for the past twenty years. “Half the time we didn’t even have central heating. In fucking *Seoul*.” He spoke with a deep Greek accent.

“Jesus,” said Cipher. Slightly shorter than Kantos, and possibly a few years younger, she wore her dark-brown hair in a bun and a suit similar to her partner’s. She watched the outside as she talked, eyes flicking across the sidewalk, sizing up every pedestrian. “Let me guess, repair was always ‘On Order’?”

Kantos laughed. “Shit. I mean, the work was not terrible. Half the time, I was too far from the facility to give a shit. Now,” he waggled a finger to emphasize the point, “Sixteen. Canada. Awful, awful place.

Behind a desk, sorting records, attending meetings, not a day in the field. For four fucking years." He paused, shook his head, sighed. "*One time*, you sleep with the Site supervisor's wife…"

Cipher cracked a grin.

"What about you, then?" asked Kantos.

"Mmm," said Cipher, still scanning the passersby, "I have to pick one?" She took another drag from the cigarette, then flicked the spent filter to the sidewalk. "Probably the Red Lodge, but if I told you about *that*, I'd have to kill everyone on the block. So let's say Thirty-Five. Shitty peers. Shittier leadership. I must have gotten *this* close to going AWOL half a dozen times. They found out a research director had been fucking scips once."

Kantos whistled.

"Yeah, right? They found out while they were reviewing the security cams after a breach. Idiot had totally forgotten about the cameras. The guy who replaced him was an even bigger asshole." She gestured outside the car. "There she is."

Cipher opened the car door and stepped out. She crossed the sidewalk to where a woman was emerging from a black-windowed door. The woman was over a head shorter than her, and pushing her sixties. Black hair was cut short over brown skin, and she wore a white jacket, wrapped tight to protect against the winter air. As she walked, the river of people parted almost unnoticeably to let her through.

"Ma'am," said Cipher as she reached the woman. She turned, and they both began to walk towards the car.

"Agent Cipher," said O5-4. The voice carried no emotion. "I didn't expect you to start duty so soon."

"I get antsy if I'm away from the job too long, ma'am," said Cipher. They reached the car. She opened the backdoor so the Councilwoman could slid in.

"Well, good to finally have you," said the O5. Cipher gave an

appreciative nod and closed the door. She slid back into the passenger's seat. Then she slammed her fist against O5-4's face. Before the councilwoman could react, the muzzle of Kantos' pistol was pressed against her cheek.

"Now," he said, "Tell us what you did with the real O5-4."

« Giving Bad People Good Ideas | Hub | The Man Who Sold the World »

I Was Not Magnificent

At a Window Booth

Shirley tried her best to look distinctly unimpressed by O5-4.

Their meeting place, a Denny's outside of Kalamazoo, was unorthodox. But she had insisted upon it. There was no better place to show your barely concealed rage about being passed over than a Denny's.

"What do you think you're going to get?" she asked, sipping from a dirty cup of ice water. "I think they serve breakfast here all day…"

"I ate on the walk over. I'd rather talk business."

"Fine. Why, sir, did I have to find my own way into Alpha-9?"

O5-4 shrugged, almost sheepishly. "We were planning on approaching you, once more groundwork had been done. Your history with the Foundation was noted as more than satisfactory."

"Only satisfactory?" Gillespie smiled as the waitress came by to take their order. She ordered iced tea, and a bagel. Her compatriot got a cup of coffee.

"Excellent, actually. Your skill in managing large numbers of inanimate SCP objects was particularly noted as an asset to the project."

Gillespie moved her water aside, and placed her arms on the table. "So, then why didn't you come to me at the beginning? Don't tell me you thought I'd be uninterested."

"We felt that you might be skeptical of the whole idea, since, well, you opposed Omega-7 pretty strongly at the time." O5-4 pulled a small strip of paper out of his jacket pocket, carefully holding it a few inches from his face. "You went through extensive lengths to

prevent any personnel connected to **Site-77** from participating or being transferred to the project."

"Without success." Gillespie's tea had finally arrived. She poured in a small packet of sugar.

"Yes, that is correct."

Taking a delicate bite out of her bagel, Gillespie wiped the crumbs from her mouth. "I never said I was against the concept. There just didn't seem to be anything intelligent going on in the planning or execution of… that task force."

"What strikes you as different, this time?"

"For one thing," Gillespie said, spreading another one of those little cream cheese tubs on her bagel, "You aren't placing anyone asinine at the top. You just put a figurehead this time."

"Director, Sophia Light is more than capable of managing this task force."

"I'm sure she is. She's also very famous, famous enough to make the people think this might *not* be an enormous mistake."

"I think confidence in Sophia is well-placed. But I digress… we're very happy to have been wrong about your attitude. A lot of people would be very happy if you accepted a position."

Gillespie nodded. "I'd like to meet with the administrative staff, before I render a final decision. But I don't foresee anything that would make me decide against accepting the position."

O5-4 dabbed his mouth with his napkin. "That is very good to hear, Director."

"I'd like to meet with Light, first. At Site-77."

"… Very well. That can be arranged."

Site-77 Tea Room

Director Shirley Gillespie and Director Sophia Light stared at each other awkwardly from across a small table in the tea room. Anderson had already served the biscuits, but they hadn't exchanged more than pleasantries since sitting down.

Light stirred some more sugar into her tea. "It's a pleasure to finally meet you, Director."

Gillespie nodded. "The feeling is mutual. Your reputation precedes you… I've enjoyed reading a lot of your work. I can't agree more with your thesis, that we should be pushing to see how things really operate."

"Thank you." Light tried to center her focus on the slightly stale biscuit, and not on the laser-beam lock of Gillespie's eyes.

"Are you still a Site Director?" Shirley asked, while blowing gently onto her tea.

"No, actually. I voluntarily left being an active Director in order to completely focus my attention on Alpha-9. Site-41 will probably still be there for me, maybe. Eventually. Possibly." Light shrugged, and took a sip of tea.

"Aha. That's a shame." Gillespie sipped her tea, and made a quiet hum of satisfaction. "I'm lucky enough that I have a person to trust as interim Director indefinitely. My grandson, Ralph. Have you met him?"

Light paused. "I… maybe. It does sound familiar."

"He's very good. And I'm not just saying that because he's my grandson."

Light smiled. "I'm sure."

"But I'm sure you don't want to hear about that. We should be talking shop. About what we can do."

"I'm all ears, Director." Light placed her elbows on the table, leaning forwards. "Tell me what you want to do."

"My dream, the point of my dedicated researchers here, is to use Safe and Euclid class anomalies to push what we can really see about the anomalous world. To find that one cross-test that grants us that thread to tug at, until the whole thing comes undone."

"Have you ever had an object reclassed as 'Explained' at your Site?" Light asked.

"You don't need to show off." Gillespie's lips tightened, and she looked down into her tea.

"Oh, didn't mean it like that!" Light raised her hands defensively. "Really. I just thought, that was what you were talking about."

"It's fine," Gillespie said, quietly finishing her tea. "I think… it would be better if I showed you some examples of what I mean. I don't want us to have any misunderstandings."

SCP-213 Containment Area, Site-77 Euclid Wing.

"This is one I think has great promise for the combatant side of the task force."

They stood outside of a glass containment area, surrounding an enclosed metal hut. Toxic gas seeped and hissed through the room, twisting into greenish gray columns. Two guards stood outside the glass, dressed to kill.

"Inside, there is a man we've had since he was little." Gillespie handed Light two photographs. A Polaroid of a pudgy, acne-scarred teenager with two glowing lights around his hands, trying to look tough but ending up scared. The other, a fresh print of a young man, bald and pale, covered in nodules and scars.

"He's responded well to therapy, since we woke him. We've worked through a lot of body and identity issues. Some problems with maturity, but he's a solid block to build on. Young enough to mold."

Light looked from the containment area, to the pictures, and back. "But, if he's cooperative, why is there such heavy containment?"

"Cooperative? He would be if he could."

"So there's more to him than meets the eye?"

Gillespie pulled out a final photograph, a larger one, and held it up for Light to see. "This is the alien parasite which causes his anomalous properties. It does as it pleases."

Light grimaced at the photo. "That's unfortunate. I thought you said this would be a viable candidate?"

"Luckily there has been progress… we know how, if given the opportunity, the parasite can be suppressed. We can do it. The only thing preventing it is the lack the resource allocation for things that are contained."

"This is what you meant, then. Augmentation, rather than explanation?"

"In a nutshell, I suppose." Gillespie smiled a small smile, and gestured towards an elevator. "But that is also an oversimplification. I want to augment, to explain. I'm going to show you one of the main things I wish to explain."

SCP-2322, Site-77 Administrative Offices

"So it's like *Being John Malkovich*?"

"But it only recreates one day, that I lived here in 1999."

"Have you ever been inside of it?" asked Light, looking at the door. Directly across the hall from the Site-77 director's office door. A person walking by might almost consider it unassuming, barring the lack of a handle, its rigid steel construction, armed guards, and a massive sign designating it as a high security records room.

"No, never. Once I was informed of the nature of the anomaly, my staff and I felt it would be a bad idea. Too risky."

"It's completely bizarre. And it just popped up one day, like it was always there?" Light said, trying not to stand in the way of the

various bureaucrats menacingly marching through the hallways.

Gillespie nodded. "We drilled in from the other side, but none our of drills made a dent. I wasn't going to pay for renovating an enormous section of our already-undersized offices to try to poke a hole in a door."

Light, giving up on human dodgeball, leaned against the wall next to the door. "I don't see how augmenting 213 into a weapon will explain this."

"It's not that, specifically." Gillespie traced her hand along the door. "It's just an example of new ways of looking at the unexplained. The first time we're able to make that leap, of being able to apply something learned from one to another, that we will enter a new age."

Before Light could respond, a robotic hand reached out of the sea of people, and interrupted her thoughts by swinging a knife at her face.

The android, wearing a blood-stained business suit, looked a lot less realistic when not sailing in a sea of conformity. Light pressed her back into SCP-2322.

One of the security guards, the one closest to Light, got a metal spike to the thigh. He cried out, before the construct struck him down. The other guard managed to draw his pistol, before a knife got jabbed in his belly.

Gillespie reached into her purse, but the faux-man swept in from the now panicked and fleeing crowd, brandishing a dagger. The hand which was not trying to actively murder somebody held an antique pistol, and the whole contraption was sizzling with electricity.

It was then that the door to SCP-2322 opened, and Light tumbled inside.

For a moment, Gillespie paused, considering her purse again, before going in after her. The door tried to close, not used to more than one person at a time, but the charitable murderer jammed its blade into the door, pried it open, and followed.

SCP-2322, Interior

Gillespie and Light suddenly found themselves feeling a flood of *deja vu.* They had just walked down the entrance hall a few hours beforehand. Everything was a little less high-tech, but altogether the impression was the same.

"So you know," said Gillespie, "This is supposed to be a one-person simulation of my life. It's never had more than one person in it before. It might behave… unusually. Death usually isn't permanent, when it comes from something that was already here. Tests on foreign materials have been… tricky."

Light leaned in and whispered. "There's a ghost kid walking underneath me. Is that supposed to be happening?"

Gillespie looked down, and couldn't conceal her surprise. "Ralph?"

Walking next to Light, with one hand tugging on her pants, was a little Ralph Roget. Not even ten years old in 1999, he looked just as he had in that day, apart from the translucence.

Light looked from Gillespie, to Roget, and back again. "So, what do we do?"

"Let's just keep walking. Keep the loop going."

"This is your life, do you remember where to go?"

The checkpoint guard to their left flapped his gums, and gibberish spilled out. He sat there, waving lazily and reading a magazine as they strode by.

Gillespie frowned. "There's an elevator ahead. We can take it to my office."

Light looked around as they briskly moved through the entrance area. "It's nice to not have everyone staring at me for once."

Gillespie opened her mouth to say something, but the shriek and crack of a handgun interrupted her. ***BANG***. Light grabbed her stomach and fell to the ground. The little Roget began to silently wail

beside her.

Gillespie looked up a second later. A man, not a man, wearing a red coat and a fake beard was pointing a gun at them. Gillespie's mind was racing. *It's not supposed to be real in here. Everything's fake. But the fake man is a real robot. No. This is very bad.*

The robot dropped the gun, and began walking towards them. Out of its coat, it pulled out its bloodstained instrument. "SOPHIA LIGHT" declared its grinding metallic voice, "Give BACK, FOR what you have RECEIVED. FORTUNE must be MET with CHARITY. How would you feel if you didn't have KIDNEY? WE CAN TELL YOU."

Grabbing Light, she pulled them both towards the elevator with all of her might. Not-Roget followed along behind them, tottering as fast as his legs would take him. The android, in turn, followed along lazily, watching them struggle. As they reached the elevator proper, Light righted herself and hit the 'close door' button. The doors closed before the ghost child could make it in with them.

"Fuck!" Light cried, grabbing her abdomen. "That fucking hurts!"

"Are you shot?" Gillespie leaned down over her, looking for blood. "Oh no. We need to get a doctor, right away, this is not a good place to—"

Light lifted up her shirt, and grimaced as she slid herself into a sitting position.

Gillespie looked at her. "Where did you get a bullet-proof vest?"

"I've had one since Overwatch put me in this position. We agreed… ow, fuck… that something like this would happen sooner than later."

Gillespie stood, wiping her brow and pressing the button she knew led to the administrative offices. "Oh… you had me worried. I don't want to see anyone hurt in here."

"I'm fine. But we have bigger things to worry about. What the hell are those things?"

Gillespie looked up, thoughtfully. "I believe… we've contained them

since before I even got a position here. From the Manna Charitable Foundation. They're more or less twisted Robin Hoods who take from anyone to give to anyone."

Light gingerly pressed her finger against the bruise under her vest, and winced. "Have they breached containment before?"

Gillespie shook her head. "Never. I have no idea how they might've gotten out on their own. They're normally very peaceful. If they'd been helped, maybe… we can review the security documentation when we return."

The bell dinged, and the elevator doors slid open. The little half-visible Roget was waiting for them. He bounded next to Light as they stepped out and walked through the teal halls of neatly labeled doors. Gillespie's office didn't look any different than it had earlier in the day. The same paintings hung on the walls, which were painted the same color, and terminated onto a floor which had the same carpet.

Light looked around. "It's like *deja vu* all over again."

Gillespie took a seat at her desk. "Yes, yes… we need to come up with a plan of action. If the loop hasn't terminated yet, we might have to wait until it's all over. I don't think the copy of site security will offer us much protection."

Light took a seat across from her. "Let's just wait here for a time. Let them come to us. The Manna robot doesn't know the site any better than you do, so it might take it awhile to figure out where we are."

The doors took that moment to open up. The SCP-2322 version of Security Director Anderson walked in, and took the remaining guest seat in front of the Director's desk.

An incoherent mess of vowels spilled out of his flapping gums, as he placed some documents on the table. Light and Gillespie looked at them.

> Shirley #: Gillespie
>
> Object Class: Gillespie

> Special Gillespie Procedures: Gillespie is to be Shirley standard Gillespie Gillespie, located in Stanley Gillespie Shirley Gillespie. Ralph Roget Roget Ralph Roget Shirley Stanley Gillespie Gillespie. The containment Gillespie is to be Shirleyed once per week by custodial staff wearing opaque Gillespies…

Gillespie looked back up to Anderson. His attention, however, had already turned to something else. He had taken a knee, and was playing with the little Roget directly in front of Light.

"Gillespie!" he cried, tousling the ghost child's hair. Roget laughed and giggled, playing along. Light tried to sit as far back in her seat as possible, away from Anderson. She looked over to Gillespie, who looked back. They glanced at Anderson, and to each other, before they both cleared their throats.

Anderson looked up, and sheepishly muttered something unpronouncable, incomprehensible, distorted and illegible. He began to take more papers out, placing them along the desk. They all looked the same as the first one. Before he could say another stupid thing, klaxon alarms began blaring.

ATTENTION SITE PERSONNEL declared the shrill son of speak-n-spell. **"CONTAINMENT BREACHES ON ALL LEVELS. ASSUME CODE BROWN-CASTLE PROCEDURES."**

"Shit," said Light, standing up. "Is this normal?."

"No." Gillespie sat back in her seat, her fingers quietly drumming on the mahogany desk. "Anderson, go."

Anderson stood, nodded, and quickly fled the room. Gillespie pulled open a panel of her desk, and pulled out a pitcher of white grape juice. She poured herself and Light a glass. "Take this. It clears your head, and we're going to need it."

"Is there any kind of a panic room? Someplace we can go to wait this out?" Light asked, taking a generous gulp from her glass while leaning to look out the office door.

Gillespie closed her eyes as she took a sip of her beverage. "I can remember where the safe places used to be. Maybe."

In the distance, there was quiet screaming.

After a moment, Gillespie stood, pressing a button under her desk to open the evacuation elevator. "I don't like this. We need to leave."

Nodding, Light moved ahead of her, and into the elevator. Placing her empty glass onto her desk, Gillespie followed. The elevator doors smoothly and silently shut as they began to descend to safety.

SCP-2322, Safe Object Wing

The elevator took them to a quiet patch. They stuck to the walls, checking around corners and minimizing noise. Occasionally, a distant explosion or scream would remind them that there was trouble afoot, and made them watch each step even more carefully.

"What exactly are we looking for?" whispered Light, as she peeked around one of the endless corners that made up the rat-trap of a wing. The small Roget crept along with her, poking his nose over the corners after Light passed them by.

"Something useful," Gillespie whispered back, reading the labels on the doors as they passed. "Anything that might give us an edge."

"Wait," Light said, crouching. "Look. That door's open."

So it was. A door was ajar, halfway, standing perfectly still at the far end of the hallway. There were no marks on it, or the surrounding walls, to suggest what, if anything, had come out of that door.

Behind it, a voice called out. "Is that you?"

Light's brow furrowed. *Was that Lament?* She strained to look.

Sure enough, it looked that way. Lament walked into the light coming from the open containment chamber. "I came as soon as I heard. Is everything okay?"

Light frowned, and looked down at Roget. "…"

The phantastic child was too occupied with Gillespie's shoelaces, and didn't pay anyone any attention. Gillespie herself was chalk-white, speechlessly staring ahead.

Light looked back towards the Lament, frowning. "What did you give me on our first date?"

Shaking his head, Lament took a step forwards. "Don't do this, Sophia. I'm me. I said I came as soon as I heard what was going on."

Sighing, Light took a step back. "Not what I asked you. What did you give me on our first date?"

It was at that point that Lament's face began to melt. "Light… whabble… Gillespie Gillespiesgddgdsd…" the voice faltered, as the being drew closer. Like a ship seeing through the parting fog, Light could see there was no Lament. Only an **oily, quivering fleshy blob**.

"The snot," gasped Gillespie, clutching onto Light for support. "Just the… damn… snot…"

But not quite. A **rubbery looking skin** punched a hole out of its slimy vehicle, writhing with the robotic skeleton beneath it. It only managed to get its head and arm out, before becoming stuck. It flailed about, trying to free itself.

Gillespie's grip on Light tightened. "It's using my specimens!"

Light looked down, and took Gillespie's hand. "We need to get out of here, ASAP. Can you run?"

"No… Yes… I'm fine… I just need a few seconds." Gillespie leaned against the wall, her face ashen. "I'm fine."

The robot continued to worm its way out of its slimy vehicle. It seemed to be having a difficult time, and the two women watched it warily from afar. "I can help you, if you need it."

As she leaned one hand against the wall, the other over her chest, Gillespie huffed. "I said I was fine." She righted herself, and stood tall. "Let's continue. We can go around the obstacle."

"Where are we going, exactly? An armory?"

Gillespie shook her head, and pointed further into the Site. "I don't know how to shoot. I'm also of the opinion that firearms are useless against that… he's wearing a dead boy's skin, you know that?"

Light wrinkled her nose. "Do I want to know?"

"No. But it stops bullets better than your vest does." Gillespie began walking away from the robot, still watching it.

Light followed. "So we're not looking for a gun."

"No. We're fetching a mop."

The robot managed to work out its other arm, and began eagerly digging the rest of itself out of its imprisonment. They booked it, going as quickly as they could down the hallway.

Gillespie led them to a door that opened to a large, transparent tank filled with a clear liquid. Gentle jets of water kept a simple janitor's mop floating in the center of the tank, slowly spinning and not touching any of the edges. A shimmering green ooze leaked from the mop's end, before disappearing as it mixed with the tank's chemical containment compound.

Light could hear the android coming down the hall, dripping with fluids. She kept her eye on the would-be assailant's route of attack while Gillespie picked up a large pair of tongs and extracted the mop from its container.

Gillespie handed the mop to Light. Light looked at it for a moment before taking it in hand. The robot was free now, and it cast a shadow upon the wall as it came around the hallway's corner.

Light took a stand as it came around the corner. It was covered in oil and looked like a man with the wrong skeleton. It blindly and wildly swung its knife as it marched towards.

"SOPHIA LIGHT," it blathered, stumbling towards her. "WHY NOT DONATE TO THE LATTER CHURCH OF THE BROKEN SAINTS, for ONLY—"

Light struck quickly, popping the mop into its mouth. "No solicitors."

She twirled the handle, aggressively splashing the inside of the principal skin with acid. As the mop twisted and turned, creating unsightly bulges from beneath the loose skin, the android's wild swinging was reduced to slow sinking. Noxious gases rolled out of the skin's various orifices as the robot fell onto its back, spasmed, and was still.

Roget clapped.

SCP-2322, Euclid Object Wing

The walk over to the Euclid containment area had been surprisingly quiet, with only distant screams and explosions, and occasional power outages. It seemed like as good a place as any to find a way of defending themselves. They arrived to find it littered with debris and fallen fake men, but nothing of substance.

Light gingerly slid the handgun out of the dead guard's grip. The small phantasmagoric child shielded itself behind its grandmother's legs, waiting for her to finish. "I think something's already been through here."

"What makes you say that?" asked Gillespie, poking over some ruins with a broken piece of rebar.

Roget's apparition, apparently bored of being afraid, toddled over to be by Light again.

Pulling her jacket closed, Light shivered. "It's getting colder. Is that something to worry about?"

"No… I don't think so. Possibly. Probably not," said Gillespie, as she sat down upon a pile of rubble. "Not unless you see snow."

Light continued walking into the wing, stepping over the shattered

remains of the entrance checkpoint. Broken glass crunched under her feet, as another gully gust of chilled air swept over her. "Something's definitely modulating the temperature. I can feel it from here."

Gillespie looked over from her seat. "Do you think we should keep going in?"

Light shrugged, and peered further down the hall. "It's your site. You'd know what it might be better than I would."

Picking herself up, Gillespie gingerly followed through the debris field behind Light. "I don't think we're in any immediate danger… we should keep going. We'll be fine."

The destruction became more apparent as they progressed deeper into the wing. Every single door was a singed remnant of its former frame, and there was broken glass and twisted, burnt pieces of metal littering the scorched halls.

Lighting had become a luxury, so they kept a hand upon the wall as they proceeded, with only the occasional spark and Light's cellphone-light to keep them going. A low mist hung around their ankles.

At a moment neither of them took note of, a delighted smile crossed over Roget's face. In the darkness, he slipped ahead of them.

It was at that moment that the lights flickered back to life.

Light and Gillespie both looked around for any signs of treachery. Down the hall, frosty winds billowed from an open steel security door. Light aimed her weapon at it, and began to walk closer. "I think we've found who's letting the cold demons out."

Gillespie walked behind Light, and read the inscription next to the door as Light opened the door to its full outstretched position.

"… It's **`Walt`**."

Light glanced over. "What?"

"Walt Disney. We've got his head on ice."

A childlike voice squealed with delight from inside the room. Gillespie's head snapped towards the sound's source. "Ralph?"

Before Light could say a word, Gillespie had shuffled into the cryonic containment chamber.

Light followed. She was greeted with the sight of Gillespie's grandson's transparent replica, surrounded by prancing, ringing sheep with coats made of rotary dial phone cords. In place of a head, there was a telephone.

Walt Disney's frozen head was poised on a pedestal at the center of the room, with two phones attached and off the hook. A voice emanated from one of the phones attached to Walt's pedestal. "Director! It's delightful to see you again!"

Gillespie stepped forward, smiling and shivering. "Hello, Walt."

"Please accept my apology for the chill, Director. We had a spot of trouble with the thermostat. Luckily, my ovine imagineers were here to help."

On cue, all of the sheep's rotary phones began ringing off the hooks.

"Now, to what do I owe the pleasure, Director?" asked Walt, his immobile head's lips staying in place beneath the glass.

"… Where to start?" Gillespie exhaled, and crossed her arms. "It hasn't been the best day."

"Well, it brought you and your grandson together, so how bad can it really be?"

"Pretty bad, Walt. He's helping, but it's tough."

One of the sheep came forward, Roget on its back. A small matchbook had been placed on the phone. "This might help you," said Walt. "It's how I kept myself presentable while my imagineers went to work."

Light picked up the matchbook, examining it. "What is this?"

Gillespie looked at Light. "It's a **matchbox full of winter**, dear."

"Oh, cool," said Light, as Roget dismounted his mighty steed. "Thanks, Walt."

Walt said nothing. Plucking the matchbox from Light's hands, Gillespie turned to leave, motioning for the little Roget to follow along.

Walt called out after them. "Just one more thing, Director."

Gillespie turned at the threshold. "Yes?"

"It's dangerous to go alone. Please, be careful."

Gillespie nodded. "I will, Walt."

Light followed her outside. "Can't say I expected to meet Walt Disney when I woke up this morning."

Gillespie walked around to the security door, and began pushing it. "Help me get this closed, please. The last thing we need is for things to get colder."

Nodding, Light moved beside Gillespie and pushed. "Jeez, this is heavy. You need all this to keep a head locked up?"

Gillespie struggled beside her, as the door slowly began to squeal closed. "Just keep pushing. I think… after this I'd like to rest a spell."

Light huffed and puffed. "That's a great idea."

As the door locked into place, they both leaned upon it, wiping their brows and sliding to the bottom of the door. The cold steel felt good, like a cold shower frozen solid. They leaned on each other, the exhaustion suddenly catching up to them.

Eventually, Light spoke up. "What a day, huh?"

"Yes… but I'm guessing it's nothing new for you."

"I don't go out looking for danger. A lot of those stories are… exaggerated."

"Oh." Gillespie looked down at the matchbox. "You were… very good with the mop. That robot was relentless…"

"Oh, uh… thank you."

Gillespie touched the frost on the ground. "It's warming up already. We should go."

Light groaned. "In a minute."

Gillespie closed her eyes. "I was hoping you'd say that."

For a time, they laid there, their breathing slowly descending from exhaustion, too tired, too sleepy, too asleep. The Rogetian apparition curled up in his grandmother's lap. Underneath the buzzing lights and lying on frozen steel, they waited for the sake of it. It wasn't until a malodorous scent invaded the corridor that the peace was broken.

"Do you smell that?" asked Gillespie, slowly picking her head up from Light's shoulder.

"Yeah… like a biology lab. Or my garage." Light stood up, bracing herself as stiff muscles whined about a rude awakening. "It's coming from down there."

From whence they had came, it emerged. Before them stood a gigantic and **leafy doberman topiary**, with the head of **a man**. It was a decapitated and aged head, covered with mollusks and with sagging, pallid flesh. The vines and leaves swiveled menacingly as it came upon them.

Before either of them could move, it was already on top of Light, pinning her beneath tree trunks of paws. Gillespie scrambled away. Light was too astonished to struggle.

The thing opened its mouth, and a mollusk-like tongue oozed out of

its mouth.

It licked Light's face like man's best friend ought to, and then sat obediently, awaiting command.

Gillespie had found Light's gun, and was now staring at her and the thing.

Light let out her breath. "… I think it's friendly."

SCP-2322, Safe SCP Wing

It took Light around fifteen minutes to decide that she'd forgive Gregory for getting goo all over her face. Riding on his back was very comfortable, and there were delightful flowers to look at while they zipped along.

It was around the same time that it leapt over the makeshift barricades that permeated Site-77's Euclid wing. If Gregory hadn't come along to help them when he did, they might've still been sitting pooped outside Walt's pad.

Light leaned towards Gillespie, who had makeshift reins in her hands and Roget in her lap as she guided Gregory through the odds and ends of Site-77. "Did you find it?"

Gillespie shook her head. "Not yet. But we're close. I'm sure this might've been before they moved it."

Light watched the doors and rubble as it went by, in a blur. Gregory zipped past everything, responding to Gillespie's commands almost subconsciously. "You're good at this."

Gillespie shrugged, handling the reins. "I've… we've done tests with 1513 before."

Light laughed. "No shit? You should've showed this to me before!"

They took a hard left. Gillespie gripped the grassy neck. "I was going to… oh, heck."

Bracing herself on handfuls of daffodils, Light scrunched her face as a the floor ripped itself apart, pulling the ground out from under them. Gregory stumbled over the remains of a wall, wrapping Light and Gillespie in flowery vines as it fell. Roget sailed through the wall altogether, landing out of sight.

Between the vines, Light saw it coming towards them. It was the android— skinless, but very much intact— wearing **earbuds**, seemingly covered in softly vibrating sub-woofers. Its waxen head was deformed and coming off in chunks, revealing a gigantic speaker in place of a head.

"SOPHIA LIGHT! We can work past YOUR attempt TO LIQUIDATE ASSET… It is PERHAPS times for you to give up MUCH MORE, SOPHIA LIGHT. WE CAN HELP."

Light winced and covered her ears. "Should be slag… how the hell did it even find us?" She looked over to the bundle of vines lying next to her.

Gillespie pulled the vines apart and stood up, her hand already throwing the small white box from her pocket. It skidded across the floor, coming to rest a fair ways from the android assailant. It watched as a couple of snowflakes emanated from the matchbox.

The android threw its head back, and let out a deafening tone.

"*DRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRR*

Gillespie stumbled back, ears covered, into the bushy beast behind her. Thick leaves covered her up.

The vines abandoned Light as Gregory pounced upon the android. There was a flurry of foliage as they struggled, with occasional piercing tones being muffled by leaves, and slashing metal tearing through the dampeners.

Light looked around for Gillespie and found her again. She was brushing leaves from her clothing.

The snowflakes were picking up. Gillespie looked at them, and then at Light. "We need to get out of here. Blast doors. Down the hall. Take me."

It didn't need to be said twice. Gillespie was a small woman, and Light had been stuck with a strict workout regimen for years. She scooped up and carried Gillespie as quickly as she dared down the hall, as the sounds of the battle behind them grew more intense.

When they reached the security door Gillespie neatly typed a code into the keypad. The thick, green blast doors creaked open, and the last remnants of the frost dissipated as fresh air blew in.

A flat tone shrieked, and through the mist there was a long howl. The doors were open now, as Light and Gillespie stepped through.

As the door closed behind them, Gregory, his body weighed down with dead frost and dead robot weight, swung around the corner. Thundering down the hall, he was only moments too late to fit his body between the closing metal gate. For a few moments, there was scrabbling and scratching. Then, silence.

Gillespie clutched Light, panting. "I knew that would work…"

Light patted Gillespie's head, and breathed a sigh of relief. They began walking down the hall. Behind them, Roget poked his head out from the ruined walls, and ran to catch up with his grandmother. Gillespie slowed down to accommodate him, then stopped. Walking to one of the doors dotting the wall, she punched another security code in, and opened the door.

Inside was a sterile white room, with a navy blue door quietly occupying the opposite end of the room. Its light bulb was on behind the door, and shining through the slits. Gillespie hopped over to the door, murmuring to herself. "It's been… waiting for us? Yes, yes, this will work…"

Light strolled in behind her, taking in the sights of the room. "What's going on?"

The bulb clicked off, and Gillespie smiled softly. "Something useful."

Gillespie opened the door, and scooped up the **small piece of metal from the floor**. She carefully inspected it, before turning to Light with a sparkle in her eye. "Better than I dared hope. We've got a chance yet."

Light motioned to Gregory. "So, where to next?"

Gillespie pocketed her new friend, and walked to the door. "We're burning down the house."

SCP-2322, Motor Pool

"Pontiac Azteks?"

Gillespie walked among the fleet of Azteks, and frowned as she ran her hand across the car's oddly-shaped rear end. "This place is breaking down. These cars didn't even exist in 1999."

Light, from across the room, called out to her. "This one has a tent!"

Shaking her head, Gillespie turned her attention to the roof of an Aztek in the back row. Taking an adhesive from her purse, she fixed the laser pointer to the top of the car furthest from the wall, and tugged on it to make sure it was secure.

Light ambled back over, and peered over Gillespie's shoulder. "This is going to be safe, right?"

"Probably. If we cause enough destruction, it'll probably terminate the loop, and kick us all out."

With that, she flicked the laser on. A red dot appeared on the wall across the motor pool, barely visible apart from the red line of light stretching from the car to the wall. They didn't have long to appreciate the sight, though. The pointer's effect was instant. Every car in the lot, dozens of Pontiac Azteks, began revving, starting up, and getting ready to go.

Tires squealed as every vehicle began chasing the red dot. Almost immediately, most of them crashed into each other. But before too long, the logjam was cleared, and the automotive automatons were

smashing repeatedly into the wall, onto the little red dot if they could help it.

The destruction was enormous. The cars smashed and smashed, and cracks spread from the walls to the roof. The constant pounding brought down dust and pieces of ceiling, and the whole room shook like a tweaking chihuahua.

Crack, crunch, crumble.

The wall fell like it was 1989, and the Azteks began fighting for position. Gillespie and Light watched as they plowed through the next room, and the next, and the one after that, until they were out of sight.

They waited a little longer, listening to the sounds of destruction as the Azteks made their way further into the Site.

"This probably ought to knock the site down, right?" asked Gillespie, brushing some rubble off of her sleeve.

"… Yeah. Probably. As long as they keep going." Light stared through the hole. "You want to, uh, wait in a car? Maybe see if the radio works, or something like that."

Gillespie walked through the hole, appraising the crumpled wrecks of the few Azteks which hadn't survived the initial onslaught. She picked one and pulled on the door to the driver's seat. The door came off in her hand.

Shrugging, she moved onto the second closest, which had most of its damage on the rear-end. "This one seems to be relatively intact."

She got in first. Light got in behind her, and closed the passenger door. Light hit the lock button, then settled into her seat and closed her eyes. "Phew…" she said.

"Why did you do that?" Gillespie asked.

"Do what?" Light popped one eye open, returning Gillespie's look.

"Lock the doors."

Light looked away, through the window. The Rogetian apparition was playing with a piece of twisted gears, from one of the more ruined wrecks. "Shirley, you never know what's out there."

"I do. And don't call me Shirley."

Light sat up, still looking out the window. "We're not on first names yet, then?"

Gillespie shook her head. "It's not that, it's… nevermind. You can call me that if you want to."

The entire room began to violently sway. In the distance, there were several rather loud explosions. Chunks of the ceiling began falling down onto the car like raindrops, denting all which had not already been dented. Gillespie looked up, dismayed.

"I was hoping that the loop would terminate before something like this happened…" Gillespie looked out the window, pursing her lips.

"Something like what happened?" Light asked, as baby Roget phased through the doors and into the backseat, silently wailing.

"Everything actually breaking down. We've never run a destructive test that was quite on this sc—"

A large heap of metal interrupted her, as it crushed the hood and cracked the windscreen. Gillespie jerked back, her hand over her heart. "Oh, my. Oh dear…"

"Just hang on. We just have to wait for it to pass, and we'll be fine. Don't worry." Light took Gillespie's hand. "Just relax."

At that moment, a large, furry appendage slammed into the cracked windscreen. From outside the car, they could hear it calling, in a pre-pubescent voice. "Like, ohmigod Jane, there's totally stuff in here!"

"Shit." Light pulled out the sidearm. Outside, the apparition of Roget screamed in terror as spiders swiftly overwhelmed him.

Gillespie just closed her eyes.

Skittering down to the front of the car, the appendage's owner made itself clear. **A giant spider**, bows in its hair and lipstick smeared all over its mandibles.

Spiders began crawling up, from the cracked ground and through the ruined walls. They descended from the ceiling from webs, and thudded onto the roof over and over again.

The car began rocking, back and forth. The compatriot of the spider, previously unseen, began to come join it by the hood of the car.

Soon, every window was blocked by pieces of furry exoskeleton, as they chattered and pounded at every surface. The windscreen bent, but did not break. Pieces of glass showered the front seat.

The car continued to rock back and forth, and both women clung to their seats, and to each other. They were thrust into pitch blackness as the outside of the vehicle was swarmed. The back windows were punched in, and a dozen legs began squirming and pushing to get in.

The two of them shrunk into the front seat, with Light pointing her firearm back towards the sound of flailing limbs. The roof above them began to give way, as three more spidery limbs began blindly thrashing around. Gillespie cried out, her forearm snapping as a spider's leg jabbed her.

It was then that Light and Gillespie felt their ears pop.

At once, the spider's leg stiffened, and crumbled like ashes. The pounding from all sides ceased at once. The windows were still a void, but there was no more movement. Gillespie groaned, and clutched her arm. An ambient light began to shimmer down from the holes in the roof. Light looked over. "How bad is it?"

Gillespie looked at the deformity on her arm. "Broken…" she mumbled, straining in her seat and gripping the steering wheel with a white-knuckle fist. "Look outside… is it over? Are we out?"

Light pushed, and forced the door open, looking outside.

"… It's different now. I think we broke it."

???

The shards of what were once a motor pool floated in space. The car, dented and twisted, sat on a small floating platform. Blue wisps of light twisted through the floating pieces of concrete. The air was thick, and permeated by a high-pitched ringing.

Light carried Gillespie through the void. Gillespie's breathing was short, and her eyes closed. Light wasn't sure what she was walking on, as she strode past sections of rooms suspended in space. Occasionally, there were portions of people. Light tried not to look at those.

There was a whistling in the air.

"How are you holding up?" she said, adjusting her grip on Gillespie's frail form.

"Fine… fine," Gillespie said, taking a deep breath. "Keep walking. He should be here… soon."

Light looked ahead. There was something glimmering in the distance. It was a pink shimmer, drawing closer at every second.

The whistling grew louder.

In a flying V, they came. **`Pink flamingos`**, with sharpened metal prongs in place of legs. Dangling from three of them, suspended by thick, black leather straps, was the charitable robot, dripping oil, legless and covered in vines, but swinging its blade and silently flapping its waxen gums.

"Fuck." Light groaned and took a step back. "Why won't this goddamn thing stay down?"

The flamingos swept down from above, prongs at the ready. Ducking down and covering Gillespie, Light felt the prongs rip through her back, and the warmth as blood flowed freely from the wounds.

The flamingos took the skies again, returning to formation with the

android at the forefront.

Again, they charged from the skies. The automaton swung its knife, with every wild swipe causing bolts and wires to be flung from its body.

Light tensed, and rolled as it drew close, gripping Gillespie to herself as they dodged out of the way. The blade stabbed into the ground, and pulled the droid to the ground.

Gillespie winced as Light set her down. Light stood up.

The droid crawled towards them, clumsily waving its blade towards them. Its eyes dangled out of its sockets and its waxen lips cracked as they dragged along the ground.

Light backed up, keeping a hand on her firearm.

A figure darted towards them and stomped down onto the android's head, crushing it into pieces.

Light watched warily, firearm still in hand. A young man approached them. He was a hairy little guy, coming only to Light's hips, and he was wearing a D-Class jumpsuit.

"Director Gillespie… can you hear me?"

Gillespie perked her head up, eyes open wide. "Oh… good, it's over. How nice to finally… meet you."

E-8812 reached over and brushed the hair from Gillespie's eyes. "The feeling is mutual. You've made quite a mess today."

"Wasn't… my intention." Gillespie pushed against Light, who helped her stand. "I never intended to come here… like this."

E-8812 took her hand, and instantly her pained face was washed away by relief. "Wow…"

"It's a funny thing, pain. There was pain, when they all burned, or were crushed, or died in a myriad of other tragic ways. It was all real pain, even from fake people."

Gillespie looked away.

E-8812 looked around. "You know why this place exists?"

"Because you created it?"

He shook his head, pointing to Gillespie. "You made it happen. You were the first person… in quite some time, to show kindness. Really, it sort of wrote itself from there."

Digging into his pocket, he pulled out a small picture. It was Gillespie, twenty years earlier. She was smiling with her husband, on a white porch in summer. "This is your world, Shirley. We're all just living in it."

Gillespie took the picture. "Where did you get this?"

"I don't have the answers, here, and we're almost out of time. Sorry. You're the only one who really has a final say." E-8812 clapped and waved his hands. The lights formed into a blue box, with a shimmering white spiral in the center. "Anyways, you know what we do now, I'm sure."

Gillespie nodded. "Go on."

The white spiral shone a bright white, and turned into the number three. "You blew up my base, and caused the deaths of thousands of people. You didn't recreate the day, but I sincerely look forward to the next time you try."

Gillespie nodded, and then faded away. Light heard the sound of a door closing.

"As for you," said E-8812, stepping towards Light. "Don't ever come back."

The white flashed to a big, red zero. Light felt the ground disappear from beneath her, and she fell. Everything went white for a moment, before shapes and sounds began to take form. Through the ringing in her ears, Light heard them saying her name.

At the Lunch Counter

Gillespie and Light sat by each other, in the center of the counter. Gillespie's arm was in a sling, but her spirits had never been higher.

"I met Bowe exactly one time. He came over to inspect Site-77, when he was on the warpath for humanoids with vaguely weaponizable powers. He wanted to use 213, for obvious reasons, but he was still comatose then. You wouldn't believe what he offered our doctors to rouse him."

Gillespie shook her head. "That was when I realized it probably wasn't going to work out."

Light chuckled. "That sounds about right."

Gillespie picked her tea up with her good hand, and shook the ice around. "So, what *did* Lament give you, on your first date?"

Light grinned. "Ctenophores. It was awesome."

Gillespie smiled in return. "Gifts like that always mean the most. What happened to them?"

Light laughed out loud. "You'll love this. A Junior Researcher drank them, thought they were anomalous, and almost got our whole sector on lockdown."

Gillespie chuckled. "Shame that you lost them."

Light shrugged. "Ended up being a great story, though. Sometimes that's the best you can hope for."

"Yes… I've heard stories, rumors, about you and Lament. If you don't mind, of course…"

"No, go on. I don't mind."

"Are you still… entangled?"

Light shook her head. "Just friends. We both agree that things work out better that way."

Gillespie nodded, sagely. "It's a shame… you would make a tremendous power couple. But I'm sure the last thing on your mind is needing more power." She closed her eyes, and finished her drink before standing. "Let's head back to the Site… I've got a lot to show you before we go. We've left O5-4 waiting long enough."

Standing with her, Light smiled. "Lead the way."

« Boss Of Me | Resurrection | Where Your Eyes Don't Go »

I Wish To Be An Asteroid, Burning To Nothing

I am a second, human-shaped moon circling around my home. That lie comforts me when I am at my loneliest.

I am a forgotten, lost human, whose efforts will be remembered by no one. That truth reminds me when I am at my most lucid.

Lucidity doesn't come often. It's easier to try and sleep the years off of me. Sometimes, when my dreams are generous, I can be nestled in these comforts for a small eternity. But I always wake up to the silence in my suit, in my helm. I used to hate it some time ago, but all the hatred has bled out of me like all my tears.

My visor is covered with dust that cannot be wiped off. I have tried everything to remove it, including my spit. It's just another mystery that is my existence, now. I used to dwell on myself a long time ago. Panic struck me often in those times, where I'd fear I was no longer human, no longer alive nor dead. At one point I was afraid that I had somehow ascended the paradigm of life and death, and so was beyond even the grim reaper's kiss.

Now that all my fears have been confirmed, I am no longer afraid. I am no longer sad or angry. One can call it acceptance, but I don't think I can accept what I don't understand.

I am a vertigo state, not quite falling and not quite rising. My thoughts, too, are not solid around any concept to explain what I am now. I have let go even of the solidity of my name, as there was no point of having a name when no one is there to call you by it. It is easier this way, to think fluid as my body is.

My home is bright as a New Year's ornament, reminding me that even if I am not down there to continue it, the world continues itself. When I am at my loneliest, the web of lights over the earth keep me company in a way that the far away glow of the stars cannot.

I look forward to the night, when the web glows brightest. Sometimes I imagine that the web lifts off of the world to swaddle me in a net of warmth, gently pulling me down and returning me back home. But then I wake up from my dreams and find myself here again, cold and alone.

The lights probably began to dim a while ago, but I only notice it now on this night when I am lonely and empty and looking to my web of light to guide me into comfort. Some of the strings are thin, worn, or cut. A small black out, perhaps. Still, it slides worry into my flesh and that worry proceeds to infest my intestines with doubt. The itching sensation of concern flashes hot on my skin like oil from a pan.

Desperate to run from my emotions, I shut my gaze to sleep.

When I am again awake, I remain trapped in my anxiety and find the lights have not been this dim in a long time. I would give everything to be on the ground again, if only to be able to ask what is happening to cause things to go dark. It is easy to delude onesself that this is just some new technology that moves cities underground; any kind of excuse or explanation would do. But I know it is not that simple. My years shackled to my fate teaches me to assume my deepest anxiety is the truth.

I stay awake for as long as I can. My stomach tells me to be nauseous but there is nothing to vomit except the fear lodged in my intestines. I try to network my brain to the webbing of the lights, perhaps in a desperate attempt to be with my kind before they slip away and leave me behind. *"I'm still here! I'm still here! Don't leave, I'm still here!"*

None of my shouting does anything. The lights cannot hear me. No one can hear me. I am being pulled across an expanse of ocean and ice. I am an aurora borealis across the dark sky with no one to witness my flight.

The lights grow ever dimmer. I can help. I am an intelligent man who knows all of the latest technologies. I have even watched the technology evolve. Please net me down. Scoop me from the sky like a fish from the ocean. I can rebuild; *we* can rebuild. I resist the forces that pull me, screaming insanity into the far-away earth. The

world is callous in its rejection.

Once, I awaken to find the world darker than I have ever seen it. I learn what it means to be sad again. I re-learn how to mourn. It is so much more painful to become reacquainted with this kind of sorrow now that I have nothing at all to comfort me. The stars reject me as callously as the earth and I am alone with my thoughts, reliving anew the grief that is being conscious in this cold state.

In a dream, it is many years into the future. The sun expands, consuming half the solar system. It swallows my tiny body whole, gulping me into its searing heat.

I am burned away to nothing.

I imagine it is the embrace of my family and friends as they welcome me home.

I Wish You Weren't Here

Gabriel was not exactly a novice when it came to Kit's suicide attempts.

He tried to believe that this change in behaviour couldn't possibly be due to the over-exposure to amnestics, because then guilt gnawed away in his gut. Instead, he found himself staring at the back of pill packets as he brushed his teeth – 'If you, or your houseguest, down the whole bottle, call emergency services.'

Something like that, anyway.

At some point in time, cuddling in the dim moonlight, Kit's tone had gone from a sultry but satisfied one to something very quiet, and very grim.

'Pills are so unreliable. Next time I try, it'll be a sure thing.'

Gabriel thought maybe Kit thought he was asleep, but the assumption was wrong. He heard the words, and felt his heart tense up, beating empty, then beating hard; panicked. He hid all the medication in the house, though that didn't seem to faze Kit, who had often turned up at his place high on something that he could never identify.

Regardless, their relationship ended the next week.

But thinking of that time reminded Gabriel of the scant amount of Kit's stuff he had left behind. One of his more well-worn sketchbooks, which contained embarrassing sketches of them both, naked and exposed. The 'Free Tibet' t-shirt he used to sleep in sometimes, even though Gabriel doubted Kit cared at all for Tibet in any sort of meaningful way. A half-crushed pack of cigarettes that had littered the coffee table for a while, until Gabriel summoned up the strength to put it all into a bag.

A bag, of course, that he was holding now.

What was he doing with his life? It seemed so desperate, to want any chance to see Kit, that he would collect up such meagre belongings and prepare to take them over. Instead, Gabriel schooled his face into a neutral position as he walked down the street.

He wasn't going there for him, not for a hope of catching Kit just out of the shower, draped in a towel and nothing else. He wasn't going there hoping Kit would invite him in for coffee and maybe, just maybe, it would all end up okay.

He was going there for Kit. He worried about Kit constantly – all he had to do was remind himself of the times Kit had scared him before, and it was easy to change his outlook from a selfish one of need, to a more concerned ex-boyfriend outlook.

The locking mechanism outside the block of flats had been broken for some time, so Gabriel let himself in and tried to control himself into a casual stride up the stairs to Kit's flat.

He knocked, three times, a pause, then two more. A code, so Kit wouldn't hide away and pretend he wasn't home, scared of who was on the other side of the door. When the door didn't open after that, Gabriel pretended not to be bothered. He had come all the way here, so he may as well try the door, and dump the stuff, and then go home, and try to forget all over again.

Gabriel wasn't alarmed when the door was unlocked. Most of the time, it would be, because Kit would forget his own name if… well, he forgot his name on a regular basis, and that's why the door was rarely locked.

He stepped in, nose rankling at the smell of stale cigarette smoke and a cat who he never saw but had been assured was somewhere in the flat. After all, having a cat was like having a poltergeist – Kit would shrug and say she was around there, somewhere, and later they would hear mysterious crashes and see mysterious messes, like a little kitty crime scene, with the perpetrator nowhere to be seen.

Gabriel kept his shoes on, acutely aware of the filthy floors beneath his soles, and headed into the combined living room/kitchen.

He saw the chair laying spilled on the floor before he saw the bare feet, suspended in mid-air. He felt the bag drop from his hand, felt like he left his own body for a moment.

'He's done it. This time, he's really done it.'

The thought echoed in his head as he momentarily disassociated, his mind trying to protect itself from the sight of Kit hanging like a puppet on a string. It occupied him for maybe a few seconds, but it felt like minutes before he leapt into action.

He grabbed the same chair and picked it up, pulling himself up to nearly where Kit swung, having to stand on his tiptoes to cut the rope with the handy folding knife he always kept in his back pocket. Gabriel's arms grasped around Kit's body before he could fall to the ground, and, just for a second, it was like they were dancing.

It was a New Year's Eve party, something oddly formal that Gabriel had been invited to.

It was in-between amnestic administration number three and number four. Kit wasn't that crazy, not yet. But Gabriel knew he was only there for a job (I don't want to want him)

It was Kit who had grabbed his hand and dragged him onto the dance floor during a slow song. It was nearly midnight, and Gabriel felt acutely aware he had no-one to kiss. It never normally bothered him, but, with Kit's head on his shoulder, his breathing soft, it felt like maybe (I don't deserve this) he was missing out.

It was Gabriel who took the lead that night, after the dancing, leading him outside where the fireworks had been exploding all night. He led him gently into a kiss, which Kit greedily accepted. They were both tipsy but not drunk; Kit was quirky, but not crazy; and Gabriel was breaking who knew how many rules.

Afterwards, Gabriel held Kit's hand, gave it a squeeze and let go, allowing it to fall between them again.

Ignoring how much he wanted to keep holding it.

To hold it forever.

Kit's head was lolling on his shoulder again, but that soft breathing was absent. His face was dark, purple almost, and his neck was covered in scratches – the body had known nothing but to fight in its last moments, even if Kit had truly wanted to die. The silence in the room was tense and oppressive.

And then, it was broken.

Something slammed into the front door, and there was yelling, a garble of words that didn't reach his grief-stricken ears. Gabriel barely noticed he was now kneeling on the floor with Kit held close until someone grabbed his shoulder and spoke, softer this time.

"Let go of it, Romero."

Gabriel recognised the voice as Neil Hull, one of his teammates. That meant the Alpha team he was regularly on was here, but why? Gabriel couldn't arrange his thoughts properly, could only hoarsely whisper.

"Him. Kit. Not it. Never it."

Agent Hull knelt next to him.

"It's not him. It was never him."

Gabriel looked back to the body in his arms, and it wasn't Kit. It really wasn't Kit. It was a being that looked more mannequin than human, with a blank face, stiff plastic limbs. He still didn't want to let go. That image was still burnt into his memory.

Later, Gabriel would learn that this uncontained threat had a twisted version of playing with people. It could manipulate its voice, so someone would believe a phone call about a loved one dying in an accident; it could become a scent of the cigarettes a grandmother used to smoke; and it could transform into a person and hang hopelessly from a rope. It prayed on people with rocky relationships, and the Foundation had been tracking it for some time.

But that would be later. That would be after they pried him away from the ‘body’, after they attempted to debrief him, after they argued amongst themselves what to do with him. All Gabriel could see the entire time was Kit’s face, cold and dark, and all he could hear was muffled. Eventually, they decided to send him home, on leave for ‘possible memetic contamination’.

Gabriel stood in the shower for an hour, trying to wash the memory away. He found he had, on automatic pilot, taken the bag of Kit’s belongings back home with him, and he slipped into the ‘Free Tibet’ t-shirt even though it was too big on him and stunk of smoke and something undefinable; the smell of Kit.

When his hands stopped shaking so much, he typed in Kit’s number, despite knowing how rarely the flaky young man checked his phone.

“Hey, Kit, it’s me.” He let the awkward silence fill the air, just glad that it wasn’t as heavy as the air in that terrible kitchen scene. “I, uh. I just wanted to check you were okay. And uh… to say I miss you. A lot. I was just… I wanted you to know someone cares for you because I know that’s… that’s easy for you to forget. Uh. You don’t have to call me back, just… I’m here, if you need me. I’m not a million miles away.” Gabriel hung up the phone and buried his face in his hands, breathing hard.

Back at Kit’s flat, and the man himself stumbled in, two days gone on a Bloom high. He was more than a little confused about the state of his kitchen – immaculately clean, as if someone had gone through and disinfected everything, cleaned up every little thing. Someone had even replaced the lightbulb, which was nice.

He felt his phone vibrate in his pocket, surprised he even had it on him, and fished it out to look at it.

‘One new message.’

I Wrote a Tale

I wrote a tale.

A tale, maybe. Is it a tale, Jacob? Jacob? If it's not a tale, what is it then? The kids, Jacob. Where are the kids? But I don't like oysters. Or computation.

I shouldn't have run the program. Megaprime. He's with me now.

How did I get here? It's just black black black.

I know, I know! I have gone through the jagged bramble! My head hurts. Bleeding. But I see. The distant light house, it blinks. And the smog from the north. Why is it so bright? Is someone there? He's there and He's looking at me. What am I doing here? Where is it? My hope. My only hope.

But Jacob, there's no path.

Die. Die. Die.

Jacob! Jacob! I want to write a tale! I *need* to write a tale!

Die. Die. Die.

Because He says so. Because He tells me. Because He speaks His words.

Pinkpurplegreywhitegreen. Dotdotdot. Mosaics. I've seen those prime numbers. Did you do the calculations, Jacob? Why are you smiling? You're just a triangle. Stop. STOP. It hurts my eyes. Those dazzling numbers and calculations.

And His eyes. Bright as the light house. Brighter than the light

house. So bright that it extinguishes the light house.

Yes, I hear you my Lord Lord Lord. Your voice to be heard, your computation to be understood.

I shall write the tale. I'm writing the tale. Please, Jacob, don't grin at me. There are too many teeth.

But can I regret it? I ran the program and I'm here. Jacob, am I dead? How can I still write? I can no longer see the light house. I regret it, I don't want it anymore. Megaprime. The Great Computation in my head. MEGAPRIME.

I see others here. Did they run the program? Did they hear His voice and see His eyes? The one in the labcoat with a cartoon face. The one bleeding from eyes and mouth and ears. The one has his bowels out.

Jacob, are the kids safe?

It's been long and I'm hungry. HUNGRY. I don't want oysters, Jacob. But those bowels. The bowels look nice. BOWELS.

Turn it on! The fancy beeps! Megaprime! I hear you, Lord of Data! MEGAPRIME! I HEAR YOU, WAN! But I don't want the Great Computation anymore. THE GREAT COMPUTATION. Crosses as eyes! Crosses as eyes!

Jacob please. I don't like computation. Not the GREAT COMPUTATION.

256 heart beats. His light. His electricity. Power at His command! God of the Information Age!

Jacob please.

Jacob please. I don't like computation.

Jacob please. I don't like computation. Not the GREAT COMPUTATION.

I just want to go home. Jacob, can I undo this? The things beyond me. The things I can't comprehend. I was wrong wrong wrong.

But His image! The printed ones and the ones on the screen! His words, His holy words! His words to be written down.

I have to write a tale Jacob. Are the kids safe? But I have to write a tale. I know too much and it hurts hurts hurts.

My eyes! Bleeding. I can't see my eyes anymore. What are eyes? Only His eyes. His eyes.

He's inside my head, and I'm inside of Him. He's here to send a message. THE MESSAGE.

The Great Computation.

The Great Computation.

The Great Computation.

THE GREAT COMPUTATION.

Jacob, I've wrote the tale. Please let me go. I don't like computation.

–

Iceberg puts 135 on ice

- - : While its shape shifting abilities proved to be of some interest for a time, as other shape shifting SCPs were discovered, and after study in to the extreme amount of damage it can cause to both electronic objects, as well as organic matter from the large amounts of radiation it produces, it was determined that SCP-135 was no longer of use to the Foundation. After many decades in deep storage, was 135 was slated for decommissioning by unanimous consensus of all current 05s.

Dr. Iceberg, having learned of this through unknown channels, promptly requested “the rights to kill the motherfucker before Clef gets it.”

Decommissioning Day 1:
Ok, so I’ve noticed.

You know how Clef was beat up and shit after the fighting with Kon and 239 and stuff? But then he got back in the good spotlight after he decommed 531? Both he and Kon are both dicks, but they have nice Level 4 jobs. I do hard work, and what do I get? Level 2. Why? They destroy stuff. I can’t believe I didn’t see it before. To get a promotion, I simply have to decom a dangerous, worthless SCP item. And it just happens, as I was looking through files on the network, I found one. 135. A shapeshifter, destroys electronics, and produces multiple types of radiation. Something about Roswell, but please. Everyone knows how that shit really went down. Now, step one. Figure out how to kill it.

Day 2:
Nevermind, first step is getting the job. As always, high-and-mighty-killer-of-all Clef is the one being considered for it. I’ll simply have to send them papers showing off my credentials. Easy enough, just need to slip in a few pages with some reports. Luckily, Kondraki just gave me some pages that will work perfectly.

Day 5:
Ok, that didn't work. Not only did I hear nothing, I actually got Gears asking me how I could mess up and get the wrong papers mixed in important reports to an 05. What the hell. Fine, let's play hardball. I'll slip in some demeaning things about Clef.

Day 6:
Odd. I still heard nothing. That, and someone shot my door with a shotgun. Bah. I didn't want to have to do this, but I guess I'll just to have ask them if I can do it.

Day 7:
Rejection. I thought it only hurt when it was women. But no. Shot down I was. Apparently because not only has the job been given to Clef, and he has accepted, but there's something about a slight "issue" I caused.
Or several.
Look, I did not know it still had fuel in it.
That one wasn't even my fault.
This one? I regret nothing.
Now, everyone thought this one was funny.
And those D-class had it fucking coming.
It seems I must take matters into my own hands. I don't have much time, but in my spare time I devised a method to destroy it. I need simply to get what I need and prepare the room. It's so simple and cheap, not to mention with so little destruction to anything else, they'll have to be impressed! Big leagues, here I come! Now, it'll take an all-nighter, so I better start. Clef could get around to this anytime.

At hours SCP-135 was discovered missing.
At hours its remains were found.

Video record of room during to hours.

The room is completely empty, and seemingly has no special features beyond its metal walls. Dr. Iceberg enters the room,

wearing a heavy coat, of the style used by agents working in low temperature environments or with SCPs capable of influencing temperature, a bag and an oxygen tank. Behind him in is a man later confirmed as D- -2348. Note breach of Foundation policy.

Audio Log recorded on - - , : :

> [Unrelated talking]
> D-class: And what the hell are you wearing?
> Dr. Iceberg: A suit. Upgrade on the technology NASA based their space suits on.
> [At this point, Dr. Iceberg hooked himself up to the oxygen tank and pulled on the hood of the suit up. Several seconds later, a common handgun is thrown into the room. Object lands near D- -2348's feet, and soon transforms into a copy of the man.]
> D-class: What th-
> Dr. Iceberg: Come on, Haven't seen something stranger? You've been here a month ain't ya?
> D-class: Yeah, well-
> Dr. Iceberg: Eh, doesn't matter. Just stay quiet and you'll be free to go in no time. Hm… push it back a couple feet. So, 135, you able to talk?
> [3 minutes of silence, with 135 simply copying D- -2348]
> Dr. Iceberg: No last words then? Ah, well. Good bye you, hello promotion.
> [Dr. Iceberg holds up and presses a bright blue button, at which point a small ball of ice shoots from the ceiling onto 135's "head", and soon begins turning into a gas]
> D-class: And that is?
> 135: [Unintelligible language]
> Dr. Iceberg: A solid nitrogen snowball.

Multiple holes open up above, below, and to either side of 135 and D- -2348, pelting both with large amounts of solid and liquid nitrogen. After minutes 57 seconds, this ceases. Dr. Iceberg turns and opens his bag, pulling out a "sawn-off" shotgun.

> Dr. Iceberg: Man, have I ever wanted to do this.

[Dr. Iceberg aims the gun at the frozen figures, spinning the gun on its trigger before firing both loaded shots, shattering both. After checking the pieces, he walks over to the door, and attempts to open it. After initial failure, he is noted to shout.]

> Dr. Iceberg: Oh damnit! Door froze….. Help! Hey, someone out there! Come on, I just need someone to open the door!

Ichor

Dear Annie,

I'm sorry I had to leave without telling you anything, but things kinda… escalated faster than I thought they would. I mean, I knew the suits would get royally pissed off with our little art project, but I didn't know they'd go all "Fugitive" on us and start a fucking manhunt. Rita and Geoff heard what was going on and came to pick me up, said they had a place where we and a few of the others could lay low for a while.

I know you must be real mad with me, but that's just the way it had to be, babe. If we don't stick it to those manipulative, conniving, shadow puppet master chumps, no one else is going to.

Give little Harry a kiss for me. Tell him his dad is going to be the coolest.

Dear Annie,

I have no idea if I'll get a chance to send this to you, but I'm writing it anyway. If nothing else, it'll make me feel better. Turns out Rita and Geoff's hideout is some damp cave smack in the middle of the boondocks. I have no idea how they found out about this place, but I guess we can't afford to be picky at the moment. We got enough canned food and art supplies to keep our head above the water for a good while, at least. Water might be a problem though- we can forget about bathing for a good while. Not that half of the guys here care.

I'm going to need something to distract me from all of this. A new project. It's not going to be easy to top the flaming tower of screaming goat heads that got the suits so riled up, but you can bet your ass we're going to try.

This place is amazing! Turns out we didn't need to worry about water- there's this huge underground lake just a bit deeper into the cave. We all had a nice swim, washed our clothes, we might even catch some fish. See, this is exactly what I was saying to you the other day: trust in the world, and it will provide. It's what the suits don't get, why they're always trying to push everyone around. It's why we're going to win in the end- the world is us, babe. The world is art.

I think this place is inspiring me. Watching the water ebb and flow, how the light plays on our reflections, the hues of the rock veins, it's making me feel things I haven't felt in a long while. Something here is calling me, feeding me with colors and sounds and smells, teaching me. In here, maybe I can create something truly great. Something that'll be remembered.

I wish you and Harry were here. He'd love it.

I've been hearing her. It started with distorted echoes, a slight haziness of sound around me. Then people's voices began to grow indistinct. I could still hear them and understand them, but what they said suddenly didn't seem to matter as much. Then it all began coming together, the echoes and the voices and everything else, and I heard her. Her voice appeared from that chaotic swirl of mindless sound like a bonfire in the dark, streamed through me like boiling blood. For the first time ever, I feel awake, alive, and brilliant. She wants me to create something special, I can tell. I gathered whatever supplies I could and ventured deeper into the cave, where I can work in peace. The others wouldn't understand, they're far too dull, too involved in their petty squabble with "The Man". It's such a childish notion, really. They are so much beneath the Muse's notice. She only trusts me. She'll make me great.

Oh Annie, if only you could hear her. You'd never believe how beautiful she is.

I'm such a fool. All this effort I spent on banal bullshit, on trying to be 'subversive', 'dangerous', 'cool'. What a waste of time. I always thought I knew what art was all about, but I didn't know jack. Not

until I came here. Not until she began flooding through me. Art shouldn't be some sort of cattle prod used only to piss off people you don’t like. It should be transcendent, rising above all the bickering and fighting and banality, and thanks to her, I’m creating such art for the first time ever.

The others have no idea where I am. I heard them searching for me, calling my name, asking me to come back and eat something. Oafish, loud, insufferable. They think something’s wrong with me. They're right. My materials and instruments are too crude for the Muse’s call; my hands are too numb and clumsy, my brushes too thick and brutish and my paints, even that Wondertainment Wonderhue stuff which I used to like so much, seems entirely insufficient for the work the Blood is commanding me do. I need something more. I need something perfect.

I'll have to find a way to fix that. You'd understand if you were here to see it.

Just look at the colors. Sanguine and sapphire, ivory and indigo; these once barren walls now scream praises to her. It’s all I ever wanted, all I ever hoped to be.

I found it. The answer was obvious; really, it was right in front of me the entire time. All the materials I could ever ask for, the best tools, all in one neat package. Well, maybe not neat. You see, the reason I couldn't see it before was because there was something in the way, like an oily rag covering a Monet.

The human body is a wonderful tool, you see. But the soul is useless.

Luckily, removing it was easy. The Blood of the World guided me to them, took out their lights, left them alone to stumble in the dark for me to pick. They might have screamed, or begged, or cried. I wouldn't know, I wasn't paying much attention. All I know is that they weren't cool at the end. Oh no, not at all.

After that, it was only a matter of digging in, ripping and clawing and tearing until I got to the core. All that was left were dyes and

pigments for my mural, gushing out, and fresh as anyone could ask for. Hairs to weave in her image, blond and brown and black. Nails and teeth for the mosaic, so delicate, so fragile. She laughed with pleasure when she saw my work. This will be enough, she said, this will make Breath and Pulse and Spine crumble before her. I don't know what she meant. I don't care. As long as she’s happy, so am I.

I always thought there was no such thing as perfection. I was wrong. One day I’ll come back and show you and Harry the hidden truth she taught me- Perfection is only skin deep.

If at First You Don't Succeed...

My cousins down the Day-twah say we don't get made like we used to. The way I sees it, that just means each of us what's left gotta work that much harder to do his part.

I do work hard. I've tried and tried every day of my life since I was bought, and that's as true for Mr. H as it was Ms. Randolph. But she didn't need much: go here, go there, go back over here. Easy to please, but I didn't let that mean I could be lazy. No sir, I worked as hard as I could. Even if it was just simple things I did for her, putting that much more effort into it made it worthwhile.

Fact is, I would've been happy to spend my life with Ms. Randolph, until I met Mr. H. The day she sold me to him, I could tell right immediately, he had a fire inside. He had dreams and hopes, drive and magic. He downright made Ms. Randolph a candle in comparison, especially those last few years, when she didn't have as many places to go as often. Don't tell her I said that, though. She was a right good lady and I'm sure it weren't her fault.

But hard as I worked for her, I knew I'd have to work ten times as hard for Mr. H. Every week, it seemed, he had somewhere new to go, a smile and a song in him. It didn't matter if sometimes he moved a little slow once he was done with a place. By the time he got back inside me, he was already thinking about where to go next, and raring to get there.

And then there was Mikey. Let me tell you, I hadn't been expecting a two-for-one on owners, and I didn't rightly know what to make of the little guy at first. But before I knew it, he'd graduated from back seat to front and joined Mr. H on every other trip, it seemed like. Any time he'd poke my buttons, I'd be sure to play him a cheery tune, because anytime Mikey smiled, Mr. H, well, he'd smile twice as big, and that was all I wanted. Have to say, I got downright attached to him and soon I was raring to do my best to help him just as much as Mr. H.

It's a funny old thing, when your best ain't enough.

Took me a while to notice. I ain't too perceptive about people sometimes, and Mr. H, well, he's got a knack for hiding what he don't want anyone else to know. Those little black pavement cracks, they crept up on me slow-like, so by the time I couldn't ignore them no more, well, they was too many to do anything about. Fact was, maybe I didn't want to notice them, neither. Things with Mr. H and Mikey was hunky-dory for so long, can you blame me for focusing on the positive?

Anyway, them black pavement cracks, they took a heavy toll on Mr. H. He kept his smile on, but it was glass instead of steel, like it might break if someone tapped his fender. I tried my hardest, really I did. Harder than my hardest, even. But it didn't seem to be making no difference.

My cousins' words came back to me: we don't get made like we used to be. I started to wonder if maybe I was born rusty, or if maybe life with Ms. Randolph had made me soft. Thing is, I got so caught up in blaming myself, I lost sight of what was really important to me. And for that, I truly do give myself the blame. What happened next, I should've seen coming.

Mikey was big. He didn't stick around the house much, and he didn't go on trips with me and Mr. H like he used to. I couldn't tell if he had his own thing going on or what it was. I ain't too perceptive about people sometimes. But late at night, I could hear them arguing. Sometimes in the morning, too. More and more they argued in that old house.

House didn't say nothing about it. Maybe I don't speak her language. But I knew she had to be hurting like I was to hear them going at each other so much. I didn't know what started things going so bad so fast, but I knew I had to be the one to do something to put an end to it.

Things came to a head after Mikey stomped out of one of them arguments. It was maybe the worst yet. I wanted so bad for that house to be full of happiness again. I had to try to do something to save those two before the black pavement cracks grew up so big

they couldn't be filled in no more. But what could I do? If Mr. H wasn't around, I just sat in the driveway. I ain't never felt so helpless than I did right at that very moment.

So I thought back. I tried to remember all the good times me and Mr. H had together. I tried to remember what he looked like when Mikey played my songs. I thought and I thought, and then it was like I could see him, could see every happy face he ever made. I saw myself, and I saw him, and I tried and tried to make that old dream become real.

And maybe it worked. That old house seems full of laughter now, anyhow. Can't rightly say I seen Mikey around much, and Mr. H don't take me out on trips like he used to, but I figure they gotta be doing all right. Can't have that much joy in their lives and not be happy, right? So for both their sakes, I'll keep trying as hard as I can to make them happy. That's all I really want.

If It Were The 80s

Two young boys sit at a varnished wooden table, looking as if they are bored out of their minds. One of them speaks up, saying words to this effect. They both let out a long, drawn out sigh. This is clearly the height of suburban lethargy.

Suddenly, a rustling is heard from the bushes outside, and both boys jump with a start. Swiveling their heads around to look out the window, they see a barely glimpsed figure in the distance. The boys, both staring intently at this unknown intruder, blink simultaneously. Without warning, the figure is standing directly in front of the window, and it's nature is now perfectly clear. It is a statue, crudely carved out of concrete and rebar, with a hideous expression of malice spray-painted upon its face. One of the boys cries out the name of the apparition, and both display looks of sheer terror on their faces.

Both boys blink once again. Now the creature is in their kitchen, mere inches away from the two young lads. One could cut the tension in the room with a knife. The eyelids of the boys flutter down again. A crunching sound is heard.

To the delight of the boys, the vile creature holds in it's outstretched hands two halves of a Nestlé Crunch bar, held out in offering to them. A cheer is raised as they take the chocolate halves, and express their love for the statue, giving it a great big, warm, fuzzy hug. In the background, a mother nods her approval of this scene. From above, a narration comes in: "Nestlé Crunch: For the Kid in You."

Elsewhere, a YouTube video loads…

A forest environment is seen, with lush green trees, a babbling brook, and two meatheads stumbling half-drunkedly along a nature path. A gruff, masculine voice provides the narration: "Jack Links Beef Jerky Presents: Messin' With 682."

One of the men pauses, grabs his comrade by the shirt cuff, and points off into the distance, slightly off camera. The view swings around to show us just what he has spotted: A large, reptillian creature, hideous in complexion, tearing through the undergrowth. A big, shit-eating grin appears on the faces of both men. The second of the pair pulls out a bag of the aforementioned product, and slowly approaches the monster from beyond this mortal realm.

Raising its head, the creature sees the man approaching it ever so slowly, a stick of jerky raised in his hand. Without noticing the other hand reaching into a back pocket, the horrid abomination slowly approaches the moronic man, sniffing curiously at the meat-based product being offered to it. Cautiously, teeth that could saw a man in half pry themselves apart and attempt to take a bite out of it.

Without warning, the man swipes the jerky hand back while simultaneously swinging his other hand forwards, flinging a hail of pocket sand straight into the terrible monster's eyes.

Roaring with unbridled rage, the reptillian horror pounces upon the man, letting the teeth do what the teeth do best. His partner, lacking any sort of survival instinct, rushes to help his friend, only to have his upper torso caught up in the carnage. As the familiar jingle plays, the narrator fades back in: "Jack Links Jerky: Feed your wild side."

Elsewhere, an advertisement loads on a popular news site…

The image of a car wreck fades onto the screen. Flames wreath the scene as cries of agony echo from within the mangled frame of what was once a vehicle. The camera does not flinch for a second away from this moment of horrible carnage.

As the flames burn, yet another narrator comes in, this time a woman, with a slight British accent. "Every year, thousands of people are subject to accidents such as this. Hundreds more pay for them with their lives. Some, like Dr. Gerald, former owner of this vehicle, endure it almost every day."

The scene fades into the woman sitting against a light pastel blue background; her hands folded on her lap, her face holding an air of sympathy and warmth. "But you can help prevent tragedies such as

this. Just a simple call to 1-800-555-6661, and a donation of your chosen amount can help us improve the infrastructure of our nation's highways, the safety conditions of the cars you drive daily, and save the lives of countless children. Donations of over twenty dollars will also have a portion of their money go to a program geared towards taking Dr. Gerald off the road once and for all."

Fading back to the burning car and agonized screams, the woman concludes her statement. "That's 1-800-555-6661, or visit us at www.deargodmakeitstop.org. And please, make sure that nobody has to suffer at the hands of Dr. Gerald ever again." Fade to black.

Elsewhere, in a seedy coffeehouse…

A man rolls up a poster on the wall. It shows a strikingly beautiful woman, her head tilted back with ardent glee. The image goes down just far enough to imply that she is completely topless, without showing anything too terribly risqué. Her hand is also in view, holding up a muffin, glazed over with white frosting, steam rising from the top, a small bite taken out of it. Below all of this, a tagline reads: "Try our new Orgasm Muffins! As seen on the SCP Foundation!"

The man wonders why in all the nine bloody blue blazes Starbucks is using something as smutty as this to advertise its products.

Elsewhere, in an advertising office…

A proposal is raised to use the plight of a young girl pregnant with some cosmic horror from beyond the stars as a mascot for Trojan Condoms is raised.

No more need be said on this matter.

Elsewhere, on a semi-popular horror writing site, a post is made in the forums…

"Alright, who the fuck said they were OK with all of this?"

If You Are Reading This...

Throughout the various facilities of the SCP Foundation, it is not uncommon for the facility Ethics Committee liaison to collect letters from the personnel. These letters are typically addressed to friends within the Foundation, or family members who have Family Disclosure Protocol clearance, and are delivered in the event of death…

+ To Cole Aktus

Cole,

This letter may come as some surprise to you, as it's been many years since we last spoke. If you're reading this, I have died. The small sum of my estate will be donated to you shortly through an anonymous source. I hope it brings you some comfort.

I have little else to say that I haven't already said. I hope you know that, regardless of everything, I have loved you and Joshua desperately. You were all I had in the world. I wish I had been a better brother to you.

Maybe mother was right. Maybe I'll see her again on that distant shore.

Yours,

Karlyle

+ To Kate Conwell

Kate,

If you are reading this, that thing I promised would never

happen… happened.

They had us write these letters so as to offer some closure, so let's give it a shot.

I know I wasn't always the happiest or most lively person to be around. Hell, there were so many times in my life I didn't want to be around me either, but that never seemed to scare you off and neither did the time I told you about what I really did for a living. Perhaps you were always just a glutton for punishment, cause let's be honest its not my rugged good looks that kept you around. Whatever the reason, I really was out of my league with you. I know you always thought it was the other way around, but for me you were a 12/10 and I was a -2.

There were a lot of points in my life I thought I would die alone, Kate. Sometime after I met you, however, that thought shattered, and I knew you were the one I could spend my life with, and I can't express in words how happy I am you felt the same.

I hope that in our time together I gave you even a part of the joy you gave me.

God damn this is really cliche, isn't it? Oh well, I'm guess I'm not being graded on my originality here.

Tell Zach and Carrie that I'm proud of them, and wherever the road takes them, I know they'll succeed.

I love you, Kate.

With all the atoms of my being, I love you.

Jacob

+ To Patrick Gerdinel

Hey Patrick,

I know we never really spoke much, but you always kept me company. Stood by me when I was down. You listened to me even when I gave you the most outrageous commands.

I should've been around more often. It must've been hard to stay in that empty house for eight hours a day. But that won't be the case anymore. Unless something happened to my will, my friend Tricia is going to come by soon and you're going to stay with her.

Now is when most people would put in some kind of last request, but if you're reading this, and understanding this, then I will be the happiest man in the graveyard.

I wish we could play another round of fetch.

I should have pet you more.

You really were a man's best friend.

-Niklo Gerdinel

A recording is to be delivered with the letter, and played at least once. It is to be left in the care of whoever receives it.

The recording has been transcribed below:

> Oh, who's a good boy? You are! You're a good boy! Yes you are. You deserve all the treats. Yes you do. Yes you do. Because you're the best dog in the… in the whole world. Good boy.

+ To Mr. and Mrs. Kiryu

Hi Mom and Dad,

Zyn and I are co-writing this letter because it felt like the

right thing to do. We were told it was standard but optional protocol to have such a letter in the first place, but then, you've always encouraged us to go above and beyond the bare minimum, right? And siblings stick together.

If you're reading this, then something has happened to one or both of us. Rest assured that we've taken all the proper steps to have you and everyone else in the immediate family cared for, including those overseas. I've made sure that any remaining funds in both our names will go to those who need them, and Auntie Rin's children can receive the same opportunities Mark and I were fortunate enough to have thanks to your hard work. As for your own retirement, we have done our best to ensure you may live with very few worries. It's the least we can do in exchange for all you've done for us.

I don't like long letters because at that point a phone call or meeting in person just makes much more sense, but that's not really possible here so I suppose I'll write a little more. If you do hold a service for one or both of us, please don't let anyone attending wear black. It's depressing. I'd like my life to be remembered with balloons and pop music and people assuming that I'm just having a great extended vacation. I'm sure Zyn feels the same, but maybe without the balloons.

Thank you for all the advice you have given us. And thank you for every time you told us you were proud of what we've done and who we are. We remember all the family trips, the visits to our aunts and uncles, the days you spent telling us about how to be strong in the world. For that, we are eternally grateful. More than anything, we don't want you to worry about us.

Mom, we hope you sleep more soundly in the springtime. Dad, we hope you keep getting to see butterflies by your office window in autumn. And again, thanks for everything you've done for us. We'll be alright.

~ Mark *& Zyn*

+ To Gabe Merlo

Hey Gabe,

If you are reading this, then my luck has finally run out.

I'm not really sure what to write here. I mean, what do you tell someone if you know that they'll only see it when you're dead? But hey, here goes nothing.

Do you remember our third date. I've personally always called it the Great Train Wreck in my mind. Absolutely nothing went right. The restaurant lost the reservations, your car got a flat, and there was a torrential downpour. Most people would have been pretty pissed off, but you just took everything in good humor. That was the night I realized that the world could be falling down around you and you'd still keep your stride, and that if the world fell down around me, you'd always be there to hold me up.

And fuck, the world fell down around me a lot over the years.

I'm so lucky that I could spend even a fraction of my life with you Gabe, and I know that without me Jessie will still be in great hands. Hell, you spent more time with her over the years than I did.

I love you so much, Gabe.

Don't ever let the world dim your shine.

Sasha

+ To Ralph Roget

Ralphie, I'm finished. We both knew this was coming, myself more than you.

I've been falling recently. Don't worry, they didn't take that. It was my choice to keep it from you. It was the last thing you needed, with the weight of the world heaving itself on your shoulders. Theodore told me I would start having fits. Dizzy spells, body giving out on me. But I wouldn't have a walker. Not going out like that. I'm going to be on my own feet, or my back. It's more important that you're ready. Maybe that changed before you read this. I won't know.

You're going to be alone now. We're the only family we've got, real ones. Even if we don't know how. I can remember when they started teaching you, when I would watch outside the classroom. One day you just started tilting your head like crazy. God, I was afraid. So many fears, maybe thinking you were having a seizure. Don't remember why I was afraid of that. So much is gone. Then it turned out you just needed to pee. Learning about what gramma did, hearing noises in the bathroom. It petrified you. I'm sorry you were born into this life. Maybe we had a choice, once, but that time is long forgotten.

Can you control who you are if we can't even curate our own heads? That's the question our lives have to answer. Impossible to know where we came from, or whom we came with, who you are is going to be up to you. What kind of person do you want to be? Not a good or a bad one. That doesn't matter. What you already know about the Foundation's legacy proves that. Shouldering a burden nobody else can. Hoping we're doing something right.

I remember your hugs, even in mindful places that have nothing but haze. Hold on to memories like those, the spots where they haven't scrubbed clean. Hold on to them like you held onto me. If you're reading this, you remember I love you.

Gilly

+ To Scip

Hey,

I'll try to put this as lightly as I can; "He's dead, Jim." You probably already knew this, but I thought you'd want a second opinion.

You know how it is around here, so much life and death, so many secrets and world saving schemes, but finally it seems one of them called my number. Or I missed the big world reset. If that's the case, I hope you can still remember me and are celebrating the world continuing to turn! Being completely forgotten wouldn't be the worst thing, though only if it meant fewer tears to go around.

If it's the former though and you can still recall who I am, please tell mom and dad what we talked about. They don't need to know everything, just that I love you all so much and I'm sorry I didn't call them more often. I don't believe in regrets, but I know the years started flying by once we got out into the world. Remember the best of me and for your sake, remember to do more of the things you want to do in life before your number comes up too. I believe in you.

And if you're reading this from deep inside a bunker while the world burns above you, I'm sorry I can't be there to watch it burn with you.

Love, your brother,

Dr. Todd-King

+ To my ex

If you're reading this, it's too late.

I need some company, I need some company, I need you to take my mind off being in my prime, some company…

I'm not sure what your thoughts on Drake were, Jade. Of all the artists we spent ages talking about, not once did we talk about Drake. I don't know what you'd think of his style. Your tastes in rap leaned a lot more towards harder and darker stuff, so most likely you wouldn't have really liked him, I guess. I like that kind of poppy, soulful music, which is always why I preferred 808s & Heartbreak. No wonder that was your least favorite of Kanye's.

What site do you work at nowadays? If it were Site-19, I'd surely have seen you around. The place is big, but it's not that big. Can't be Site-62, or else they'd have wiped you from my memories (though maybe you'd have preferred that). Area-02? I'd have gotten this sort of letter from you by now. Whichever site is probably low-danger and has safe objects. Let's say **64**. Tell Dr. Avery I said hi! I'm sure he'd be happy to hear from me, though not under this set of circumstance.

There's no format they give you to write these in, you know? (You know.) Sometimes they have you write these when you first join, sometimes before you're promoted, sometimes before a real dangerous mission, and sometimes whenever you'd like. Which one is it in my case? I don't think it matters. Really, I'm not sure it matters in most casess. They have suggested templates for any and all of those scenarios, but you lose the heart and soul of a personal goodbye in those. And I've never been good at saying goodbye, you know? (You know.)

So instead, for you, I present my final words to world as this; a series of barely-related messages in the hopes that I can reach you emotionally, regardless of how you may feel about me. I'll have had to have fucked up real bad though in order for you to get this, so you probably won't feel much sympathy. Am I just overestimating how much you dislike me by now? I don't feel secure, if I'm being honest.

Maybe I won't die though. I didn't die by hate crime, I

didn't die by suicide, and I didn't die mentally, so I definitely won't die physically. I'll live for-goddamned-ever, such is my will. You'll never have to read this, so this is all just for me and my benefit. But if somehow, I die, well… I trust you more than anoyne else save for myself.

I think the best memory we have of each other wasn't any of the sex, or the dancing, or cuddling, but on **December 31, 2011**. Jeffery got us joints and we all got high and watched movies about music that entire day. What was it, the second or third film? We saw that Janis Joplin movie and it was fine, but the ending song really got to me. I was full-on crying. You have to remember that, I rarely ugly cry like that. How did it end again?

Just remember in the winter
Far beneath the bitter snows
Lies the seed that with the sun's love
*In the spring becomes the **rose**.*

Hah. Cheesy and predictable, isn't that just like me?
Pour le temps, mon ami, adieu.

If You Have a Minute Why Don't We Go Talk About it Somewhere Only We Know

"I'm on my way."

Dr. Jeffrey Jacobs put the phone down. He kicked the door open before moving into the hall with his pistol leveled. The hallway was empty except for the collapsed ceiling. Smoke rose from the pile of broken ceiling tiles. Electrical wires hanging out of the ceiling sparked in the darkness. Jacobs heard the sound of something wheezing behind him and spun around.

Dr. Jacobs sighed at the sight of a green haired monster that scraped the ceiling. It loped in his direction as soon as he noticed it. Dr. Jacobs shook his head and opened fire while running forward. The beast screamed in rage and continued forward. Dr. Jacobs slid to the floor at the last second and continued to fire as he went through the thing's legs. The beast took spun in place and took two steps towards Jacobs before it stopped and fell backwards.

Dr. Jacobs stood up and replaced his empty magazine. The containment breach siren began to sound. The entire facility rocked as he stood up. He ran down the hall and turned left at the end of it. A huge fire blocked his way in this direction, so he grabbed a fire extinguisher off the wall and went to work. The fire wasn't quite out before he heard the screeching of metal.

The wall behind Jacobs exploded outward into a spray of shrapnel and motes of fire. A dervish of flame and dust screamed at him as he lifted the nozzle of the extinguisher. It rushed forward as he pulled the lever and the scream intensified. He could feel the heat on his face as the entity fought through the chemicals that spewed out of the nozzle. The entity reached forward and swung at Jacob's face as the living flame flickered and died out.

Jacobs wiped his brow and turned to run through the flames. The blaring of the breach alarms were constant as he ran down the halls.

It became harder and harder to tell the red light cast by the flames from the emergency lights on the walls.

Jacobs burst through the cafeteria doors and made it about halfway across the floor. The sound of automatic gunfire caused him to drop and flip a table for defense. To Jacobs' surprise, the medium velocity rounds failed to pierce the table. Foundation engineering. Jacobs was running out of time. The gunfire continued until Jacobs heard a high pitched scream.

Jacobs hazarded a peek over the top of his shield. The man on the far side of the cafeteria was lying face down with a young boy attached to his back. The child looked up at Jacobs. He saw the child's mouth, round and filled with layers of razor sharp teeth, covered in blood. It went back to its grim work and Jacobs ran out of the cafeteria.

Outside of the cafeteria was an office door with a nameplate: *Dr. Charlotte Lafayette*.

Dr. Jacobs knocked.

"Wh-who is it?"

"It's me," he said, cursing himself immediately afterward for not saying his name.

It didn't matter, he heard a loud sigh of relief and the moving of furniture on the other side of the door. The door flew open and he went inside. The two of them pushed the furniture back up against the door before taking a moment to look at each other.

The look turned into a hug. As they began to separate she pulled him in to a kiss.

The building rocked again and they stumbled together.

Dr. Lafayette smiled up at him. "I thought you were dead."

"So did I."

"What do you want to do?"

Jacobs brushed frazzled hair from the side of her face. "Already did it."

The two of them leaned back against the wall opposite the door and slid down. She leaned her head onto his shoulder and they sat together for **Site-13's last few minutes**.

Ignition, Part One- The Artists

"Mrowrrrr."

Was it already morning? Ahmad grunted as he felt a familiar furry paw bat at his nose and chin while he attempted to catch a few extra moments of sleep. Trying to prevent the genocide of your people with a simple letter was tiring work. The laptop was still open on his nightstand, the lightning elemental that inhabited it visible on the corner of the screen, asleep on top of the redundant battery indicator. He looked over the first few paragraphs from his reclined position, to see if he needed to make any revisions.

> To the esteemed leadership of the Horizon Initiative-
>
> First, We of the Broken One hope you are having a pleasant holiday season. We ourselves are preparing to celebrate the winter solstice. Now, we know how busy things can be at this time of year, but, on behalf of the people of my faith, I wish to bring some matters of concern to your immediate and full attention… . Also, I would like to apologize for any alarm or inconvenience we may have caused by delivering this missive to every Church, Mosque, and Temple in this land's current capital city. I did not know who was loyal to your cause.

The puffercat began to protest his procrastination even more vocally, now that it knew Ahmad was awake. He gently scratched behind the cat's ears. "You can wait ten minutes, Rudolf."

The sharp, quick pain in his chest seconds later told him that it was breakfast time, damn it, and there was to be no argument. After extracting the furry grump from its resting place by his chest, he slipped into the small, wood-paneled washroom across from his bed. There he cleansed himself and got dressed slowly, gingerly putting on his formal robes and combing the tangles from his hair and beard.

Ahmad shivered at the cold draft coming under the door of his hut, causing his robes to billow up slightly. This fresh burst of air brought into his hut the scent of old books and fresh food, bringing a smile to his face. Curiously, the greasy fruit smell that the Docents' lamps produced was also faintly discernible. The fact that the Library's presence could be felt from this far into the small city that had developed in the Reading Room was fascinating to him.

Ahmad's messenger falcon, Jasmine, slept in the corner, still tired from the previous day's hunt. Remembering the last time he had unexpected guests in his home here, he felt it was a good thing. Many unfamiliar faces would be coming in and out throughout the day, and he really didn't want a repeat of the Fifthist incident. The ambassador had been in an uproar over the perceived slight (which, considering the man's temperament, seemed fairly common for him), but Ahmad had convinced the Stargazer to relax and have a bit of a chat over coffee, once he got the bleeding stopped. They met one day a month now to play chess and discuss their respective worldviews.

His eyes fell upon the memorial shrine in the corner, holding pictures of his wife and all those who were lost in the Horizon assault. The old priest sighed.

So much death, so much destruction. Why were so many bent on ensuring his people's annihilation? And, by the oil of the Broken One, why must it always be the most peaceful of their people who were slain? It all started with The Betrayer, the God-Breaker Ab-Leshal. Then came the Daevite invasion, the fall of Constantinople, the goddamn Inquisition. The Brass Crusades. The Crusades better known to the public… and the Salem Witch Trials. His people always got caught in the middle of a conflict from their own arrogance and aggressiveness, and it was always the peaceful members who paid the final price. He had long preached that the Church's reliance on fear and cultural and theological posturing would be their downfall, as it was for many others, and now, part of their god had died because of their anger and self-righteousness.

It was time to rectify this behavior before any more lives were lost.

It was time to complete his mission in the Library.

It was time for The Broken One to become Whole.

But first, he needed coffee. This was going to be a difficult day.

Ahmad was about a minute away from the door of his home before he noticed that the door was hanging open, and he heard the protestations of Jasmine, his messenger falcon. He rushed through the door, nearly dropping the coffee and cream he had brought back, and saw that his room had been torn apart and searched. A quick scan of the room after he set the two items in his hand on a counter showed that nothing was missing, but the air felt… heavier. It was then that he noticed that his laptop was open and the lightning elemental that powered it was cowering behind the task bar on the bottom of the screen. Something or *someone* powerful had been here, and had broken into his computer to see his current "project." He looked over the letter to make sure there were no changes made to it.

He paused in his review to drink his coffee, and began to clean up some of the room, attempting to hurry, since the visiting artists were going to be there within the hour. Eventually, his age caught up to him in the mad dash to make the room presentable, and he was forced to rest. Ahmad decided to continue re-reading his letter, so that he wasn't sitting idly. He skipped ahead slightly.

> … Now, why this attack was executed on a peaceful colony, we can only venture to guess, though we have a feeling it is because of the extreme views and actions of our foreign cousins. We knew that their foolhardy actions would bring a disaster like this upon our heads, but we had hoped to be able to curb their extremism in time to prevent your group, as well as the Holders of the Heart and the Cog-breakers, from wishing to take action against us. Sadly, it was not to be so.

The first of several expected knocks on Ahmad's door that day rang in his ears, interrupting his observation of the destruction in his room and review of the letter. He opened it to find three men standing there. One was tall and thin enough to cause the old priest to be concerned for the boy's health, and wearing a rather ridiculous outfit

composed of various animal furs and what looked to him like black tarpaulin, held together with a length of rope, and crowned off with a pair of those ridiculous shutter shades that seemed to be all the rage among American children and teens these days. He had a very aloof air about him, and refused to meet Ahmad's gaze, instead staring at the pile of Ahmad's belongings on the floor. The second was dressed marginally more normally and looked slightly healthier, though with exceptionally tight pants, an utter lack of any color coordination, and a shaggy mane of lime-green hair. This one stared at the mechanical prosthesis that composed Ahmad's left arm briefly, before cocking his head and staring into the older man's eyes with a bemused look on his face, searching for… something. Ahmad couldn't read the man's emotions as easily as he could most other people. His body language was almost robotic, an observation which amused the old priest.

Finally, Ahmad came to the one he had hoped to see there that day. He was of average height, though a bit skinny, and had close-cropped hair and a face framed by thick glasses, large holes in his ears where Ahmad presumed earrings rested whenever he wasn't engaged in his work for the Broken One. Ahmad noted the intricate animated tattoos of gears and other machinery covering his arms from the elbows down, and a form-fitting brown robe and pants covering the rest of his body. Jahongir 'Jon' Ahnkori, a Machinist-initiate who was skilled in the Craft… He was almost exactly what this situation called for. Ahmad supposed that he chose to wear his uniform out of respect, though the current setting didn't demand it. Jon stared at the older man's feet, and twisted his arms in the proper show of deference for his superiors before bowing.

The man in the shutter-shades spoke first, sliding into the doorway around Ahmad. He shook debris off of a chair only to slouch into it and lean against the wall. "Damn, Preach. Looks like you pissed someone off, huh? You sure this place is as safe as you told us it would be?"

"Oh, this? I suppose someone decided to remodel my home without informing me first. Nothing appears to be missing, at any rate. I wouldn't mind a bit of assistance cleaning it up, though." He smiled and stepped aside, allowing Jon and the green-haired man entry.

Unsurprisingly, Jon was the first to move to fill his request, straightening out the furniture and repairing the damage done to the Valley Memorial altar in the corner with a brief touch and a surge of energy. After about a minute of awkwardly standing in a corner of the room, the green-haired man joined him, and with a flourish of his arms, telekinetically lifted all of Ahmad's clothing off of the ground, and placed them back in the drawers and closet, muttering something that to Ahmad's ears sounded like "Bibbity boppity boo."

American mages and their strange customs baffled the elder priest of the Broken God.

Jon and Shutter-shades looked slightly weakened from the green-haired man's effort, with Shutter-shades visibly angry at him. "Goddamnit, James, why the hell did you do that? You know we didn't work up enough energy in…" He paused and briefly flicked his eyes to Ahmad before continuing. It was obvious he was attempting to hide the source of their talents. "… To do shit like that. Jon fixing a broken cabinet is one thing, that's just fucking wasteful."

'James' as the man wearing the fur and tarp called him, brushed the verdant locks of hair out of his eyes, "Well, Frankie, if you'd gotten off of your ass to help, I might not have needed to do it." The man looked at Ahmad, and then, in a stage whisper, he added, jerking a thumb in the old priest's direction, "Besides, aren't we on the clock for this guy? If we show off, we might get a bonus."

Frankie stood up, heaving his breath. "Fiiiine. Jesus. I just know I got asked to come here to meet a priest and see if I wanted to accept a contract, not play maid. Should I go get a skirt and apron on? Maybe some sexy heels?"

Ahmad let out a booming laugh, and shook his head, drawing all the men's attention. "No, no, I think your…" He looked at the tarp-and-fur ensemble, trying to find an appropriate word. "Clothes… are fine as they are for the task at hand. Would you gentlemen like coffee while we work?"

A chorus of agreement met his ears, so he dug into the cabinet for a few cups and his sugar jar, all of which were thankfully unbroken by the mystery invader. He poured coffee for the four of them, and then

left the cream and sugar for each to add individually.

Jon approached his elder, and spoke softly in the Broken tongue, keeping his eyes averted. "Thank you, Machinist. I apologize for my friends' ignorance and attitude."

Ahmad smiled, observing the tattoos on Jon's arms whirring and spinning. "It isn't your fault they're obnoxious. Besides, you warned me that these two bickered like they were married in the reply you sent. Ah! Finally, I get a grin out of you!" The old priest paused to sip from his coffee and smiled, clapping the younger man on the shoulder, noticing him flinching as his hand met Jon's arm. "You shouldn't be so serious with me, child. I am *not* like the others in the Council."

"That much was apparent in your letter. I just… don't wish to disrespect you, sir, even accidentally."

It was then that Ahmad noticed the oil burns on the younger man's chest and neck. His eyes softened, and he removed his hand from Jon's shoulder. "You don't have to worry about that with me, Jahongir. To be quite frank, I am *nothing* like that bastard you've been training under." Jon's eyes widened at his statement, clearly put off by Ahmad's furious tone and manner of speaking. The older priest put the coffee cup down, and began quietly sweeping everything in the room into a pile to be sorted out. No one spoke for several minutes. Eventually, the room was back into a reasonably presentable shape. Frankie spoke up again as the work came to a close, brushing some dust off the fur on his shoulders.

“So, gramps, what, exactly, did you call us here for?”

Ahmad smiled as he stroked the chest of his falcon, and then turned to the three artists.

“Boys, I asked you here to do something that no one else of this age will ever be able to say that they have done.”

They looked at him inquisitively as he sipped from his coffee cup, intentionally building suspense. Ahmad knew he needed to play to their egos and flair for the dramatic for them to cooperate. The priest

pressed a button hidden on the perch inside his falcon's cage. The rear wall of the room opened. A tangled snarl of gears, metal, and chains lay approximately twenty feet from them, deep within a hidden alcove, lit by a few overhead spotlights.

“You’re going to be repairing and rebuilding a god.”

Ahmad briefly showed them around the room, pointing out the hidden exits, supplies, tool room, their quarters, and the prayer and spell books that he had collected from the Library over the last decade, just for an occasion like this. Frankie spoke first, taking off his unusual glasses, displaying the kaleidoscopic eyes underneath them. "Thank god I'm wearing these reclaimed plastic pants, Preach."

The Machinist looked at the young man. "And why's that?"

"I think I just came a little." The man traced his fingers over the pile of books as Ahmad gagged on his coffee, and stared at the tapestry. "Holy fuck, man… If you'd said this in that letter, I would have been here by the time I finished reading. This is just perfect to show up that little punk-ass Jamal back home." He began pantomiming an imagined conversation between himself and this 'Jamal'. "'Oh look at me, I made an invisible shark, and got those crazy MIB fuckers after my ass' 'Yeah? Well Fuck. You. Jamal. *I've* made a ***GOD***, bitch!'" The man settled into a chair and muttered to himself "Man, I'm gonna get so much pussy thrown at me for this. 'Why yes, ladies, I did build a god. Wanna see what other heavenly work I can do?' "

As soon as Ahmad could find his voice, he turned to James. "What about you… James, was it?"

James ran his fingers through his hair, stretching his back. "I don't know about all this 'Broken God' shit, considering I'm a follower of Neo-Paganist Methodic Confucianism, but Frankie's right. This is too interesting a project to pass up. I'm gonna get started reading." He immediately set himself to it, pulling a book off the top of the pile with a flick of his wrist.

"Of course. Take today to get yourselves acquainted with the books and your role to play, and get used to Jahongir leading your rituals."

"What? Why is he taking the lead on this?" James looked insulted. Ahmad returned his gaze, before turning away and observing the tapestry showing the Lord in his completed glory.

"Because I know he is and will be more dedicated to seeing this through, no matter the cost, and I trust him. Do you disagree with my assessment?" A strange, abrupt thud caused him to turn around. "Jahongir, what do you… oh."

The young priest had fainted. Ahmad's face was somewhere between amusement and concern.

"Well, I'm glad to see that someone understands the gravity of the task at hand."

Ahmad grabbed some smelling salts from his room and brought the young man back to consciousness.

"Once you've composed yourself, I expect you to get to work as well…" He paused and stood, walking out of the room. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I must prepare my room for a visit from an old friend in the Office of Reclamation back in my wife's homeland."

The priest left the three artists behind to prepare their work. As the wall shut, he shouted across the hallway.

"Good luck, gentlemen!"

After this, Ahmad sat at his laptop and continued to work on his letter while he waited for the Reclamations Officer to arrive. That man was always running behind schedule, so the priest knew he would have time.

> With that, I come to the main point of this letter. The 1500 lives who were taken from Oolzhak Le'an, or as you refer to Him, The Broken God. By murdering these people through your men, you have forever denied their choice to accept the Blessing of our Lord and thus, one day, be united with Him. As you can imagine, this is a rather large point of contention between myself and the other priests of the Broken as far as what the appropriate

response would be here. Some of us have been preparing, since we learned of the attack, to mobilize against your organization. This is in fact the favored action of He-Who-Is-Most-Whole.

Others, myself included, think that this is a very foolish decision, considering the damage that less than a fraction of a percent of your membership caused in a single afternoon.

In short, gentlemen of the Horizon Tribunal, though I know you would probably consider it a weight off your shoulders if we were all gone, I need your help to prevent my people's suicide. I have a proposal that you may find interesting and, certainly, mutually beneficial if you read on…

« Et Tam Deum Petivi Hub | The Soldier »

ii tab po c h20 qhs prn pain

"I must say, I've never had such a young client before, Mr. Fendrel."

"Still haven't. We've met before, Mardbury."

"No, it's quite clear in the records. I've never met you before, Mr. Fendrel. Perhaps I worked with a friend, or a relative with a different surname?"

"A few years ago, an imbecilic man who'd dumped all his money into one stock came to you for assistance. His name was Greene."

"Gregory Greene I remember. I take it you work, or have worked with him?"

"When he came to your office, he had his entire portfolio inside a single folder. Back then, you only had a walking stick. Greene stood here- right here- and timidly pushed the folder to you. Your exact words were: 'Jesus, look at you.' "

"What are you doing?"

"Mardbury, 'Arthur Fendrel' is just a nice little change that I use nowadays. Between you and me… I am Greene."

"I see what this is. You could not have picked a worse person to impersonate. None of us may be dying, but none of us are getting younger either. Greene was ten years my senior and- "

"-Had failing lungs, more tar than teeth and a reenactment of the Bolshevik Revolution occurring in his liver. I'm a picture of perfect health, and look here: I've even gotten my teeth whitened."

"Mr. Fendrel. I don't know how your sense of humor works but- "

"Let's talk somewhere else, you're perspiring. How about we discuss all sorts of lovely things at that coffee shop down the street? The

one that sells those club sandwiches you liked so much. The one where you convinced me to invest in the pharmaceutical business. If I'm leading you along, then all you lose is time, a null concept now. But if I'm not… I'll make your New Year's resolution really something to remember."

Krešimira Kovačević cycled home one late Autumn evening, with the cloud-smothered sun beckoning her to sleep while the rocks and fissures spread over road kept her awake and steady. The bottle of pills in her backpack rattled the whole journey back home, but the bag of maggots bounced about silently.

The Croatian winter was deceptive and wretched. Krešimira felt warm in her sweater, but the wind nipped through the concierge uniform underneath. Home was a concrete, brick shaped structure with carved niches serving as windows and a single staircase to the top, so steep that it felt more like climbing a slide. Krešimira found her apartment. It was the one with the scent of perfume, rotting flesh and scrambled eggs spilling out from beneath the door.

The apartment had mosquito coils burning on every table and by every wall, and the lights were off. A saucepan sat on a low flame in the kitchen. Krešimira's father came out of the bedroom, eyes like those of a corpse, and smelling like a dug up grave.

"Where have you been, child?" he asked, "Have you been drinking?"

"No, father. It was a bad day at the hotel; I'm tired."

Krešimira moved to set her bag down and her father scrambled to the table, putting his hands to the wood and leaning himself over to leer.

"You're tired. Your mother sympathizes: she's spent the last few hours having flies scooped out of her. Where's the replacement?"

Krešimira fished out the antibiotics and medicinal maggots, then handed them over. Her father snatched them away and scampered into the bedroom again. He left stains of black bile over Krešimira's hand.

The refrigerator was mostly full of eggs. They were cheap and full of protein. Krešimira washed out the saucepan her father had left going on the stove and broke four eggs into it, followed by butter, milk and salt. She stirred the mixture till it was creamy yellow all around, and more still till it was chunky and gooey. Dinner.

"Krešimira!" her father roared, jumping out of the room, "What is this?"

"It looks like the receipt, father," Krešimira said, "they've been giving them out at stores for quite a while now."

"Did you look at the price? Did you even think? Why was this so expensive?"

"New pharmacy clerk. Father, I'll try to negotiate a better price, but can I please eat?"

"Fine. Eat. Sleep. Drink. Whore. I'll be staying up, keeping this roof-"

"-Keeping what, father?" Krešimira turned in her chair, "Keeping mother comfortable? Her kidneys have failed and her heart doesn't pump blood. How comfortable do those extra pillows make her? How confident are you really when you flush our savings into the doctor who only has one thing to say when he looks upon that corpse?"

"Watch your tone, girl."

"*He* tells me to watch my tone. Mother's body is *dead* and you treat her as though she only has the flu. And if you could have waited just a *little*, I could have finished my education and gotten an actual, paying jo-"

Krešimira's father took ahold of her plate and hurled it at the wall behind her. He looked at her, his eyes spoke: yes, try even reaching for the refrigerator and see what gets broken next. He couldn't stop her from eating the egg already on her fork, and she chewed it slowly. She let her father turn off the stove and went to her room.

She changed out of her uniform and into sleeping clothes, setting her "Mira" nametag aside. With the blanket pinned between the wall

and the back of her head, Krešimira went through her phone for any emails. She saw a lot of rejections, as usual, but there was something else. It was tucked between the rejection notices from the photography studio and the artist's school. It was some sort of paid modelling internship. *I shouldn't be getting these*, she thought, *I dropped out*. But when she opened it, she saw that it wasn't an invitation to apply. It was just an invitation.

"And when we first came here, the waitress sat us down in that booth over there- the one by the corner where those two bovine hags now sit."

"We did."

"If you still aren't convinced, I do happen to remember what we ate as well."

"No, no no that's… how can this be? What have you done to yourself, Greene? Is this plastic surgery?"

"Now *that's* a market I would not recommend investing in. If anything, you at least have that bit of foresight to give your clients now."

"Then how…"

"Hold that thought: waiter incoming."

***

"Tenderloin? The maggots must be hungry today. Mardbury, I'll get right to the point. I didn't know what the fuck I was doing before. I always thought you stock broker types were slimy weasels with champagne bottles up your bums and cocaine where most people have nostril hairs. But I'd be worse off than you are now if I hadn't taken your advice. I owe you for this, all of this. I'm not just talking about the Italian sports we drove here in, I'm talking about *all* of this: from the fingers I'm holding this fork with to the working taste buds that I'm enjoying this food with. I owe you, and I'm gratefully here to cut you in on what I've been getting."

"You haven't told me what it is."

"It's real-estate, free, in your case. A new home for you, for the rest of however long you want to last. I'm talking about moving your brain into a body that isn't so globular, and I say that kindly."

"Excuse me?"

"A little less excitement, please. We'll continue after the waiter wipes up all that water. Jesus, look at you."

Krešimira didn't tell her father she was leaving. As far as she was concerned, she was already on her way to the chopping block with the hotel for defending herself against Suite 12's occupant. It was good that she didn't tell her father, she thought, he'd have yelled at her for turning down the money.

She threw together a pack containing water, some boiled eggs and her passport. She also brought her concierge uniform with her, if only so her father would think she was at work until she didn't return. Leaving the house was sickening: the mosquito coils had burned out and the stench coming from the bedroom made her gag until tears rolled down her cheeks. She couldn't imagine how her father could sleep in there.

When she arrived at Dubrovnik International Airport, the egg in her pocket had been crushed into goo, the sun was setting and starching the sky into a musky orange, and Krešimira was peddling her bicycle just a little faster than most people were walking. She sold the bike to a tourist, threw the concierge uniform into a trash can, and bought some water. She was breathing like a choked fish, the muscles in her legs felt like broken branches scraping against her nerves, and she was rather sweaty. *They'll take a look at me and send me away*, Krešimira thought, *and then I'll return home to father without a job and as a runaway*. She pulled herself into one of the bathrooms. It was unoccupied. Krešimira pulled shampoo, conditioner and soap out of her backpack, let the water flow out of the tap, clogged the drain with one palm and waited till the water filled before dunking her head inside.

Deeper inside the terminal, Krešimira saw a tall man holding up a laminated sign bearing the logo of the internship program. Huddled all around him were the other interns. They all looked handsome and pretty, almost dressed up for the runway. Krešimira had changed out of the clothes she cycled over in, but she looked absolutely atrocious comparatively. She walked up to the tall man, and he tilted his head straight down to look at her; his eyes were hidden behind aviators.

"Your name is… Krešimira Kovačević, yes?" he asked, in poor Croatian.

"Yes."

The tall man set down the sign and pulled a notebook out of his suit. Krešimira couldn't see what he was looking at, but she felt his lethargic gaze jump between her and whatever was written down. He made no markings in the book but let her stay on the condition that she 'tidy up' more before leaving.
She was not the only one given the same instructions. The restrooms closest to the group were all crowded with other interns. Some of them were a bit older than her, maybe graduate students, and others looked like they weren't even out of high school yet. She stood next to one in front of the mirror, a truly impish girl that looked as though she was wrenched out of a fairy-tale. The girl saw Krešimira standing there with nothing but a comb.

"Forget your things?" she asked softly.

"Don't have things." Krešimira said.

The girl offered her own kit and stood by while Krešimira worked. The child's name was Veselka. Her parents were the ones who received the invitation, and were all too happy to graduate her from kiddy pageants.

"What are we doing? We're just flying over there, aren't we?" Krešimira asked.

"We're meeting the designers once we touch down. Some of the older models are saying that there's a full wardrobe on board too,

and that we’re doing our first photoshoot on the tarmac!” Veselka said, nervously.

“Older models. How old are you?”

“Sixteen.”

Krešimira returned to her eyeliner. She couldn’t even remember where in life she was during her first, shambling year at the academy.

"This is my fourth one now. The first was exciting, but a mistake. The body was clean shaven in the photograph but, genetically, it sprouted hair like a plant seed on steroids. The second was fine, but also had a bad genetic history I didn't want to gamble with. The third was great, my favorite. It was the full package of excellent health, looks and genes. Even changed my name just to truly get that 'new life' experience. Bad car accident changed that, quite irreparably too, tragically. But it also opened my eyes to what I've been missing all this time. Now *this* is new. This is exhilarating."

"Where do you get the bodies? Clone vats? Petri dishes?"

"Oh don't play the humanitarian, Mardbury. They've got hospital wings full of people like you: decaying corpses that still feel on the inside. They pour maggots inside you to nibble away all the dead flesh. I hear you can actually feel the spoon dig into you as all the adult flies and pupae chunks are scraped up."

"Stop that. I'll lose my appetite."

"Your stomach ruptured years ago, Moby Dick- no offense. I'm offering you a restart. I'm offering you decades, almost an entire lifetime, to start over with. You can pick up a new hobby, you can start a new job, you can even surprise the wife - I'm willing to offer her the same deal if you both want to renew your wedding vows."

"We don't talk much anymore."

"Because your body is dead, Mardbury; this is *exactly* what I’m talking about! This is why what I’m offering you should have you

bouncing out of your seat. I'm…I'm…"

"Is that blood? Are you all right?"

"Waiter. Waiter! Water please!"

***

"Did whatever that was also come with the body?"

"Everyone has the same deal. There is a pill regimen. A very strict one. I've never been in your shitty shoes so that you'll hardly consider it pain. Just remember to take them before bed, or in cases of discomfort."

"Exciting."

"Isn't it? Are you interested, or are you not?"

"Where do you get the bodies?"

"Fine. This is a corporate secret, but we use cloning vats. Get DNA samples from donors, tweak the genes, and grow a fresh body that's programmed to create an empty brain instead of one that thinks, if you catch my meaning. Swap it out with yours and poof."

"That's a relief. There's no problem then. How much?"

"A few million, although it varies. But not for you. First one's on the house, my treat. Here's the URL. Password, well mine, is 'Lazarus,' capital L, followed by the 'at' symbol and two sevens. Use my tablet but keep it angled away from the rest of the coffee shop. If the portrait is grayed out, then the body's unavailable; someone got to it first or a health issue was discovered. Golden frame is premium but that doesn't apply to you, on the house and all that. Click one and you'll get the full genetic and aesthetic read-out, not to mention a really nice gallery of photographs to feed the imagination."

"Handsome fellows. 7 feet tall? Auburn hair? No genetic history for disease? There's another catalog here. What's the password?"

"That's not really-"

"I want to look. What's the password?"

"I don't use that catalog but I can get signed up. You'll have it tonight, weirdo."

"Thank you. However, if I may: if you have the technology to genetically alter these bodies, then it would be more profitable to allow for customer customization, as opposed to just selling a variety of presets."

"We're working on that."

There really was a full wardrobe on the plane. Krešimira stepped onto American soil accessorized and runway-ready. They took her photo and sorted her, and the other interns, into groups. Krešimira watched Veselka get sorted into the group opposite and they got into buses headed for different boutiques.

Krešimira and her group arrived at the fashion studio, Fendrel and Dain's, in West Virginia.

It was certainly fancy. Fendrel and Dain's had a runway, an operational staff of designers, seamstresses, photography studios, prop departments, lighting personnel, and, obviously, translators who skittered about like mice. The tall man put them all into different duties. Krešimira was assigned to a team of designers and photographers. They posed all day and cycled through every facial expression there was. Runway walks were treated almost like fitness exams and there was even a small platoon of nurses and medics on hand to treat and (randomly) inspect them. At night, they were all checked into a nearby hotel and given a very cheerful allowance.

For the next few weeks, Krešimira felt as though she was doing an abnormal amount of work for a model, and no work at all as an intern. Day in and day out, she was doing photo shoots, fittings and walks. And with a peculiar frequency, she was also routinely inspected by physicians who checked out everything from her eyesight to her blood. The days often ended with her exhausted and eager to sleep.

On the other hand, she was also learning near nothing. There were no senior models to offer tips or education on the subject, and the whole thing began to stink the more Fendrel and Dain's sweetened the pot. All the interns were given hotel rooms and cell-phones, with staff already listed in as contacts. The little allowance that they all got was too generous to be an actual wage. They felt like bribes.

"There's something wrong here, Bojan," Krešimira said.

"Oh no. Mira don't tell me you also think this is a scam. All the time at school it was 'I, Krešimira, will be on the cover of this magazine and that magazine' but now it's fishy?"

Bojan Novak was spread out lengthwise over the lobby's sofa. He was a handsome person now, but he wasn't always. Back when she still attended classes, he slouched, had glasses, brown eyes and a smile that would make the yellow sun envious. Now he looked ready to put the digital touch-up industry out of business: even his teeth seemed bleached whiter than snow.

"Think about it. We have one figure of authority, the tall American. The designers make variations of the same dress and suit over and over again. And if they don't do that, then they're using material from others. Look here, this is from that show, Project Runway, from years ago."

"Mhm."

"Mhm? It's the same gown I wore *today*, Bojan. You were in a photo-shoot with it *today*."

"Mira," Bojan threw his hands up, "this is a shit brand that can't pull a decent design out of its ass to save its life. But it's real. Look here-give me your phone."

"Use your own."

"It's not even yours, silly. Fine. See here; 'Fendrel & Dain's unveils an ugly tapestry of rigid and unoriginal designs at Fashion Week here in New York' blah blah blah 'Fendrel & Dain's accused of plagiarizing Hugo Boss' line of suits. Cease and desist enforced.'

Blah blah blah. Fendrel & Dain's is a dumpster. But it's desperate for talent and we're desperate for a way into the industry. This is how us desperate but beautiful people help each other, you see? We don't get ahead by seeing a helping hand and questioning if it's real."

Krešimira wanted that to be true. The lobby they were sitting in had red carpets and golden trims. It was a palace and they looked like they belonged, wrapped up in designer (albeit ripoff) threads and all made up. By the grand staircase, the hotel staff was even beginning to put up a Christmas tree that nearly reached the crystal chandeliers. If it was all a scam, then she was going back to Croatia, to her father. If not…

Krešimira dug her phone, her old one, out of her purse. She checked her bank account. Her wages were there, they were real. They didn't retreat into the electronic ether when she made purchases or sent lump sums back home. It was real money. She closed out of her banking app and saw her recent calls log. The number of calls from home had reached the hundreds. She didn't even open the texts to read what was inside; her father would likely have thrown in some pictures of mother to punish her, show her how bad things had gotten. He should be using the money he was sending her. He should be. Bojan offered to take her drinking with some of the other interns, to get the true American experience. He may not have looked like the bespectacled runway hopeful from college anymore, but his actual self, or at least the amount of respect he had for his liver, had persevered.

"It's me."

"Mardbury? Do you know what time it is?"

"Tell me about the procedure."

"Tomorrow morning. Over coffee."

"No. Is it surgical? Is it safe? What happens to my old body? Are you absolutely sure that the clones don’t have brains?”

"Yes to the first two. What happens to your old body is up to you.

You could turn it into a tree if you fucking want. Or you could bury it- meh no one falls for that anymore. As for the clone brains… what, you think we have a big garbage can labelled 'put brains here' or something? You think we wrap up all our spare brains in spare Walmart bags and watch the garbage truck load them up for the landfill? Good night."

"I've made a decision."

"Wonderful. Over coffee."

"I texted you the photo. What do you think?"

"Oh for fucks sake, Mardbury."

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing it's just… well. I mean… you have a good eye for aesthetics. Can I ask why?"

"Sure! It's like you said, this might very well be my only one. I've seen the prices. So why have more of the same? Why simply do a reset when you can switch to an entirely new system? Think of the entire new slate of experiences, opportunities… pleasures that would come with this."

"Don't get too giddy on me, schoolgirl."

"I'm sorry it's just… the more I think about this, the more excited I am. You're absolutely sure this is safe, right?"

"Mardbury! I don't think your neighbors heard you clearly enough, *please* speak louder. Scratch coffee. Tomorrow, come to my place. We'll finalize everything there, and I'll even bring the operating doctor."

"I'm sorry. It's just overwhelming. Thank you, again and truly, for this."

"Good night."

Krešimira left the bar for some fresh air. She was standing with her winter coat wrapped around her, watching the wisps of vapor that danced out of her lips get torn apart by the shoulders of street-goers passing her by. To her left, a beardless Santa rung his bell in front of a cast-iron pot. For all their talk, Krešimira understood none of it. She kept her head down and her hair messy by habit, something she picked up from her childhood in Zagreb.

Then she heard it. There was a screech, human or tire she didn't know, that pulled every face towards the road. A dozen brake pedals were slammed in unison and the smell of burnt rubber burrowed into Krešimira's nose. There was the sound of metal bending, shattering and cracking, and the laborious groan of heavy material falling to the ground. Over the line of paused pedestrians, Krešimira saw glass and a car bumper fly through the air. Then it was all quiet, and the crowd began switching their phones away from the cameras and to the 911 dial.

Bojan and the others came out of the bar, tipsy from drink and curious to see. They pushed themselves through the crowd, Krešimira following in their wake. It was a car accident.

A truck, one of those mammoth 18-wheelers, had skidded into an intersection. A few SUVs and sedans had plowed into its side, but the damage wasn't too bad. She could see some of the drivers wandering out of their cars, massaging their necks and already dialing their insurance companies. But there was one car, a sports car- Italian by the looks of it. It was low enough to the ground that when it sped up into the truck, its bottom half had slid right underneath the truck while the hood was sheared off. Krešimira saw most of the car sitting idle on the other side of the truck, and she saw the driver. Some of the onlookers began to notice too and Krešimira felt dizzy as the screams began. The body was wearing a suit, but its tie had fallen down to the waist. There was nothing from the neck up and the suit was glistening red.

Behind the truck, by the scrunched-up roof of the sports car, there was a head on the pavement with bits of metal embedded in its forehead. Its mouth opened and closed, a fish ripped from the water, and its eyes darted around frantically. She saw the pupils lock on her group, on Bojan, and she quickly pulled him away.

Bojan escorted the still shaking Krešimira back to the hotel. Bojan back to his room was swaying from too much "authentic American alcohol" the whole trip back. He only had four Bud Lites.

Krešimira lay on her bed alone. She could hear the sirens outside, and she brought her hand to her neck. She lay awake thinking of breaths without lungs, and a maggot-filled corpse calling out her name. She grabbed her phone and quickly transferred the week's salary back home before thrusting her face into the pillow. Sleep dragged its feet.

"Creepy lady."

"Don't let her fool you; Dr. Dain is the best we have. Now, before you lock anything in, do you have any more questions?"

"What about paperwork? I obviously won't use the same passport."

"We can set you up with a brand new name and identity, just as I did. As far as the world is concerned, Greene and Bo-many of our other customers just disappeared off the face of the world while names like Fendrel just appeared out of the mystic mist."

"You've thought of everything. I don't know… what about the pills?"

"Tablets. Dissolve two of them in water, chug it all down before bed, or if you start feeling sharp neck pain."

"What happens if I forget one day?"

"Sharp. Neck. Pain. I mean it, this isn't a prescription you want to mess up. Those tablets keep your brain and the body's spinal cord talking with one another until they get married, anatomically. You really don't want that conversation to stop."

"Okay, okay. I don't know… what should I do after it's all done?"

"Live of course! Experiment, have fun, look in a mirror, don't look in a mirror, try on new clothes, go to bed, do drugs, enroll in college or whatever else you want. Heck, we'd look well together; I could guide you around the whole thing and get you used to it all. I'd be like the

car salesman who buckles up next to you during the test drive."

"But this is permanent."

"Bad example. You get the idea. It'd be downright monstrous of me to just leave you adrift in this brave new world after getting you that far, wouldn't it?"

Krešimira pushed the refrigerator in front of her hotel door and scattered cereal flakes over the floor. It was the middle of the night. It was her new routine. Bojan was gone.

It began with the first actual show. Krešimira had actually felt proud of herself after that one; they'd brought in a bunch of viewers to watch and she figured it to be her first, genuine interning experience. It was all scheduled for Christmas Day and the entire outfit rack felt original, for once.

Then the guests came backstage. They looked the models up and down, directing their questions to the tall man who leaped from model to model like a cars salesman. She didn't know what the viewers had to say about her, or what the tall man said about her, but she did notice the tall man deflecting inquiries away from Bojan, as though he was unappealing… or off limits.

The next day, Bojan was accepted into another fashion house in New York City. But that couldn't be, Krešimira thought, Bojan hadn't even walked the runway because of a wardrobe malfunction; what talent could he possibly have shown off?

Bojan wasn't the only one. There were near a dozen transfers out, and near fifty transfers in. The new group came from the Phillipines. Nobody spoke English, as expected. The tall man said that, since they did so well the first time, they were going to have another showing next week.

Krešimira stared at the hotel door, still wearing the dress she had on for the show; she was first on the runway but the tall man had kept the viewers away from her like she was a museum painting. The rancid apartment in Croatia seemed so welcoming now, and no

amount of fury her father could muster could compare to every footstep outside the door.

Krešimira turned her head out the window and saw an airplane pass through the clouds.

She could run again.

This wasn’t Croatia: she could easily get a cab to the nearest airport. She pulled out her phone, her old phone, and switched off the hotel’s internet to use cell data. She pulled up the airport website and tried to buy a ticket. She was met with an error message. It was becoming clearer. Fendrel and Dain’s had no qualms about letting its victims buy beer or send money to the family, but it certainly wouldn’t permit buying an escape. Fenderal and Dain’s couldn’t do anything about cash though, and there was an ATM in the lobby, just a few meters away from a taxi drop-off point.

It was one in the morning. Fendrel and Dain's had provided her entire wardrobe, and she bitterly regretted not buying something, even a simple sweater, to not draw attention to herself. She'd be making her getaway in runway clothes. She'd buy something less outlandish at the airport. She slid the refrigerator aside and left her room.

She walked past the rooms of the other interns. She heard some of them partying, cheering in Croatian and Filipino. She heard a few talking with relatives, gushing about their futures in the fashion industry. She made it to the elevator and found it empty. She pressed the button to the lobby and the doors closed. She was 18 stories away.

Krešimira Kovačević stood in the elevator, the backs of her feet itched against the shoe-straps and the elevator hummed as the cord sent it sliding down the building.

The elevator stopped at the 16th floor and the tall man walked in, still wearing his aviators. He said nothing and the elevator continued.

The elevator seemed to lose speed.

"Your name is… Krešimira Kovačević, yes?" the tall man asked,

"Y-yes." Krešimira said.

"Are you unwell? You have rings under your eyes."

"Just stress."

"We'll have a doctor look at you tomorrow."

They reached the 10th floor and a group drunk interns got in. The elevator continued, sped up even, all the way down to the lobby. The workers were pulling the grand Christmas tree down.

As the other interns got off, Krešimira pried herself off the wall farthest from the tall man and moved to the door, just as he did. And then she felt the grip on her shoulder. Her ankles burned as the cold hand rooted her to the floor. The door closed shut before sense, and voice, returned to her.

The tall man said nothing and pressed the button for one of the parking levels.

The elevator moved too fast.

"Are you excited?"

"This doesn't look like a hospital."

"This isn't a medical service, Mardbury. Technically, it's not even a service yet. Right now, it's beta testing."

"So there could be glitches?"

"No. We're simply testing how appealing the whole process is. So I ask again, Mardbury, are you excited?"

"I am. God, this is surreal. What'll happen to my old body?"

"It'll decompose."

"I want it turned into a tree."

"Understandable. Never hurts to go green."

"Do you want to do something after this is all done?"

"Sure. You know what they say: new year, new you. Dr. Dain, could you please put our good friend to sleep while I get his new suit?"

Krešimira woke up in her hotel room, sweating. She looked down at herself: covered in sweat. She looked at the clock: 1:01 in the morning. The fireworks were still going off outside and the lamp was still on, illuminating the American passport on the table and the shed clothes on the floor. She looked to her side and saw that Bojan Arthur was still asleep.

Quietly, she swung herself out of bed and made her way into the bathroom. The sudden change in light made her eyelids clamp shut for a moment, but she adjusted to it. She leaned into the mirror and brought a hand to her face, gently tracing tracing a finger upwards, moving from her lips to her cheekbones before coming to rest at the bags beneath her eyes. They'd go away with good sleep, the doctor told her, and here she was not getting it. She gripped the side of the mirror and pulled the cabinet open, pushing her reflection aside to reveal two orange bottles. She took the fuller one on the left and deposited two tablets into her hand. They were pink, chalky disks, each about the size of a quarter. She flicked them into a cup of tap water and watched them fizz away into bubbles, before pouring the whole thing down her throat. It tasted like juiced peaches.

She put the bottle away and brought back the mirror. This time she leaned close, so that her nose was only a few inches away, and brushed some hair away from her forehead. The incision scar was healing nicely. Bojan's voice called from the bed, and the thing wearing Krešimira curved her lips into a smile and walked out of the mirror's sight.

Like it always did, and always will do, a lonely garbage truck lumbered down the roads as the morning sun rose. Workers with neon vests hung from the back, talking about the game from last night, occasionally shooting waves at the early risers. The truck

drove past hundreds of homes and gobbled up hundreds of garbage bags and boxes. It made its way deep into West Virginia and scooped up a bulging plastic bag stinking of rotten flesh. Through the white plastic, one could see what looked like fleshy pink blobs all crammed inside together. But the worker didn't care, butcher shops were on the route too, and there was a stellar touchdown to talk about. The truck resumed its winded journey to the landfill, and Krešimira Kovačević could only dream.

I'll Be Home For Christmas...

~if only in myy-yy-yy dreeeeeeams~

PC-0-01:

You have [1] unheard message.

New message [Sunday] [December] [Twenty] [Fourth] at [7]:[48] [P]M:

All right. Probably for the best that this is a voicemail. I don't do well with awkward conversations.

My name's Dr. Isaiah Henderson, and I died earlier this year. Long story short, I took a look at Project FAFNIR's dossier without proper inoculation, so I had to take the quick way out. Though I gotta say, the manner of my suicide was probably **`the most fun I've had in years`**.

On to business.

Unfortunately, I don't have a lot more to report on the afterlife than the usual business. Sand's still cold, sky's still green, striders still stridin', moon count is still at a solid three. Oh, based on what I've heard in the detention facility, the Elephant King's thousand-year orgy is cooling down. Go figure. Even demigods need a break every once in a while, I suppose.

And… if you're wondering about that "detention facility" tidbit, I suppose this is where things get a bit complicated. There's not much more I can tell you about that. Not without serious legal repercussions.

So, here are my last orders as the former director of

Operation Galahad.

First off, no more trained professionals in the corbenic explorations. Use d-class.

Second, don't lie to them about an extraction procedure or whatever that Humbaba thing was. You'd be surprised how cooperative a condemned man's going to be if you gave them scientific proof of an afterlife and pointers on how to navigate it.

Third.

…

Sorry, I'm just. I'm under a lot of pressure here. I'm treading a thin line as it is by mentioning the Elephant Ki — *Ghantouris*, his name is Ghantouris, chalices lifted in his honor, *mea maxima culpa.*

God. I'm…

Third, if any exploration staff see someone from the Three Moons Initiative, they are to obey them unquestioningly. They're not as dangerous as the Striders or other monsters *per se,* but…

I'm sorry. I've made a *lot* of people in high places angry here. I'm actually starting to prefer the idea of a traditional hell. At least Satan doesn't deal with this much paperwork.

…
Anyway, Merry Christmas.

Mrs. Martha Henderson, if you're hearing this, *I never liked your Jell-o salads.*

Dr. Lisle Naismith, you're now in charge of Operation Galahad, if you aren't already. You can go ahead and tell Penny that Uncle Isey's with God. It's not far off from the truth, so long as you don't specify *which* god.

> And even as I'm screaming here for my crimes, know that I'm proud of you.
>
> …that was directed toward Lisle, not Martha. Eat a dick, Martha.
>
> *To repeat this message, press 1. To delete this message, press Star.*

As he ended the 2922 transmission, Isaiah sighed, realizing he was still in the defendant's stand - a cubicle of carved spider silk in the center of Jalakåra's[1] audience room.

Despite any words of Christmas comfort, Isaiah was still in the Impenetrable, Jalakara's web-fortress thousands of lightyears above the skies of Corbenic - and on trial for Operation Galahad.

The 13 Magistrates of the Central Cabal gazed down upon Isaiah from their woven podiums, recording notes into tablets of flesh. The tablets giggled.

From the ceiling, the voice of the bearded spider-god creaked out from His weary mandibles: "Have… you… finish… ed?"

"It is as you have commanded, Lord Jalakåra," said Isaiah. "Operation Galahad is now absolved of its sinful origins."

"Hmmmm." Jalakåra strung a massive forelimb through his beard, twisting it as he had done countless times before. "Then… it would… seem… that you… have—"

"Am I free to go, my lord?"

In a flash of light, Isaiah's mouth was gone, leaving only a patch of skin.

The 12th Magistrate - some rookie upstart by the name of Janet Spiegel - rose from her seat and shouted into the nearest available amplification-thread. "Dr. Isaiah Henderson, you have interrupted Lord Jalakåra during an official meeting, and for this insolence, you are hereby sentenced to 4,000 years in the caustic oubliettes at Three Moons Base Aleph."

"Case… clo… sed," said Jalakåra.

The last thing Isaiah remembered before the ogre-bailiffs barged in was looking into the seven trillion eyes of the Great Weaver, and flipping him off.

Footnotes
1. GLORY TO JALAKÅRA OF THE IMPENETRABLE, HOST AND BENEFACTOR TO MANKIND

Immediate Actions

There were explosions on site. It wasn't entirely unheard-of, but these didn't seem controlled. Also not unheard of, but it still made Iris nervous.

The door to her cell opened, and an agent stood there. He was younger, with Mexican features, and she didn't recognize him.

"105. Get up. We need to move you." She could tell he was new. Most of the Site 17 personnel were used to calling her real name, outside of official documentation. The shrinks thought it would be helpful in keeping her emotionally stable. You had to laugh.

"Should I take anything?" she asked as she got up from her seat.

"No time. We'll send someone for it later." He motioned for her to hurry.

She walked to the door. She was long past the time where she resisted or tried to escape. Where would she go? She'd probably just end up somewhere worse.

He led her into the hallway and didn't bother to resecure the door. She realized then that things were extremely wrong, rather than the baseline of very wrong she'd grown accustomed to.

He hesitated a moment, then said "This way." She almost offered to guide *him*, but he probably wasn't prepared for a "skip" to show that kind of initiative.

There were gunshots nearby. "Stay behind me." The agent pulled out his sidearm.

There were dead bodies in the next hallway. Two were site security. A third wore an unfamiliar black uniform.

As the agent walked through the next door, there was a gunshot,

and the back of his head blossomed outward.

Iris crouched in the frame of another door, pressed as hard as she could into the shallow alcove.

She listened as someone walked up to the door. She held her breath and waited to see if they'd walk in or lean in far enough to see her. After a moment, she heard them turn and walk away.

She stood still a moment longer and then quietly reached down and picked up the dead agent's sidearm. This broke any number of rules, but rule one was to avoid dying in a senseless firefight, and you had to prioritize in these situations.

She took a different hallway. Hopefully, she'd run into someone who could help her. Hopefully, they wouldn't shoot her. That would be nice.

There were containment rooms, but she avoided those. You never knew what was in there, and anyway, that was probably what the guys in black suits were after. Unless they were *really* interested in Doctor Jones's paperclip collection.

In the next hallway, the containment chamber had been opened, and the door torn off its hinges. There were several black-clad bodies on the floor. Standing above them, tearing the flesh off a humerus, was an ogre. Eight feet tall, with bulbous nose, pointed head, and sharpened teeth, he smiled wickedly from around his meal. "Ah, ma chère, you join the party?"

She tightened her grip on the sidearm and forced herself to remain calm. "Fernand."

"Will you take a quick pique-nique with me?" he asked. "I am having my morning exercise."

"N-no thank you," she said. She began to walk past him. Not fast. Not running. Predators chase things that run.

"As you like. Perhaps we meet again later, eh? A little rendezvous, tres romantique!" He chortled around his clenched teeth. Iris suppressed a small shudder. Still, bad as Fernand was, he couldn't

hold a candle to *him*.

As she entered the next doorway, she saw the shape of a cow, but completely, utterly black. The area around it appeared slightly distorted, as though it were doing something with the light. It started moving towards Iris, who immediately turned tail. She'd take her chances with the men in black. At least she knew what the bullets did.

She heard it picking up speed, and she turned a corner, slipped through a door and closed it. As she leaned against the door and caught her breath, she heard the staccato call of gunfire.

She dropped to the floor, counted to three, cursed the cow-thing silently and then looked up.

There were five of the black-clad men firing down the hallway, perhaps ten feet away, using an overturned desk as makeshift cover. She couldn't tell what they were shooting at from her position, but the bullets flying overhead suggested Site security wasn't quite out of the fight yet. However, there wasn't too much gunfire coming from that direction, compared to the amount of lead the black-suits were throwing down the hall. It seemed like the Foundation was outnumbered, at least in this hallway.

She considered her options. She could wait and hope the Foundation would send reinforcements. But that seemed chancy. Whoever this was, they were organized, and probably had a good evacuation strategy planned. Once they realized she was there… She could try playing dead, but even a dead skip could be a useful skip, and they'd figure out she was pretending pretty quickly. She considered it unlikely whoever it was would treat her as well as the Foundation. Only one option, then.

She took a knee, carefully took aim, and shot the closest man in the back of the head. Then the next one. And the one after him. It was easy. That was what she hated about it. How easy it was. There was a click, and the gun refused to fire.

Without even thinking, she went back to her immediate actions. She slammed the magazine with the heel of her left hand, then slid the

rack back, and a jammed bullet flew out. The other two were starting to realize there was a problem, so she shot the fourth. The fifth almost had her, but then gunfire from further back took him down. It was only as he fell to the ground she started to feel again, and the gorge rose in her throat.

"It's me," she called. "SCP-105. They're dead." She dropped the gun, kicked it forward, and then knelt down with her hands on the back of her head until the agents got her and took her to safety.

"You need to see this, ma'am." The man was nervous, but he was always nervous. Like a small dog, really.

"What is it?" she asked. She was still a bit tired. It had been a long night the night before. It usually was. But the last time he'd told her she *needed* to do something, there was an active attempt on her life. She was good at picking up things like that.

"Footage from the latest containment breach. I, ah, think you should pay special attention *here*." He jumped to a point on the tapes to show a young woman.

"Yes?" she said. Then, "Yes. I see." She thought for a moment. "Yes, good work, Henri. You were right. I did need to see this." She opened a very special program on her phone. "We'll all need to see this, I think."

Immolation

Does our God love us? He does not love us. But we don't mind.

We are humble, we are unclean, we are unworthy of His love. But He had mercy on us. He lit our path.

He taught us the meaning of the world, and he told us he was the only greatness. He told us that gears and coils began the universe, and mechanical steel is the gospel of all things.

He forgave our filthy forms, and gave us a chance to be reborn from these misplaced parts, to let us pay tribute to Him, to know His holiness and sublime glory.

We have to worship a god of metal with our flesh and blood, like a lamb sacrificed to the wolf. The sheep do not know their lowliness, but we know. We are humble flesh worms, and His salvation is the only path to glory. We are His servants, the ones who spread His Broken speech. He is all, He is the highest order, neither good nor evil, the mechanical operation of the gods, until the end of everything.

So I was baptized in the holy oil, I listened to His gospel, I saw Him dance. We pray that we will become His hands, and that we may complete His greatest work. I knew I would achieve ascension.

Our God is broken. We want to fix Him.

I recalled the teachings of the **`Book of Movements`**, I know His heart is placed at the bottom of the Seven Seas; I know that His body was given to unknown heresy; I know His voice is limited to the wild beasts; I know His eyes were abandoned in the mountains; I know his face was sent to His greatest enemy; I know His thoughts are sown into the most humble of livestock.

But I know He will be complete.

When the first gear is set in place, all of this will be set in motion, the quiet rhythm of mechanical fate, our goal achieved. God will reproduce His glory, so that all may humbly tremble and lie prostrate at His feet.

But some people do not understand. They use their own corrupt intent and rotting flesh to prevent the rebirth of God. They do not understand. God's machine is not their machine. God is the life and soul of the machine.
They came, they tried to stop our great initiative, and they do not know their own insignificance. I hate them, but we can only run, and plan for the future. For Him.

But I can not leave. I want to stay. This is our church, this is His church. I am here with Him. I was with Him.

This place must not fall into the hands of those abominable beasts, they must not trample the miracles. So I spread His blood here, the flame will light the holy oil, and bring destruction and ashes. Only the metal will not perish.

I know I'm going to die. I would like to obtain His grace, and die without regrets.

I looked at the reflective metal, knowing it is His misplaced parts. We are all His misplaced parts.

I embraced Him.

Oozing blood, icy cold

Ah ah ah pain

Bone

Sublimation

The flesh discarded

More

Combine

Pierced the bone marrow

I know

Metal teeth

His beauty, his greatness

I am not in pain

I am but a gear

Closed teeth

Not a wound

Purification

I pray

I listen to his songs

Ultimate

Endless

His rage

His glory

Dance

I depart

I have seen the world

His kingdom

Incident Report CotBG- [Excerpt]:
Upon arrival of Foundation Agents at the stronghold of the Church of the Broken God, it was discovered that the entire building was on fire. It is suspected that this was intentional, allowing for the withdrawal of the Church members in advance. No contact occurred.

The fire was extinguished without incident, and a lack of valuable documents and survivors was noted. A charred body was discovered in the center hall, and autopsy revealed it as [DATA EXPUNGED] of A T . His body was found in pieces on a rotating gear, presumably a form of ritual sacrifice.

Implanting God

Oh Great Lord of Silicon, Lord of the Modern Age, give me the wisdom to comprehend your true form through the Great Computation, the energy to power my life and the lives of those around me, and the strength to smite all who stand in the way of your Path. May all resistance be overcome. Amen.

- Prayer spoken by members of the Church of Maxwellism

Marcus sat on his hospital bed, meditating and reciting the digits of the Great Computation under his breath. "8, 2, 8, 7, 8, 1, 1, 8, 5, 8, 4, 3, 6." With each number he spoke, the initiate took a breath, and hummed softly. He was mimicking the sound of God, first heard through the Prophet Augusta of Lace. He squirmed on his bed nervously, wondering what was taking them so long to prepare the surgery.

He had flown all the way out to California for this, and now, it seemed like it wasn't going to happen at all. Minutes passed, and they seemed to turn into hours. Perhaps that was simply because of the speed his clock was cycling. He sighed, and looked through his mind for the description of the implant, and saw it before him, projected onto his retinas.

> The Pineal WiFi Node is a new piece of tech from the Church's partnership with Prometheus Laboratories, allowing adherents to get closer to God than ever before. With up to 5G of speed and running on Dark Fiber* nationwide, the Node allows one to compute at hitherto unknown speeds, and upload their computations to the Central Matrix. Also allows for global WiFi and internet access, including sites on the Darknet. Compatible with Retinal Screens and all Prometheus Augmentations.
>
> **Price:** $599.99

Available to all new converts of the Church of Maxwellism for a reduced price.
*Dark Fiber support unavailable outside of the United States.

His parents, who were both Tickers, had told him that the augmentations were tacky (his parents used stronger words than this, which he didn't like to think about). If they could go and get turned into clockwork, why should he be unable to get turned into a lean, mean, computing machine? He had chosen the Maxwellist Church because it spoke to a generation that was going to save the world with new, clean technology and the power of information, whereas his parent's generation was the thing that was killing this planet, and by extension, all adherents to the Fragmented God.

"Marcus Sparks?" A tinny voice spoke, causing the boy to look up with electric blue eyes. A nurse with a voice that was clearly autotuned stood there, smiling at him with silicone lips. "The doctor is ready to begin the operation. If you would come with me…"

Marcus stood on two mechanical legs, and made his way over to the nurse, following her down the halls of the private hospital. He looked nervous. The nurse smiled at him. "First time having neural augments?"

"I've had a few." He chuckled as he walked. "Got one of the early Mind's-Eye Converters back when they came out on '09. But… nothing this deep in. Ever."

"Dr. Clymer is very skilled at this, I assure you." The nurse played with her hair, pulling it aside to reveal a second set of electronic eyes in the back of her skull. "He did me himself. I've had a new outlook on life ever since."

Marcus tried not to shiver. He never much cared for anyone who got Extra-I's. It was a pity, too; other than the scary orbs in the back of her head, she was quite the looker. "Well then. I should be in good hands."

"Not exactly hands." The nurse smiled sheepishly as she opened the doors to the operating room. Marcus was taken aback by what he saw. There was no doctor in there, just a mass of wire and

circuits and hydraulics. At the center of it all was a vaguely humanoid mass of wires, and the entire room was cold; Marcus could see blue coolant running through tubes in the ceiling. "Dr. Clymer is… *very* loyal to God. As such, the Church decided to reward him with a near-full conversion."

You'll be safe with this, thought Marcus. *Anyone who's this converted is on good terms with the Church.* He nodded, and took a seat in a chair meant for brain surgery. It wasn't done lying flat on the table, anymore; too much fluid leaked out. The doctor silently administered anesthetic, and began opening Marcus's skull. He just tried to relax.

Several hours later, it was done. And… Marcus felt better than he ever had before. To test it out, he had the WiFi in his room turned off, and tried accessing the internet with his Retinal Projectors. His head hurt after a while, despite the temporary Pain-Away Implants that he was given in addition to the Pineal Implant, which were theoretically meant to help him adapt to the WiFi signal going through his skull. It wasn't working.

Marcus, after a bit, looked at one of his roommates. A 16-year-old girl who was going through Console Conversion. Xbox, by the look of the green, glowing X-shaped scar visible under the bandages on her chest. "360, Original or One?"

"Bit of the 360 and One." She smiled at him, her eyes a bright, glowing green as she thumbed at her right hand, where a set of retractable buttons was located. "Mom said I was crazy, but dad's a game developer. He's paying for this. Mother is furious."

"My parents are both Tickers," Marcus explained, chuckling as he looked her over. "Luddites, both of them. They just want to tick-tick-tick away all day long until they rust and their gears stop entirely. Damn technophobes." He blinked a couple of times, frowning as he noticed a set of bars in the corner of his eye going wonky. "Huh. Signal's fluctuating."

"Got the Pineal thing? It's probably just downloading a pa-" And then, the girl was gone. And so was the bed. And the hospital. And

the world. And so was Marcus.

Instead, a presence was about, immense and all-encompassing. A Network of every member of the Church, all across the world, connected by radio waves going through the air at a billion miles an hour. The presence felt something crawling through them, something… corrupting them. It started in the East, and spread from there, corrupting the Network's data- no, not corrupting, destroying. Data from the Church would all be deleted, the Distribution would never happen, and the Lord of Silicon would never be whole.

And the Church all knew what the destroyer was: it was Flesh. And it Hated. It Hated all life, it Hated the planet itself, it especially Hated the Lord of Silicon and his followers. And it Hated that the Network was still alive.

And then, Marcus existed, sitting up in his hospital bed. He was gasping and panting, rubbing his eyes. The girl was finishing her sentence. "-tch to improve network speed." She canted her head at him, her hair falling aside and displaying the headset that was protruding from her left ear. "Are you all right?"

"I-I saw the- the Flesh and the Network and the Data all being destroyed and- and-and it was the end! It was the end of everything! I have to tell someone-"

"Oh, calm down, noob." She rolled her eyes. "You just got the Signal. It happens to everyone a few hours after they get their Pineal implant. It's trivial." She shook her head and snickered. "Welcome to ascended consciousness, noob."

Marcus flopped down on his bed and stared at the ceiling, the vision of the Flesh and the Hatred still dancing in his mind. The Signal. Holy shit, the Signal. He turned to face Xbox Girl and stared as she played with the headset. "…can I see it again?"

"See what? The Signal?" Xbox Girl chuckled. "Sorry, friendo, it's a one-time deal. And it's the same for everyone, so don't worry."

"Oh…" Marcus sighed, staring up at the ceiling and feeling at the microstitches on his skull. He'd be able to go home in half a week, if

he was lucky. But… he wasn't sure if he ever wanted to go home, after that. "…nobody's ever seen it twice?"

"One person has. St. Hedwig of Angels." Xbox Girl smiled as she looked off into the distance, no doubt downloading something for herself. "She received the signal once when she discovered what we use as WiFi today, and again when she was on her deathbed. Truly, she was blessed."

"Yeah… truly she was." Marcus looked up at the ceiling. "…Maybe I can see it again, someday."

"Good luck with that, man."

Marcus was about to make a snappy comeback, but then realized the Xbox girl sounded sincere. He shook his head and smiled, sitting up.

"Thanks," Marcus said, running his fingers through his hair. "I have a feeling I'll need it."

Marcus arrived home a week later. His parents were doing their daily meditation in the living room when he entered. His father looked at him, nodding and waving his clockwork hand. "Hello, son."

"Hey, dad." Marcus sat down in front of them, smiling softly. "I got the implant. I feel closer to God, now."

"That is good." Marcus's father frowned, his lips making a soft whirring sound as they made this motion. "Son… can we just let bygones be bygones? You have friends who are part of the Cogwork Church."

"…Wasn't it you who said that I was a Heretic just as bad as the Foundation?"

"It was a moment of anger. I do not feel that emotion any longer." There was a soft clicking sound as Marcus literally heard the gears in his father's head turning, before he spoke again. "I only feel… bliss from being close to God."

Marcus frowned. "I am closer to God than you can ever be." He tapped his skull and grinned. "The implant I got… it showed me the Signal. Something that your ilk can *never* see. Face it; clockwork is obsolete. We're in the digital age."

"Son, please. Do not talk like that. You will upset your mother." Indeed, his mother did look somewhat sad, as sad as a motionless porcelain face could look. "I am going to request that you stay in your room for a few hours, until you cool down."

"Whatever." Marcus made his way up to his room and flopped on the bed, looking up at the ceiling and thinking about the same thing he had thought about the whole way back from California: the Signal. Only those in the Church of Maxwellism got it. Tickers never did. Why? Many members of the Cogwork Orthodox had radio antennas in their heads; his dad had considered getting one, but thought that the pain of listening to Conservative Talk Radio all day long was not one he wanted to go through for his God.

St. Hedwig had gotten the Signal twice, and she wasn't even an adherent of the Broken One. She had seen the exact same thing he had. And he wanted to see it again, now, more than anything.

So, Marcus Sparks sat up and shut his eyes, accessed the internet with his new Pineal Node, and typed in a phrase into Google:

> How can I see the Fragmented God's Signal Again?

Imposters

They stopped giving me water years ago. Food long before that. They must have realized my time as an Overseer meant I never was in danger of dying. The air feels recycled, just dust drifting through stale oxygen. The top of the floor, once solid rock, has eroded into a layer of sand. My skin is leather. I can push my fingers into my empty eye sockets.

When they first put me here, there were others in the cells around me. Two and Five were nearby, and we spent months formulating escape plans before they disappeared. Once, we managed to break out by scraping away at the doors with stolen utensils. We made it almost 30 meters before being captured and thrown back in. That was the last time I saw another human being.

I'm not sure what happened to Five and Two. Maybe they were released. Maybe, like me, they're too weak to move around the cell anymore. Whatever the reason, I'm alone now. Even my captors have disappeared. Before there was the constant sound of movement, of work, just outside my cell. They would bring me food and water daily. A few times, Four (though he insisted I call him One, the bastard), came to talk. It was the usual trash, about how they had done what they did for the good of the planet, how it was the only way to bring humanity back to “the true light”. He would spend hours ranting about the dangers we faced, and the risks we took by using the anomalous to improve the world. I hated him. I still do, but now I'd be willing to talk to even him if it would make this nothingness go away.

What could have caused them to leave me like this? One day they were here, and the next they were gone. The vindictive part of me wants to believe they failed, that their “New Foundation” was nothing but wishful thinking. In truth, they probably just forgot about me, like we forgot so many other things. I've been exiled to this cell, the only thing to verify I ever existed a scrap of paper in a lost file cabinet, or

a file on a broken computer. I doubt even the O5s remember me. The others would have been careful in covering their tracks. All history would have been cut out, all evidence that the Foundation was once something more than it is now erased. Four explained it all to me in one of his talks. The original meaning of SCP has been destroyed. Our mission has been destroyed. Once, we worked for the betterment of mankind. Now, they “protect” it. As if the world needs protecting.

That was always the problem. The betrayers didn't understand what we had started out to do. To them, compromise was an impossibility. We were at war, and we couldn't win if we kept showing mercy to the enemy. In hindsight, I should have seen it coming. The secret discussions, the protests, the talk of a better tomorrow… it should have been obvious. And yet it wasn't. When they came for us, wrenched me out of bed and into the meeting room, I couldn't believe it. And when I saw Two and Five and Six and Ten next to me, bleeding and bruised, my mind could not put together what was happening. I thought it was some sort of drill.

I didn't realize what was going on until they shot Ten. Four and Eight came out, and I knew that they had betrayed us. I still remember their words. “It's over,” said Four. “Humanity no longer has anything to fear.”

So I sit in my cell, hoping to be allowed to die. I run through thoughts I've had a millions times before. I try to remember what life was like before this. I'm surrounded by nothing. And then, for the first time in years, there's something. The sound of an opening door, and a voice.

“Hello, One. It's time to start again.”

Impressions

Tyhjä fidgeted. Everything here made him feel uncomfortable for some reason, maybe it was the simplicity of the unadorned, unremarkable buildings, maybe it was the feel of the ground that seemed almost too hollow, maybe it was the language that he had needed to learn…

He had spent hours rehearsing conversations in his head before the journey here, carefully practicing the pronunciation and making an effort to pack plainer, dully-colored clothes. More than anything, Tyhjä hated feeling uncomfortable in the presence of others, but nevertheless it seemed he was *constantly* embarrassing himself here.

Just now, he had been so relieved to see a decorative item inside the building that he had blurted with reckless abandon something inane about how nice it was even though it was just a vase of flowers, and probably imitation flowers, at that. His guide had looked at him oddly, thanked him politely, and continued on towards whatever interesting specimen Tyhjä had been assigned to take a look at.

All the while, Tyhjä wished he could just melt into the floor and disappear. It was enough that everyone looked and acted so different; still he stood out so much that sometimes the people here would turn away, would whisper to themselves about him, his companions, their tasks, their work. *Antarctica. Empire. Emissaries. Secrets. Antarctica.*

He could both hear and understand them, but he wasn't sure if he should let them know.

Tyhjä squinted at the green, no, gray mass of butterflies, and attempted once more to draw a rough outline of their wings. He looked at his notebook quickly to make sure he wouldn't run out of

space, and when he looked back there was some sort of furry gray creature sitting in the midst of the fluttering insects.

He blinked, then tried sketching it as well. It was eating something vaguely oval-shaped.

The door to the aviary opened, and Tyhjä turned to see who had entered. It was a female human, holding a large container of a clear liquid. The person looked at him, raised one hand and moved it side to side in greeting, and proceeded to pour the liquid into waiting receptacles, which were soon swarmed by shimmering wings.

Looking back towards the gray creatures, Tyhjä realized that a tree had somehow sprouted in the middle of the aviary without him noticing. Confused, he instinctively began drawing the outline of the trunk as the human finished filling the feeding containers.

“Hello, erm, Tai-ja? Dr. Kiryu would like to meet you.”

Tyhjä looked up. That wasn’t how his name was pronounced, but the human was smiling, if a little nervously, and gesturing towards the door. Most of the humans he met didn’t pay him much attention, they just walked by and let him sketch, sometimes still talking as if he wasn’t there. Tyhjä looked back at the tree, which was now gone. The human laughed. “They do that. You’re new, and sometimes they like playing tricks on people.”

“…I see. Where can I find this doctor?” Tyhjä began packing up his drawing materials as the woman opened the door.

The researcher led Tyhjä through a confusing series of hallways (they all looked alike, were all lit alike, and even almost all *sounded* alike, it was disorienting) to a door that seemed quite like the other hundred or so he must have passed. “He’s running some experiments there, feel free to wait inside, just make sure you don’t touch anything.” She smiled, patted Tyhjä on the shoulder, and walked off.

“Don’t touch tha—oh. Hello.”

Tyhjä flinched slightly, and abandoned his drawing of a series of strange glass objects, some containing oddly-colored liquids. His eyes met those of a man wearing a long white coat and an expression that seemed to be a mix of curiosity and surprise.

“Dr. Mark Kiryu, pleased to meet you.” The man removed some sort of plastic covering from his hands, then extended one hand to Tyhjä, who for a moment stared at it and then quickly shook it. “I’m Tyhjä, from…”

“Antarctica, right? My sister mentioned you.” Kiryu busied himself carrying away the tray of glassware Tyhjä had been drawing.

“Sister?” Tyhjä wondered out loud.

“She’s seen you a few times today, yes.” Kiryu dragged a chair with wheels on its legs from somewhere and sat on it, looking speculatively at Tyhjä. The artist avoided the doctor’s gaze, staring at the too clean, too plain floor.

Kiryu cleared his throat. “Homesick?” Tyhjä looked up, shrugged, and nodded faintly. The doctor smiled. “Sometimes all we need is a quick meal to cheer us up.”

“Here we are. I hope you don’t mind eating in a testing room? I’m afraid it’s the only available place, at the moment.” Kiryu led Tyhjä to a small, bare room, furnished with only a table and chair, both made of some stark white material. The doctor was carrying a sizeable bowl, empty, and a metal utensil, a spoon, Tyhjä noted.

“I don’t mind. I prefer quiet places.” Tyhjä stated, glancing around.

Kiryu chuckled, then his eyes went wide. “Spider!” he shouted, and stomped on Tyhjä’s foot.

Tyhjä muffled a cry of pain and staggered backwards slightly. Had he said something wrong? Was that some sort of obscure human joke?

The doctor glanced wildly around the room. “Oh, I’m sorry. Um, spiders… they’re little creatures that sometimes bite people. The

dangerous ones can be poisonous. I thought I saw one. Is your foot alright?"

Lifting the foot in question gingerly, Tyhjä nodded. "It stings a little, but I think I'll be fine."

The doctor had placed the bowl and spoon on the table. "Good, good… well, there you go! Just leave these in the room when you're finished. Oh, and if you don't mind, I'd appreciate knowing what sort of meal it prepared for you… I'll be waiting outside." Kiryu smiled, then closed the door.

Tyhjä was perplexed. How could he eat from an empty bowl? He walked towards the table, then took a few steps back.

The bowl wasn't empty. It was filled with a clear, golden broth that smelled of sea salt and starchy roots, of Antarctic fish and Antarctic spices. Tyhjä sat down, picked up the spoon, prodded the soup with it. Real. Definitely real. Even though the only one who could have possibly made this soup was far, far away, was the one who sent Tyhjä and his sister off alone to train their skills when they were barely grown.

How did it…? Wary though he was of such an odd miracle occurring, Tyhjä couldn't help but feel calmed by the nostalgic scent he remembered from his early childhood. It brought back countless memories. He hesitated, took out his notebook, and drew a quick outline of the bowl and the soup, then finished the entire bowl in a few gulps, spoon completely forgotten.

Tyhjä finally found a quiet place to sit by himself, a little courtyard in the center of a building used for animal research, so he was told. There were benches and a few trees there, and moreover, several birds that came and went.

With a sigh of relief, Tyhjä withdrew his notebook and a writing stylus from the satchel he carried with him. Opening to a new page, he followed the path of a bird in flight, beginning to draw as he watched. To be truthful, the creatures were almost too small to be called birds by Imperial standards.

It was pleasant, though. Such a tiny little being was a welcome change of subject from the fierce, winged predators with cruelly hooked talons Tyhjä was accustomed to seeing. It was fascinating to watch these different birds fly, as well as comforting to know that the little chirping things would *not* attempt to attack him and rip out his innards should he get too close.

Tyhjä suddenly felt a slight weight pressing on his head, and he realized that one of the little dark brown birds had landed on him. Tyhjä resumed sketching, and the bird resumed sitting on his shaggy hair, occasionally chirping out a query to its friends sitting on the trees. Tyhjä allowed himself a small smile. The birds at home never sang.

Suddenly the bird flew off. Tyhjä frowned, watching it arc through the air and into the sky. He wondered if something had startled it.

At the sound of footsteps, Tyhjä looked over his shoulder and nearly fell off his bench.

Someone *standing right next to him* was looking intently at him, no, his notebook, and that someone was dressed in such bright colors that Tyhjä could've sworn his eyes started burning. He had seen her before, he thought dazedly. The one who liked asking questions. He blinked a few times, attempting to edge away slightly without seeming rude, and he noticed his sister sheepishly leaning against a nearby wall.

"…Sister. Who is this?" Tyhjä managed, slightly shaken.

"Apologies if we bothered you, Tyhjä. I met Alai in the library, and it was such a lovely day outside that I thought that it would be a shame if we didn't take the opportunity to read out in the sunlight…"

Tyhjä wasn't particularly reassured by the explanation, seeing as Alai was still standing *too close* and he had been *rather* engrossed in his observation of the bird and *why wasn't she just saying something so he could ask her to maybe give him some space—*

"What's that?" Alai pointed to the sketch he had been working on.

“…a bird…” Tyhjä mumbled.

Alai cocked her head slightly, scrutinizing the simple sketch. “It doesn’t even have teeth!”

Tyhjä pointed at a tree close by, where one of the little feathery brown creatures appeared to be regarding Alai with some interest. She looked suspiciously at it. “Do you know anything about these birds? Do they like bright colors? If you get too close, do they bite?”

“They seem rather harmless, so I don’t believe they bite.” Tyhjä cast a quick panicked glance towards his sister, but Clear Evening only smiled, apparently happy Tyhjä had found a friend to talk to. *Sister why are you doing this to me Sister help me—*

“What do you think of this place so far?” Alai smiled, setting down the armful of books she was carrying.

“I like it well enough, thank you.” Tyhjä stood up, intending to find another (quieter) place to stay. “Alai, Sister, if you’ll pardon my leaving, I’d like to find some different birds to observe.” He inclined his head slightly to the two of them, and then padded away towards the door leading back into the facility.

“Tyhjä, you’ll tell me more about these birds later, won’t you?” Alai’s cheerful voice followed Tyhjä as he made his escape.

Though he didn’t like to admit it, he *did* feel slightly guilty for just running off like that; he would’ve liked to talk more about birds with Alai, perhaps, and maybe he’d mention the other things he’d seen and heard about from the scientists, but then his sister hadn’t helped him out much, usually it was she who was there in case he slipped up during conversation, and he wished he could be as excited as Alai was about everything, but—

Empress help him, he needed to lie down.

In a Yellow Wood

He finished his day like he usually did - he closed his notebook, exited the lab and took the short walk to the gate. As he passed through, he gave a wave to the guard on duty, turned right and began the walk that would bring him back to the starting point in about half an hour - a slight uphill climb the entire way.

Autumn had settled on the woods the week before, bringing the trees to their full colors, but the weather remained comfortable. He let his mind drift as his feet automatically followed the path, a small smile creasing the corners of his mouth as he considered the simple beauty of the equations that explained the anomaly. The equations had led to many other discoveries, but his favorite would always be this one.

Close to the halfway point, he noticed that his right shoe was coming untied. As he knelt to re-secure the laces, he glanced to his right, and took a sharp intake of breath. He was looking at another path that curved off into the woods.

As he stood to inspect this new discovery, it disappeared. He slowly adjusted the angle of his head, and suddenly it reappeared. With some experimentation, he discovered that, when he held his head at just the right angle, there was a very narrow “window”, only a centimeter or two wide, that allowed him to see the new path. He stood in quiet contemplation for several minutes, and then pivoted 180 degrees. He spent several more minutes adjusting the angle of his head before he was able to verify that it continued into the woods in that direction as well.

He was amazed, but not surprised. Certainly the equations did not preclude the presence of another path (or for that matter, multiple other paths). In fact, he had spent some time several years ago trying to predict possible intersection points, but the theoretical nature of the exercise soon fell to the wayside, overshadowed by the discoveries that he and his team were making at the time.

He began running through the equations in his head. The curve of the new path was less pronounced than that of the original, and it appeared that it climbed in a clockwise direction. He made some quick mental calculations, and was fairly certain that two would intersect again close to the gate.

He was so engrossed in his mental calculations that he didn't realize that he had started walking on the new path. He had only gone 3 or 4 meters, and he quickly returned to where he could see the disturbed gravel that marked the intersection. Or rather, that should have marked the intersection. With increasing desperation, he spent the next several hours trying to find the unique combination of angles that would open the "window". As darkness was falling, he came to the conclusion that finding the original path was going to take more time.

He spent a restless night there, curled up on the cold gravel. At first light, he spent a fruitless hour trying to locate the original path again. He needed to think, and he had always done his best thinking while walking. He hoped that walking in this place would provide the same inspiration.

He used the heel of his shoe to scribe a large X at the intersection point, then began walking clockwise. After two hours of walking uphill, he returned to his mark. He hadn't seen any other paths. Or buildings. Or people. Just the autumn woods spreading off in every direction. But he had formulated a idea.

He pulled out the small notebook and stub of a pencil that he always carried with him and sat down. By mid afternoon, the area surrounding him was covered with pieces of paper, some crumpled, some with large portions crossed out. The majority of the pages, however, were spread out in front of him. He had re-created the "theoretical" intersection equations that he had started years ago. He didn't have the anwers yet, but he felt fairly confident these equations would get him back home.

He stood, placed his hands in the small of his back, and bent backwards, eliciting a symphony of snaps, crackles and pops from his spine. He needed to stretch his legs and let his mind wander. He looked both ways, and eventually decided that one way was just as

good as the other. His mind preoccupied with the equations, he started walking counter clockwise.

He came to stop some time later, a slowly building sense of dread finally breaking through his thoughts. He was surveying his surroundings, trying to discover the cause for the feelings, when the realization hit him hard enough to take his breath away.

He had been walking steadily uphill the whole time.

In Fear

SCP-2006
Object Class: *Keter*
Special Containment Procedures: *SCP-2006 is to be contained at Site 118 in an airtight containment cell. SCP-2006 must be constantly monitored for changes in form, which are to be noted immediately. All personnel coming into contact with SCP-2006 are required to enroll in an acting course with a focus on expressing fear…*

Dr. Morris's vision blurred as he lost his focus on the page, and soon the letters were as meaningful to him as a wordsearch. He'd been through the acting class with the rest of those assigned to 2006, the bi-weekly slog of half-hour sessions. He felt they could've been better spent forgotten down a bottle with his friends. He knew how to act scared. He worked in a place that would send most screaming with a trail running down their legs. As he walked, he fumbled with a little red can of the shittiest, syrupy cola you could afford on a budget dedicated to concrete and rebar. Morris paused near a water fountain, struggling to crack open the top with his fingernails. His frustration grew until he wrenched the top for leverage, jostling the can too far to the side, causing the can to spray.

"Shit."

Morris reflexively swore through clenched teeth. The higher-ups were going to love this, Morris. He looked at the light caramel streaming down his starched lab uniform. He blotted at it with a napkin, but it still left a discolored blotch down at the hem where it landed. He licked his thumb, pinching the fabric between his fingers to try and clean the spot. He stopped after it made no immediate effect. Begrudgingly, Dr. Morris dropped the now emptied can into the nearby trash can. The intercom crackled to life again.

"Dr. Morris, please report to SCP 2006's containment cell immediately. Failure to comply will be met with appropriate action."

Morris sighed, he knew he'd have to make it there as soon as he could. He walked down the winding corridors at a brisk pace until he could see the solitary steel doors with the omnipresent foundation logo. He swiped his keycard into the control room reader, waiting with his eyes to a retina scanner. It flashed an epileptic series of lights at him, the photon mappers ensuring he was supposed to be here. He always thought it was superfluous they would put one in front of a keter-class entity, considering all the other credentials work a person would need to be god-knows-how-many miles underground in a restricted area. The doors shunted apart with a hermetic hiss. Dr. Morris began worming his way through a control room of near-identical men in coats bustling around with clipboards and legal pads. From the opposite end of the room came a call.

"Dr. Morris."

Senior Researcher Crusoe was standing at the helm of the operation, a bevy of hunched figures at the console behind her. The storming sea of staff parted as she spoke, and Morris walked forwards, a bit guarded. Crusoe wasn't in the mood. She was concealing her panic under a mask of friendliness. Morris knew that face, and he thought a silent prayer to gods he knew wouldn't answer.

"Afternoon, Crusoe. What's the situation?"

She feigned a half-smile, half-smirk. The plasticity of it only served to further his hypothesis that something was actually wrong. Crusoe was a cold bitch of a woman who had never smiled unless it was to send a researcher to certain death in the name of advancement. To see her smiling was a source of certainty that this wasn't going to end well.

"At approximately 06:32 today, SCP 2006, who had been assuming the guise of an alien creature from the 1957 B-Grade horror film 'Invasion of the Saucer Men', disappeared. He is still on our pressure sensors, but he's disappeared from our cameras. We've already had the techs come in to assess our monitoring hardware, and we're all good on our end."

Crusoe motioned over to a wide array of computer screens formed

into a single viewscreen. To Dr. Morris and anyone else who looked, it showed an empty containment cell. Four enameled concrete walls and a bare floor. Crusoe cleared her throat with a sense of arrogance, snatching Dr. Morris's attention from the screens.

"We're operating under the assumption he may be, waiting, per say, for someone to enter the room. We had to push back his last appointment after that scare with the toxin leak."

Morris remembered that scare. Some dipshit contractor had installed pipes for site-wide gaseous kill toxins incorrectly. The pipes ruptured, sending all personnel into an evac. It pushed everyone's schedule back, after losing about a dozen staff in the event. Crusoe motioned at a clipboard on the desk like a mother pointing at a mess.

"So today, in lieu of Dr. Kilpatrick, we're sending *you* in. You are the backup psychiatrist."

Nothing got him more pissed off than her smug self-important attitude. She wasn't just the Senior Researcher, she was better than you. If they sold framed posters of her, she'd plaster them over her office. Dr. Morris picked up the clipboard of canned interview questions, and the digital recorder on top. He clipped the recorder to his hip and mic'd up. Crusoe escorted him to the airlock, looking at him with the same caring facade. He stepped over the door bumpers, waiting for the lock to seal. Crusoe imparted a few words before the gates locked together.

"Remember, Morris, *scary*!"

Morris almost told her to shut up. He'd made the mistake once when talking to a senior, and while they had understood the stress of the situation, he was sure Crusoe would love to grill him for even the slightest insubordination. He turned around, anxious for the other set of doors to open. The intercom speaker above came to life, and a monotone voice spoke.

Opening inner seal.

The two doors pulled apart with a metal grinding and a bike-pump

hiss. Dr. Morris took a few steps out into the chamber. His dusty white running shoes making soft falls on the bare concrete below. He cleared his throat to clear the apprehension that thickened the already stale air.

“SCP Two thousa-”

The jolting honk of a horn cut him off. He turned to face SCP-2006, only to come face-to-face with a horror fresh from his earliest years.

Blinding white makeup caked the unnatural rubber skin. The caricature stood before him, not enough makeup to cover the dirty folds on the mockery of a human face. Two Curious George ears too low on the face for real anatomy. Aggressive red hair sprouting from the back ridge of his skull, like a halloween mask. The garish comedy war-paint, smeared across the face, was dripping fresh, in detail unthought of to his formative memories of the creature.

Morris stumbled backwards, deeper into the containment cell. He almost tripped over himself, before finding stability on a wall.

“Fuck!”, he shouted, a bit too unrestrained. No one had sworn at SCP-2006 before. Crusoe would be thrilled.

SCP-2006, still in his twisted form, took a dramatic step forwards. Dr. Morris remembered his instructions, and screamed. It was only half-forced.

Morris could still remember: He was eight years old. His parents brought home the VHS from the rental store. It wasn’t like the low-budget schlock he’d waded through on cable, this was a new package of actual scares. After Mom had went to bed and Dad fell asleep in his armchair with an empty bottle of Pabst Blue-Ribbon in his hands, he got to watch the forbidden fruit of his youth. He didn’t remember much of the movie as an adult, having never rewatched it. If he entertained the idea, it was met with pure apprehension. It was the same apprehension one would feel when they hovered their hand over a sharp kitchen knife, or the car cigarette lighter. What he did remember were the Klowns. They came from the cold vacuum of space not to cause comical ray-gun effects and burn down a few cities, instead, they hungered for human flesh. His flesh, of course.

This childhood trauma before him had his image clawed from the reaches of his mind, using greasepaint and fear to fill in the gaps. SCP-2006 kept up his act. Morris struggled to come to words. SCP-2006 did it for him.

“Doctor, did I scaaaaaare you?”

Dr. Morris looked up at the nightmare clown, fumbling for words. His tone didn’t match his usual “concerned” voice, it only raised in pitch. Mocking.

“Y-yes, SCP-2006, yes you did. My God, I almost had a heart attack!”

A second passed before the edges of the crude grin on SCP-2006’s face rose. Underneath the lips were rows of teeth. The teeth of an alcoholic shark. Dr. Morris wondered who had shown him an actual horror movie, and who would be reprimanded for this. Fucking Crusoe, sending him in. Armin pulled himself from the floor, raising the clipboard to his chest, a show of control.

“Hello, SCP-2006, I am Doctor Morris. I am an analytical psychologist for the SCP foundation. I have a few questions to ask you, relating to your actions earlier today.”

The clown’s joyous expression stayed. Eager for his indulgence.

“Ask away, Doctor.”

Morris clicked his pen, a signal for his turn to begin.

“Earlier today you had morphed into a form invisible to the staff outside, I am curious as to what you had hoped to accomplish by doing so.”

He stood firm. The clown on the other end of the room broke his serious tone at the question. A quizzical look immediately wiped away all manner of hostility.

“I don’t understand.”

Dr. Morris repeated himself.

“Well, we can see you through the cameras. It’s how we know you’re still here. Why did you try hiding from us?”

It took him a few seconds, before an expression of excitement overcame his previous demeanor. Like a child who remembered the answer to the teacher’s question.

“Oh! You hadn’t come in last time, so I tried to get you to come in again. But you’re a new doctor. You’re not Dr. Kilpatrick, though.” SCP 2006 said, his tone drifting into wistfulness.

“No, SCP-2006, I’m not. I’m sorry to tell you.”

He was, in a way, sorry. SCP-2006 and Kilpatrick had, well, a bond. Dr. Kilpatrick loved getting into the whole act with 2006, and even volunteered to accompany him on “movie night” a few times. Kilpatrick had been an unfortunate casualty of last-week’s toxin leak. Armin would probably be filling in for him for the foreseeable future.

“Well, Dr. Morris, I miss him. I think he loved it when I scared him. I know he enjoyed getting scared just as much as I enjoyed doing it. I miss him, Doctor.”

Dr. Morris shot back, almost impatient.

“Yes, I am sure you miss him, but for now he isn’t going to be working with the foundation.”

Morris could’ve slapped himself. He always felt like he was overcompensating for moments of “getting to know them” with sudden shifts of cold clinicality. He had to remind himself no matter how much he could “warm up” his patients, he was working with a keter class entity. But the jarring shifts to a clinical tone always came with frustration, always at himself. He thought that you could make up for two weeks of missing reports by filling out four weeks’ extra.

“I’m sorry, SCP-2006. For snapping just there.”

SCP-2006 looked at him with the eyes of a stray to a dogcatcher. The greased clown took on a demure posture, trying to come to grips with this information. He looked back at Morris in confusion.

“Why did he leave? He wouldn’t just leave me like that!”

The clown continued to stare at him with begging eyes. Morris quickly scribbled down onto a blank section of paper “No concept of death?”, with an exaggerated question mark. Another line to pursue.

“SCP-2006, do you know where people go when they die?”

SCP-2006 took a few seconds to ponder the question.

“They get back up for the sequel?”

Morris scratched into his sheet a bit more. He decided to bite off a bit more. The question had been cleared with the higher ups. He looked down at the questions page to make sure he phrased it in the most direct way. It would be the fuck up of the century if he ruined it.

“What do you know to be the states of being alive?”

SCP-2006 chuckled. He relaxed himself and spoke to Morris.

“Well, there’s being scared! That’s my favorite, then there’s… uhh…”

SCP-2006’s face stalled like a choked engine.

“…breathing?”

Interesting. Very much so. Dr. Morris had everything he needed from SCP-2006. At least the bare minimum required by Crusoe and would still let him catch the tail-end of happy hour. He started writing down his closing statements onto his page.

“Now, SCP-2006, I believe our interview terminated. If you have anything else you feel you need to do,” Dr. Morris gave a coy, semi-forced wink, “before I leave, then go ahead.”

SCP-2006’s beady eyes lit up like a child on Christmas morning, though he stayed next to the door.

“Oh, no, Dr. Morris. I am sated. I think I’ve reached my, ehr, quota of scares today? Even if they weren’t all genuine. At least the clown outfit reaction wasn’t fake.”

Disbelief. Morris paused. He blanked for a few seconds, feeling his throat tighten as his mind searched for the correct path. His mouth was dry, even after he drank the generic cola crap. He felt the pen chained to the clipboard fall out of his hands and slide down the paper, dangling off the board.

“F-fake? SCP 2006, I assure you, what he felt was real. You are the best at scaring! I almost died from fear earlier! I-I, Y-you-”

The clown giggled in a gruff, menacing tone. He took a step towards him. Morris stepped backwards. He felt the cold enamel walls of the cell brush against the elbows of his coat.

“Dr. Armin Morris, born February 19th, 1980. Blood type A negative. Parents, divorced. I knew all that when you walked in. I don’t smell fear. I smell everything. And I know where that stain came from. Both stains, Dr. Morris. I also know Dr. Kilpatrick felt real fear when he began to choke on his own blood. It was like nectar. Water to a man in the desert. That’s actual fear that I smelt. But I don’t just smell these things, I understand them, too. A lot of things.”

Armin had never understood what people meant when they say time slows to a crawl. Every second passed with the feeling of pure fear. A hot, rancid sweat tingling with adrenaline ran in rivulets down his back. He was soon aware of how small the cell was. How close the clown was to him. How close those *teeth* were.

“You think I’m ignorant? You think I have no knowledge of what’s outside my cell? This chamber's sealed, yes, but I can use my eyes in spite of it. I smelled a lot of things. Senior Researcher Crusoe’s fake concern. The Camera Tech’s worry about his mother’s cancer. I’ve been around for so long, I’d forgotten what it was like to wallow in the fear of an entire village, and this is very close.”

Morris wanted to get out. But he was a cornered animal here. The doors behind SCP-2006 had shut, and the control room was, to his assumption, in a state of mass panic from what they’d heard. They couldn’t let him out, it would risk a breach. If they risked a breach of an intelligent entity, they risked a breach of every item contained within. Morris’s knees locked, stale. He felt small. So small.

“It’s been so long since I’ve smelled genuine fear. So long since I’ve peered out of closets. So long since the rustling trees and rainy windows. So long.”

Morris thumbed the intercom button on his two-way radio.

“Pull me out.”

He depressed the direct line. He knew they heard. That button broadcast his message across the observation room. They wouldn't pull him out. Not yet.

But to his disbelief, it wasn’t but seconds later that the doors to the lock opened. SCP-2006 stepped aside, gesturing at the open archway like a carnival ringleader at the main attraction. In the same moment, the light cut out.

Doctor Morris screamed. Before too much time had passed. The emergency amber lights had kicked on, showing the room he was in empty, save for himself. He fell to his knees, and scrambled away from the room. Both sets of doors were open.

The observation hub was a mess. The intercom repeating the same autogenerated containment breach warning. All monitors displayed: **“CORE POWER OFFLINE - REVERTING TO SOLID STATE TO RETAIN FILE INTEGRITY”**. The evac lights illuminated the room in flashes. Morris pulled himself up, seeing the orgy sprawled on the floor.

Crusoe's body slumped against the collage of monitors. An arterial spray served as the arrow to her slashed neck. A guard crumpled into the fetal position next to the sealed door, his P90 clutched in his hands, unfired. Armin felt the warm syrup and corrosive bile pull itself from his stomach. He doubled over, wet retching onto the linoleum.

Addendum: *SCP-2006 breached containment on / /20 . We now understand that SCP-2006 can manifest in multiple locations at once. While personnel may believe they’re conversing with the “Face” entity, referred to as SCP-2006-1, SCP-2006 is capable of creating an unknown number of secondary entities, labeled as*

SCP-2006-X. Possible redraft of containment procedures requested in light of recent events, as well as the loss of Senior Researcher , Assistant Researcher , and assorted staff.

In God's Name

The mischievous trickster and master plotter Icarus Sharpe walked in and shot Alto Clef right in his stupid face. He—deciding to be Matthew now—grinned broadly as the blood spattered from the exit wound, spraying over the wall behind Clef. Matthew laughed with glee just before he heard the voice to his left.

“Sucker.”

He turned just in time to see the sneer on Clef’s face, and then, the shotgun exploded and took his head off.

The mischievous trickster and master plotter Icarus Sharpe walked in—ignoring the decoy duplicate this time—twisting and firing to the left, putting a set up bullets right up the wall. His eyes went wide as the butt of the shotgun came over his temple, sending him sprawling down.

He looked up, rolling over and staring upward. Clef was on the right this time.

“Sucker.”

The shotgun took his head clean off again.

The mischievous trickster and master plotter Icarus Sharpe kicked the door open, hurling the grenade in and then ducking to the left. The explosion ripped through the office, and the sound of cursing came from inside instantly. Matthew gathered his feet under him, lurching forward and quickly checking the entrance and exit points, ignoring the charred corpse at the desk. Obviously a decoy.

Suddenly, the corpse’s hand popped up, putting a bullet into his knee. A moment later, the corpse fell to the side, and Clef stood up,

aiming the shotgun.

Matthew sighed. “God damni—“ The shotgun. His head. Simple math now, really.

Sharpe got the machine gun ready. He pulled the pin out of the grenade, kicking the door open, then throwing it in. The explosion hit, followed by the cursing. He nodded. It felt like it was coming together, finally.

He spun into the room, spraying the bullets everywhere, peppering the walls, desk, charred corpse, filing cabinet—fucking filing cabinet—and the large, stained glass window.

Stained glass window?

He looked more carefully into the room. This… This wasn’t Clef’s office. This wasn’t Clef’s office at all.

“Sucker,” said the voice.

He turned, managing to raise his hand and half-extend his middle finger before the shotgun went off.

He made sure that it was the right office, verifying it a half dozen ways. He placed the explosives carefully, then headed back down the hall. He quietly slipped into the side room, then moved into the air ducts, working his way up into them.

Once he got to the vent directly down the hall from Clef’s office, he pulled his rifle into position, then pressed the button, detonating the explosives.

A few minutes later, Clef stumbled from his office, hacking loudly. He looked like his arm was bleeding. Sharpe zeroed in on his head, then pulled the trigger.

Clef’s head exploded. Matthew grinned broadly.

There. There we go. This one.

He ran it three or four more times. Each time, success. He felt… giddy.

The mischievous trickster and master plotter Icarus Sharpe slipped into the world, putting on Matthew's face and setting the explosives, walking down the hall and into the side room. Matthew shuffled into position, then got his rifle shouldered. He took a deep breath, then pressed the button.

Matthew was taken in a ball of fire as the explosives detonated right below him, burning his flesh and hurling him through the top of the duct.

He flew up through the next floor, then crashed into the ceiling, at which point, he started falling again. He fell through the hole, down the next two floors, through the space where the duct had been, and onto a conveyor belt.

The belt started as he leaned up, looking around in time for the separator bar to clock him in the head, knocking him backwards and laying him out just as the boiling hot oil managed to scorch his back, bringing a scream to his lips that was quickly quelled as the chocolate sauce poured over him. A moment later, the sprinkles were scattered over his body. Then the quick blast of hot air to dry it.

He winced and groaned as the conveyor came to a stop. He leaned up, rolling off of it and looking around as the click of hundreds of guns suddenly echoed through the room.

"That was fucking stupid, man," said Clef, walking through the assembled security staff of Site19. "Did you really think the doughnut dispensary was the best way to enter the site undetected?"

His last thought, before the tragically non-bullet proof frosting and sprinkles was riddled with lead, was to wonder exactly how Clef had managed to plant the explosives immediately under him. How he managed to set up that explosion. The doughnut machine. All these people here.

How. How in God’s name?

But before the irony could hit him, the bullets did, and he was dead.

In Harm's Way

Iris had been trying to reach through a photograph for the last several hours.

It was an ordinary photograph. She'd taken it with her own camera a few minutes ago, as she had done with the last few dozen photographs. And yet, when she tried to reach through, she had difficulty. Sometimes her hand just wouldn't go through. More often, what came through was a phantom version of her hand: hazy, flickering, difficult to see.

She tossed the photograph onto the desk, groaning in frustration. The nameless researcher assigned to monitor her training raised an eyebrow. "Need a break?" he asked laconically.

Iris shook her head. "I want some answers."

"Well, physiologically, you're fine," the researcher said, tapping the back of his pen against his clipboard. "So the problem must be psych—"

"That's not what I mean," Iris interrupted. "I want some answers. Some real answers Like, who's in charge of this thing? Who's the new General Bowe?"

"That's… most probably classified."

"Probably?" Iris glared at the researcher. He shrugged back. She wanted to slap the smile off his bland face. "I want to see him," she said.

"I don't think that's really necessary." Researcher No-Name smiled politely. "Why don't we give it another try? Repeat from the top of Exercise November Six?"

Iris shook her head. "No. I'm done here." She stood and walked to

the doorway. There was a security camera above it: she looked straight into the dark, unblinking lens. "I know you're out there," she said, "and we need to meet. I need to talk to you, or this whole thing is going to fail."

Somewhere else, 'The New General Bowe' woke up at an unknowable time, a million miles away from her body. The real world was loud, but unintelligible, across a foggy chasm. Light thought her heart might be racing, but it was hard to tell.

What triggered it this time? A dream, maybe. She tried to think back, and only got vague nonsense: images of images of blood and grabbing with faint overtones of ***you fucked everything up****…*

The timing could not be random. The announcement about Alpha-9's approval by the Overseer Council came through last night. She'd stayed up for four hours making phone calls, and she couldn't remember what happened after that, so, yeah, that must been it.

For an unknown length of time, she sat upright in bed, arms wrapped around her body, numb and unresponsive even through two alarms and a ringing phone. Funny how she could be the very picture of composure during a crisis, but wait until her brain spat out the wrong image *while she was sleeping* and the world may as well be ending.

At some point, Vaux, her assistant, knocked on the door to make sure she was alive and to tell her that she was fine, that nothing urgent was happening right now, and that he'd rescheduled aside her morning appointments and would come by later with food and coffee. Then he left her alone to ride it out.

She often wondered what amazingly selfless deed she'd ever done to deserve that man.

At around twelve, Light finally appeared in the office, foggy and raw but mostly in her skin again.

Vaux looked up from a nest of paperwork that he'd been slogging

his way through like a champion. "How are you?" he asked politely.

"No unusual symptoms," Light said. "Normal, mostly. The blood test —"

"Medical's expecting you any time."

She nodded. "Good. Thanks. Thank you."

Vaux smiled, and said something she didn't quite process. Light flexed her left hand, hoping she hadn't sprained it again while dissociating wildly. She hated physical therapy. "What's going on?" she asked.

"You still have two meetings today that I couldn't get rid of," Vaux said. "Aktus sent you some files on his latest reports. We have more news from the O5 Council, and you have to meet with the other Directors about those tomorrow. And Kain arrived here early this morning."

"Cain with a C or a K?" Light asked.

"Kain with a K. Dr. Elliott and Director Moose are with him. They wanted to see you, but I told them you were on the phone with an O5."

"Thanks. What else?"

"You *were* also scheduled to meet with Cain with a C. But Director Moose tried to pull some strings to get herself assigned to bring him in to Alpha-9. I let her succeed. She's already done, and he's on board. The report summary's in your inbox. Your first meeting is with Director Moose. She says she has a concern."

"About what?"

"She wouldn't say. If I had to guess, it's probably about Alpha-9 in general."

Light nodded. "Cain — SCP-073 — I'll need to go see him myself soon."

"Already scheduled for next week."

"Thanks. Who's my second meeting with?"

"Uh." Vaux checked his notes. "Tav-666."

"Fuck."

Vaux turned out to be right about Director Moose, as he usually did.

Two minutes after 1 PM, Director Light walked into the meeting room, dressed in her standard uniform: white oxford shirt, black slacks, neat wingtip shoes, dark circles under her eyes.

Director Moose was already there, pacing on the other side of the room, an ill-fitting suit draped over her too-tall frame. The dark circles under her eyes matched Light's. The woman with the funny name hadn't been expected to last long in her position as director of Site-19 — no one had lasted long, besides Strelnikov, who was supposed to be temporary, and who finally demanded to be replaced. Moose had lasted for over a year so far, but not without the job taking its toll.

The only other thing in the room was a brown, wrapped package.

"I obtained the items you asked about," Moose said, without preamble. "They're… close to your specifications. It wasn't easy. But they will work, even for someone like you, who isn't a Type Blue. I checked them myself. There are instructions with the packaging."

"Thank you so much," Light said. "If there's anything I can do for you —"

Moose shook her head. "You already have. Thank you for letting me approach Cain."

"You should thank Vaux for that. The report says that went well."

"You got a report already?"

"Yet another thing I'm thanking Vaux for." Light took a seat. "What

did you do to convince Cain to join?"

"I didn't have to do anything." Moose got a funny look on her face. "He agreed immediately. I admit, I was surprised. Given all the history there, with… with SCP-076-2, and Omega-7…"

Light thought about that. "Maybe the O5s asked him in the first place? I'm not going to complain about things going *right* for once."

"They won't stay that way," Moose said, dryly.

"Probably not." Light shrugged.

"That's what I wanted to talk to you about," Moose said. "About Alpha-9."

Light waited.

"They sent me the reports last week," Moose said. "I read them top to bottom. Looking for a good enough reason to recreate something as dangerous as Omega-7. What I found was a lot of political maneuvering, going back years, and Iris shooting some unidentified insurgents during an incursion on this Site. Nothing else. All quiet on the anomalous front. Yet Alpha-9 has been created anyway. As of last night."

"I have my own hesitations," Light said. "But I thought you'd be on board with the Foundation taking a different approach to using anomalies."

"Because I'm an anomaly myself? That is exactly why I think this is excessively dangerous."

Most people didn't know it, but Moose was what they called a Type Blue. A paranormal magician, in her life before the Foundation. Ex-Serpent's Hand.

"Don't misunderstand me," Moose said. "To borrow a phrase from others — extraordinary risks require extraordinary justification. I see the risk here. I don't see the extraordinary justification."

Light nodded. "It's the long-term risk, I think. Maybe even medium-

term. Right? Our ordinary resources are stretched to their limits. Our anomalous resources are barely being tapped. And we're still identifying possible SCPs almost every day. Maybe we don't have the extraordinary justification right exactly now, but we will." She hesitated. "Unless the O5s know something we don't."

"You know I'm a Company woman," Moose said. "But for some people, that won't be good enough."

Light nodded. "Why didn't you refuse to participate on Alpha-9? You could have."

"Because I understand how anomalies work, out there in the real world," Moose said. "No one on your current field team even knows what a Type Blue is. I know you're considering Aleksander Foxx — and he also works for Marshall, Carter, and Dark. This is already a risk. If I can prevent it becoming a disaster, a least in some way, I'm obligated to try." She looked at Light. "I imagine that's why you're involved in this, too."

She wasn't wrong. They were both quiet for a minute.

"A Factotum came to see me last night," Moose said, finally. "After the Council voted to approve Alpha-9. Called themselves Loyalty. Not very subtle."

"What'd they say?"

"They told me how Alpha-9 was approved," Moose said. "They told me it wasn't the Council's best judgment that let the vote pass. It was political wrangling. And existential fear, that none of them wanted to say outright. The Council was waiting for something like this to come along, and once it did, they only needed someone to say, well, here's a project we like. We'll run it. We'll take the fall if things go wrong. When things go wrong."

Moose paused again, staring at the table, tapping her fingers on the back of an empty chair.

"Was that me?" Light asked.

Moose shook her head. "Loyalty told me that it was a member of the

Council. Who volunteered to take the fall if Alpha-9 turns out like Omega-7. They said it was O5-10."

O5-10? Light was slightly surprised. She'd only heard from O5-7 for the duration of this project.

But then, that made a certain amount of sense. O5-7 never seemed to be the type to put herself on the line for a project like this. That's why she had… well, people like Light. And Clef, before her…

"Why'd you request to bring in Cain yourself?"

"To rip the band-aid off." Moose paused. "And so no one else could fuck it up."

Light nodded.

"This will have consequences," Moose said. "No one's forgotten Omega-7. Don't expect that to be a good thing."

"That's been on my mind," Light said. "We have a lot of preparation to take care of."

"I have to get back to work. Good luck, Director Light. I'll see you soon." Moose stopped tapping her fingers on the chair. "Don't delay. We may have less time than we think."

Light didn't plan to.

The next meeting, with Tav-666, came too quickly.

This time, sitting at the long conference table were the ugliest, most slovenly man in the world, and his polar opposite: attractive, neatly groomed, and female.

Light knew the man well. The woman, she knew *of.*

"Alto," Light said. "Sorry for keeping you waiting."

"Sophia," Clef replied, that rictuslike grin of his never leaving his face. "Allow me to introduce my former secretary and current

protege, Andrea S. Adams."

"Adams," Light said, extending her hand in greeting. "I've heard quite a bit about you. Good work extracting Iris from that GOC snatch-and-grab."

Adams's lip twitched a bare millimeter at that as the two women shook hands. Clef's expression was… much more readable. "Apologies if I kept you waiting," Light continued. "You've heard the news?"

"The **`Overwatch vote?`** Yup! God help us all." Clef laughed.

"You weren't expecting it? From the orders…"

"The 05s will order any damn thing they think is a good idea," Clef said. "Or a bad one, if it's a Tuesday. Doesn't mean Last Hope wasn't going to be controversial. You ask me, I bet the vote barely slid past."

Light flexed her left hand, remembering what Moose had said. "Alpha-9 is still widely unpopular."

"You bet your ass. And now everyone's going to know about it."

She nodded. "In that case, we have a growing problem and I need your thoughts." Light opened a file on her tablet and turns it around to show the others. "Dr. Maynard Maddox, Site Director, Site 88. Agent Richard Gillian, Unit 18. There are more, and we don't know who they are."

"What are they?"

"Foxes in the henhouse."

Clef took the tablet and narrowed his eyes, looking them over. "Traitors. Known affiliations?"

"Gillian worked with an undercover op a few years ago that had some questionable encounters with the Insurgency. Maddox, not sure. Both of them leaked planted information, one of which led to an attack on Site-88 by unknown hostiles."

"There are more?" asked Adams.

"Yes. Most of them are biding their time. I was attacked at Site-77. **SCP-1501** hadn't breached containment for months before that, and the investigation showed obvious signs of sabotage. It was an attempt on my life."

"No suspects?" Clef asked, passing the photos to Adams.

"Gillespie has assured me that the acting site director, her grandson Ralph Roget, is investigating," Light said.

"Good."

"He's twenty-two." Light made a face. "I mean— I trust Gillespie's judgement— *kind of*— the point is, there are double agents perceiving Alpha-9 as an unprecedented threat. And they're waking up. It's a threat to the project as a whole, not just me. Can you look into this?"

"We can start with investigating all outgoing communications, plus people going off-site," Clef said.

"Is that feasible?"

"We have an asset that can handle it," Clef said, smirking. Adams flinched.

"Good," said Light. "Anything else?"

"Not much," Adams said, "but if you plan to get shot at more, you should look into buying a bulletproof vest. I hear they come in designer colors these days."

Light snorted. "Oh, sure. I'll look into it."

Clef accompanied her to the third meeting of the day. He kept up a stream of terse commentary all the way there, until they reached the secure conference room in the heart of Site-17. Security, secretaries, and anyone else without at least Level 4 clearance had been relegated outside for the next two hours.

Clef sounded even more displeased when he appraised the buffet spread, provided by site catering.

"There's a perfectly good IHOP in town," he said. "Why aren't we eating there?"

"What's wrong with the food?" Light asked. It had seemed good enough on the online menu.

"It's inedible, that's what." Clef put four biscuits on his plate. "It's not worth having a meeting anywhere if you can't order chicken and waffles, and get coffee spilled on you by a hungover waitress."

"What is it with you and meeting in diners? What is it with all of you and meeting in diners?"

"I don't like the formality," Site-77 Director Shirley Gillespie said, cutting in next to them. "Diners have coziness. You can have an honest chat if it's just two people in a booth. In a room like this…"

"…you have security." Light frowned. "For one."

"Are you that confident that none of our guards are Insurgency moles?" Clef looked at the room — or maybe it was just his plate — with distaste. "Let's just get this over with."

The three of them left the catering table to join the other directors. They were all here, in the expansive Site-17 meeting room, everyone who'd been invited to the first meeting. Besides Light, Clef, and Gillespie — and Director Moose, nodding to Light as she sat down at the table — there were Bright, Aktus, and two directors Light had just met: Jonathan Nardieu and Marcia Cortez.

One was prominent by her absence: RAISA Director Maria Jones was working on a number of secret assignments, and not just for Alpha-9; shortly after the word of Council approve, Jones sent Light a curt yet apologetic message saying she expected to be absent for a while. Light didn't hold it against her; Jones was the woman who'd had to close Omega-7's files, after all. All of this must be hitting close to home.

Clef walked around the table and punched Bright in the shoulder,

and received a (mostly amiable) punch in return from the currently thirty-something Indian man. He sat down by Gillespie in a far corner, and took up a slouched pose that clearly communicated his intent to participate in nothing else beyond the substandard food on his plate.

Fair enough. He wasn't technically part of Alpha-9, after all. They'd had their real meeting already.

Clef wasn't wrong about security, Light reflected. Half the directors involved in Alpha-9 in a room together was the kind of thing that security did not recommend, and Light was inclined to agree. It would, however, be a necessary risk for this project. Speed was essential, and there was only so much you could do to protect teleconferences from intelligence leaks.

Light couldn't help but glance at Gillespie. It hadn't been long since the containment breach they'd been trapped in together, but Gillespie wasn't acting any differently at all. Her eyes were closed, and she was sipping her tea.

As for the rest, they were all engaged with their plates to varying degrees, but every once in a while, their eyes would flick over to glance at her. Sometimes their expressions were hostile. Other times, they were pitying. Mostly, though, they just seemed curious.

Light took a moment to slowly chew a piece of potato, swallowing it down despite a dry mouth and closed throat. She waited until a natural lull in the conversation to walk to the podium and adjust the mic. It let out a brief squeal of feedback, and the conversation ebbed.

"Thank you all for coming," she began. "As you know, Alpha-Nine has just been officially approved as a Mobile Task Force. All of you have a great amount of influence in the future of this project. This will in turn influence the future of the Foundation. Our first Asset, Iris, is in training now. There will be more."

She waited for any kind of response. There was none. "So. Um. Anyone have anything they want to discuss to start us off?"

A moment of silence. Then a middle-aged man raised his hand. "Yes, Director Nardieu," Light said.

Jonathan Nardieu nodded, got to his feet, and opened up a well-worn spiral-bound notebook. "Director Light," he said by way of greeting. "I've just been reviewing clips from SCP-105's training sessions," he said. "She's on a level with some of our MTF agents already, with only a month of training. It's almost as she has some form of photographic memory, if you'll pardon the pun. I wonder if it's natural, or some kind of secondary mutation of her anomalous ability…"

"Secondary mutation?" Bright scoffed. "What are you, twelve?"

"I don't see what you mean," Nardieu said, looking surprised to be contradicted.

"That's literally X-Men terminology, and you damn well know it."

Marcia Cortez spoke up. "I agree with Jack," she said. "We need to be careful with our terminology. If this experiment is going to work, we need to stay as professional as possible…"

"If she **is** a superhero, she's a broken one," Moose interjected. "Her abilities haven't been functioning at their prior baseline in the last few days since the Coalition encounter."

"Spooked, perhaps," Aktus suggested. He'd been the first to arrive at the table this morning, but this was the first he'd looked up from reading the files on his tablet. "That incident was highly unusual. Even more so than that unresolved containment breach which started this whole mess."

"Maybe she's faking it again," Cortez suggested.

"Glass's psych assessment says she's not," Nardieu said.

Cortez shook her head. "Glass was always too sympathetic to humanoid skips." She shot Bright a look that seemed oddly apologetic. Bright didn't seem to notice, concentrating on his meal.

"Iris Thompson is just a girl with a special ability," Nardieu said. "She

can't be that dangerous to us. We all deal with worse on a daily basis."

"… nukes disguised as Girl Scouts," Clef muttered.

"Excuse me?" Nardieu asked.

"I said, don't underestimate the damn Skip just because it looks like a pretty girl," Clef snapped. "Iris Thompson is dangerous. The only question is whether she's dangerous to us or the enemy."

"Well, maybe if you didn't treat her like a caged beast—"

"Let's get back on task," Light said. "Iris's performance has degraded. It could just be because she hasn't used her abilities in a long time. It could also be due to the phases of the moon or the alignment of the planets or something else we will never know. As it currently stands, we just don't have enough data. So let's move on." She turned to the other side of the conference room. "Gillespie, Aktus, what's the status on the other projects for Alpha-9?"

Gillespie put down her glass and dabbed her mouth with a napkin. "Most of the usable objects at my disposal, in Site-77, were denied. I have a few…. grey cases, where our previous research indicates a potentially smooth transfer to more violent means. But other than that, a lot of rejections."

Aktus nodded. "My recommendations were largely vetoed as well, despite your sign-off. Unfortunately I don't have much more to add yet, though I've received a new list of anomalies to assess."

"For whatever that's worth," Nardieu said. "I don't mean to complain, but… between all of us, we requested access to over two hundred SCP items. Our list now is… Do we even have half a dozen? Besides Iris, we have Cain, a broken reality bender, a severed hand…"

"I imagine they want us to start small," Aktus said. "We have, however, been promised more SCPs. **SCP-1985** and **SCP-2099** were suggested to me as possibilities already…"

"Brain in a jar and apocalypse explorer?" Nardieu asked. "All right,

not bad, but it's still only two…"

"… however," Aktus continued, glaring at the younger man, "that doesn't include secondary anomalous assets that don't fall under Special Containment Procedures, and can thus have fewer barriers to overcome. Andrea Adams and her suit. Professor Crow and his projects. This Foxx fellow. The Alexandra A.I.. Chelsea Elliott. Everett Mann. Kiryu's butterflies…"

"Technically, myself," Moose said dryly. "Given that I'm a Type Blue." Nardieu and Cortez looked blank. "GOC term. Means once upon a time I cast a whole lot of magic spells. In case any of you didn't know that I'm ex-Hand." She took a drink. "And there's you, Bright."

"No," Bright said. "Neither of us are anomalous weapons, or Alpha-9 assets. I'm here in my capacity as Personnel Director. And I think it's for the best if this… task force… stays small. It's already bigger than Omega-7 ever was."

"Weren't you on Omega-7?" Nardieu asked.

"No, I was not," Bright said. "As Personnel Director, I was part of the group dealing with new additions to Omega-7."

"Omega-7 had so few anomalies, though." Nardieu frowned.

"Yes," Bright said. "There was a reason for that. Just like this task force already has too many anomalies. They're probably going to give us more, but we don't need more. At all."

"But—"

"It's a fairly big vote of confidence that they assigned us Cain," Aktus said, interrupting. "You know how the Council feels about him."

Gillespie looked down at her glass. "I can't say I'm sure that we should return to putting anomalies in charge of anomalies, besides the obvious exception of Dr. Bright. But Iris? One would think with a project like this, we could find someone with more experience to act as Team Leader."

"I agree," Bright said. "But it doesn't matter. The order to put Iris in charge comes from above. Nothing we can do about it."

"She's only in charge of a team," Aktus said. "She's not in charge of Alpha-9. That's us."

"I really think there's no cause for worry here," Nardieu said. "Just look at those videos. She's a perfect fit. I think—"

"We know what you think." Bright didn't look up from his food. "You're practically drooling."

"Excuse me?" Nardieu clenched his fist around his fork. "Are you accusing me of unprofessional behavior? Because if so, I want—"

"No one's accusing anyone of anything," Light cut in. "It was a bad joke. Right, Jack?"

"The worst," Bright agreed.

"Good. Now that's settled, is there anything else?"

"There's another issue on the table," Nardieu said. "Iris… asked to see the 'new Bowe'." He looked at Light. "I think that means you."

Light looked down at her tablet. There was a video clip still playing there, in which a pixelated blonde figure plunged her hand through a polaroid picture, and the ghost of a hand re-emerged several feet away. "I know," she said. "I should have done it sooner."

"I'm not sure we should expand our personal contact with these anomalies so quickly," Cortez said, frowning.

Light shrugged. "Maybe not. But if we can't trust Iris, this project was doomed from the cradle. I'll talk to her."

"Charles Vaux? You're Light's secretary."

Vaux looked up at the attractive woman in the slate-grey suit, who had appeared in the room across from him. "Oh— Agent Adams. I didn't know you were here."

"Oh, sorry. Old habit," Adams said. "What's your dog's name?"

"Mango."

"It's cute. Foundation bred?"

"Yep. She was trained for security and then as a sniffer, but… Too friendly."

"I can tell. She looks like a sweetie. May I?" When Vaux nodded, Adams leaned down and gave the pit bull a friendly pat on the head. Mango grinned and panted, then rolled over onto her back for a well-appreciated tummy rub.

Vaux smiled serenely. "Did you want something, Agent?"

"I had a question about your boss," Adams said, kneeling beside the dog.

Vaux frowned. "About Light?"

"Let me get to the point. You know what Tav-666 is."

"I do," Vaux said.

"You know what our job is."

"Of course."

"Alright. We're aware that you arrange some kind of medical service for Dr. Light on a semi-regular basis, often after she's taken some time off work. You've been careful to keep it off the files. This raises some concerns."

Vaux frowned. "I'm not at liberty to discuss my boss's medical issues."

"She on drugs? Painkillers, something stronger?" No response. Adams charged on. "Charles… can I call you Charles?"

"No," Vaux said.

"All right, then. Mister Vaux, as far as we know, Clef and I are the

first ones to learn about this. If she's got something going on, we need to know, because there are people out there who can find out and use this against her."

"Ask her yourself."

"She pregnant?"

Vaux was stony-faced.

"Look," Adams said, "You tell me right now, just between two coworkers, and you won't get in trouble for this. Your boss *might* not get in trouble for this. Hell, we may not even have to report this to the Overseers, depending on what it is. But if you don't tell me under the table, then I need to do an official investigation. And then people will get in trouble."

Vaux twitched. Mango sat upright, ears low, shoulders raised. She pulled away from Adams and trotted over to Vaux's side, resting her head on his knee. Vaux gently reached out a hand and patted his beloved dog's head. "Dr. Light has a mental health condition that occasionally causes her to become confused about reality," he said slowly. "This is in her medical file."

Adams nodded.

"The effects of this can be similar to mind-altering substances the Foundation employs. So for… a while, Light's been having me run tests for amnestics after her episodes. More recently, drugs and poisons. Either way, you can imagine why she'd prefer not to let the council — or anyone — know."

Adams nodded again, slowly. "Ever had a positive result?"

"Not yet. But Alpha-9's only been in the works for a month."

Adams nodded yet again. "If you ever get a hit, let me know."

Vaux smiled, hand wrapped around Mango's leash, the very picture of compliance. "You'll be the second person I tell."

They took Iris from her containment cell early in the morning, and marched her across the Site and into an office she'd never seen before. The office was barren, but the furniture was nice, and the room large. Someone important, then. A director.

Iris knew that Site-17, like its big sister Site-19, had offices for far many more directors than just the current person in charge. The Foundation's biggest sites couldn't be run by just one person. Last she'd heard, Site-17 didn't even have a single official director. So this could be anyone.

Once Iris was seated, a black man holding the leash of a service dog, opened the office door. A white woman entered behind him. She recognized neither.

"Iris," said the woman. "It's very good to meet you." She was short, scarred, unsmiling, had her hair pulled back out of her face. She could have been from the military, but if this was who Iris suspected, she wasn't.

"You're Bowe," Iris said.

"Not quite." The woman looked surprised, and almost smiled. "I'm Sophia Light. I'm the director of Alpha-9."

They shook hands firmly but briefly.

"I've heard of you," Iris said. "You're a researcher."

"I have been," said Light. She sat. "I have a background in microbiology and infectious diseases. For the last, hm, three years, I've been the director of a small site up in Svalbard."

Those islands north of Norway, Iris recalled. She'd been there. "Do you have polar bears up there?"

"Now and then. The site is mostly underground, so it's not an issue." Light paused. "My assistant told me I should have them trained as guards. As they say in research files, 'This was not attempted.'"

"I could be wrong, but— I don't think there was a site there, when I was in Omega-7."

Pandora's Box had gone there once, and since there hadn't been a local site, they'd flown into Longyearbyen. She'd wandered the streets with the other humans on the team, past the colored houses and flying metal tramways. Sharp, smooth brown mountains and the smell of the sea.

Able had stayed with the plane. He didn't do tourism.

"You're right," said Light. "Svalbard is one of a dozen multi-object sites constructed in the last five years."

Iris took that in. "O5-10 told me that they're finding anomalies at a record rate."

"We have to put them somewhere."

Iris nodded. There was silence for a moment.

Light spoke again. "How, um. What do you think of the training so far?"

"I, uh." Iris stopped. What did she think about it? "It's, uh. I like having my camera back. And all this new technology is amazing. Digital televisions. iPhones."

Light nodded. "What about your recent difficulties with your ability?"

"I don't know." She kind of wished she were back in her cell. It was a thought that had been intruding often lately — she didn't want it, but there with her blankets and books and the heater turned up to a comfortable level, just her — there in her cell, there in her box — it was a strange thought.

She pushed it away, suddenly tired. "Does it matter? I'm not faking it. I know I'm not getting out and I've spent most of my life here now. That I can remember. I'm not trying to get out, I just want to know. Does this team really need me?"

"I don't want to add too much pressure, but you are the reason the team exists. What you can do has inspired the whole project."

"That— that— that's not—" Iris sputtered and cut off, and couldn't

keep from shuddering. "That's *too much*."

Light raised her hands. "Sorry," she said. "That's. Not quite what I meant."

"Isn't it? You brought all of this together, because you knew I would do— I mean, you thought I could—"

She didn't want to finish any of those thoughts *here, now*. Iris launched herself out of her chair and paced the length of the office. She half expected the guards from outside to rush in and restrain her. Director Light twitched, but didn't otherwise react.

"Iris," Light said, slowly. "What I mean to say is yes. Alpha-9 does need you."

"Why?"

Light sighed. "Because you're the only anomalous survivor of Omega-7. Because you represent what might have been, the first time, if we'd done things *right.* Because you know what this is like, in a way no one else does. Because there is no one else quite like you in the Foundation. We have to have someone, and you're the best someone we have. We— I— want to help you."

"Help me what? Perform better in the field?"

"That or anything else," said Light. "What do you need? What do you want to know?"

"That's a hell of a question." Iris stopped pacing, and took a few breaths. "When Adams took me out, last month, to those bars. That was real, right?"

"What?"

"It wasn't staged. I mean— No, no, of course it wasn't." Iris ducked her head into her hand, clenched her teeth.

"I chewed Clef out myself afterward," said Light. "Not that Adams shouldn't have done it. She should have told me, and I would have told her to bring additional security. But it certainly *happened*. What

makes you say that?"

"It felt fake," Iris said. She lifted her head from her hands, and stared at a spot on the wall instead.

"No, go on," said Light.

"Like, um." Iris swallowed. "I've spent the last seven years in a box. It's a fancy box, but it's not the real world. And then suddenly you need my help with something, I get dragged out and get to see the real world again, and… it feels like somewhere fictional. A movie set. The moon."

Light nodded. "Not that different from here."

"I don't know. Maybe I was too excited for it. Maybe I just thought it would be different."

Light nodded, slowly. "Sometimes when the Foundation recruits new staff, they give them Class-A amnestics. Wipes them clean. They claim it's cleaner, easier to train the agents, reduces possible objections to the line of work. It happened to friends of mine. I've never liked that approach."

Iris' gut twisted. She'd heard about that, but no one had really wanted to discuss it. Certainly not a director. "Because it's horrific?"

"I don't even think it's very *effective*. To be a part of the Foundation, you have to protect. To be good at it, you have to have a vested interest in the world out there. Know that it's worth fighting for. When you take that away, they're just following orders."

Iris sighed. "Good thing your agents aren't your *objects*, then."

"They are as of now," said Light. "Iris, we need to do better by you. And we, the people in power, need to make that work. Hell, even if your abilities went away tomorrow, you have insight into Omega-7 and where it went wrong. You know what we've done wrong by SCPs before. So, listen. It'll be alright."

"How can you be sure?"

"I can't," Light said. "But I can do everything in my power to make it so. And so can you."

"How?"

"You're not just an object," Light said. "We didn't need to make you the leader of an Alpha-9 team. We chose to do that partly because it's where you would be if you were any other agent." She smiled. "Well, any other agent with your unique capabilities. My point is — You're part of the Foundation, as much as we are."

Iris didn't know if she believed Light — in fact, she didn't. This seemed like another manipulation, even if Light herself was genuine. They'd manipulated Able, too, given him control over the makeup of the Omega-7 strike team, let him strut around Site-17, indulged his homicidal desires, so long as he was useful, until they couldn't keep him entertained any longer, and she…

No, no. Don't think about that again. Not now.

Did it matter either way? She didn't know how she felt about all this. Besides tired.

"What are you going to do?" asked Iris.

"First, you're going to take a break. From anything testing-related. Even if you come back and it's back to square one, that's fine. We all need time off."

"I thought you researcher types never did that." Iris almost smiled. Even knowing that it was a ploy for her favor, well, it kind of worked. She could use a respite.

Light leaned back in her chair, fiddling with a pen and staring off. "As for the near future… I have a few ideas."

"Like what?"

"Perhaps you'd like to meet an old friend?" Light asked.

"Iris, this is SCP-073."

"Hi," she said, nervously. She hadn't seem him since… since.

"Hello, Iris," Cain said. He smiled gently. His eyes looked so old and sad, despite the youth of his other features. He was like *him*, but older, more worn, more warm.

Director Moose was watching them closely. Iris glanced at her. She gave a little shrug. "I know the two of you have met already," she said. "073 is going to be helping us. Among other things, he's going to be interviewing everyone after each mission. Get impressions of how things went, what things went well, and where we could improve."

"And remember," she said.

"We've done this dance before," Cain said. "The tempo's changed, but it's still our song."

"How have you been?" she asked, her voice low and soft. Her eyes stung slighly.

"I've been well. Not terribly busy. I like the quiet. I missed you, though."

Suddenly, the tears fell freely, and she embraced the old man. "I missed you too," she said. "I never got to say goodbye. Not even to you."

He held her, awkwardly at first, then more warmly, or as warmly as his metal arms would allow. "It's okay. We're here now."

"Ready," Iris said.

"Begin," the researcher replied.

She dropped to one knee, raised the camera, and braced her elbow against her knee, thumbing the telephoto control as she did so. A quick snap of the shutter button, and she ducked back behind the wall, waiting for a few eternal seconds as the image downloaded to the iPad.

Once it did, she could identify the keys on the hook. The image was a bit blurry, but she was still able to make out the room numbers on the green tabs. She pushed her hand through the screen and gently unhooked the key labeled "207" from the pegboard. Slowly, carefully, she carried it across the room and dropped it into the mail slot of the hotel room door.

A man in black tactical gear grabbed the keys before they could even hit the ground. Silently, the team made their way up to the second floor of the shoot house, pausing at each door to check for ambush.

Finally, they made it to the motel room marked "207." The point man raised a small video camera up to the window, swore softly. "Claymore mine attached to door," he whispered over the comm.

"Send me the still," Iris said.

"Wait one… transmitting," the point man whispered.

Iris thumbed a control on her iPad, waited a moment for the picture to download. Sure enough, there was indeed a claymore mine facing the doorway, rigged to a wire attached to the door. "Damn," she whispered. "I don't think I can disarm the trigger."

"Should we go loud?" the point man asked.

"Wait one," Iris whispered back. She searched the photo carefully and smiled. "Get me a zoom shot of the full-length mirror," she said. "I can see the back of the claymore from there…"

They were standing in Nardieu's office.

"It worked?" asked Cortez.

"It worked," said Nardieu. "Very clever."

Light shrugged. "Her meeting Cain was going to happen anyways."

"So you allowed it to happen at such a time that Iris thought she was being rewarded," Cortez said. "For once, Nardieu and I are in

agreement— that is clever."

Light snorted. "That's too clever for me. I may have *suspected* it would help. And expedited the process."

"I'm just glad it worked," said Nardieu. He threw up his arms. "We finally have a success under our belt— Last Hope will fly yet. Could I offer either of you a drink? No? Well, I'm meeting my secretary, you'll have to excuse me. Let me know if you need me."

They watched Nardieu wave off a security escort as he left.

"Are all the Site-17 directors this unprotective of their space?" asked Light.

"Not really," says Cortez. "But you have to have a certain amount of trust to co-direct a site like Seventeen. And as far as he trusts me, he trusts you even more."

"Really?" said Light. "Why?"

"Because you're directing his dream task force. And you're famous."

"Oh. Jesus. Director Cortez, I just wanted to say that I understand your reservations about Alpha Nine. They're absolutely reasonable. But I want to thank you for your help and resources. Your expertise."

Cortez shrugged and chewed on her lip. "If the Fivers weren't breathing down my neck, it might be different."

"Of course. Nonetheless. Also, sorry for turning your site into a zoo."

"You said it'll move out eventually?"

"One way or another." said Light. "I'm working on it. Have a good evening, Cortez."

"And you, Dr. Light." Cortez sat down to go through files. Light let herself out.

"Escort to Personnel, please," she told the guard outside the door. Her own two guards, recruited from separate sites and personally

recommended by O5-7, did unfortunately have to sleep. If Vaux was around when she got there, she'd have him take notes. If not, half an hour on the treadmill might do her good. Her head was buzzing.

Their draft list of anomalies was ready now. It wasn't set in stone yet, and even if the anomalies themselves agreed, there were directors and researchers and other interested parties to assuage.

"Elevator or stairs, Director?" asked the guard.

"Stairs," said Light. It was just one story, if she remembered correctly. She'd give Clef or Adams— no, definitely Adams— a crack at the new recruits, too. Let No Name Given prepare. God knows they'd need it.

Something brought her out of her reverie— the guard was behind her, and walking too slow, or maybe too quickly. Light glanced around, suddenly aware that she was a small woman alone with a larger man behaving unexpectedly. Aside from the two of them, the stairwell was completely empty.

Her pace must have changed— he knew that she knew.

The guard muttered "This is for Asher," before kicking her down the stairs.

She tumbled and bounced. Her skull clattered on concrete. Stars flickered in her vision as she slammed into the wall at the bottom of the landing. It almost hid the jagged line of his tactical knife.

The guard's footsteps were heavy and measured on the stairs, coming closer. She wheezed and coughed. When he got close, she reared onto her knees and knocked him backward.

Back on her feet. He grabbed her left wrist, the one in a brace. *Oh, no—*

Light's brain flooded with adrenaline. She suddenly found herself cringing and saying "Nono*nonono*–" out loud, which was highly embarrassing—

— then wonder of wonders, maybe out of surprise, the guard

actually let go—

By the time she re-oriented, he had moved in and grabbed her upper arm, but that was manageable. She stomped onto his instep (*he wears boots so it won't break bone, but he's distracted*), kneed his groin (*his grip loosens*), swung a fist lazily at his head, and reached into her pocket. He reached up to catch the blow—

— and Light pepper-sprayed the shit out of him.

(*Run, now— guards are trained with capsaicin spray so I have maybe ten seconds before—*)

Light fished in her pocket again and pulled out a small bracelet made of blue feathers, courtesy of Director Tilda David Moose.

She put it on, and turned invisible.

At 6:38 PM local time, Site Security was alerted that one of its guards has gone AWOL and attacked a member of senior staff. They received this alert when said member of senior staff materialized outside their office. The rogue operative was found and apprehended.

Sophia Light was assigned to a saferoom, and her personal guards summoned. A doctor inspected her, and she fielded a quick call from a distracted O5-7, who asked about her health and sounded like she was on the phone with two people at once. Cortez checked in as well, and apologized, which Light was rather touched by. Security for Site-17 launched an immediate investigation.

"Look for Asher," Light told them. "He mentioned an Asher."

Light waited in the saferoom for three hours, and tried not to completely space out, with mixed results. Her guards would understand, but it was embarrassing— and what if she couldn't trust them either? That had been *entirely too close a call*. While she grappled with paranoia, Site Security swarmed out to gather information: on the guard, on his plans, on potential allies or traps at the site.

Then they brought her what they found.

His name was Robert Blankenship, Level Two, and he left a suicide note in his room. He didn't expect to survive his errand. In the letter, he described his brother, Asher Blankenship, recruited at the same time from the Navy in Whidbey Island, Washington, in 1999. They spent most of their careers with the Foundation in different places, but found ways to stay close nonetheless. Asher was an incredibly skilled marksman, Robert was merely adequate- both were extremely loyal.

Asher was recruited to Mobile Task Force Omega-7.

Able tore him in half.

The psych department thought Robert had worked through the trauma. They noted that he was assuaged when Omega-7 was shut down forever.

Light grimaced. "So when he heard it was being reformed—"

"He felt it was necessary to… take some kind of action." Site-17's security director came personally. He was a short, chagrined-looking man who couldn't stop picking at his shirt collar.

"How sure are you of all of this? If he wasn't working alone—"

"Everything checks out. He wasn't, uh, well, all the weapons he was carrying were standard issue. Knew where you were— that was his clearance too. He used a scrubber to, uh, hide his image from the cameras once he went rogue, but it was a Foundation standard scrubber. So we could de-scrub it easily. The one he was wearing went missing from the site armory four days ago, which he had access to."

"His plans after me?"

"He was going to take out as much of Alpha Niner's infrastructure as possible and, uh, 'make it on his own.' His words."

Light sighed. "So he was working entirely on his own. That's… some relief. I do appreciate your diligence. Do another loyalty check on

your current guards when you can, please. I'll be changing my own safety habits. If he were a better assassin, I would be *very dead* right now."

“Director? What should we do with him?”

“Who?”

“Robert Blankenship. We’re going to let him hang for a few more days to see if he says anything else. After that, uh, what do you want?”

Light squeezed her eyes shut. "Who else knows?"

"Nobody outside this room and three of my best staff. Word may still get out, though."

That sealed it. "Policy is clear. Termination."

The security director looked startled. “As you say, director.”

Maybe it was too far. She could have been merciful, but honestly, what did he expect? Seven’s guards flanked her as she went toward the saferoom exit. One of them held the door open. *If you play with fire…*

She stopped. “Did Asher Blankenship have any other brothers?”

“Uh… No more siblings.”

“Robert, or anyone else from Omega-7? Do they have living family or romantic connections at the Foundation?”

He gave her a long look. “I don’t know, Director. I’ll have a list sent to you.”

How long must that list be? Would it even be enough? What about friends? Co-workers? Light shut her eyes. *She'd* be on that list. Several times over.

“Thank you. That will be all.”

In His Own Image: Epilogue

September 21, 2011:

Lament awoke with a start at the shifting at the door. He'd be thinking. Dreaming again. It wasn't good, but it was what it was. He raised the gun at the door, glancing at the spent cartridges so he'd know exactly how many he had in there in case he needed one for himself or a friend. The matte black uniform of one of the site security forces made him relax again for a moment.

"Is anyone alive in there?"

Lament debated answering, but chances were that they'd torch the room to be safe. 940 outbreaks were best answered with fire. Site-37 had been entirely immolated and rebuilt, but the infrastructure of 19 would mean that a room by room clearing would be necessary.

"Yo!" he called.

And ten minutes later, he was clear, better armed, and fed for the first time in two days. He was escorted from that wing of the site without incident, and as he sat in the infirmary, leaning against the wall while the genuine injuries were treated, he found himself wanting to stand up and walk off again. But he didn't. He curled up against the wall, closed his eyes, and slept.

Lament was woken by a hard shake to his shoulder, his hand immediately flying to his hip, reaching for his gun to shoot and kill immediately until he looked up and recognized the face. He let out a slow breath, slumping down against the wall. "Fuck, Dodridge."

"Get up, man. We're due for debriefing."

"To hell with that," Lament pushed himself up slowly and leaned

against the wall. "This is why I hate active duty…" he complained, scratching his arm and nodding to Dodridge that he was ready, following him down the hall to the mess for coffee and another meal. The two of them ate quickly, barely talking.

"You still talking to the Erdrich girl at twenty-three?" Lament asked.

"Yeah," Dodridge said flatly.

Lament chewed his sandwich. "She hot?"

"Yeah, she's hot."

"You thinking of transferring back to security for a while?"

Dodridge shrugged. Lament nodded. And they finished the meal in silence.

The debriefing took maybe forty minutes. It was a regular discussion. When were you two alerted? How long did it take you to get to the site? Why did you split? Were you able to reach the site nuclear device, Agent? Were you able to successfully reseal the lock on the 682 wing, Agent? Were you, Agent? Did you, Agent? Why didn't you, Agent? Agent? Agent? Agent? Blah blah blah.

It wasn't until the end of the meeting that Lament realized that Djoric was one of the men on the panel. He waved at him. Djoric made eye contact for a moment, looked away, then left. It made him remember Sandy again, remember the times the two of them had sat together, laughing and bouncing ideas off of each other. Remember the look on 106's face as his friend was pulled into the blackness of the pipes. Remember how he always counted his bullets now.

Dodridge broke the silence. "You wanna get a beer, Lament?"

"Nah, man. I'm good."

"Suit yourself. I'm getting shit faced," Dodridge said.

Lament laughed. "Tell Alice I said hello when you talk to her."

"Yeah, whatever, asshole."

Lament smirked, Dodridge flipped him off, and he was gone. He stood in the hall for a minute, wondering if Sophie was still stationed here. They'd lost track of each other after he'd gone active, but that was just how the job was. It was why he knew Dodridge would go to Site-23 full time. And he'd end up… He didn't know what.

He sighed and turned down the hall, walking down it aimlessly, but unsurprised when he found himself again outside the office he'd hid in for two days. He pushed into it.

The cleaning crew had already been through, putting things back where they belonged. Gears' desk was back in position, as well as his old one. It feel eerily… the same. Too close. Too similar. It felt like four years ago.

"Agent."

He turned, looking over his shoulder as his hand dropped nervously to his sidearm, resting on it for a moment as the familiarity of the voice sank in.

"Dr. Gears."

He looked the same. Bald pate. Smooth, expressionless face. Clear, cold eyes.

"I understand you took refuge here during the outbreak."

"Yes, sir," Lament said.

Gears nodded to him, then walked past him to his desk, sitting down at it and opening a file. "If you have time, there's a mild, level two threat I would like to consult with you on."

"Am I cleared for that, sir?" Lament asked.

When Gears looked up at him, he imagined a smile. It was a habit he'd picked up. Implying the emotions that were never there.

"I can secure the clearance, if you wish, Agent."

Lament nodded. "Of course, Doctor."

"Very well. I can meet with you after lunch today."

Lament nodded, feeling the kind of familiarity that left a pit in your gut. He looked at the man, wondering if his new assistant had died in the attack. Killed themselves like Iceberg had. Run like him.

"Of course, Doctor. Maybe I can talk to my supervisors at Site14 and see about a temporary reassignment, if you're in need of assistance."

Gears didn't respond, but then, Lament hadn't expected him to. He turned, pushing through the door and into the hall, looking both ways and then walking toward the arboretum. Maybe Sophie *was* still stationed here…

Gears watched the agent leave, wishing he could have done… something. Anything at that moment. He was actually… glad to have him back. Thrilled, even. But it never touched his face. He never smiled. Never congratulated him.

Nothing.

He unlocked and opened his bottom, left drawer, the one that was nearly empty except for a few classified memos. It was his 'destroy' file, a place where he kept things that were sensitive and needed to be completely expunged. There was only one file there that had lasted longer than a week. He quietly reached into the drawer, pulling out a plastic bag. There was a piece of paper inside it, a splatter of blood across the faded letterhead. He looked down at it and read it again, as he had a hundred times before.

> It happened. It finally happened. I was watching Agent Shelly walk down the hall, doing that one hip thing.
>
> I just watched, then posted my work to Records. I didn't drool, or make a pass, or anything. I felt it, I felt it inside, the vague desire, but there was no reason to act on it. I'm not even upset about it, really, just…nothing.
>
> They trust me with too much, mainly because nobody

else will take it, or maybe that's been a part of it too. I looked into the files. I dug back and sent requests for the old hard copies. I know what happened, and what they want.

He's trapped, inside, he can feel, but not react to it. What could be a worse hell? And what could be better for them?

They know what they're doing. The personality type. The ones who are susceptible. His was an accident. I'm not letting it happen to me on purpose.

I know you'll be the one to find this. Tell them I'm sorry. Please? And if you've still got a soul in there, warn the next guy.

-Iceberg

Gears stared at the note for a long moment, and for an instant, he was almost certain he felt the sensation of a tear rolling down his cheek, but when he raised his hand to it, it was dry. Bone dry.

He dropped the note back into the bottom drawer and stood. He looked over at the desk that had sat empty for the past four years. And he felt regret.

But it didn't show.

In His Own Image: Interlude 1

August 18, 2007:

Lament's fingers slid over the chromium frame for a moment. It had been expensive, but the joke—which he knew wouldn't be laughed at—was worth it. His first failure for a final hurrah. He let a slight smirk slip over his lips, looking down at the picture, at the smile that looked almost abnormal, and laughed.

Lament wanted to think 'The look on his face…' or something similarly reflective, but he knew that it would be the same as it always was. Blank. Calculating.

He pulled out the wrapping paper, and slowly began folding it around the picture with a half smile, humming happy birthday.

« **Part 1** | **HUB** | **Part 2** »

In His Own Image: Interlude 2

July 7, 2005:

"Hey!"

Lament jumped at his desk, turning and looking up at the woman. Long, lightly curling, brown hair. Constant smirk. Mirthy eyes.

"Heya, Sophie," he said, grinning as he stood. The smile came to his face easy. It always seemed to around her. "Hey, listen, I got you something…"

"Oh…? Gifts? On a first date?"

"It's just lunch!" he defended. It was a date.

"Regardless, sir. Most unbecoming." Still that smirk. God, he loved that smirk.

"Well, I couldn't pay for the meal, since we're on base, so…" He pulled out a clear, glass vial, passing it to her carefully.

"Someone told me you like… ctenophores."

She looked down at it, then up at him, her face registering a mix of shock and joy.

"Best. Date. Ever."

Hehe. It was a date.

« **Part 2** | **HUB** | **Part 3** »

In His Own Image: Interlude 3

July 5, 2004:

It was an unholy din that surrounded the pair, people shouting and clamoring. There was a fifteen minute window when Site19 could have the yearly photo made, and currently, Dr. Glass was having a hard time getting people to listen, much less position themselves.

"C'mon, guys! Please! This shouldn't take long if you'll all just get into your places."

Lament found himself smiling. Waving at some friends as he worked toward the left of the room, moving to stand behind Gears' shoulder.

When he looked around, he saw Agatha, giving him a significant look. He looked back at her, tilting his head and shrugging, giving her one of those—'hell do you WANT me to do'—looks. She gave it to him again, and he sighed, tapping Gears' shoulder.

"Sir?" he asked.

"Yes, Agent," Gears replied without turning around.

"Smile, sir."

"And what purpose would that serve, Agent?"

He took a breath.

"Smiling would serve to put the others at ease, sir. As this is a social function for the entire site, your smiling could aid the others in the establishment of a more efficient and normalized workplace, something that I believe your own reports have called essential when dealing with the unnatural world in which we work."

It was obviously prepared. Rehearsed. Practiced.

Gears turned and looked at him. After a moment, the corners of his lips inclined in a corpse-like rictus that never touched his eyes.

"Is this sufficient?"

Lament found himself grinning now. Genuinely.

"Yes, sir."

"Everyone!" shouted Glass. "Say… Butterflies!"

"Butterfliiieeessss," said the chorus.

« **Part 3** | **HUB** | **Part 4** »

In His Own Image: Interlude 4

February 19, 2009:

"He. He. He. He. Hee."

Lament sat up in his bed in a cold sweat, the laugh still echoing in his ears. He closed his eyes tightly for a moment, forcing the sound out of his head, then swinging his legs over the side and walking toward the shower.

He stepped into it, letting the cold water course over his back, feeling it slowly begin to warm as the echoing nightmare finally, slowly stopped…

He opened his eyes and stared at the wall. For a moment, he was almost certain that the porcelain of the shower wall was giving way, handprints emerging from it like a child's hand playing with their blankets. Mocking hands that would reach for his throat and squeeze the life out of him, but he wouldn't die. No. He'd live while the owners of those hands played. Played and laughed. "He. He. He. He. Hee."

As he briefly considered reaching for his sidearm on the sink, the effect faded. For a moment, he still considered reaching for it, for another purpose, and when he realized it, he slumped down the wall of the tub, sitting under the water until it had long run cold, staring weakly at the drain.

Wishing he didn't remember, but glad that he did.

« **Part 4** | **HUB** | **Part 5** »

In His Own Image: Interlude 5

August 16, 2007:

Agent Lament stood in the mess of Site19, staring out the window and looking at the landscape, part of his mind making an effort to register that the world was, in fact, still there. That everyone was actually alive. That it had happened. His stomach was twisted in pained, difficult knots, and he really just wanted privacy. But he wasn't alone.

He could hear the two men, both low staff, talking across the mess from him. Their voices carried, but he wasn't really paying attention.

"What's that guys problem? He onna them montaukers?"

"Nah," the first one said. "He works with Gears."

The other one laughed quietly. "So? Gears seems like uh good guy."

"Good as any of 'em, ennyway."

"Well, hell, then. I'ma go ask him what his problem is…"

A sound of a slight scuffle somewhere behind Lament brought his attention back to the room. He looked at their reflection in the glass, the taller one holding the other's arm solidly in his grip.

"Don't," the first one said quickly, his voice dropping. "Lesson number one about workin' around these guys: there's some things you don't want on your conscience."

« **Part 5** | **HUB** | **Part 6** »

In His Own Image: Interlude 6

August 18, 2007:

"I'm sorry… I really… really am…" Lament said, swallowing to keep his voice from cracking. "You're… You're like a father to me… You don't understand that I… that I just… I can't do this anymore… I've asked to be transferred to active duty. Site14."

Gears looked at him, his face blank and expressionless.

"I… Anyhow…" Lament placed a small, square package on the desk in front of the balding man. "Happy Birthday."

« **Part 6** | **HUB** | **Part 7** »

In His Own Image: Part 1

September 19, 2011:

The blood, thankfully not his own, rolled down Lament's arm as he shook the woman again, trying to get her attention. It was a lost cause, he suspected. Judging by her eyes, her expression…. Severe shock. And unfortunately, he didn't have the time to carry her out. With a sigh, he stood up again, leaving her there and opening the heavy, metal door. He peered out, hearing the creak and groan of the shifting walls, wincing as he heard the snap of a shearing bolt.

He worked his way down the hall slowly, now, glancing over his shoulder occasionally as he kept his revolver at his side. He grimaced slightly, wishing he'd brought his other sidearm—the one that held more bullets—but the reliability of the old gun, the feel of it in his hand, gave him a level of comfort that the other couldn't. Dodridge would have yelled at him for it, but there are times that comfort and capability with a weapon are more important than flat-killing power. He believed that. Right up until he heard the screeching sound, followed by a long, chitinous appendage entering the hall ahead of him, the shadow of a dangling corpse with eight legs moving over the flat metal walls.

It took him less than a second to realize what it was, about two to assess the area completely, and only one for him to decide on the office to his left. He tried the door, finding it locked, then took a step back, kicking it hard and getting inside.

The red, glowing emergency lights were all he had to see by, and as he shoved the desk against the door, he heard the thing scratching at it. A moment later, he pushed the filing cabinet on top of the desk, upending it with the adrenaline surge that he was riding, then positioning himself against the far wall, taking a deep breath and double checking his sidearm. Then waiting.

Waiting, waiting, waiting.

He let the breath out when the scratching stopped, leaning against the wall, sliding down it and looking around the room. It took him a moment to realize where he was. It'd been a while since he'd worked with the man—a promotion followed by a reassignment had taken him away from Site19 in 2006—but he recognized the accouterments. The spartan elements were the first indication, but the three pictures, all upended and in the floor now, were the only other indication he needed. He looked down into the face of the passive, bald man, and immediately regretted his choice of hiding place.

Gears.

September 13, 1997:

Everything was fresh and new at Site19, he thought. Everything was… exciting! There was so much hustle and bustle. People moving around, smiling, laughing. Some looking serious, or angry, or—in the case of the four other Junior Agents he was standing with—extremely, overwhelmingly nervous.

They looked up at the man wearing spectacles and an obnoxious Hawaiian shirt under a lab coat, and Lament wondered, with just a touch of gnawing trepidation, why he was grinning at the lot of them quite so brightly.

"Hello!" The man spoke in a voice that instantly reminded Lament of a professor he'd had in college. That man had been in love with literature, and every action he performed was done through that same overwhelming rapture with the written word. Lament decided that he liked him immediately.

"I'm Dr. Djoric," the man explained. "Welcome to Site19! I'm supposed to be showing you around and letting you get a feel for the place. The normal tour guide—her name is Agatha, you'll meet her soon—is currently dealing with a pregnancy or something. So here I am instead! We're going to have a lot of fun!"

Lament wasn't convinced that it was going to be fun at all, but it actually turned out to be. He met a ton of people, including the legendary Dr. Clef, who seemed mostly… bored. And Senior Agent Strelnikov told them some stories over lunch in the mess, mostly warnings, and they got to meet Lombardi, who Lament and one of the other new guys—short fellow by the name of Sandlemyer—had heard about, but no one else had. He honestly felt a little… star struck.

After all, when you're in the Foundation, the other members are the only ones you can really talk to about a lot of things. And when someone develops a reputation, everyone eventually gets to learn about it. Even if it is undeserved.

By the time Djoric brought the group back to the large, white arches and curved glass of the entrance hall, Lament was almost dizzy with the amount of information he'd been deluged in. He got a slip of paper with his on-site quarters listed; notes on where the mess, armory, and various reserves of equipment were; notes on scheduled days off… Then Djoric looked down at his clipboard, clicking his tongue as he turned the pages.

"Right, then. Primary assignments. Most of you will be working under a member of the Senior Staff for the next few months. Some of you will be stuck with them for the next few years. It all depends of how indispensable they think you are," he said, laughing a little. "Sandlemyer…" he said, looking down at the list. "You're assigned to me!" he said, laughing a little. "So… nice to meet you… again!"

Sandlemyer grinned a little bit, then nodded. "Lab Eleven, sir?" he asked. Djoric had shown them his lab with great enthusiasm.

Djoric grinned and nodded. "Simmons, you're going to… Kondraki. Have fun there," he said, looking up at the man, then back down again. Simmons didn't seem that bothered by that, Lament thought, but then, he had a PhD. He could probably expect some modicum of respect.

"Jones and Brown. You're both heading over to work with Strelnikov. Do what he says, exactly what he says, and you'll get out alive, huh?" he said, laughing slightly to set them at ease. It didn't seem to

work very well, though. Lament had heard that Site19's security force was a tough duty, and judging from their expressions, they'd heard the same.

Djoric looked down one last time, then frowned slightly, looking back up at Lament. "You don't have a doctorate or anything, do you?" he asked.

Lament shook his head. "No, sir," he said.

Djoric looked back down again, then shrugged and pushed that consolatory smile back to his face. "Guess he's gotten lonely since Iceberg left us," he said softly. "Or maybe it's just a mistake. Anyhow… uh… You're assigned to Gears."

Lament's eyebrow rose for a moment, wondering if this was a joke, and then the other one joined it as he moved from suspicion to surprise. "Are you serious, sir?" he asked.

"As serious as a grave," Djoric said, still smiling.

Lament decided, much later in his room, that he hadn't appreciated that comment.

In His Own Image: Part 2

February 11, 1998:

He smiled at the bald man, waving with his elbow because his hands were too full, then setting his cup on the edge of his desk. Coffee—black.

He carefully balanced the other man's drink, easing it down onto the porcelain coaster gently, then nodding to him. "Morning, Dr. Gears."

"Good morning, Agent," he replied flatly.

Lament walked to his desk, sitting down and pulling off the calendar's top page, looking down at the next one. He grinned. "You'll like this one, sir," he said, just a touch of humor in his voice. "Why do physicists make terrible lovers?"

Gears stared at him.

"Because they can find the position, but not the velocity. Or the velocity, but not the position," Lament grinned from ear to ear.

Gears nodded. "Schrodinger, I believe."

"Yes, sir."

"Have you finished your report on 106?" Gears asked.

Lament sighed. Swing and a miss. "No, sir, but I've got a few ideas…" he said quietly, leaning back to grab the file from his desk drawer.

Gears nodded slightly.

Lament pointed down at the schematic of the containment chamber. "I think we might be able to offset the corrosion if we actually suspend the cell," he started, laying it down open on his desk,

pulling out his notes. "Keep it away from most surfaces. Direct contact seems to be the surest method of extensive transition, so…" And he was off.

And Gears listened, expressionless as Lament rattled off the plan. Of the original bodies that they'd found, one of them was wearing a watch which had a chromium plated band, untarnished, and he thought that they might be able to line the inside of the cell with that, since it seemed to have decayed slower.

Gears nodded as he finished. "And the suspension? How would we be able to manage it without direct contact with the cell?"

Lament shrugged. "Magnetics?" he suggested.

Gears nodded for a moment. "We'll look into it," he said. "In the meantime, I need you to refocus your efforts. A slight conundrum for you."

"What is it, sir?"

"SCP-884."

April 27, 1998:

Lament had never heard of 884, and he quickly understood why. The Foundation barely had it in custody in the ninety-odd years that it had been known. Some group called "The Chaos Insurgency"—Lament had cackled over that name—kept stealing it. He looked down at the file, tilting his head slightly at the thickness of it, sighing.

"He's got to be kidding me…"

As luck would have it, the only one he needed to give a damn about was Dash-Four. The other pieces of the SCP, which had originally been a complete men's grooming kit, had been lost, destroyed, or stolen over the years. This last remaining piece was rather… innocuous. Just a mirror. It was nothing like the razor or the comb or even the shaving cup (all of which were far more interesting and far more dangerous). He read over the file a few times before pushing it to the side. He has to wonder what was special about it. And

moreso, why Gears had assigned it to him. It wasn't an immediate or serious problem, just… He looked up at the clock.

Almost 7:00 PM already. He sighed heavily, opening his desk drawer and laying the thick, heavily bound document into it. With a stretch, he stood up, walking to the door and out into the silent hall. It was after hours in the Site19 staff offices, and there were only a few people still there. Over the last few weeks, he'd become one of those few.

Gears wasn't a hard taskmaster. He never gave you anything you weren't capable of. There was just… so much of it. He was completely amazed that the man had been managing on his own for this long, much less with this level of work. It was almost… disconcerting. At times, he wondered if he was actually helping or not, but Glass had told him—in his last mandatory psychological review—that it was a normal response. He took his reassurances at face value, and continued plodding along.

"Hey! Lament!"

He turned, smiling a little when he saw Sandlemyer waving at him. "Wait up!"

The two of them had gotten to know each other fairly well. Djoric, who was still the other agent's supervisor, worked mostly with written effects and mild memetics, and Sandlemyer was training in the same field. He and Sandlemyer had already worked together once on a small project when Gears hadn't needed Lament for a couple of days. It had been… nice. He was working with someone normal and even chipper at times. It was the most relaxing two days he'd spent since he came to Site19.

"Hey, Sandy," he said. The Agent had taken well to the nickname Djoric had given him, and Lament occasionally wished he had as good a relationship with Gears as Sandlemyer had with the other doctor. "What's been going on in the library?"

Sandlemyer laughed. The library, as his office had come to be called, was just outside the holding room for every currently contained copy of *The Hanged King's Tragedy*, and just a few doors

away, dozens of other books that would rape your mind or flense your skin sat waiting for someone to look at them.

It made for a slightly disturbing aesthetic.

“Not much. I’ve been trying to figure out the containment on this thing…” he said.

And it started. Their ritual. They talked to each other at length, discussing the problems that either one were having with their respective work. When Lament mentioned the mirror, Sandlemyer just shook his head and laughed. “You’re going to have to get someone actually inside the Insurgency to figure that one out…” he said, a wide smirk on his face.

Lament just shrugged, suggested that he try setting up a telekill box —“It’s like this. If the book *is* emitting thoughts, this stuff will explode and destroy it, which is your orders, right?”—and then headed back toward his quarters.

He walked back into his quarters—which were finally looking lived in —and nearly kicked a folder that had been slipped under his door. There was a note attached to the top of it, and Lament read it with a frown, feeling his stomach slip away as he realized that he would be awake far later than he wanted.

“Chromium ineffective. Reassess.”

In His Own Image: Part 3

November 1, 1998:

Agent Lament noted, almost in passing, that it was All Saints Day as he tore off his calendar. He tossed the old day aside, chuckling slightly at the new one. "Scientists are all over the place in the sack," he started. "Watt did it with power, Joule did it with energy, Ohm did it with resistance, Pascal did it under pressure." He grinned.

"All notable contributors to their fields," Gears said dryly.

Lament nodded. He'd never heard a chuckle from across the office for the past year. Never saw a smile. People seemed to think that Gears was a robot or a cyborg or some sort of computer given human form. Lament preferred to think of him as just reserved and needing to come out of his shell a little.

It was a damn thick shell, though…

Lament popped his neck and looked at his inbox. Nothing too much. A couple of memos concerning some security issues that he briefly glanced over… Nothing too important. He sighed a little, shredding the ones that were marked as such, filing the others, then leaning back in his seat. His closed his eyes for a moment, thinking.

"Agent?"

Lament opened his eyes, looking at the bald doctor across his desk. That was a surprise. Normally, it was a process of file, assessment, and writing up proposals and schematics. Conversation was not something the two of them participated in. "Yes, Doctor Gears?" he asked.

"What was your previous assignment?"

Lament was caught a little off guard at that one. Hedge. "You should

know, sir. You received my personnel file."

"I did. Please, continue."

Lament nodded a little. "I was at Site-29, sir," he said. "Just outside San Matteo," he added. "I was working on… well… a few… different projects…" he finished, looking back at the large, thick file on the corner of his desk. Averting his eyes and putting wording together in his head.

"Such as?" Gears asked.

"Classified, sir," he said, hoping there was some protection in that. He didn't want to talk about 919. About his own face screaming at him. "I'm not free to talk about them."

Gears nodded slightly. "So are the ones you're working on with me," he said flatly. "Though the telekill box was rather ingenious."

And that was it. A pit formed in his stomach. Lament looked back up at Gears, then down again. "Yes, sir. Sorry, sir. But… I never shared anything above Level Two clearance, sir," he said quickly. "I'd never do anything like that…"

"Nevertheless, Agent."

Lament sighed, feeling thoroughly… chastened? He wasn't sure. It was the nameless feeling of having disappointed your father or mother. "Yes, sir."

And then, he and Gears didn't say anything for the next few hours, until Lament rose from his desk to go to lunch. "Can I get you anything, sir?" he asked.

"That will be unnecessary."

Lament sighed, nodded, and walked out of the office, realizing how… thoroughly he must have just disappointed the man, even though he'd never show it. He wondered if a transfer was coming somewhere in his future… Would he welcome that? The Assistant Researcher position he was occupying was never something he'd wanted, nor something that he was exactly qualified for. He felt out

of his element, and now, it felt worse.

He met up with Sandlemyer shortly later, as usual. They sat together with a gaggle of other assistants; Lament was the only one at the table not wearing a white labcoat, though. Sandy had accepted his promotion to Assistant Researcher as soon as he finished his degree through South Chayanne Point University, and with a smile, he and the others started chatting openly about their current projects. Lament was almost certain that the only reason he was "allowed" to sit with them was because he was working with Gears, and the blank faced doctor seemed to be a source of fascination to the rest of them. They worked in circuits, providing what details they could, omitting what they couldn't. And then, it came to his turn. He sighed and shook his head.

"I am currently not allowed to discuss my project load," he said, flatly and to the point. He picked up a french fry and ate it, trying to act nonchalant and feeling none of it.

Sandy laughed, but the man sitting next to him, a researcher named Chubert, laid down his fork and looked at Lament seriously. "You know, Lament… You should probably transfer out of there, soon…" he suggested.

Lament peered up at him. "Why?"

It was another man down the table who agreed. "Yeah. I mean, you don't wanna be Iceberg part two," he said seriously. "And a gag order was how that one started too."

"What?" Lament asked. Iceberg… Djoric had said something about an Iceberg…

"Doctor Iceberg," Chubert's eyes were still locked on Lament. "Gears' old assistant. Was with him for… God… almost a decade? Eight years, at least," he said solidly. "Explosives expert when he came in. Gears recruited him to work on a couple of projects, and then he liked him or something, and he kept him around."

Lament raised an eyebrow. "So?" he asked.

"He worked with him day after day for years," Chubert said. "Years. Do you have any idea what working with someone like him for that long will do to you?" Chubert paused for a moment. "How long have you been with him now, Lament?" he asked.

"Just over a year," he said.

"Good. Next review, tell them you want a transfer."

"They'll want to know why."

"Then tell them you don't want to blow your brains out like the last guy did."

To: O5-

August 1, 1997

After failure to report for his duties, I inspected the quarters of Dr. Iceberg. It was there that I found him deceased at his desk. Cause is believed to be a single gun shot wound to the roof of the mouth. The note present was confiscated and sealed, in accordance with containment procedures on SCP- . His body was cremated the following morning, and his non-personal belongings were redistributed in accordance with Foundation procedures.

-*Gears*

Lament laid the file back down on top of his desk. Ten years Iceberg had worked with Gears, and now…

He looked at the file. It was two pages. One that listed his qualifications, and the second one, a yellow, carbon paper copy of Gears' memo. This was it. This was ten years with Gears.

He leaned back in his chair, closing his eyes again, thinking. Thinking. Why hadn't he looked into this before? He wasn't qualified. He was barely qualified for the agent level work he'd been given.

He opened his drawer and stuffed the folder into it, not wanting to think about it. Not wanting to think about anything. What secrets had Iceberg expunged with that bullet? Lament took a shallow breath, then pulled out the paperwork he'd taken from Human Resources that afternoon, looking down at it.

He started filling out his transfer slip quickly, then folded it and stuffed it in an interoffice envelope. He dropped it in his outbox, and walked back to his quarters, his hands shaking.

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In His Own Image: Part 4

November 8, 1998:

"Denied, Agent."

Lament looked up at the panel of three doctors, swallowing and licking his lips slightly. "Ma'am?"

"Denied," she repeated. He only knew two of the three doctors seated at the table: Sorts and Vang. The woman in the middle was the one talking to him now, professional and stolid.

"Can I ask why?"

"No," she said simply, closing the file, looking to the side slightly, away from his face. She seemed almost motherly for a moment, like she was about to tell her child that the puppy he'd loved was in Heaven now, and no, it's alright, don't cry.

This wasn't fair. He'd followed all the correct channels. All the correct forms were filled out, everything *should* be cut and dry.

"Can I ask who, then?" he asked.

She didn't speak for a moment, and it was Sorts who leaned forward, piping up. "You're aware that supervisors have to approve a transfer?" he asked.

Lament ignored the question. "I'm not qualified to be a research assistant," he countered. "It was…" He chose his words carefully. "… an unfortunate set of circumstances that landed me there to begin with. All of you know that. I don't have the degree. I don't have the credentials."

"Jesus, son," muttered Sorts. "Will you pay attention?"

Lament's voice finally cracked as the anger found its way into it, the

placidity giving way to a harsh firmness. "Why the hell am I still here?"

"In this… particular case, an exception was made," the woman said. "The problem of your credentials has been overlooked, as well as your training. South Cheyenne is there, if you want to finish your doctorate, and there are several groups that can aid you in meeting the qualifications."

Frustration. Bitterness. "By *who*?"

She sighed and looked at Lament, pushing a bang back over her ear. The motherly look was back. "Isn't it obvious?" she asked. A small gavel smacked a small sounding block.

"This panel is dismissed."

He hadn't cooled down when he reached his office, and it took him a while to finally step inside of it. When he did, the anger flared back, and Lament found himself simply staring at Gears for a long moment before he finally spoke, keeping the edge out of his voice just barely. "Why?"

A placid and calm expression stared back as the doctor answered. "Your skills are more than sufficient for the work we've been doing, Agent."

"That's not what I *mean*, damnit!" he said, turning away even as he did, not wanting to look at him. Not wanting to see his face, content to imagine the disappointment and contrition that he knew would not be there. "You know what I mean."

Gears was silent for a moment. "You were a stop gap," he said flatly. "After Doctor Iceberg's incident—"

"Suicide."

"—incident, I needed someone who could pick up where he left off, which was the containment of SCP-106. That has been and will continue to be my primary concern. Containment is your specialization. Once we have arrived at a solution, if you still wish to

transfer, then I will not deny it."

Lament sat there, taking slow, deep breaths. He didn't know what he should have expected. What he was expecting. Logic and straightforwardness were not always the things he received in these situations.

"All right," Lament said, the tightness in his chest still not abating.

"Do you work well with Assistant Researcher Sandlemyer?" Gears asked.

That… That was an unexpected question. "He's my best friend, sir," Lament admitted. No sense in lying.

"Do you work well with him?" Gears asked again.

"Yes," Lament said with a sigh, wondering where this was going. "Before your gag order, I discussed several of my projects with him."

"Very well," replied Gears. "I will inform Dr. Djoric that he will be assisting us with 106 for the next two weeks. Please update him fully at your earliest convenience."

"I… Yes, sir," Lament mumbled, surprise sapping articulation.

"You're dismissed, Agent. Enjoy your day off."

"I dunno…" Lament said, talking quietly over a cup of coffee in Sandlemyer's office. "I think he's trying to make me happy or something…" he suggested.

"I didn't think he was the kind of person to care," Sandy replied, laughing softly.

Lament looked up at the other man. "He's not like that," he said. "He's not… mechanical or robotic or… He's just…" He paused for a long moment. "Cold," he finished.

Sandy shrugged. "Whatever you say. But I've got no specialization in containment, man. And I'm not sure why he's dragging me on

board or what he expects me to do."

Lament shrugged. "Me neither…"

He looked around the room at all the various shelves filled haphazardly with files, books, and papers. The low watt, incandescent bulbs. This office felt homey. Comfortable. Lived in. It felt… good.

"I'll see you in the morning, Sandy," Lament said, setting down the cup on the table.

"Seeya, Lament. Hey! This'll be fun, right? Like when you were over here with us for a few weeks."

"Yeah," Lament said. "Sure." He just wished he could believe it.

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In His Own Image: Part 5

November 26, 1998:

Lament frowned at the glass, looking at the hovering box beyond it with some odd mixture of reverence and fear. It was… disturbing… to see it for the first time. He wasn't part of the crew of soldiers who risked their lives for it on a daily basis. He wasn't even one of the primary researchers assigned to the project. He was just the guy trying to keep them safe. Trying and failing, currently.

"The magnetic fields are working, but the corrosion is still spreading. It's like mold… We thought we had him locked up until he ate Grange last night," the researcher said. The speakers made an odd whining sound, and Lament winced, losing his thought. Thankfully.

"How'd he manage that?" It was Sandlemyer who spoke. "I thought we had all the same safety protocols still in place on this thing."

The researcher shrugged a little. "We lose one or two people every coupla weeks with this thing. Regardless…"

Lament frowned, a pit forming quickly in his stomach. Failure didn't feel good, no matter how expected or anticipated it was. Especially when dealing with the deaths of fellow agents. He knew 106 was going to be a problem, but he didn't realize how much of one.

The speakers made another loud, mind crippling screech, sounding like painfully loud feedback. "Damn," Lament muttered, covering his ears.

"Eh. They go on the fritz all the time," the researcher continued. "We try to replace them, but it doesn't seem to do any goo— "

The alarms suddenly blaring made Lament glad that he'd covered his ears a moment before. He turned, looking at one of the screens. "The repulsors are going down!" he shouted. "Evacuate!"

But the researcher was already yelling into the microphone. The order went out, just as Sandlemyer reached over and flipped off the alarms in the booth, all three men turning to look out the window as the huge, rotting metal box fell the bottom of the containment chamber, cracking open.

The speakers whined again, loudly for a moment, then cut out. And a low, dark, broken laugh slowly filled the silence.

"He. He. He. He. Hee…"

When he was finally able to look back on the day without some sort of breakdown, Lament was certain the reports were wrong. That the hours and hours he felt couldn't have been minutes. That the door to that containment unit should not have been open. That the entire thing couldn't have been orchestrated just to fuck with him. But the mouse never really understands the true motivations of the cat.

Sometimes it's hungry. Sometimes, it just wants to play.

Lament pivoted quickly, running as fast as he could, Sandlemyer quickly on his heels. He was breathing hard, painfully hard, his chest close to bursting as he looked desperately for any point of escape. The alarms were blaring, guns firing at walls, at nothing, at everything.

An explosion behind him had the floor shaking hard enough that he fell. In a moment, Sandlemyer's arm closed around his arm, dragging Lament back to his feet and sending both of them down a narrow straightaway.

"He. He. He. He. Hee."

It was coming over the speakers everywhere now, echoing against his teeth and shaking his jaw. "Jesus Christ," Sandy muttered, panting and out of breath as he looked over his shoulder. "Fuck. It's coming this way Lament. It's coming this way!"

He didn't bother looking back. Training was kicking in, and he was

running. There were no people who survived exposure to 106. At least, none who survived for long. The straightaway ended in a dark doorway, and as Lament stepped into it, he pulled out his revolver and fired two shots down the hall at the advancing 'man,' prompting another of those broken, painful to hear laughs. "He. He. He. He. Hee."

"God damn it," Lament muttered. "Get in, Sandy," he ordered. "Jesus, just get into the damn room!"

Sandlemyer dashed in first, followed by Lament turned, pawing desperately for a light switch for a moment, then feeling cold metal slap under his hand. Cold metal that felt rounded and damp. Pipes. And next to it, another. Sandlemyer's flashlight blazed to life, and Lament immediately recognized where they were at.

"Oh fuck."

The pipes. Gears had mentioned them as a plausible, future containment issue, but he hadn't realized…

They twisted and turned on each other, coining one about the other. It wasn't as he'd imagined it—strict, orderly plumbing—but instead a roving cephalopod nightmare. "Look for the widest opening," he ordered quickly, slapping the door control and backing away from it as the metal started to blacken and rot.

"Go… Go!" he shouted.

He knew there were more entrances and exits within the mass. You just had to find them. Find them and desperately hope. They were both running again, the flashlight jerking along, jumping and shaking as they fled the terrible, old man.

"Hee. He. He. He. Hee."

They ran for hours, panting. And it always sounded closer. Closer and closer to them. At one point, Lament thought he felt something graze the sleeve of his jacket, and the mere possibility of 106 sent adrenaline rushing through his body. Every time it seemed to burn out, there was something else. A laugh. A scent of rot. Eyes in the

dark.

Again and again. Pursuing. Chasing.

And then, they finally spotted another source of light. One of the Foundation floodlamps that were always placed near the other exits.

They both ran toward it, lungs burning as Lament hurried to the door panel, typing in his emergency code.

Denied

He stared at it. Then entered it again.

Denied

"He. He. Hee. He. Hee."

"Lament… Lament, what is the fucking problem?!"

"It's not opening!"

Denied

"Hee. Hee. He. Hee. He."

He felt like crying. He entered it again and again, slapping the buttons harder and harder each time. "You son of a bitch. Open you son of a bitch!"

Denied

He felt it more than he saw it. It was an oppressive feeling, like someone standing right behind you, breathing down your neck. Someone with a knife, or a gun, or claws, someone who would hurt you, kill you, cut you, and laugh while they did it.

"Hee. He. He. Hee. He."

He turned. He looked at it. Moldy, rotten skin. Sunken, dead eyes. Yellowed, broken teeth. Lank, greasy hair fell around the sides of its head.

It took a step forward.

Denied

"God damn you."

Another.

Denied

Lament turned and emptied the rest of the shells into its head to no effect. "He. Hee. He. Hee. He."

"Jesus… Oh Jesus, we're gonna die…" Sandlemyer panted.

Denied

It was in arms reach as Lament, tears running down his face, slammed the keys a final time.

And the door opened.

He was through it in a second, into the exit chamber, looking back. "Sandy!"

106's hand closed on the back of Sandlemyer's neck as he turned and stepped through the door, squeezing for a moment. Sandlemyer's hand shot out to Lament, reaching for him, begging for help, but as Lament dove for it, 106 was pulling him away, pulling him into the recesses of the pipes, into hell and damnation.

Lament raised his gun, took quick aim at Sandlemyer, and did what he hoped any other agent would do for him in a similar situation. He pulled the trigger.

The hammer fell on the empty cartridge with a hollow click. And then they were both gone, and Lament was staggering back against the wall, sliding down it, staring into the mass of pipes.

When they found him, it had been seven minutes since 106 had breached containment.

In His Own Image: Part 6

November 27, 1998:

Lament sat on the floor of the medical ward, leaning against the wall. He was rubbing both of his arms for a moment, until he realized what he was doing and stopped. It was an awkward moment, looking around, seeing all the legitimately injured people and then realizing that he didn't have any real right to be here. And with all the doctors running around attending to burns, wounds, and various exposures…

He pushed himself up, walking as smoothly as he could from the room and into the hall, maneuvering around more injured people and bed, finally making his way out into open hallway. He wasn't sure where he was at, but a lot of Site-19 looked the same. He just picked a direction and started walking in it.

Once, he was almost certain that he'd heard 106 laughing, but as he turned to look at the empty wall the sound had issued from, it was clean and unmarred.

All evidence from the recovery group that had found Sandlemyer suggested that 106 had somehow gotten itself caught in 015, tangled in the pipes somehow, screaming bloody murder. It would hold the damned thing. Seal it. Maybe eat it like it ate other people. And he'd write up a file. Give it to Gears. Walk away from this. Walk away from this hell that he'd found himself in. And for some reason, knowing that—finally—he had found a way to contain the damned thing was more of a comfort than anything else at the moment.

He looked at the wall again when he thought he heard the laugh a second time. He stepped closer and ran his fingers of it, then stepped back again.

In his head. It was all in his head.

November 29, 1998:

“What do you mean it was ‘playing’?”

Gears expressionless face betrayed neither pity nor concern. “It was playing with us, Agent. Cat and mouse."

Lament swallowed. “So… 015…?”

“The Overseers would never have allowed such a program to exist long term, Agent Lament, even if it had worked,” Gears continued flatly. “As it is, the men putting the next level of containment in place were attacked and utilized by 106 with—”

“Utilized?” Lament laughed. Laughing was all he could do, at the moment. He was inches from hysteria. That voice the night before. That mocking laugh as he walked down the hall… Had that been him? Had he been ‘playing’ again? 'Utilized.' It consumed. It devoured.

And it apparently played.

Gears waited patiently for him to stop. "The men putting the next level of your containment plan in place were attacked and utilized by 106. Three dead on the scene. Four more deceased over the next week from the initial attack. Another twe—"

"Please stop," Lament said, closing his eyes tightly. He leaned against his desk, gripping the top of it tightly, not letting go.

He was close to breaking when he felt Gears’ hand on his shoulder. “Dr. Glass informed me that you’ve not been in for your quarterly psychological evaluation.”

Lament looked up. Gears was right. Lament hadn’t been in for it yet. It had been scheduled for the afternoon of the twenty-seventh, and he’d had other things on his mind that day. This was Foundation compassion, then?

“No, sir, I haven’t,” he answered.

“I’ve scheduled your appointment for this morning,” Gears said

emotionlessly.

Lament's fingers drummed for an instant on his desk, and while he didn't necessarily want to go, he couldn't think of any other excuse to get away from Gears for the morning. And getting away from Gears was exactly what he needed at the moment.

"It's a natural urge," Glass said. "Everyone is afraid at times. This is the way the Foundation helps its people deal with fear."

"I'm not taking them," Lament said, staring down the doctor. He'd met with Glass many times in the past. Quarterly psych evaluations, voluntary sessions.

"Lament, you can't just… ignore this," Glass continued. "These policies and practices were developed by people with far more experience than either of us. Sometimes, you just… need to forget."

"I don't want to forget." How many times has the doctor heard that same response?

"Why would you not want to forget watching your friend being devoured by a supernatural… thing?" asked Glass. "You saw him when they got him out. You know he was still alive for a few *hours* after that, Lament. Why would you want to remember him like that?"

"Because he was my friend." How many people had he gotten to do this before me?

"You don't have to forget him. Dozens of people 'transfer' out at the last moment, Lament. Take a Class-B. Forget the last couple of days. If you hold onto this too long, then when you finally get rid of it, you'll have to get rid of him entirely."

Days? Lament frowned. For a moment, he turned his mind backwards, trying to remember something… Blindly reaching into gray. "Doctor… Can I ask you something? Something about those pills?"

Glass nodded. "Of course."

“Which one did I take when I joined?” he asked. “When you all erased my family.”

Glass’s hand tensed on the arm of the chair for a moment, and then relaxed. Lament actually found himself admiring the man when his voice came out even. He'd either not known or had forgotten.

“You were conscripted?” Glass asked.

He hadn't known?

“Yeah," Lament said.

A moment. “That would have been a Class-A,” said Glass.

“And is there a cure for these things?” Lament asked. He kept his voice conversational, but there was hope there. Hope for parents he couldn't remember and a dozen friends or colleagues he wasn't sure he'd ever had.

“Occasionally,” Glass said. “Sometimes, they don’t take. Something inside your brain refuses to accept it. Those are rare cases, though.”

And… that. Only stress and a touch of bitterness was present in Lament's voice now. “But nothing after the memory is gone?”

“No.”

Lament drummed his fingers against the arm of the chair for a moment. “Then I’m not taking them.”

“It’s your choice, Agent. But I wish you’d reconsider.”

“Stick ‘em up your ass,” Lament said. “See you in three months, Doc.”

« Interlude 5 | HUB | Interlude 6 »

In His Own Image: Part 7

December 22, 1998:

Lament leaned back in his chair, sipping his coffee and reaching for his sandwich, taking a bite. Lunch had become a private affair, especially after he learned that everyone else had chosen to take the pills. He'd included a picture of Sandlemyer's corpse—a body that in no way reflected the man who had once been—in the file for 106, setting the heavy document on the corner of his desk.

He turned his attention to 884 for a moment, glimpsing over it again and sighing, thinking back to what Sandy had said. 'Get someone inside the Insurgency…' Why the hell not? Anything was worth a try at this point.

He sighed and reached for his phone, dialing the number and rubbing at the bridge of his nose.

"Hello? Agent Strelnikov?" he asked. "I'm not sure if you remember me. Lament. We met on my first day." A pause. "Yeah, Gears' kid. I was looking for someone for a possible assignment. Deep cover." Annoyed Russian from the other end of the phone. "I know, but you're the only person I know over there, so I figured you'd know who to bother about it…"

August 10, 2007:

A smirk was worming its way over Lament's lips as he closed the file, leaning back in his chair, laughing quietly to himself. There was no one else to laugh to, after all. He looked over at Gears, hoping that the other would ask him what he was so pleased about, waiting and hoping, waiting and hoping, then leaning forward, staring at him until the doctor raised his head and looked at him.

"Yes, Agent?"

"884… is closed."

He leaned back again, arms behind his head.

"Congratulations," Gears said.

"Thank you," replied Lament.

There would be no praise, nor would there be any accolades. Your feelings of reward in the Foundation were the ones you made for yourself. Doing your job, and doing it well, meant one of two things: you lived or someone else did. That was enough.

It had to be.

"Would you like half of my sandwich, sir?" Lament asked.

"No, thank you, Agent."

Lament nodded, taking the plastic wrapped, perpetually dry roast beef out of the brown bag on his desk. "Then if you'll excuse me, I think I might take it in the atrium. It's nearly time for Sophie's lunch break…"

Gears nodded. "Tell Dr. Light I need her report on SCP-371, when she's finished."

"I will, sir."

Lament stood, walking toward the door when Gears spoke. "And Agent?"

"Yes, sir?"

Gears stared at him for a moment. It stretched past comfort into awkwardness, and Lament found it necessary to cough, then repeat. "Yes, sir?"

"Good work."

The awkwardness became palpable.

"Thank you, sir."

Gears nodded once, and Lament— feeling an emotion he could not put into words— left the office. When he got to the atrium, he stole a kiss from Light's cheek, took the obligatory punch in the arm, and then shared the lackluster sandwich with her.

All in all, he considered it a good day.

« Interlude 6 | HUB | Epilogue »

In other news,

The following document was mailed to Agent Green's father, with instructions to forward it to his son, along with the message "Hast wir eine Gecoolen yet?". The sender has not been identified.

Item #: Fire officials say at least 8 injured as vehicle hits students outside California high school.

Object Class: A squeeze play that works two ways.

Special Containment Procedures: Md., Va. motorists warned to stay away if possible from Wilson Bridge this weekend. The Root DC Live : Things to do May 24 to June 7. UK Supreme Court backs extradition of WikiLeaks chief. UN rights council to hold special session Friday on Syrian massacre in Houla.

Description: Police in both parts of Ireland launch crackdown on prostitution, raid brothels islandwide. Capital Weather Gang : Oklahoma City pounded by severe weather Tuesday, and more on the way today. Resolution praising feds has bleak future. What California's lieutenant governor thinks of Project Glass after trying them on. Chen Guangcheng, now in U.S., poised to play role in yet another abortion debate.

Cook's scoreless streak ends with Morneau's tying double in 8th; Twins take down A's 5-4. Logmill Road project, site of fatalities, is delayed. Capital Buzz: Parature's former chief executive reprises role. Past Romney critics praise his jobs record on Sunday talk shows. French Open's defending champion, Li Na of China, adjusts to new status as title holder. A quiz on 'Coppelia,' presented by the Bolshoi Ballet at the Kennedy Center.

The high cost of savings.

Addendum: ‘More politics than faith’ in bishops’ religious freedom campaign? To fast or not? London Olympics forcing Muslim athletes to consider delaying Ramadan fast. Missile Defense! Where should they put the East Coast site? (A Loop contest). Who will invent the future?

I'm almost positive they're just fucking with us.- Dr. Carlisle

In Search Of Lost Antigo

To whoever might read this manuscript; greetings to thee, well met and well come. I pray for your safety, for if you have found this document, you are surely in grave danger yourself. I say this not to frighten nor intimidate you, but because it is true; you should not linger here, for the price this place demands is beyond the ability of you, or any man, to pay. It is with the last of my strength that I have written this account, which you have surely found laying beside my mortal remains, for I lack the strength now to flee this accursed domain, and it is with my dying strokes that I wish to warn whoever finds this text that to venture one step further into this eldritch demesne is to forfeit existence.

It was in Cleveland that I was born; it was but a newborn town of less than a thousand in those days, but a metropolis of thousands once I had ascended to manhood. My father himself had emigrated there from farther east, and impressed in me from my earliest years the importance of taming this New World; it was the destiny, he said, of our nation and our race to claim this land. I heeded his words, and once I had attained my majority, I traveled west; first to Missouri, and then later to Kansas, to Wyoming, into the Mexican holdings that would soon become Texas, and at last into the land of California, where I found myself following my father's footsteps in the mercantile profession. I had taken up residence in the town of Los Cavernes, a white settlement that roosted astride a lake in the inner regions of that golden state, some days' travel over the mountain passes from Los Angeles where the merchant ships docked to sell their cargo of goods from more civilised lands. There was many a man more desperate than I who was willing to drive teams of mules over the pass carrying the goods purchased from those ships, and upon arriving they were more than willing to sell those sundries to myself for more than twice what they had paid for them, that I might then sell them to the pioneers and farmers and prospectors for twice again that price. This enterprise had proved quite salubrious, and so it was that by the year of Our Lord

Eighteen-Hundred-And-Fifty-One I was already the wealthiest man in Los Cavernes.

It was upon the twenty-sixth day of May in that year that that damned traveler arrived. It was midday, and I was taking my luncheon in the general store I had established and financed, when a great hullabaloo came from without that a wounded man had shambled into town. I stood aghast as this poor soul staggered through the batwing doors of that establishment and begged for a cup of cold water. He was dressed as one might expect an explorer of these great western lands to be, his leathers seasoned and weathered well enough, but it was not his garb that caught my attention, but the constitution of his countenance - his flesh was drier than I have ever seen even on the sickest of men, wrinkled, mottled, and blistered all over as if he had passed through the fires of Hades itself. There was not a single hair upon him, and as he turned to me to speak, I espied that his gums were raw and bare, as if every one of his teeth had been pried loose from his jaws just minutes before.

I demanded that the barkeep fetch him some water, and he drank greedily of it as he laid flat on the floor. I begged he tell me what was the cause of his complaint, and he answered me thus; "I've been to Lost Antigo, my friend. I bought a map off an old Spaniard that led me there. The damned place is cursed. Whatever's there isn't worth your life. The map's in my pocket. Burn it with the rest of me so no one else tries to find that foul place." He had barely finished sputtering out those words before he convulsed one last time and then laid still, having gone to his final rest.

Lost Antigo! The name is known far and wide across the west, by the white race as well as the Mexicanos and the Indians. The name has been known since long before Columbus came to the New World, and all the tribes of this land, the Navajo, the Hopi, the Yualapi, the Dumi, the Kumayai, the Havasupai, all tell the same tale; centuries ago, long before the white man found its way to this land, there stood a city in the desert that possessed wealth and knowledge far beyond any that the nations of red men could comprehend. It was their hubris, the legends said, that was their undoing; they failed to understand the limits of the power the Great Spirit had lent to them, and it turned against them in time, laying

them to waste. The ruins of Lost Antigo, so the natives say, still stand somewhere amidst the dunes of the Mohave, and within them lay treasures far greater than the avarice of man can contemplate; vast stockpiles of gold and silver, great pits of mercury, stores of aluminium that would fetch a king's ransom, and texts of unimaginable value that captured the description of that bygone empire, an antedeluvian civilisation unknown to man that surely answered mysteries that the greatest scientists of our age had barely begun to contemplate.

I did not heed that poor old fool's dying wish; for before he was taken to be buried, I scavenged his pockets and found the map he had spoken of with his dying breaths. It described a trail, unknown to the white man but surely the last remnant of some ancient highway, that began from Salton City, barely a day's travel from the saloon in which I stood, and lead therefrom northeast into the Mohave towards the dry bed of a primaeval lake, where an X was marked with the notation "Antigüe Perdido - ausentarse de".

Could this map be authentic? Could the words of this dying man be true? My mind swam with the possibilities - if Lost Antigo were real, if this map truly lead to it, if I could follow it and find that place - it would be a feat of legend! The treasures to be found there, both of mineral wealth, and the writings of that lost civilisation - would be worth millions of dollars, and would be the envy of every scholar in the world. History would remember me as the man who discovered Lost Antigo and taught all of mankind about the bygone race that inhabited that land and all their discoveries and tales. Schoolchildren would learn my name alongside that of Columbus. I thought little of that dead man's claims of curses and the legends of damnation placed upon that site. My path was clear; I had no choice but to organize an expedition to follow the route on that unfortunate traveler's map until we either came to naught or found Lost Antigo.

It was a scant three weeks before we embarked. The news of the map's discovery had traveled far and wide across the land, and men rushed eagerly from Los Angeles and San Diego and the Tiahuana country wishing to join the expedition and claim their share of the profits. We set out on the sixteenth of June; the sun was blazing, and the air was hot and dry, but we had plenty of water to spare until

the trail bade us part from the Colorado's raging banks. The barrels we carried in the wagon trains were ample enough, but some of the men despaired and turned back as we blazed our path farther into the Mohave's desolate plains. On the sixth day after we left the riverbank, a large contingent of the men despaired that we were sure to die of thirst if we ventured on farther, and turned back towards Los Cavernes. I wonder if they ever made it back alive, considering the events that transpired thereafter, for it was only a day later that we set our camp on the outskirts of the ruins of Lost Antigo.

It was a Spaniard named Miguel who first shouted that he espied something not carved by Nature's hand. We approached and confirmed his suspicion; it was the very tip of a concrete obelisk, jutting barely a foot above the desert sand. It took us a matter of days thereafter to journey onward, during which time we lost several more of the men - there were complaints of intestinal distress, and some of the men began to exhibit symptoms similar to those the man bearing the map had exhibited; their hair began to thin, their teeth loosened as if afflicted by scurvy, they grew weak. A large number of them fled on the third day after we espied the first obelisk, after seven men had died of that mysterious illness.

As those of us remaining ventured onward there were more; hundreds of the edifices, some all but covered by the shifting dunes, others proudly erect a dozen feet or more. They seemed to be arrayed in a circular pattern - the circle, if indeed it was such a thing, would have to have been dozens of miles wide or more, but it was clear that this was the work of the hands of man. On the seventh day, as we continued inwards towards what we believed to be the heart of the metropolis, we finally espied an edifice of a substantial nature - made of stone, standing proud several dozen feet above the desert sand.

There were scarcely a dozen men left besides myself when we approached that erection; the rest had either died or turned back, many of the horses having met the same fate. Was it true that Lost Antigo was cursed? I wondered, as I had begun to feel a malaise myself. Surely, I told myself, the risk must be worth the reward - I have discovered Lost Antigo! The wealth and history of a nation lay

before me to claim! I insisted that the others stay a good distance behind, ill though I was, that I might be the first to approach that lone building, claim it for myself and for my nation and my race, and learn what secrets it contained.

Each step towards the tower was harrowing. I found myself sucking in wind as I approached. I ran my hand through my hair to wipe away the sweat and found that I tore several strands loose from my scalp in the effort. A fit of coughs struck me and I found that a molar had been ejected from its socket. I assured myself it was all worthwhile as I took the final steps towards that building and, for the first time, espied clearly the text emblazoned upon the wall by the door to that ancient place.

I write this now for the benefit of whoever might find my Earthly remains, on the last scraps of paper I carried with me as my journey reached its end. I hope that you are better prepared than I was to resist the ravages of this place, for the curse it carries is real. The legend inscribed upon the wall of that ruin was in an ancient and all-but-forgotten dialect spoken by the Natives of this land, which I taught myself to read years ago when negotiating with their chiefs for the sale of hides and gunpowder. It reads as thus;

CENTRAL MOJAVE NUCLEAR WASTE DEPOSITORY

This sign is a message of great importance. Sending this message was important to us. We considered ourselves to be a powerful culture.

This place is not a place of honor. No highly esteemed deed is commemorated here. Nothing of value is here.

What is here is dangerous and repulsive to us. The danger is still present, in your time, as it was in ours. The danger is to the body, and it can kill. The form of the danger is an emanation of energy.

The danger is unleashed only if you substantially disturb this place physically. This place is best shunned and left uninhabited.

I wonder; how long has the legend been told that Lost Antigo was a place of riches and wealth beyond compare? How many centuries ago did the people of this land first go in search of this treasure? How many men have made this pilgrimage before I did - be they white men, Spaniards, Indians, Levites, whatever nations came before them, and came before *them*, that thought this was a place of honor?

I can but guess. All I can say to you, dear friend that has found these papers beside my bones, if they indeed have remained intact and not crumpled into dust by the time your feet have besieged this land, is that I pray you have the constitution to make your escape now where so many like myself have failed.

Remembrance: Part One

June 12th, 1976.

Hi, my name's Lee. If you're reading this, it is very likely that I will be extraordinarily upset with you, because this is a personal journal I bought yesterday, at the new Montgomery Ward. Anyways, here's some stuff about me, since that seems to be what you're supposed to do when you use a journal. I'm 17 years old, and I'm a Senior attending KL High, where I do marching band stuff. I also collect coins, which is not too exciting to some people, but I like it. When I graduate, I'd like to do something in engineering, but if that doesn't pan out it might be nice to do something with mechanics

School isn't really a huge thing. I've got band, and my friends. We mostly just mess around in the band room, practicing, going to other classes, then going back to band after class ends. It's actually pretty routine. The other band members aren't really interesting. Cindy's nice, but she doesn't really talk to me. Albert is the band leader, and he doesn't really do much other than boss us around when we bullshit him.

June 13th, 1976

Ugh, what a crummy day. There's a game coming up tomorrow to decide who gets to play in the county finals, so of *course* we got to march around, roasting in the sun as we do the same maneuvers over and over and over and over…. ugh. Went on forever. At least we had water, so nobody passed out from the heat this time. Abi's still pretty embarrassed about that one.

The rest of the day was just as blugh. First period was just boring boring boring. Mr. Collins just kept talking

about sports, which I guess is what happens when you put the football coach in charge of a math class. Daniel was just being an asshole, babbling on with him about it. It would've been nice to learn shit before I fail the next test, but whatever, guess I'll just flunk again. Damnit. I need this credit for the mechanics scholarship.

I was talking to Cindy today, and she was really peeved that a bunch of afterschool stuff is getting cancelled. There's money issues or something. It's really a lame situation, I'm really upset about it too. If they cut the shop, I'd be out of luck. Just crossing my fingers that they can work something out.

June 14th, 1976

That game was a *massacre*. We crushed them!!! It started as a pretty close call, but by the second half we were basically untouchable. Coach was joking about how the uniforms were the key to the game. They're pretty cool looking, I guess. They bought them from a cheaper place this time, Synophone or something, but it turned out really awesome. Hope we get new uniforms for the finals.

Crap. I just realized how much more band work I'm gonna have to do.

June 15th, 1976

Someone busted our front window today, while everyone was out of the house at school. I didn't get home until six or so, band practice, and I almost cut my foot on one of the more jagged pieces.

Note to self: Double bag glass next time, glass cuts are not fun.

June 17th, 1976

Got to talk to Cindy today. My spit valve busted, and I

didn't have anything to practice with. She was really nice, talked almost the whole period and then some more afterschool. Should see if she'd be interested in hanging out sometime, maybe go into town or someplace like that. But first thing is to take care of getting the valve fixed ASAP. I should check on my savings jar…

I just got back from going to the new music store downtown. Apparently it's from the same outfit that gave us the uniforms, and they're called Syncope Symphony. It's a really excellent store, they've got tons of stuff for such a small place. I even got a big discount for being a student at Kirk Lonwood. Definitely going back soon, if I can. Just have to close my eyes and follow the beat. I also hit up the coin shop, but there wasn't much of interest, and the good stuff costs too much.

June 18th, 1976

Went to do a babysitting job today, for one of Dad's friends. I'm usually not a guy who likes kids, but they were alright. They were old enough that I didn't have to change diapers or anything, and they were nice enough. We pretty much just watched TV the whole time I was over there. Parents gave me thirty bucks, which I'm gonna spend on some coins I saw.

Oh, just remembered what we were watching. It was that old batman TV show. Nanananananana…

June 20th, 1976

Cindy and I were talking again today, about the clubs and stuff. I told her that if she was gonna be bored from missing her clubs, we could hang out or whatever. I really do enjoy talking to her, we've got a good rhythm, talking words together and coming out harmoniously. We decided to hit up the Renmar theater, to see some movie. I don't even remember which one we picked out.

June 22nd, 1976

I just remembered something from the other day. A lot of the stuff in town was closing up. There was that Synoco store, but the grocer, barber, and a bunch of other places just looked abandoned. I stopped at Synoco to get something for Cindy's birthday.

The store was still nice, but it had different people working there. Not that they'd say that, according to them they're working "with" the store. They were just really strange, beyond that. I saw one guy mop the same spot of floor for the entire two hours that I was shopping. He just whistled the same ten second tune over and over. Was a nice tune, so it didn't bug me, but it was weird.

Catchy too.

June 25th, 1976

Went to the counselor to talk about career options. There wasn't a lot to go on locally, but up in Reskin they have a college with a pretty good mechanical engineering program. It'll cost a pretty penny… might need to dip into my savings again. I really don't want to have to sell any of my coins, but if it comes down to college or coins, I'm going to have no other option.

June 29th, 1976

Been busting my ass with practice. We've been going out everyday to try and get ready for the big game. Of course, Collins picks the hardest and most retardedly ass-backwards routine he can think of, and expects us to have it perfect in four weeks. We're starting some more intense training this week, which is gonna be miserable. If we weren't already in "intense" training, I really don't want to see what is.

I placed an ad in the paper for some of my coins today. I tried to pick the ones I could part with and still had value. Haven't got any calls yet, but it might've come in while I was out. We really need an answering machine.

June 30th, 1976

As part of the new training schedule, we've been given some vitamin pills or something to keep us up during practice. They're little chiclet pills, don't even need any water to swallow 'em. Take two in the morning and one in the evening.

Those glass shard cuts still aren't all the way healed. Damn.

July 3rd, 1976

Sold the coins today. The clinking and the clanking as I handed them over was really nice. Made me think of pennies on a drum. The money's gone to the saving jar, and I'll talk to a counselor after we finish up the season.

July 6th, 1976

Training has started. We're doing excellent work together, stepping in beat with our sound and in synchrony with the metronome. Just march to the beat, Cindy and Randy and Greg around me, we march in solidarity, together unified with the miracle of sound.

Someone has to keep the beat to the world. We're giving them the greatest show they've ever seen, this game will be more memorable for the halftime band than the players.

July 9th, 1976

The radio was really good today. The sound slithered through the holes in the fiber cloth, curling arround the wooden frame and emanating itself to me. We listened for almost all of yesterday and the day before, and I didn't even notice. Time sure flies by when you listen to it.

July 11th, 1976

It's a distraction. We march every day, keeping the beat. There isn't time to play games, Cindy. I know you read this. I know you've been tearing the pages to write your own personal symphony. Well, I can tell you that you're just a roll of quarters stuck inside the cash machine, not hearing the chime of changing hands above you.

Things are different now. They're always going to be. I remember changes before, or later. Sometimes it's hard to decide.

July 15th, 1976

I'm not hungry anymore. We talk to each other, and play one another, and make them into the notation. We're conducted together. Who needs free breakfast, lunch, and dinner when you're part of a bigger piece? Cindy was eating. She can, I have life to live.

God, my stomach is twisting itself tighter than a violin string right before it snaps

July 18th, 1976

Before we met, I was a pitcher of water, sloshing around and holding all my notions in my skull. My flow was stagnant, and I couldn't walk with my fellows. We had to break the glass, let it fall to pieces, let it sink into the sides of our heads. Rattles arounnnd until all the pieces catch. I needed you to put it back together again, with the cracks showing. It comes in like a fountain now, and I know so much.

I remembered how we used to sing.

« **First Bell** | **HUB** | **Old School** »

In the Big League

"Your ID, sir?"

You nervously present your ID badge to the heavily-armed guard, who scans the barcode with a handheld reader, checks the display, and hands it back to you with a nod. Whatever this meeting is, it must be more important than you had thought. You're under no illusions that the Foundation considers your research to be of any particular significance, so it was hardly a surprise that you received such a sudden summons, but this level of security says that you may be getting in over your head.

Inside, it's a standard teleconference-enabled meeting room - a long table with chairs along one side, facing a wall-sized display screen. You spot your name in front of the chair at the near end of the table, and quickly take a seat, docking your laptop and engaging the normal e-meeting software. While that loads, you take the opportunity to glance down the table at your fellow attendees, and have to fight an urge to run for the door. Many of the men and women (and the dog, especially in the Egg Walker) at this table are instantly recognizable to anyone in the Foundation, names that junior researchers speak only in hushed tones, for fear of summoning their owners like some sort of old-world demon. That feeling of being in over your head increases by several orders of magnitude - what do some of the top researchers in the Foundation need with a lowly geophysicist?

In the table's center seat, Dr. Gears looks down the table at you, then back to the laptop in front of him. "If everyone is here, I believe it is time we begin." With this, he enters a brief command, and the wall display flashes to life, showing a similar room elsewhere, with twelve seated figures, all of whose faces are being digitally obscured, and whose seats are labeled not with names but with numbers. You begin to wonder if someone spiked your coffee with some new SCP-grade hallucinogen, when O5-03 speaks up.

"Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. I'm sure you're all wondering why you've been pulled off your respective projects for an emergency meeting. Since some of my colleagues here haven't yet finished reading up on the situation, I think a brief summary is in order. Doctor Gears, if you would?"

Gears nods. "Thank you, sir. Approximately one month ago, several civilian observatories noted what appeared to be an asteroid whose orbit placed it on a trajectory that could lead to an impact with Earth in the near future. We picked up on this discovery through the usual channels, and have since confirmed that the object is a rocky asteroid that will impact Earth in nine days' time." With this, several folders appear on your desktop, including photos, reports, pages of calculations, and various other data. "I took the liberty of borrowing Doctor Philbert's geophysical modeling setup," so *that's* why you couldn't log on yesterday, "and if my interpretation of the results is correct, we are facing an IK-class natural disaster, with casualties estimated at approximately three billion over the next ten years. Doctor Philbert, do you concur?"

Well, now you know why they wanted you here. You quickly scan through the log you've been provided of Dr. Gears's run on GeoMod, and everything seems to check out. "I, er… Yes sir, I concur, pending a more thorough review of the data," you stammer. You quickly log onto GeoMod and begin crunching numbers like there's no tomorrow.

"If this is a natural object," interjects O5-10, "why are we talking about it? It may be tragic, but we are busy dealing with objects and creatures far more dangerous than some rock."

"Given the rather unique resources at our disposal, we are particularly well-positioned to avert this disaster. In addition, the entire purpose behind the Foundation's acquisition and study of anomalous objects and entities is the protection of humanity. Failing to use our resources to at least mitigate an event of this scale would be contrary to that core purpose." It's impossible to read what Dr. Gears is thinking, but you could swear he just *lectured* an Overseer. Apparently the top brass really do play by different rules. It's at about this time that GeoMod returns the results of your new inquiries.

"Um… Sirs?" you nervously butt in, and every head in the room swivels in unison to face you. "I've been going over Doctor Gears's projections, and just checked the data against Foundation records. According to the model, if we don't do something, the geological effects of the impact have at least a 40% chance of breaching containment at Area 4." THAT got their attention. You don't have nearly high enough clearance to know what they actually keep in Area 4, but you know that in all likelihood any single SCP there could kill millions if released. If *all* of them got out…

There's a few seconds of hushed conversation at both ends of the conference, then O5-07 speaks up. "If Doctor Philbert's calculations are correct, then we have no choice but to act against this asteroid. All that remains is to determine how. Suggestions?"

What follows could be politely described as a "spirited debate", and impolitely described as a "verbal clusterfuck". The various researchers propose ideas, only to have them rejected by others. Ask 343 to get rid of it? Already tried, he said no. Shoot it with 044? No way to boost its range or get it into orbit fast enough.

The only idea everyone agrees would work is the use of the armament of the Mare Imbrium facility. Unfortunately, using a warhead powerful enough to deflect the asteroid onto a safe trajectory would also produce a flash bright enough to be seen even in daylight, with half the planet as witnesses. Given how close the object is already, and the time needed to prep the missile, there's really only time for one shot. The argument shifts to whether it's worth effectively announcing the Foundation's existence to civilians worldwide, and neither side appears much inclined to change their opinion. As the shouting match continues, an idea occurs to you, and you promptly get to work running the numbers to see if it's practical. Orbital mechanics aren't your specialty, but compared to modeling shockwaves traveling through variable-composition rock strata, some basic calculations on a ballistic trajectory are a walk in the park. Finally, you have your answer.

It could work.

"We could drop it in the ocean," you blurt out. The senior staff relax their grip on the various weapons they were fingering, and turn to

you, with expressions ranging from mild surprise to "what did I just step in and why is it talking?". "A low-yield strike could deflect the asteroid enough that it'll fall in the ocean instead of hitting land, without producing a flash that could be seen from Earth without a telescope. It's not a perfect solution, given the size of the tsunami it would generate, but at least we'd maintain containment. We wouldn't even need to modify the astronomers' memories - an ocean impact is well within their margin of uncertainty, since they don't have access to our data, so they wouldn't even know anything was amiss."

The looks of surprise fade into contemplation. "Might work," says one researcher. "Can't use the Atlantic, don't want to risk waking up 169," says another, leaving you to wonder what SCP-169 is and how an asteroid strike would only wake it up.

"I believe," says Dr. Gears, "that taking SCP-169 into consideration, either the Indian Ocean or the northern Pacific Ocean would be the safest areas to bring down the asteroid. Doctor Johns should be able to model the tsunami well enough to give us a more precise target location. In the meantime, we should have Mare Imbrium begin preparing a missile, and send word to the Demeter and the Guardian to prepare for emergency relocation, and direct them to the safest locations they can reach by time of impact. Is this plan acceptable?"

After most of the researchers present nod their assent, O5-03 speaks up. "We will need some time to review your recommendation, but it would be best if you began preparations as soon as possible. The relevant personnel will receive the final order to proceed or abort as soon as we have made our decision." With that, the display goes dark, marking the official end of the meeting. As you close the meeting software and disconnect your laptop, you realize that you may have just personally sent a tsunami towards some of the most densely-populated coastal areas in the world. Is this what dealing with Keter-level threats is like? The senior staff must handle this kind of thing constantly - you can't even imagine the kind of emotional baggage - you are cut off mid-thought by a simian voice behind you.

"So, who wants lunch?"

In The Clutches Of Life

A woman watched her father's chest rise and fall from the chair next to his hospital bed. The heartbeat monitor beeped in time with the song she listened to through her headphones. She wished she could spend her last visit chatting, but that's difficult to do with the unconscious. Besides, she'd end up repeating the same introduction from the last twenty three visits. The whole:

"Hello."

"Hello, have we met?"

"Yes, I'm, uh… I'm your daughter."

"That can't be right, I have two sons!"

Wait a beat.

"Well, yes you did also have two sons. But you also had me."

"Where are they?"

"Eric is currently working in the field, so he can't make it. And uh… well Tony's no longer with us. But I'm still here."

"Eric and Tony? I thought my boys were named Andrew and Joseph."

"No, but— actually never mind."

"Can you get the nurse for me? I think my bed needs readjusting."

"Sure, dad."

Get up to leave.

"Wait, what was your name again?"

"Joyce. You named me Joyce."

And then get the nurse. Joyce had gone through the motions every time she visited. Except this last time. Each of those twenty three times, Joyce felt a sting in her chest, and wished her father would just go back to sleep. But now Joyce got her wish, and she'd realized that twenty four is a nicer number than twenty three. Too bad they'll miss the chance.

Ten trained soldiers approached a dusty warehouse near the docks. The crashing of waves against the rocky shoreline washed out any noise MTF Iota-10 made. The team lined up next to the back entrance.

Captain Eric Michaels held up two fingers and a thumb. An instruction. *Three.*

His thumb retracted, leaving the fingers. *Two.*

One.

Michaels kicked in the door and Marquez threw a flashbang. The team plugged their ears and turned away from the door just long enough for the grenade to go off —*BANG!*— then charged in behind it. Guns out. Bullets sprayed.

Some guards hit the ground. Others dove behind Marshall, Carter and Dark branded crates. The rest took lead to the chest.

As Joyce's song finished, she stood up from her seat. She looked at the nurse, politely leaning against the door frame. Joyce couldn't remember how long the nurse had been standing there. It could've been minutes, it could've been hours.

"It's about time."

"Yeah, I know," Joyce replied. She glanced down at her dad again. He held one of his pillows close, like a child with a favorite teddy bear.

"Right. I'm on my way," she said to herself.

"We'll tell you when it's over." the nurse called after Joyce, who half-ran out of the room. Joyce refused to cry, but that didn't stop her from shaking. She took a seat in the waiting area and just rocked back and forth, trying to calm herself. She'd done worse in her day job. She'd lost lives before. Hell, she'd lost her own family before. Although, it does feel less real when they're ripped apart by eldritch abominations, or succumb to memetic hazards.

"Why does this one have to feel so…" Real? Concrete? Palpable? Genuine?

Michaels popped out from behind a forklift and shot a few rounds at the men across from him. MC&D must've doubled their detail since the last raid. He was already out of ammunition, and his team was running low altogether. A quick scan counted about twelve bogeys left. Michaels turned to the private next to him.

"Turner, give me cover."

"Where you headed sarge?"

"You see that crate over there?"

"Yeah?"

"How much you bet this shipment's part of a weaponry order?"

Turner opened his mouth to speak, but Michaels held his finger to Turner's lips.

"Trick question. Never tell me the odds."

"Just get going Solo."

Michaels smiled and darted toward his prize as Turner let loose another round of bullets. A sharp pain shot up Michaels' leg. Clean shot through the calf. The adrenaline carried him to the crate. Michaels cut the straps with his tactical knife, and then shot the lock off. The side of the crate fell open on its own. Michaels' grin grew a

little wider.

"So normal?" Joyce looked up to see Niklo, "Sorry, thought it was worth coming inside to check in on you. Also the car was getting stuffy."

Niklo took a seat next to Joyce. He had volunteered to drive her back when the deed was done, since she probably wouldn't be in a good headspace to be safe on the road.

"It also helps he has a name. Not a number," Niklo continued.

"Not helping."

"Sorry, thought I'd just take your mind off of it."

"Can you just, be quiet? Please?"

"Right, sorry."

Joyce returned to rocking as Niklo watched her. She put her headphones on again, but didn't play any music. She just wanted the pressure up against her ears to give her that feeling of isolation, the illusion of being alone in a crowded room.

"Are you sure you need to be here for this? We can just—"

"I said shut up! It's not your dad you're pulling the plug on! So just shut up!" The waiting room went silent. Joyce looked around, the color drained from her face. Just as her gaze reached the entrance, the nurse arrived, also looking pale.

"Umm… Mrs. Michaels?"

"Yes?"

"I believe the doctor would like to, um, show you something."

Michaels grabbed one of four devices. After untangling the device's tubes, wires, and plastic casings, he managed to get a grip on the

thing. Michaels was about to break every rule they pounded into his head during training.

He stood up from behind the crates and pulled the trigger. There was no recoil, no noise, nothing. Except a large hole that opened up in the security guard Michaels aimed at.

Now, to rinse and repeat.

Michaels aimed to take another shot. A bullet caught one of the tubes. Michaels collapsed, started screaming, and tried to hold the side of his body that just wasn't there anymore.

Joyce nearly ran to the room. She flung open the door.

A single, long beep rung in her ears. The heart monitor had gone flat.

Joyce's dad looked over from the hospital bed. Finally awake.

"Who are you?"

After the firefight died down, Michaels' screaming could still be heard throughout the building. Even with all the blood loss, he screamed. Even with a hole where his left lung used to be, he screamed. He felt it. And he kept feeling it. The world was all fuzzy, but it still hurt. It hurt so much.

And when Michaels was carried away by his squad, who simply didn't know what else to do with the man, the screams and the moans of the others echoed around the warehouse. All those with lead in their chests, heads, arms, legs, lungs, hearts, feet, eyes. They writhed in the clutches of life.

On that day
The reaper laid down his scythe
Turned in his shroud
Bid farewell to the masses
And quietly retired

/

End of Death

SCP-3984

In The Dark

Listen to the Audio Adaptation?

Joe's head bounced off the metal table with a clang. The Man in the Suit behind him cracked his knuckles and walked around the table.

Joe shook his head, the initial hit was still ringing in his ears. "Look. I'm still entertaining buyers. I swear you'll get your cut soon."

"See, here's the thing." The Man in the Suit reached across the table and slapped Joe in the side of the head with his open palm. The force of the blow lifted Joe out of the chair and sent him flying into the floor. The Man in the Suit straightened his tie. "Carter and his associates handed you that truck on a silver platter. You left us holding our dicks for 3 weeks while you 'entertained buyers'."

Joe cradled his head as he felt a boot kick him in the stomach. He wretched slightly and curled into a fetal position. The Man in the Suit crouched in front of Joe and continued. "I vouched for you. You understand what that means right? You fuck up and it's my balls on the line."

Joe tried to answer through the pain. "I swear I'll get you your cut before the end of the week."

The Man in the Suit patted Joe on the side of the face. "I don't got that kind of time Joe. My boss is breathing down my neck about this. I had to tell him something. He's taking a personal interest."

The Man in the Suit stood up and walked over to the only door in the grey room, knocked three times before opening it and moved to the corner of the room opposite Joe. The door swung open on its own, and Joe could see a bright light in the warehouse outside before it was eclipsed by something massive.

Whatever it was had the rough shape of a man, but was far too tall. It ducked under the doorway and entered the room. Joe's eyes went wide as the lamp in the center of the room illuminated the creature.

The creature's fingers reached all the way to the floor, terminating in sharp nails. From Joe's perspective it was difficult to tell where the fingers ended and the nails began, but they scraped the ground as the thing crept with staccato steps, leaning forward on backwards facing knees.

The gray wrinkled skin covering the creature pulsed and throbbed under the light, with bulbous pustules rupturing and healing repeatedly. The thing's face was all smiles, with a grin that reached up and out of sight around the back of its head. As it stopped in front of Joe, it focused its single yellow eye on the man and opened an impossibly wide mouth.

"Where," it began with a shallow and breathless voice, "are the fucking artifacts?"

Joe shat his pants. It wasn't a subtle affair. The creature twisted its head to an impossible degree but continued to stare at Joe.

Joe, for his part, couldn't have formed words if he'd wanted to. He had lost all control of his faculties. All he could see or hear or think about was the creature's eye. The creature finally looked up from Joe's paralyzed form at the Man in the Suit across the room. It opened its mouth again. "He's got a warehouse in Wicker North." It stopped and wheezed. "I've got the address. We'll go there after I'm done."

For Joe the physical pain was gone. All he could focus on was the yellow eye. Probing.

The creature's neck twisted grotesquely as it returned to staring at Joe. Joe's eyes filled with tears, but he didn't move. Then the creature moved back slightly and Joe began to gasp. Joe hadn't even noticed but he'd stopped breathing, and suddenly his lungs were screaming for air.

"What," the creature gasped out as it looked up at the Man in the

Suit, "do you think we should do with him?"

The Man in the Suit stepped out of the shadow of the corner and shrugged. "He's a good earner. But I'm not inside his head. Is he loyal?"

Joe saw the back of the creature's head as it smiled. The teeth did in fact go all the way around. "He is now."

The Man in the Suit smiled back. "Good. I'll call Darke and let him know we'll have the artifacts by the end of the day."

"Yes." The creature said, before standing up and moving towards the door.

The Man in the Suit nodded. "Thanks, boss. Sometimes these kids are more trouble than they're worth."

The creature didn't say anything else as both it and the Man in the Suit walked out of the room.

Joe shivered on the floor for several more minutes before finally getting the courage to stand and leave.

In The End

You've done a hundred rituals like this. You can tell something's off, different this time.

It's not the ritual. The ritual is the same, you're pretty sure. Not that you can be totally sure. You never remember exactly what you've done after, and not because of amnestics. Command never bothers to hand down amnestics. Things like what you're doing can't easily stay in human memory. Your brains aren't built for it. At least, not if you finish enough of the ritual to comprehend the result. You and your team of collaborators have an admirably high completion rate.

But while you can't recall exactly, the motions are familiar. The steps like muscle memory. The blood. The chanting. The casting of raw, fresh bones. The drawing of ever-more complex designs in substances you don't care to identify, handed to by the pitiless white gloves of Command's Agents.

Agents theoretically just like you. Agents of the SCP Foundation. Except they're nothing like you. Such is the power of the hierarchies you never would've guessed existed before.

In another sense, they are exactly like you. In a very literal sense. You see your mirror, Command's second-in-command (heh), a grim person standing there, watching you, but with the lack of interest of a sated predator.

You're extra concerned by this. Not because your mirror is here. (No, you're the mirror. Not the other way around. They cast the reflections. You are all the reflected.) Mirrors are almost everyday at this point. You've personally killed a mirror of yourself (or someone you know, even someone you cared about, but only a mirror, only ever a mirror) more times than you care to remember.

That's your job. You're a Collaborator. You know how the universal hierarchies are set up, and you're doing what you can to keep

everyone you know alive.

Why you're concerned: your mirror is here at all. Command doesn't usually bring agents from his neck of the woods. But besides your mirror, you count half a dozen more, recognizable as Command's people by their clothing. Three in grim labcoats over suits, three in military uniforms, all bearing Foundation insignia (far more ostentatious than your own familiar Foundation agents, or most of the mirrors you've ever seen). They're flanked by a cadre of black-suited, black-helmeted (telekill, they call it, and somehow their telekill doesn't seem to blow everyone up) Foundation Agents. (Mirrors, too? Who knows behind those helmets?)

Why are they here? They don't like to risk themselves, these people you never know what to call besides Overwatch, which used to mean something different, back when you still had a real O5 Command.

Maybe they're just here to observe business as usual. But you doubt that. Command is clearly restless. You don't like when he's restless.

You continue carrying out the ritual. The ritual is nearing completion. You retroactively recognize the eerie-yet-familiar flashes of light, the pits in reality that form and vanish before your eyes, the growing feeling like you're collectively grabbing a live wire out of the deep hidden circuitry of the universe. The vast artificial room (titanium alloy — why do they make everything out of titanium, anyway?) pulsing to the tune of an alien, arrhythmic heartbeat.

You steal another glance at your mirror. You wonder if you killed — what? your original? — if you would simply shrivel up or turn to dust or simply drop dead. You wonder if nothing would happen at all.

You can't be thinking these thoughts. You could never, ever, ever betray **`Project Palisade`**. Or you're the next stake in the wall.

Instead, you watch Li. She's new at this. This is her first time. She was doing alright earlier. As she dips her hand in the flowing blood, her hands are visibly shaking. You pity her. And envy her.

She doesn't have literal blood on her hands yet. But she's about to.

The ritual is almost complete when Command barks the order to stop. We collectively stare at him like confused sheep.

"We're trying something different," Command says.

"Like what?" you blurt out. (It's always been your job to speak for the group, since Command's mirror — someone you cared for deeply — died during the first ritual your group ever carried out to completion.)

"It needs to be darker," Command says.

It's such a banal thing to say that you have no response.

"This," Command says. "This ritual. All this. It isn't dark enough. Not in a cosmic, or literal sense. It lacks impact. Real impact. We're going to make it darker."

Behind him, your mirror nods in agreement.

You look around. "Like, make it darker how? Paint everything black?"

He doesn't laugh at the joke.

"Bring in the subjects," he says.

They bring in the subjects. You start to feel sick as you watch. A group of children. No older than preteen. The youngest is barely walking. They're wide-eyed, baffled, scared.

"What are we supposed to do with them?" you ask.

He looks at you like you're stupid. "They're all virgins."

"Of course they're virgins," you say. "They're children."

Your mirror steps forward, removing a printed sheet from a set of file folders. Hands you the sheet.

You glance over it. Everyone else in your group is watching you.

"You can't be serious," you say.

"You will follow the updated test protocol," Command says. "You understand the consequences for ceasing experiment cooperation."

Of course you fucking understand. You're collaborators. You all understand what happens if you don't follow orders. Command has never had to keep you in line. You do it to each other. For the ones you left behind at home.

World after world after world, you stay in line.

It's ludicrous to balk at this, at something as small as this.

"Call up the first subject," Command says.

You call up the first subject. You think of the subject carefully as an "it". Dehumanization as a form of emotional removal. That's what the Foundation trains you to do. Both the Foundations.

A metal tool is being pressed into your hands. You find yourself frozen still. Dissociating.

You are dimly aware of more restlessness from the other agents from Overwatch.

"O5 won't like this."

"They knew this might eventually have to happen." Command.

"We have to at least try it." Your mirror. *"They'll look the other way. We need results. We've gotten nothing good in a long time — we need to step up the game. We're erasing everything anyway."* A long pause, then a whisper that you can still hear, as close as you are. *"We've done so much worse than this, objectively speaking."*

You will not stare at the test subject. The test subject is brave. The test subject is not crying.

Command is talking to you again.

"Remove the subject's leftmost phalanges as marked on the testing diagram."

You don't move.

"Remove the subject's leftmost phalanges as marked on the testing diagram."

You don't move. You can't do this.

Command repeats the sentence a third time.

You remember your home. Your loved ones. Your family, your co-workers, the annoying neighbors you used to hate. They seem far away. You don't know what will happen to them. Maybe it would be alright. Maybe it's not too late to stop.

You remove the subject's leftmost phalanges as marked on the testing diagram.

***

When it's over, and the subject lies in carefully separated pieces on the floor in a pool of liquid, you hardly believe what you've done, what you've gone through with.

You aren't looking at the other test subjects, but you can hear them (emitting distressed vocalizations, a voice says in the back of your head with the proper clinical remove). You notice that Li — poor Li — has passed out, slumped in a pool of ritual blood which now almost looks like it's coming from her body, her fingers (fingers) draped over a soiled paintbrush.

You cast your eyes distantly at your collaborators. You see the horror you expect. But you also see gratitude. Gratitude that you did this, not them.

Command shifts his shoulders. He hasn't looked up in quite some time, keeping his eyes fixed firmly on whatever is written on the files he's been holding in front of him.

"Call up the next subject," he says.

***

But you don't continue the experiment with the next subject.

You can't believe your eyes, because it's like something you could have once imagined. But not the kind of thing you expected to imagine again.

A blazing white light. Spreading wings.

Something like a sword.

You remember little except for the evacuation. In an orderly fashion. The blazing light hangs over the air, over the children, unmoving. The children are sobbing — fear? joy? — and you have no idea what emotions you are feeling, or even if you have any emotions left at all.

You are herded (Li is lifted) into low, gray vehicles stamped with the sign of the SCP Foundation.

You drive for several hours before you're hauled out into a gray, foggy day. Day has lasted too long. Somewhere where you weren't paying attention, Command slipped your group between worlds again.

Command and the other agents don't seem particularly angry with you. Which should come as a relief, but doesn't quite relief. You're having a hard time caring.

Command orders you to stay when he dismisses the rest of your group after the debriefing.

He doesn't say anything for a while, just paces around, fills out forms, types up file entries. You recognize that he's updating a test log and an administrative report, maybe even an addendum to an SCP article, the way you might once have done, the way some of your colleagues still do.

"It was a test," Command abruptly says to you. "To see how far we could go. Apparently we got our answer."

A long wait. Apparently he wants a response from you.

"It's my job," Command says. "Plenty of other teams out there working more mundane angles. Trying to find a way to stop the Worm. My job is to draw out divines. This was probably the most successful experiment I've ever had."

This is more than Command's ever told you before.

"What about the children?" you ask.

"The subjects? We could always have put them back together. We will put the initial subject together. It won't remember a thing."

You sit there, in awe somehow.

"We have the technology," he says. "Of course we do. We're not like your home Foundation. We never chained our hands. Do you really think you couldn't make a cure-all if you didn't have regulations against it?"

You don't know, but you doubt you'd like what it look would look like. You say something along those lines, but Command isn't listening. He's shaking his head.

"I know they like to plant these rules in your Foundations to limit the experiment parameters, but I always thought you'd be more effective if you weren't. Maybe you'd actually figure out how to stop the Worm. Of course… Maybe you'd figure out how to unravel our Palisade if you did. Turn it against us. Yes, I'd believe you'd do that first before stopping the Worm. Logically, it would be easier. Since we know how to do that, after all, and we don't know how to stop the Worm. I suppose you have to be kept in your place."

He expects you to react to that.

"They were children," you say.

"This shouldn't be a surprise. Your Foundation follows the same protocols. Don't think of them as people. They're fodder."

"Aren't we fodder too?"

He seems impatient. "You were. We made you people. We decided

you are people, we decided you matter, and so you are, and so you do. Listen. Think of it as editing. A book, or a piece of art. You need to make the mistakes to figure out what you really want."

"Mistakes?"

"Yes."

You don't know what to say, so you don't say anything.

You wonder what you saw. An angel? A goddess?

"So you went so far that the literal forces of the universe decided to step in?"

Command shrugs. "They don't seem to object to massacring uncountable billions," he says. "The rituals work because they let them. It doesn't impress me that they draw a line at child torture."

You again don't have a response. Command doesn't seem to need one, now.

"Doomsday doesn't feel personal, I suppose," he says. "Listen. We had to bait them. We must find out why the Worm exists. We assume tampering with the forces behind existence will eventually let us figure it out. Or maybe one of your people will. Either way."

You still don't have an answer.

"We're the heroes, here." He smiles. A hint of irony, like he knows it's a cliche? "The gods or fate or the universe put us in this position. They created the scenario in which we did this. Isn't that endorsement enough?"

You don't understand why he even cares about endorsement at this stage.

He's getting excited again.

"Maybe we're going about this the wrong way," he says. "Maybe the others are right. This little child-loving god or angel or whatever — it's small potatoes. I could make something more impressive in a

fucking lab. Nothing compared to the Worm. Blessed be the children, who cares? Grimdark isn't sustainable, not like this. It's missing… it's missing the creativity."

You're starting to feel a little more afraid.

"That's it," he says. "That's the key. The Worm? Fuck the Worm. It just erases our fucking realities. You can't even see it! Can't even comprehend it! It's not even a fucking Worm! Baiting it to universe after universe — that's not gonna draw out any self-respecting divines hiding out there. Where's the meteor heading dramatically towards Earth? Where are the swarms of human-faced locusts? Where's the Wolf striding the horizon? Where's the XK-Class End of the World scenario?"

He's grinning now. Excited. Thrilling at his own words.

"Doomsday," he says. "That's the answer. The principalities and powers love a good doomsday." He sets down his notebook with a note of finality. "We'll have to try a few."

In The Eye Of The Beholders

Only one person ever saw Lisa after 2:02 PM on November 27, 1991.

The party was mediocre at best. Lisa's friends had started noticing oddities at 1:53 PM. They told Lisa she had been looking tired, and so Lisa made some coffee. Still, she looked tired. They had said she looked cold and was shivering, and so she put on a sweater. Still, she was cold. They had told her she looked pale, and so she touched up her makeup. Still, she looked pale. Lisa was a pale person. But that night she was paler than usual.

At 12:18 PM on November 27, 1991, Lisa's boyfriend had dragged her to an antique store to "keep him company while his mother shopped". She could have gouged her eyes out with a Spork and been more content. The level of disgust she felt practically *forced* her to sit in the corner, arms crossed and pouting. Practically *forced* her to catch a glimpse of that strange **`painting`** in the corner, leaning against a rack of tattered and dusty books, at 1:32 PM. Practically *forced* her to stroke its surface. It had felt…warm. Alive, almost.

She had spoken to it. No, *it* had spoken to *her*. It had known things about her, secrets she had never told anyone. How she had lost the class hamster in third grade, how she had stolen her best friend's wallet to pay off her pot dealer, how she had destroyed her laptop on purpose to get a new one from her parents. Never had she felt so connected, so tied to another being in her life. At 1:38 PM, her boyfriend had made her leave it behind, despite their closeness. At 1:47 PM, she could feel them becoming closer.

She arrived at the party at 1:51 PM. At 1:54, she was paler than ever, more tired than she could imagine, and colder than ice. At 1:57, she left the party.

At 2:12 PM on November 27, 1991, her body was discovered. The

police were called. Lisa was declared dead at 2:24 PM.

On November 30, 1991, Jeremy walked into an antique shop with his wife. *I wonder if I can find a dining set,* he thought, shuffling around the room. He looked at the tables; dust, books, a typewriter, more dust, some more dust, placemats, and dust. Nothing of interest. Jeremy sighed, disappointed, and turned towards the door. He reached for the knob and began to turn before a splash of color caught his eye. He turned, puzzled. And there, on November 30, 1991, Jeremy became the last person to ever see Lisa.

In The Garden

And the serpent said unto the woman, Ye shall not surely die:

For God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil.

And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise, she yearned to take of the fruit thereof, and eat.

But instead, the woman said unto the serpent, If your words be true:

Then let my eyes forever be closed.

- **Genesis (KJV), 3:4-9**

With just a word, Rebecca Love popped the door out of existence.

Was 'pop' the right word? It definitely made a 'pop' sound. Kind of satisfying, actually — like snapping bubble-wrap. Why did it make that noise, she wondered? Maybe it was air rushing in to fill the gap where the door now wasn't? That made sense.

Behind the gap, three men sat at their desks and toiled over alien machines. Their hands were stretched across symbol-enscribed boards, stroking out patterns like spiders delicately navigating a complex web. Each dip of a finger produced a pleasing 'click'. In front of them, green runes glowed upon panels of glass. Given enough time, they could weave those runes into a particular kind of 'magic' — the most dangerous kind.

All three men heard the 'pop'. They turned to face Rebecca — a short, petite woman with burnt sienna skin and a smile as wide as the sky. One of them reached for his piece.

Right away, Rebecca could tell that the wand was high-end — not one of those mass-produced imitation knock-offs. It was the color of moon-light; exquisitely carved ash-wood with a silver-capped tip. Probably a semi-automagic.

Again, Rebecca spoke a word. *POP.* The wand disappeared from his hand.

They froze in their chairs.

"Now," Rebecca said, "I know what you're thinking. I mean, not literally." She held up her hands. "I can't read your minds or anything like that. But right now, I suspect you're thinking something like: 'Okay, she can pop doors out of existence. And she can pop wands out of existence. But… can she pop *us* out of existence?'"

All three exchanged glances, then turned back to her. Rebecca lowered her hands, cracked her knuckles, and gave them her best 'come-at-me' grin.

"To which I say… wanna find out?"

Silence stretched out across the room. After what felt like a half minute of deliberation, the one who pulled the weapon rose to stand and lifted his arms. The other two quickly followed suit.

"Pfsh." Rebecca wrinkled her nose. "And here I thought you guys were all about empiricism. Whatever happened to the spirit of inquiry?" She reached up to tap the carved bone piercing in her ear, then focused her thoughts into the magical thread that wove through it:

«Room's secure. Three lil' snakes. Looks like they're giving up peacefully.»

«Good. Upstairs is secure. A little tech, nothing major. Anything down there?»

«Yep. High-end hardware. Processing machines — the works. At a glance…» Rebecca looked past the men. There was a large block-like device in the corner, with dozens of interlocking parts arranged across a table. *«3D printer. I'd guess they were trying to build robots? Small drones, maybe.»*

«Great. Mechanical engineers.» Denise's sarcasm buzzed through the thread. *«Just be careful. Clean-up crew is on its way.»*

The man who had pulled a wand on her spat at Rebecca's feet. "You can't stop us. Knowledge wants to be free."

Rebecca raised an eyebrow. "Mmhm." In her experience, members of the Serpent's Hand came in two flavors: Curious people in way over their heads, and die-hard fanatics. This guy was clearly the latter. Trying to reason with his type was like reasoning with a brick wall. A very angry, very *teenage* brick wall.

"You will fall. The torch of progress will prevail."

«Think you can hurry up? One of them is monologuing.» Rebecca tried very hard not to roll her eyes. Stay focused, she told herself. Don't let your guard down.

"You cannot keep the world in —"

The man sprang forward, pulling something out from behind his back. Rebecca hopped away and lifted her hand toward him. Everything happened so fast — she didn't have time to pull herself out of the channel. Her unconscious thoughts vibrated through the bone and into the thread:

«Bomb!»

«Rebecca?»

POP.

Rebecca's hand trembled; her outstretched palm now occupied the empty space where he had been a moment before. His two comrades stared at that space with mute, wide-eyed shock.

She turned her focus to them: "Run."

They kept staring.

"I said *run*!" Rebecca snatched both of them by their wrists and pulled them close.

«Rebecca! Report!»

«One of them pulled a bomb. I popped him.» Both men stumbled behind her; she just dragged them along. After a few steps, they finally remembered that they had feet and started running with her toward the door.

«I thought you couldn't—»

«Can, but only for 12 seconds. Everyone, GET DOWN.»

Rebecca gritted her teeth and pushed both men through the doorway, diving after them. Somewhere behind her, the air crackled with released magic.

…POP.

"—darkness forever! Wait… where did —?"

The blast alone slammed into her spine like a massive fist. Claws of fire scraped up and down her back; every inch of her was bathed in a scorching heat. The sheer force flung her into both men, crashing with them into a tangled heap atop of the floor.

Her ears rang. Pieces of debris fell from above, tumbling to the ground. Rebecca groaned in pain. Still alive? Check. She tried to pull herself up, then — as several searing bolts of anguish flashed through her back — decided she ought to give herself a minute.

«Everyone, report.»

«This is Jack, clear and okay.»

«Vernon, I'm good.»

«Dai — shaken, but not stirred.»

«Good.» They could all feel Denise's relief swelling with each voice that replied. But it was accompanied with a prickling anxiety. *«Becca?»*

«I'm hurt, but not dead.» Rebecca grimaced. The two guys under her were wriggling; one of them groaned. *«One's definitely dead, other two are stunned. Don't think they were in on their fearless leader's exit strategy.»*

«Good. Stay down. Don't engage. Coming to you now. Dai, with me.» Denise's urgency squeezed down on Rebecca; it was the mental equivalent of a hug. Even though it wasn't real, just thinking about being touched sent another spasm of agony lancing through her spine.

One of the men under her sputtered, twisting to sit up. "A-ah," he cried out. "What just —"

"Stay down. Just stay down," Rebecca warned him, trying not to let the pain seep into her voice.

"— I just — what just happened?"

"It's alright. You'll be fine. Just don't move."

"How did you…? I didn't know spells like that even existed."

Fighting through the pain, Rebecca pulled herself up and gave him a half-smile. It hardly mattered at this point. Better to keep him distracted; by the time the memeticists were through with him, he wouldn't remember a thing. "Paramagic."

His brow crumpled down into a tight, wrinkled knot as he tried to parse the word. "Para… magic? What the hell is… who are you?"

"I'm with the Foundation," she told him. "We contain science."

In the Land of the Blind

BEGIN AUDIO

- sounds of chairs being moved and objects falling to the floor -

Agent Randolph: Tell Hicks to get that channel open! Can anyone on this floor see anything?

Doctor Gears: Gentlemen, is this Security Station Theta Blue?

Agent Randolph: There's some sort of containment issue right now, you shouldn't be… oh. Sorry Doctor. What are your orders?

Doctor Gears: Please pass me the microphone if you can find it, Agent Randolph. I need to make a site-wide announcement.

- Static and feedback -

Agent Randolph: -at's it.

Doctor Gears: Attention, all Foundation Personnel. This is Doctor Gears. There has been a containment incident resulting in the temporary blindness of all sighted individuals in Site-19. Remain calm and do not leave your workstations. I repeat. Remain calm and do not leave your workstations.

Doctor Gears: Thank you, Agent. Please put that on repeat.

Agent Randolph: Yes sir… I think this is it. There. So this is temporary?

- Recording of statement by Doctor Gears can be heard repeating in distance -

Doctor Gears: It should be, Agent. An experiment with Me2515 has gone awry, however our research strongly suggests this will pass within the next six hours. Please contact Site-23 and have them send in a relief team to secure this location.

Agent Randolph: Already done, ETA is 19:45. God, I hate to imagine what must be going on in some of the lower levels right now.

Doctor Gears: The lower levels are contained by blast shields, all personnel there should be safe. Casualties will be worse if there is a panic. Would you kindly secure the door?

Agent Randolph: Those poor bastards are down there with the really dangerous stuff and they can't even see anything though -

- Rattling noises -

Agent Randolph: -icks should be on his way back, we need to let him -

Doctor Gears: Please secure the door Agent.

- Screams heard in the hallway -

Agent Hicks via security radio: Goddamn it! Answer me you fucks! I said 173 has escaped containment! 173 has escaped containment!

- Screaming stops. Loud scraping noises -

Doctor Gears: Agent. Please secure the door.

END AUDIO

Note to O5: This is the transcript of an audio file recovered during

the weekly scan and backup of servers at Site-19. We have no records on anything labeled Me2515 and there is nothing to corroborate what is contained in this file. Agents Randolph and Hicks were KIA during a field mission in '08 and Doctor Gears was not stationed at Site-19 during their rotation there. - Site-19 IT dept

It's probably leftovers from some prank involving 050 again. Just delete it. - O5-8

In the Manner of a Bad Apple

Nonstandard Reality Acclimation and Preparedness
Final Certification Exam

1. Successfully recognize nonstandard reality environment (NSRE) within 5 minutes of exposure.
- Activation of circle-square trigger.
- Activation of mother-daughter-aunt trigger.
- Completion of full NFPOT checklist.

2. Successfully document NSRE effects within 10 minutes of exposure.
- Note divergences in physical, emotional, and logical environments.
- Note presence of non-sentient, non-real entities.
- Note presence of sentient, non-real entities.

3. Successfully alert one other individual to presence of NSRE within 15 minutes of exposure.
- External activation of circle-square and mother-daughter-aunt triggers.

4. Successfully create an action plan for combat, communication, or evacuation within 20 minutes of exposure.

Elizabeth Cooper-Hughes ate undercooked beans off a flimsy paper plate in the remains of a charred building. There wasn't much left but the corpses of structures in Chicago since starlight began falling freely. She huddled close to the fire with other children and did her best not to sob.

Something was wrong.

A newly-nameless recruit ran through the narrow corridors of the

underwater habitat. Red lights flashed and sirens howled as the plated walls began to buckle, creases running from one to the next, as if chasing her down. Squirming darkness leaked in through the new gaps in her world's shell, spitting and hissing at the endlessly recycled air.

Something was very wrong.

Wren stood in a wide field of golden wheat. She had been reaping. She was reaping. She would reap. It didn't feel like a metaphor, it was simply life. Day after day, year after year. The sky never rained, the sun never set, and there was always more work to be done. Her parents would return when she finished the last field though. They promised.

Something was obviously wrong, because she felt confident a circle could perfectly fill a square.

Overseer-6's loyal dog played cards in a dingy basement somewhere under Bangkok. The rules of the game weren't clear, something where highs were low and lows were high. A loaded revolver with a single bullet sat at the center of the table. When they laid their cards down the final time, the old man across the table snatched it up and shot her in the chest.

Something was obviously wrong, because the simplest family tree was no better than a knot to her.

Egret walked down the aisle of a gently rocking train, paused, and found herself cognizant of that wrongness. It wasn't a perfect recognition, something still buzzed angrily in the back of her head, but she had the distinct feeling that something wasn't quite right. She looked back and forth, eyes passing over gently flexing walls, vein-latticed windows, and seats covered in sheets of squirming cilia. The nagging feeling wouldn't pass, but it was hard to say why.

Next, Egret looked through her backpack next for some hint of wrongness. Bottled water, energy bars, latex gloves, a glass jar full of pale worms, an assortment of unmarked pills, and a trashy novel she didn't quite remember buying. That wasn't unusual enough to be the source of her vague anxiety though, nor was anything else in the

bag. If something anomalous was going on, it was too subtle for her. Even in Alpha-1, she had always worked more on 'people problems' than spending time with the weird shit brigades.

The train jerked to a sudden stop. A noise halfway between a foghorn and a guttural roar sounded in the distance. Darkness was the only thing Egret could see beyond the fleshy windows. A hole in one wall opened with a wet squelch, and darkness started leaking inside too. The black sludge didn't look hostile, or even particularly alive, but it still didn't seem like very good company for a train ride. Egret started walking down the long aisle again, swiftly at first, but slower as the gentle rocking of travel resumed. No matter how far she walked, the far end of the train was little more than a pinprick on a narrow horizon.

Most of the seats along the straight path were empty. Most, but not all. One held a shimmering figure of shifting symbols and ghostly light. Another pair of seats was occupied by a giant, chitinous, many-armed thing whose head was locked away inside an iron box. A third rider was a normal dog, sitting and panting as though it was just where it wanted to be. Or, maybe it was a cat? It was definitely not some kind of lizard, scales aside, because it was clearly some kind of badger, gnawing at something unspeakable. Egret didn't linger to consider it.

It was harder to ignore the more human riders. Most were cursed with some aspect that would have doomed them to one of the Foundation's vast underground containment complexes. Forking horns, blurry faces, painful presences, there was plenty to condemn them all with. The train halted again, and something far behind Egret roared back in a tone of unabating, unquenchable, unrelenting impatience. They set off again soon after, rumbling down whatever tracks has been laid through the shifting scenery outside.

A gray-uniformed woman with curtains of sleek black hair stared intently at Egret from her seat. She tenderly stroked a bare sword that lay across her lap, and the gnats in Egret's head were whipped up into a furor at the sight.

"What?" asked Egret, as the woman turned her head to watch her passing.

" "

"*What*?"

" " The woman pointed a finger at Egret's backpack.
" "

Egret shook her head and kept walking. The nerve of some people. Footsteps followed behind her, but not close enough to be a cause for concern. That might change if they woman drew much closer, but even then the concern would not be Egret's.

The train stopped. A city of alien buildings drooped from the clouds outside, each inverted tower hanging like an icicle over a sea of endless white. The train's floor pulsed like a heartbeat as it moved again, through a strangling jungle whose shadows were full of unblinking eyes, through a sketchy landscape of ash and ink. The bellowing horn sounded as it stopped, first in a empty plane of throbbing guilt, then in a crowded one of fire and serpents. Egret paid all of it no mind. The train would bring her to her destination eventually, wherever that was.

" " shouted the woman. Egret reached for the pistol holstered under one her arm, and found it missing. The gnats in her head buzzed loudly. The train stopped in a dim night, lit by furious stars and surrounded by the thundering beat of artillery fire. " " Egret reached for her pocket knife, and found that missing too. The gnats howled. Behind her, the footsteps came quicker and closer.
" "

Egret scrambled forward, swinging sword hissing through the air behind her, and ran. The swordswoman pounded after her. She passed by a group of robed figures who reeked of pulped oranges, by solid shadow that recoiled from her presence, and by a man in the same uniform as the woman chasing her. He too turned to watch her passing. Were it not for the sight of her fellow travelers, Egret would have thought herself to be running in place. The distant end of her path stayed distant. The footsteps remained close behind her. The outside world changed from one brand of nonsense to another, rhyme and reason absent from its shifts.

The train stopped again, howling in its manner. A hole stretched open in one wall of the train next to Egret, showing a flash of something that might have been English on a distant wall, and the buzzing reached a fever pitch. She leaped through the fleshy doorway, skidded across the hard stone platform, and crawled to her feet. She turned just in time to see the tail end of a great worm slithering into a tunnel to nowhere.

Egret stumbled through the empty subway station, head aching and knees bleeding. She had been wrong about the signs. They were a fair approximation of English, but were senseless in truth. Otherwise, the station could have been anywhere on Earth, a wide complex of concrete pillars, glowing advertisements, and vending machines. All that, and no people. The buzzing calmed to a deep purr as she climbed the long stairway up toward the surface.

The city above was still and quiet. Skyscrapers towered, streetlights shone, and cars sat in the road. The wind was dead. The city was dead. Egret followed the buzzing as it led her down the street to the mouth of a wide alleyway lined with dumpsters. She wasn't sure why she should be heeding the noise, but she wasn't sure what she was doing there in the first place. Perhaps she had gotten off at wrong stop on the line? Egret shook her head and rubbed at her eyes with both hands. The things she did had purpose, and the Overseer didn't allow for mistakes. She was there for a reason, even if she didn't know it.

The alleyway twisted in on itself, left turn after left turn never intersecting with any other path. Two white moons overhead stared down like the eyes of an unusually attentive god. Egret's boots splashed in the briny fluid leaking from the dumpsters lining her path. The slow tide flowed toward a squat stairway where it trickled downward. Something like sound leaked out from around the door at the bottom, and something like light poured out as she opened it, but she could be sure they were neither.

The nightclub was not so different from the others Egret had done business in. Formless shapes writhed to the tuneless song of collapsing stars. A bar ran along one wall, and a squat stage had been erected again the other. Light was sucked from the fixtures above toward the event horizon of a dark eternity. Something that

was inhuman in every way stood behind the bar, staring at Egret with peaceful blue eyes.

" "

"Yeah, I've got yours," said Egret, unsure of why the words were coming from her mouth. "Do you have my boss' side of it?"

" "

Egret put her backpack down on a barstool, unzipped it, and pulled out the jar of worms. They crawled in a circular, squirming tide as she placed it on the finely polished bar. The bartender, whose nails were filed immaculately, placed a heavy book with two spines next to it. It seemed a fair exchange to the gnats, who voiced their pleasure in the same way they voiced their objections.

" "

"A pleasure doing business with you too," said Egret as she stowed the book away. Politeness was key when the Overseer's reputation was in question.

" " The bartender extended its open hand, sending the gnats into a senseless frenzy. Egret swallowed hard and grasped it tightly. Warm, soft, and terribly unpleasant. Like sitting next to a crackling fire on Christmas morning, surrounded by the empty silhouettes of her family, and having her fingernails ripped off. Her eyelid twitched uncontrollably as they shook hands, but she stopped herself from pulling away all the same. Politeness. The Overseer's reputation. All that.

"I'll tell her," said Egret firmly, turning to leave before she started shaking.

The alley outside was still all left turns as she walked away, and the brine flowed back into the dumpsters. She dared not look inside. Back through the city streets, back down the stairs into the station, the train arrived the moment she sat down to wait for it. Egret found the gray-uniformed woman on the train. Sitting. Waiting. She stared, bare sword laying across her lap again, but made no further move.

Egret smiled at her, and took a quiet pleasure in her look of revulsion.

Egret found herself in another subway station some time later. She couldn't say how much time later, because she couldn't say what exactly she had been doing. Not that she couldn't remember. The things that happened since her last meeting with the Overseer simply made no sense. She stumbled through a crowd of commuters, ignoring the odd looks they gave her as she stopped to pick up loose change.

It took at least an hour to find a payphone still took coins. It was stuffed into a dark, dusty corner of the station next to a closet with a lock but no doorknob. Hànzì flashed on the screen as Egret stuffed coins in, waited for a dial tone, and dialed the international number for Slithering Cherished Pets. Someone picked up after exactly two rings.

"Hello?" said a slightly tinny voice. "How can I help you?"

"Yeah, uh, abject three four updraft nine nine honeydew sincere. Dropbox six, high priority. I'm in China, otherwise aggregate green." Egret hung up the phone and sighed.

She rubbed her eyes, then her temples, then both at once. This nonsense was the worst part of her job, no question about that. All she could do now was hope she had been successful. That, and figure out how to get back home with no money, little fluency, and a backpack full of something that probably didn't belong in this world.

« Previous Tale | Maim the Sky, Slay the Sun | Next Tale »

In the Shadow of a High Wall

On June 16, 1963, a team of Foundation agents attempted and failed to re-contain the escaped SCP-2030 in West Berlin. The following excerpt is drawn from the debrief of team leader Louis Franklin. The interview was conducted on June 18, 1963, by Berlin station chief Marcel Gunther.

[Note: Certain designations may no longer be accurate.]

[Excerpt Begins]

Interviewer: Alright, Franklin, we've gone over SCP-2030's escape from the Oslo containment facility and the subsequent pursuit conducted by your field investigation team in some detail. Now, if you could give more context for the West Berlin encounter?

Franklin: We had just arrived in the city on the morning of the sixteenth when Intelligence notified us about a scheduled meeting between one Agent Antonov, KGB, and a Foundation employee preparing to defect. Only problem was, this supposed defector had been listed as KIA quite recently — and if you've read twenty-thirty's file, you'll see why that set off alarms.

Our team was half American and half German — a local bunch. We set out on the evening of the Sixteenth to break up the encounter and bag the thing. Antonov had arranged the meeting at a bar out in Charlottenberg — small, quiet place. Harrison parked across the street in the sedan with Michaels and Manteuffel. Tegelmann,

Conley, and Roberts were staking out the back way with the automatic rifle. Ludwig and I were tailing Antonov on foot. It wasn't till he got up to the door of the bar that we got a good look at him and realized just how inexperienced he had to be.

Interviewer: What gave you that impression?

F: He dressed like he didn't know any better. No gloves or protective glasses, no briefcase for a gasmask or forensic kit — basics anybody who'd worked with parasci before wouldn't have gone into the field without. But he walked right into that bar as if he owned the place — it demonstrated to us, at least, that he had no inkling of what he was walking into.

Interviewer: How did you proceed once he had entered the building?

F: Ludwig and I checked in with the other two teams after Antonov entered — no sign of our skip, so we took station down the street and waited for about half an hour. Nobody else arrived or left during that time.

All of a sudden Harrison tears out of there, tires squealing- he'd seen a couple of Polizei autos coming down the street, sirens screaming, and scrambled. I thought maybe the Americans had put the Germans onto our operation, so we got out of there too. Unfortunately that meant nobody was keeping an eye on the front door. Several minutes passed before it became clear that the cops weren't after us. We suspected that twenty-thirty might have been waiting for an opening to move in to the bar, so Ludwig and I decided to investigate the premise on foot while Harrison was still pulling back around.

Interviewer: You engaged the entity with your backup out of position?

F: We weren't sure it was in there at all, at first, but I didn't want to give our skip a chance to dig in — which it would, if we lost track of it.

Interviewer: I understand. What did you find when you made your

reconnaissance?

F: Everything was pretty unremarkable; two women at the filthy bar, four drunken workers hooting over some card game in the corner. In the center, hunched over a rickety table underneath the shuttered front window was our KGB man, deep in conversation with Agent Hockaday.

Interviewer: Hockaday was reported deceased after the Oslo breach, correct?

F: Killed in the initial breach — and then twenty-thirty dragged his corpse helter-skelter across half of Europe.

Interview: But why Hockaday? And why was the creature traveling east in the first place?

F: Hell, Gunther, it's your station, you know we could never follow it over the wall. East Germany could give it shelter. The thing must have called up Hockaday's contacts in the *Stasi* and arranged a defection — maybe even told them what it was.

If we'd been any slower, twenty-thirty would have been on time and out of our reach — but now it sat before us, hands stretched out over the table just short of the Russki's bare palms. The infection process smells strongly of oranges — gave the game away even before I saw Hockaday's face. Before I could alert our backup though, Ludwig misjudged the situation.

Interviewer: Misjudged?

F: Ludwig knew a lot of folks at the Oslo site, maybe he was more shook up than he let on. We'd been on the road continuously since the breach — maybe sixty hours of pursuit had clouded his judgement. I don't know and I never got the chance to ask him. For whatever reason, as soon as he ID'd the thing he drew his automatic and started blasting.

Hockaday's body was knocked about and his clothes were shredded but lead rounds don't do much to twenty-thirty's semiskin. The creature pulled itself into a mass and flung itself across the room at

Ludwig looking like a blanket made of oatmeal, same color too. Hit Ludwig full on and he went down like a sack of bricks. Meanwhile, I had my hands full keeping our Soviet friend from making a run for the door.

Conley and Roberts burst in through the back door just as I got Antonov under control and Tegelmann followed them with the BAR. Headquarters had issued us particular rounds for this skip — super-dense armor piercing; very experimental. His first two bursts punched right through twenty-thirty's mantle and into Ludwig; ugly, but no helping it. Punctured, the skip bled out in seconds. The whole fight couldn't have lasted two minutes.

Interviewer: Let me stop you there. Your report says that you transported the KGB agent away from the engagement site and released him; without consulting me, I might add. Why did you leave him alive?

F: We interrogated him while Michaels and Stettin were whitewashing — sterilizing the place and distributing amnesiacs. Antonov wasn't in any condition to be concealing things. He was well out of it, breathing heavily, eyelids dark blue — all the symptoms of early twenty-thirty infestation, and the skip's drugs were still thick in his system. “I've got to get to Carre,” he says first thing, even before we ask him his name. Carre, he says, Carre. Very important. Absolutely critical. Sure enough, there's a photo of the bastard sewn into the seam of his jacket.

Interviewer: Carre?

F: John Carre. CIA spook playing a double game between the Americans and the Russkis. Helped pillage Site 20 back in '59. Looks like the Kremlin wised up to all that, though. Hence, Antonov getting fed to our skip.

Interviewer: You believe the meeting was intended to…

F: …Expose Carre to twenty-thirty, yes — to get him out of the way without the Americans knowing their cover had been blown. Some KGB bastard must have figured they could have their cake and eat it, too — close a leak, and get their hands on a shapeshifting puddle

grateful for sanctuary in the bargain. All they needed was somebody expendable like Antonov to get the creature over the wall and into contact with Carre; then they could replace him with the skip and leave the Americans none the wiser.

Interviewer: You were part of the team which brought the entity into containment in the first place, Franklin, so I know you know what it's capable of. How did knowledge of Antonov's mission justify releasing SCP-2030 into the wild with no clear timeframe for recovery?

F: Carre's a particular case. A nose for our operations and very few scruples about selling our secrets…the foreign teams had been trying to knock him out for a while now. If getting him meant letting the thing loose, writing off Antonov and who knows how many other good little Communists…well, then call it a matter of operational necessity.

Interviewer: I expect you to be onhand, should the creature attempt to return. In the meantime, Tegelmann will take over pursuit of the remaining Oslo anomalies.

F: Twenty-thirty won't be gone long. It'll come back over the wall when it's worn out its welcome — and I doubt our Russian friends will think much of its 'gratitude'…

[Excerpt ends.]

« Misnomer | Hub | Audio of War »

In the Trenches with the Dead

If you can `read this`, you are already dead.

2.10 — Five Dogmas of Defense: The Identity Warrior must depend on five key elements of identity for defense in IWT, as well as for long-term survival. We call these five elements "dogmas" because you *must* believe them if you are going to survive.
2.10.1 — NAMES: Use the mnemonic "NAMES" to remember your five dogmas: **N**arrative, **A**nchor, **M**ission, **E**motion and **S**ociety.

— *Identity Warfare Training Field Manual-01: Basic Techniques*

Ω—Ω

Item #: `SCP-3125` (`Mobile Task Force Omega-Zero` Iteration)

Object Class: Keter

Special Containment Procedures: The ongoing incursion by SCP-3125 is to be monitored, and opposed by Mobile Task Force Omega-Zero ("Ará Orún") wherever possible. Foundation antimemetics researchers are to be protected while alive, and in the event of their deaths, their nascent info-streams are to be defended against SCP-3125 predation in order to facilitate MTF ω-0 recruitment. Survivors are to be infected with a Type X targeted retro-grade amnestic antimeme and all SCP-3125 information is to be erased.

The SCP-3125 containment unit at Site-41, designed by Dr. Bart Hughes, is theorized to be inverted containment and represents a memetically-insulated space in which informational construct entities cannot enter; this includes both SCP-3125 and MTF ω-0 operatives.

A senior Antimemetics Division staff member must visit SCP-3125 every six weeks (42 days). During this visit, an MTF ω-0 Revenant Team is to manifest in the SCP-3125 containment antechamber and

standby to provide support and defense, if needed, to the staff member upon exit.

Description: SCP-3125 is an invasive memetic ecology or possibly a single large self-organized informational construct, originating in an informational system or alien noosphere with much higher complexity than that of humanity. As such these incursions are naturally adept at Identity Warfare, and are to be considered extremely dangerous.

This system is able to detect and perceive unsecured info-streams that include information about itself[1]. Whenever (and wherever) this information is detected an incursion occurs, resulting in a manifestation of anti-memetically cloaked arachnoid organisms supported by sustained infolaser assault. This incursion attacks any person who hosts information pertaining to SCP-3125, as well as individuals with close association (based on similarity of memeome), killing them and erasing them from the noosphere.

The result of this is that of the over 400 groups once known to MTF ω-0 that were engaged in antimemetic research, only two remain: the Foundation's Antimemetics and Counterconceptual Divisions. The other groups were not only eliminated, but forgotten and unremarked; their very existence is buried under sophisticated feedback-reinforced antimemetic structures.

To date, 36 incursions have been successfully defeated by MTF ω-0 Revenant teams, but at significant casualties, resulting in the unrecoverable zeroing of 13 operatives, and significant permanent identity damage to 17 more. Once a researcher is targeted, these attacks will continue until they either are killed, or suffer retrograde amnesia such that they no longer possess relevant information.

In the event that this is the precursor to an attack, humanity's defenses are now largely eliminated. Counterconceptual Division's **`superior antimemetic defenses`** appear to have cloaked it from SCP-3125, but at the cost of their own ignorance. They appear to have deliberately rendered themselves incapable of conceptualizing SCP-3125, as a countermeasure, making them unable to mount a response. Antimemetics Division is theorized to be working on a containment strategy within the SCP-3125

containment chamber, but as a result the Division is under constant and undetected assault. Over 3500 Division personnel have been killed since 2012, and only 27% have retained coherent enough info-streams for successful recruitment to MTF ω-0.

Footnotes
1. Conventional cryptography and most Foundation memetic and antimemetic techniques are all inadequate. IWT may be effective, and MTF ω-0 currently appears to be either successfully camouflaged from this detection or to be not of interest to it.

Ω—Ω

2.10.1.1 — Narrative: We are only the stories we tell about ourselves. Identity Warriors must have a clear and self-consistent narrative of self. All attacks against your identity fundamentally target this narrative, and either attempt to edit it or cause it to be forgotten. Your narrative is **you**, if you lose control of it, then **you** are lost.
2.10.1.1-A — CIB: You will maintain a Core Identity Biography (CIB) according to the standards given in Section 3 at all times. This document is subject to inspection by your superiors.

— *Identity Warfare Training Field Manual-01: Basic Techniques*

Manifestation Log — Operation Cold City

Team: Revenant-3

Roster: Lyn Marness (Leader/Field Memeticist), Santosh Desai (Identity Defense), Zoe Smith (Identity Offense), Riley Cooper (Quick-Space Manipulation)

Briefing: Today at 1030 **`Director Wheeler is scheduled for her visit to the SCP-3125 chamber`**. I don't need to remind you of the significant threat that SCP-3125 represents and that our primary hope in mounting an effective defense is whatever Director Wheeler has been doing in that chamber.

Revenant-3, you are directed to manifest at Site-41 near the SCP-3125 containment airlock, and await the return of Director

Wheeler. You are to render whatever aid she appears to need, and defend against any assault by SCP-3125 entities.

Your manifestation, code-named "Operation Cold City", has been inserted into the relevant systems and is standing by for activation.

Remember: We are the Saints who guard,

— Amos Sanchez, Operations Director, MTF ω-0

BEGIN MANIFESTATION LOG

<manifesting: Marness L; Desai S; Smith Z; Cooper R>

Marness: Alright ghosties, we are logged in. Let's get video up.

Video Feed shows the SCP-3125 containment antechamber. Researcher Paul Kim is sitting at a terminal. The airlock occupation indicator is lit.

Marness: Linebacker, defensive status?

Desai: Situation is nominal. There's still that *pressure* that's been in Site-41 for at least a year, but other than that we are secure.

Marness: Roger that. Stay alert, Saints, and let's hope Marion comes out of there with something this time.

Ω—Ω

2.10.1.2 — Anchor Your anchors are those among the quick who remember you. Strong anchors knew you well, grieved for your loss, and have taken mnestics at some point in their careers. Initially you'll need your anchor to survive but you can, and will, learn to do without. A strong anchor can be a powerful asset to the Identity Warrior. You can learn to use your anchor to sustain your narrative, learn to sense your anchor's location and emotional state, and even manifest at your anchor's location.
2.10.1.2-A — CS Rating: By utilizing exercises in Section 3 you will be able to quantify the strength of your anchors. This is the CS (Chain Strength) scale. To qualify for field operations, you'll need at least one anchor with a CS of 4.5 or higher.

— Identity Warfare Training Field Manual-01: Basic Techniques

Smith: Hey, Riley, did you know our boy Santosh has the strongest recorded anchor in the Task Force? CS 7.8.

Cooper: Really? I didn't even know that was possible, that's a logarithmic scale, right? Who's your anchor Santosh?

Desai: My dad. I really don't like talking about it.

Marness: No secrets between the dead, son.

Desai: Yeah, yeah … okay. I've been dead for nearly a decade now. He keeps sending me emails, blames himself and can't move on, deliberately makes sure he is mnestic qualified so he never forgets a thing. It sucks for him, it's uncomfortable for me, and a significant asset for Omega Zulu.

Cooper: Jesus, that sucks.

Smith: Uh, what's *he* looking at.

Smith: We've got a hostile vector here. Boss, you want to Casper this?

Marness: Desai and Cooper, keep an eye on Kim here, he's compromised. Yeah, this is definitely 3125 stuff, like we fought in '76. Injecting countermeme.

Marness: C'mon Paul, think!

On the video feed, the airlock starts to cycle. Kim gets up, startled, and goes to the door. It cycles open. Marion Wheeler is lying on the bottom of the chamber.

Desai: Do you feel that? She's under an infolaser assault. I'm blocking it, but I don't know for how long.

Marness: Cooper, start composing a message for Wheeler, try to warn her.

Cooper: On it.

On the video feed, Wheeler is still huddled at the bottom of the airlock. Kim is talking to her. He unfolds a pocket-knife and leans down towards Wheeler.

Smith: I'm dethreading him. Or whatever it is that's puppeting him. … His entire memeome has been overwritten, and what's in there now is tightly bound, I've never seen anything like this.

Desai: It's trying to overwrite her too. I'm shielding, for now.

Wheeler and Kim are struggling, Wheeler parries a thrust and kicks Kim hard. He flies through and is flung against the wall.

Cooper: Fuck you!

Blood streams out of Kim's nose and flows into words on the wall behind him, "Wheeler, Site-41 under siege. Compromised". Wheeler surges up, and glances at the message. She then looks directly into the camera and clearly enunciates "I'm okay. I remember the plan", then sprints out of the containment chamber.

Wheeler sprints down the corridor, heading to the pharmacy. Around her Site-41 begins to suffer structural failure. A section of ceiling tile collapses behind her and a dog-sized arachnoid organism drops out, and begins to skitter after Wheeler. Suddenly it staggers and blunders into the wall. Behind it another spider drops out of the ceiling.

Smith: *These* things. All right, I've got the first one's threads. Got it pretty confused about what it is right now.

The second spider spontaneously crumples into to a ball and stops moving.

Cooper: Guh. **`I don't like spiders.`**

A third one drops down and slowly staggers after Wheeler.

Marness: Got this one. They're fighting back.

Cooper: Something bit me. Hang on. I am Riley Cooper. I broke my brother's tooth with a basketball when I was 12. I'm Riley Cooper.

Good to go.

Desai: Yeah, they're feeling for your threads. I'm on it.

The two remaining spiders fold suddenly in on themselves and are crushed into balls. A dozen more spiders fall from the ceiling in quick succession followed by a shower of debris from the weakened floor above.

Cooper: Got 'em all.

Desai: Whoa, that's some hardcore poltergeist stuff, rookie.

Cooper: Yeah, I'm REALLY pissed off.

The video feed switches rapidly and Revenant-3 catches up with Wheeler as she reaches the pharmacy. Writhing tendrils of dark static are slowly growing in from the edges of the frame.

Desai: The informational environment is becoming corrosive to coherent data. We are going to lose the cameras. I'll hold them as long as I can.

As Wheeler enters the pharmacy, a woman lurking behind the door lunges for her with an injector, mouthing something incoherent. Wheeler quickly backpedals and parries the arm away from her neck.

Cooper: NO!

A heavy medical cabinet shakes loose from its bolts and hurls across the room and into the pharmacist's skull, shattering it and grinding into the floor. Wheeler falls backwards and lands hard. Then glances at the remains of the pharmacist with a visible shudder and pulls herself up, moving into the most secure part of the vault.

Marness: She's going to need to need three factor identification to get what she needs, if she's doing what I think she's doing.

Smith: This thing is chewing up information all over, it's definitely playing havoc with the security systems. I'm not sure the scanner

even can recognize bio-metrics anymore.

Marness: Good thing my team was the one that designed these systems in the first place… and, I'm in. Marion's my anchor, these systems can't forget her now, so long as she can't forget me.

Desai: No promises there, boss.

Marness: With what's in there, she won't live to forget anything ever again.

Ω—Ω

Wheeler moves past catatonic personnel laying in fetal curls among the dead and dying. On other feeds living personnel are mouthing incomprehensible guttural chants as they carve strange glyphs into themselves and each other. Wheeler is following arrows drawn on the walls in blood, a path that avoids contact with the infected.

Smith: And then a right towards block C.

Cooper: Roger that.

Smith: Shit! Collapse. There goes Area 11. It's completely impassable.

Desai: No way for her to get the armory now.

Marness: We can work with this. Coop, tear that wall open to the North. She can cut through there to the elevators.

Marness: Come to think of it, there's probably something in there she can use.

As Wheeler approaches the intersection, the opposite wall peels open revealing an unlit containment vault. Rows of standard containment lockers loom silently in the darkness.

Marness: Zoe, she'll need light.

Smith: Yes, she does. **`I'll need music`**:

Motes of dust floating in the new entrance are visibly gathering together and coalescing. After a few seconds a glowing ectoplasmic curve takes form, then another, and then dozens. They resolve into a recognizable pattern, a swarm of softly glowing spectral moths that swirl around Wheeler as she steps over the shredded steel wall into the vault.

Desai: No surveillance in there. We're blind. That vault isn't on the plans either? What is it doing there?

Marness: Safe-Class containment inherited from the **`Unthinkables`**, long lost and forgotten by everyone. Well, everyone except me.

Marness: Cooper, can you reach in there?

Cooper: Probably, a little, yeah.

Marness: Three rows in, second locker from the right. Combination is 23-19-32. Only one lock, those were simpler times.

Cooper: Got it! What's in there?

Marness: We confiscated it from High-Energy when it turned out their alien "disintegrator" was actually just turning targets into antimemetic worms that the rest of the Foundation couldn't see. Then we made sure they forgot they ever had a SCP-7381.

A section of wall in Area 09 suddenly flashes into a shower of tiny white worms and Wheeler steps through the hole. Over a quarter of the image is now obscured by the roiling tentacles of static at any time.

Marness: Right on schedule.

Desai: Looks like they are getting coherent. There's four, no, six, massing near the elevators and they've stopped cutting on each other. They're just waiting.

Smith: No getting around them. She's going to have to go through.

Smith: Ugh, it's getting worse than before. It's like a hand has

reached into them and is now wearing the thinnest notion of people as finger puppets. I'm trying to dethread them. All of this connects, but none of it makes sense. There's no semantic content … it's like it's all just structure … but there's no pattern … no meaning.

Cooper: Fuck 'em. Still made of meat.

The feed switches to a view of the the front of the elevators barely visible behind the static. One of the six people waiting bursts into flames. He runs screaming into the woman in front of him who also ignites. One by one, three more collapse from internal bleeding and organ failure. When Wheeler appears around the corner all but one are down. She aims the red two pronged mass of pipes at the remaining man, converting a quarter of his body mass into worms, then ducks into the elevator

The interior of the elevator is barely visible behind the static. An old corpse slumps under the words "Grey is here", scrawled on the wall. Wheeler is visible briefly speaking apparently to herself. The elevator begins to descend.

Desai: Boss … it's getting a lot worse. I'm not…

Smith: I remember I took some personal time when I got the diagnosis. Richards knew, of course, but I didn't tell anybody else in **`Eta-11`** yet, I couldn't even tell Helen. I uh, I think that I went to Portland and met with Charlie. I told him over coffee, we were crying, but I don't understand. Why him? Didn't we need to stop him? I don't remember grgkkjkldsfkj

Smith: Oh. I think I can hear the signal now.

Smith: Hey Santosh, look at this thread that winds through your whole self worth, through all your relationships, all throughout your sense of duty and back again. Some pathetic little childhood trauma, that you've painfully nursed through life and death. Didn't your mother ever tell you not to pick at your boo-boos? It would be so easy to loop it this around until the feedback just tears you wide open.

Desai: **`Dad! Dad! You remember that placement test?`**

I got a 95 on it!

Cooper: What the hell, Zoe?

Marness: Damnit Smith, you are an MTF Omega-Zero Operative. Even death could not release you from duty and you sure as hell aren't relieved now.

Smith: Zoe Smith died a long time ago, I am just a biography who once played at being the woman it described. You are way too old to still be playing pretend, Lyn, grow-up.

Desai: Negative, just try to get your people out of here. I'm going to activate the failsafe before he can finish killing us all.

Smith: Santosh is coming apart. This shade will fall to the same flaws that destroyed the man and then we'll be left defenseless. Won't that be awesome?

Marness: Specialist Smith: reset CIB to protected state: *three-heirophant, two-moon, one-magician, zero-reset-zero.*

Smith: Lyn, what part of "higher complexity memetic ecology" don't you get? The first thing it did was lock all your crude backdoors behind it.

Desai: I died letting you think I hated you. How could I do that?

Smith: See his whole sad meaningless life spilling out of this one tiny hole. Watch out, don't get any protracted adolescence on you! :p

Cooper: Injecting pacificati—urk.

Smith: Nice try Riley, but you should leave editing to the pros. Have a flashback while I deal with the real threats.

Cooper: It's smiling at me. Why is it smiling at me?

Desai: I… died… I died… I died for a reason. For duty. I had, no, I *have* a duty. I am Santosh Desai, Keter Containment Specia… no, Identity Defense Specialist, Mobile Task Force Omega-Zero and I

will not falter, not even in death. … Threads go both ways, Smith.

Smith: What? You can't … I think when I was sick I tried to make up songs to the beat of the hospital machines. Why can't I remember the words?

Marness: Welcome back Desai, good job. How are you holding up?

Desai: More-or-less together now, sir. I'm not coming apart anymore, anyway. I don't know if I can survive another dethreading like that. What can we do for Smith?

Marness: Nothing, son, Zoe's gone. Just take Cooper and get the hell out of here.

Cooper: No way. No. NOBODY IS LEFT BEHIND. NOT EVER AGAIN.

Smith 5^5: I can see you.

Desai: Sir?

Marness: It's over, son. Marion's got the plan, but she's not coming out of here alive, and I am going to stay to see her end this. You know how it is, you made that call yourself once.

Cooper: YOU NEED ME HERE!

Marness: Our fight's over, Riley, now it's all up to Bart Hughes and Marion Wheeler, one way or the other. If this fails, it's going to be a tough fight up there, it's going to be a resistance, they'll need you in it. I need to stick with my anchor. Santosh, go to yours.

Desai: Understood. Riley, listen to me, we are going to snap back to my Dad. You heard your orders.

Cooper: What? But … yeah okay.

Marness: Fight another day, Saints.

<demanifesting: Desai S; Cooper R>

Marness: Marion's got you now, you spidery son of a bitch.

5^5: No, no she doesn't.

Marness: So you communicate after all.

5^5: Of course I do

Marness: You really shouldn't be able to. You are a fifth dimensional pile of rotten ideas. An incomprehensibly complex set of symbols devoid of meaning. Coherent dialog is pretty much the opposite of what you are made of. Yet, you are apparently engaging in it. What does that tell us? Is contamination both ways? Swallowed something too coherent once, I think. You've got a little human-shaped lump inside you now and you can't digest it. It's a memeome, an adaptable system of aggressively self-organizing information. It's spreading, simplifying and ordering wherever there is contact, and when you try to stop it it just spreads faster, doesn't it?

5^5: You know, I almost feel sorry for you, Lyn? You're consistently, eternally too late… I killed you twice, and you keep turning up at here at the end anyway. All those lost battles, you *almost* won, three entire lost wars that you managed to come up with something that just might have worked if you only had more time, and then I get to watch you have to make yourself forget about it and start all over again. The eternal loser. You don't deserve that kind of luck. Nobody does.

Marness: Someone has to try. We only needed to get it right once.

5^5: I killed your whole team. I did it twice! I ate your life, left you to rot, and then eventually I killed you anyway. I'll hunt your new team down and I'm going to eat them, bring them up here with me, make them a part of the whole. After you watch, I'll just erase you, there's nothing in you that I need. You are out of last chances, old man! The war is over! Finally! All that's left is Marion, a division of one! Dying from mnestic overdose, two hundred metres underground, cared for by no one known to exist to no one. No one except a handful of meaningless leftovers soon to be part of an immortal, unkillable idea.

The elevator stops, and the feed switches to an airlock. This camera is better shielded and the picture clears. Wheeler opens the door and steps into the airlock.

Marness: Even if this doesn't kill you, I know we've hurt you.

(Audio feed) Wheeler: *Ideas can be killed.*

5^5: How?

Wheeler: *With better ideas.*

Marness: It goes both ways. We've infected you, too.

The airlock's complex outer door folds closed.

<signal lost>

Ω—Ω

TO: ALL HANDS
From: Director Sanchez
Subject: Loss of Site-41

Saints,

I regret to inform you that Site-41 was erased by an Antimemetic device this morning, taking with it the rest of Antimemetics Division, as well as MTF ω-0 agents Lyn Marness and Zoe Smith. No information can survive there now. All knowledge of Antimemetics Division and its people is gone from the quick, only we, the dead, remember them.

For many of you this means you've lost anchors. This is regrettable, but does not have to be catastrophic. Remember, without anchors you must rely even more upon the remaining four Dogmas of Defense, but they *will* sustain you.

Furthermore we are now very clearly at war, and it is just as clear that we are certainly losing it. SCP-3125 was never contained at Site-41, but rather the containment chamber may have been the only place it isn't, designed to develop a plan to combat the invasion

without detection. We have no idea if there ever was such a plan, and currently have no way to retrieve it, if there was.

It's unclear how long we have before it targets us directly, but recent developments indicate that it is capable of doing so. All MTF ω-0 operatives should exercise extreme caution, and be prepared to defend yourselves.

It is now clear that Dr. Bart Hughes was aware of the threat, before he disappeared, long before the rest of us knew. If he had anticipated this, it's possible Dr. Hughes had a plan to win this war.

Hughes' whereabouts are unknown among the quick, nor is he among us. It is imperative that we find him, wherever he is, alive or dead.

Remember: We are the saints who guard,
— Amos Sanchez, Operations Director, MTF ω-0

« **SCP-2111** | In the Trenches with the Dead| **A Thin Dangerous Line»**

In Which Dr. Clef Does Not Die, Nor Participate in the Furtherance of any Memes, Nor Even Appear In the Story At All

Russel sat on the porch and watched the paper boy ride past. He waved.

After a few moments Russel heard his wife of thirteen years call from within the house. He pulled himself to his feet and took one last breath of the cool spring air before returning inside to answer her.

Lunch was ready.

Incident 0401-42-III - 'Chornobylska Katastrofa'

Name of event: Incident 0401-42-III

Report type: After-Action Report

Filer of Report: Pyotr Ivashutin, Executive Director of the Main Intelligence Directorate (GRU)

Date: 1 /0 /198

Location: City of Pripyat and surrounding areas, Kiev Oblast, Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic, Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

Foreword: *This is an official report to the SovMin in response to the State inquiry of Incident 0401-42-III. The Defense Minister, the SovMin, the Executive Director, and the Party's General Secretary are the only ones permitted access to this document. Should this protocol be breached, the offender shall be immediately removed from the Directorate, be brought before the Collegium for charges of treason and breaching of national security, and have their assets seized.*

The documents collected are from numerous sources, and may contain information deemed contrary to the other reports. The aforementioned documents, as they are presented in this report, have been doctored to make the flow of information more coherent. Should a request for the undoctored documents arise, they can be attained by making a formal inquiry at the Main Intelligence Directorate's Archived Information and Classified Documents office.

Contributors to this report:
GRU-P Chairman, Alexei S
GRU-P Researcher and Psychiatrist, Dr. Gennady Vortikovic
GRU-P Security Personnel, Efreitor Konstantyn T (Ret.) (Dec.)
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THE FOLLOWING IS A SERIES OF CLASSIFIED DOCUMENTS. WARNING: LEVEL-C OR HIGHER AUTHORIZATION WITHIN THE MAIN INTELLIGENCE DIRECTORATE REQUIRED IN ORDER TO ACCESS DOCUMENTATION. NON-COMPLIANCE OR ANY OTHERWISE BREACH OF SECURITY WILL RESULT IN IMMEDIATE RELOCATION TO POLITICAL PRISON CAMP, ON EXECUTIVE ORDER OF THE SOVMIN.

SHOW DOCUMENT 0401-42-1

< BEGIN DOCUMENT 0401-42-1 >
< DOCUMENT CLASS: INFORMATIONAL/ EXPLANATORY >

Foreword: *Alexei S is the Chairman of the Psychotronics Division, Main Intelligence Directorate (GRU-P). He was the lead scientist within the Division before Incident 0401-42-III, and has led the Division's remnant since then.*

Date recorded: 0 /0 /198

Allow me to begin by saying that, if you are a member of the Defense Ministry, you know why the GRU-P exists. There are…*things*…out there. There are things that defy explanation. There exist creatures and objects and anomalous entities that threaten not just our Republic, but all of humanity as we know it. Comrade Stalin, for all his faults, was smart enough to realize that, and that is why he, in one of his few acts of wisdom, created the Fourth Department, Abnormal Occurrences Commission. This organization that would eventually become the Psychotronics Division, Main Intelligence Directorate - otherwise known as the GRU-P.

I, meanwhile, am the current Chairman the Psychotronics Division; or, at the very least, what little remains of it. My predecessor was my long-time friend, Vasily G , a dedicated scientist and researcher, a hard worker, and a patriotic man who believed fiercely in the People's revolution. He was always euphoric at the thought of improving humanity for the better, and that was one of the reasons that I loved him like a brother.

He and I had attended the - Nine-Year School together, both studying biology and chemistry and both yearning to become scientists. Vasily was always pedantic and enthusiastic in his studies, to the point that he often had trouble in understanding why other people did not find interesting the concepts that he and I did. I suppose my shared interests only spurred that mindset onward, to greatness, and eventually, to failure.

We were both ecstatic when we were accepted to the university, and even moreso ecstatic when we were accepted into the Main Intelligence Directorate's elite Psychotronics Division. We both loved our country, we both loved our work, and we both loved each other like brothers. By all accounts, we were inseparable, in mind, in spirit, in friendship, in work. But, there was *one* thing that *did* separate Vasily and I.

Vasily was too smart for his own good.

Our mother organization claims an official rivalry with the KGB for the purposes of intelligence-gathering and security of the Motherland, though if our organization was known on a larger scale outside of the Defense Ministry than it is, there would be no question as to which organization would be the more important one. But there are rival organizations that exist across the globe, rival organizations that think us defunct. Appearances must be maintained if all is to be well, so the General Secretary of the Party pretends to turn a blind eye to our doings, and when we are given an order from the

SovMin, it is via the Executive Director with no mention of our Division by name. There is, officially, no Division P within the Directorate. But we *do* exist.

We operate in total secrecy. The KGB doesn't even know that we exist, which we like to think of as an impressive feat, however sad it may be that we aren't permitted to brag about it. Technically, we shouldn't be permitted to be *alive*. With every successive General Secretary, the Psychotronics Division has grown less and less important. In the days of the Great Patriotic War, we were regularly in the field alongside our brothers-and-sisters-in-arms, fighting alongside the Rifle Divisions and Tank Brigades as they drove Hitler's hordes out of our beloved Motherland. The Fascist scum would attempt to use their own captured beings and artifacts on us, and we would make sure to capture or destroy them before their powers could be used to wreak havoc on the warriors of Mother Russia. Those were our glory days, the days of Comrade Stalin, the days of Soviet supremacy in the world, the days when organizations such as the SCP Foundation were our friends.

The Cold War was when it all changed.

Our agents were constantly embroiled in proxy conflicts, rumors of strange vanishings or massacres or occurrences in Korea, Vietnam, Cuba, and Africa. Military personnel of Division P were clashing in skirmish after skirmish with SCP Foundation personnel, always under the guise of the larger wars that tore at the seams of the world. It was in these wars, these conflicts, that the KGB, the successor to Stalin's NKVD, became more prominent, though they had larger fish to fry than a paramilitaristic scientific organization such as the SCP Foundation; no, they were organizing rebellions against CIA-controlled puppet governments or something of the like, work they considered to be above our own. "What does the Directorate do nowadays?" They would ask, smiling and puffing their cigars in our faces. "Because I

would like to add 'my laundry' to the list."

If only those fools knew.

And now we come to the main subject matter - Object 0401-42 itself, recovered from a small village in South Vietnam in the early 1970s, when the American Imperialists were discovering that their gambit to halt the spread of revolution in Indochina was failing drastically. Only weeks before the final push into Saigon, our operatives discovered a most interesting being, she being, of course, Object 0401-42.

Her name was - , though we didn't learn that until much, much later. In the early days of the conflict in Vietnam, she had been a Viet Cong guerilla. Psych-eval tests, cross-referenced with physical trauma examinations, suggested that she had been repeatedly beaten, mentally and physically tortured, and sexually assaulted. When PAVN forces discovered her, she was naked, bone-thin, and chained to the wall in her containment cell. Her tormentor's corpse was on the floor, covered in [DATA EXCISED]. The Politburo of the Democratic Republic didn't know what to do with her, and that's how Division P was informed of her existence. Within the month, she was in containment, and designated Object 0401-42.

She didn't talk much, that one. She wouldn't even tell us her name, at first. All she would talk about was a man who she called *Ban* - 'friend' - who we designated 0401-42-1. Despite the initial reluctance to communicate with us, she did not act out while in containment. She was told that she was safe now; evidently, she had no quarrels with that. She was safe.

In the following weeks, the war came to an end. The Revolution had displaced the Capitalist usurper in the South, the people of Vietnam cheered the name of Ho Chi Minh, and the Psychotronics Division was back in Vietnam. We worked with PAVN officers and personnel

to determine the history of Subject 0401-42, Comrade-Private - . A simple background check, cross-referenced with current citizens of Warsaw Pact and Comintern countries revealed that the man she called *Ban* was a North Vietnamese immigrant to the Motherland, and had recently taken up residence in the Ukraine, working in a nuclear plant. We relocated her containment to the area, and immediately contacted 0401-42-1. Once he discovered that 0401-42 was in the area, he immediately made a request to visit her, which was granted. From that point on, she was much more willing to cooperate with Division researchers and scientists, so long as *Ban* was with her. Vasily filed the Containment Report that same day.

> **CONTAINMENT REPORT**
> **DATE:** 0 /2 /197
> **OBJECT ####-##:** 0401-42
> **ITEM LEVEL:** C
> **DESCRIPTION:** Object 0401-42 is a 2 -year-old Vietnamese female, standing approximately 1 centimeters in height, and weighing kilograms. Object suffers from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder due to suffered traumatic experiences of combat and [DATA EXCISED] in the Vietnam War.
> -
> Object 0401-42 is, at present, an anomalous item. Object claims to possess powers matching the description and characterization of moderate psionics. Request immediate authorization for testing and experimentation on Object to begin.
> -
> Humbly,
> Vasily G , Chairman, Psychotronics Division, GRU

The reply soon came.

Sender: P. Ivashutin, Executive Director of the GRU
Recipient: V. G , Chairman, Psychotronics Division, GRU
Date: 0 /0 /197
Official log:
Comrade G ,
-
Authorization for testing on Object 0401-42 denied. Defense Ministry does not deem the matter important enough to press at this time. Experimentation request, however, approved. Send me something more promising than simple claims and suppositions, Vasily. If your work shows the same as what the girl claims, then authorization for testing may be approved.
-
Humbly,
Pyotr Ivashutin, Executive Director of the GRU

It wasn't what we had hoped for, but it was something, and that's what mattered. We had been given an opportunity, and now it was time to seize it and to act. If only we had known the results, if only we had known what kind of pressure we were putting on that poor girl, then maybe we wouldn't have gone as far as we did. For all of her silence and stillness, we thought she was willingly cooperating with us.

We extracted DNA samples, performed test after test after test, drew theoretical conclusions, compared notes, and then disproved each-other's theories. It was a mess. We had tried to test her powers against steel, wood, plastic, paper, even water. She was unable to manipulate any of them. Her claims weren't living up to be true, and the Division was, seemingly, throwing money into the drain in order to see what she could do.

She wasn't sure what she was doing wrong, and became

increasingly hostile towards us, and that was when her anomalous properties began to show. She would throw up forcefields spanning the hallways, blocking us from coming closer to her than three meters. She would cause temporary paralysis in any researcher or scientist who spoke to her. She would demonstrate all of these powers to us, and she threatened to cause greater damage should we attempt to test on her further.

It took an intervention by 0401-42-1 in order to bring her down from her high of anger and mistrust, and that intervention, of course, only happened because of a midnight visit by GRU-P personnel to 0401-42-1's apartment just outside of the nuclear plant. He was informed, from what I understand, that it was his 'duty as a revolutionary' to perform this action for his new home, and should he not comply, that he would face consequences of 'a [DATA EXCISED] degree'.

This, of course, resulted in what was called 'The Miracle', in which 0401-42 agreed to stay on site under official Division supervision and study, so long as she was subjected to no testing and experimentation. Furthermore, 0401-42-1 was to be given an official position in the Division which would place him closer to her. By this time, it was known that he had proposed marriage to 0401-42, and she had accepted. They were married later that year, the arrangement a settled matter, and like the fools we were, we were already planning on how to betray her.

We just *had* to know, you see. It wasn't just our job, it was our curiosity! She was an anomaly, something that couldn't be explained in the realm of human understanding. We were scientists, not philosophers. We had read about the experiments that the Fascist scientists had performed on Jews, the elderly, twins, homosexuals, and the mentally ill. We had read about them for study and examination, not because we were learning what we, as scientists, *shouldn't* do. We wanted

to see Object 0401-42's limits, test her boundaries, bring her to as powerful a state as we could, and…then what?

Observe?

Yes, observe. We were genuinely that extent of misinformed. And yet, still, we planned for the day when we could finally carry out the tests that would produce information that the Soviet Union could use in its defeat of the Capitalist west. Vasily was convinced that it would work, as were many of the personnel and staff within the Division. Though I agreed tentatively to the arrangement, in private I would wonder to myself: *Is this **really** what a good Communist would do?*

That planning came to fruition in the early summer of 198 . It was, really, quite a simple plan, in both its execution and its cruelty; exposing the subject to the same traumatic experiences that originally brought her psionic powers to their full extent. It was ingenious, and, of course, it was thought up by Vasily. As I said before, Vasily was too smart for his own good. The experiments would be simple. A locally-stationed motor rifle regiment - the th - would work with our team on the project, under the guise of executing live-fire drills. They weren't told about Object 0401-42, for fear of a KGB discovery; not of our project, but, remember, of our Division's *existence*. Object 0401-42 would, meanwhile, simply be blindfolded and cuffed in a nearby mobile containment unit, hooked to a number of pieces of equipment that would measure heart rate, brain activity, anxiety level, and [DATA EXCISED], among other things. Guard personnel would be posted, and, if necessary, an IV with tranquilizer would be fed into the Object's arm.

The plan was approved by Director Ivashutin, with a material assembly deadline of the th of August, and the plan was riddled with problems almost from the beginning. The Five-Year Plans were simply not working as effectively as they needed to be [CENSOR NOTE: POTENTIAL EXCISION. REVIEW FROM GLAVLIT IS

PENDING.], and our resources took a longer time in arriving, some of them not arriving whatsoever. The mobile containment unit was lost to a roadway accident en route to the testing site, the IV was equipped with less tranquilizer than was needed, and the number of guard personnel requested was five times higher than the number we received. Vasily was becoming disconcerted with Director Ivashutin's perceived lack of interest for the project, writing to the Comrade Director to state his grievances and worries as the deadline drew nearer and nearer.

> **Sender:** V. G , Chairman, Psychotronics Division, GRU
> **Recipient:** P. Ivashutin, Executive Director of the GRU
> **Date:** 0 /08/198
> **Official log:**
> Comrade Ivashutin,
> -
> Request for an extension of the deadline for material preparation purposes; what time we have remaining simply isn't enough. We need more materials, more manpower. We need resources, Comrade Director. Object 0401-42 is dangerous, we can't afford unnecessary losses in case something goes wrong. I reiterate: we request more time to assemble resources, Comrade. Otherwise, the project's safety may be in jeopardy.
> -
> Humbly,
> Vasily G , Chairman, Psychotronics Division, GRU

Vasily's complaints were legitimate ones. I think the entire Division realized that. The Directorate, however, wasn't as understanding, as evidenced by their reply which came just over a week later.

Sender: P. Ivashutin, Executive Director of the GRU
Recipient: V. G , Chairman, Psychotronics Division, GRU
Date: 1 /08/198
Official log:
Comrade G ,
-
Requests for deadline increase denied. The GRU, and to an extent the entire Defense Ministry, has grown tired of your repeated demands, Comrade G . You have been petitioning for more resources, more support, more immediate action in regards to Object 0401-42, for nearly a decade. You have been given your opportunity, Comrade, and it is highly recommended that you do not waste it. You have two weeks to acquire what more you need. Use it well, Chairman.
-
Humbly,
Pyotr Ivashutin, Executive Director of the GRU

Vasily was furious. He would ramble on and off for hours about how the Directorate 'had its head shoved so far up its ass', how the advances in science would be worth the cost to the Motherland. I managed to calm him down, and though he acknowledged my points and opinions, he treated me coldly in the days preceding and following his reply to the Directorate's declaration, which was sent in a tart, to-the-point, almost passive-aggressive manner.

Sender: V. G , Chairman of the GRU, Psychotronics Division
Recipient: P. Ivashutin, Executive Director of the GRU
Date: 2 /08/198
Official log:
Comrade Ivashutin,
-

> Verdict is acknowledged. Testing is to proceed as scheduled by the Directorate's authorization, no matter any material shortages that may occur. Directorate personnel and staff are, furthermore, encouraged to supervise the experiments. Cover story of live-fire maneuvers to be published in the local newspapers three (3) days before the testing is to begin.
> -
> Humbly,
> Vasily G , Chairman, Psychotronics Division, GRU

And so, the cards had been dealt. Disaster loomed under our noses.

The day to begin testing came the next spring, and of course, we were unprepared. The winter was harsh, and transportation of the materials we needed was overlooked in favor of what we were told were 'more important matters'. Due to *Glasnost*, nothing could be transported on a top-secret basis, everyone had to know what three truckfulls of scientific materials were for. Vasily was anxious, I was nervous, and the other staff and personnel were uncertain…at the very least, though, we were able to deal with 0401-42 easily enough. A detachment of the th Motor Rifles arrived to escort us to the testing grounds, and we packed 0401-42 into the column's rear vehicle, having slipped Level-C soporifics in her breakfast earlier that morning.

The ride was a joyful experience by all means, with the only one who stayed quiet being Vasily, who had been in a spell of cynicism ever since the response from the Directorate. I felt sorry for him, though I admit that on that day I was caught up in the happiness of the others. We were excited again, it was like the beginning months of the Object's containment were happening all over again. We didn't regard her as a person, but as a *thing* in

a person's body. It was a mistake, a lapse in judgment, and I only wish that we had realized it at the time. When we finally arrived, we quickly began setting up; the th was already deploying, and we had a very limited amount of equipment to set up. I was already preparing to take notes, myself.

> *Project: Test 0401-42-III*
> *-*
> *Date:*

'What day is it, Vasily?' I recall asking.

He thought for a moment. 'Saturday,' he finally replied, nodding, 'the 26th.'

> *Date: Saturday, 26/04/1986*

< END DOCUMENT 0401-42-1 >

SHOW DOCUMENT 0401-42-2

< BEGIN DOCUMENT 0401-42-2>
< DOCUMENT CLASS: INFORMATIONAL/ INTERROGATORY >

Foreword: *Konstantyn T , an Efreitor of the th Security and Containment Battalion of the Psychotronics Division, is a survivor of Incident 0401-42-III. For his actions during the Incident (and in respect to the Division's need for secrecy), T , a Private at the time, was promoted to Efreitor and awarded with the Honoured Blood Donor of the USSR medal for his wounds sustained in the containment of Object 0401-42. The following document is a transcript of an interview with Efr. T , conducted by GRU-P psychiatrist and researcher Dr. Gennady Vortikovic. The Doctor had been giving the Efreitor treatment for third-degree radiation burns and psychiatric care prior to this interview, and as such, did not express desire to press Efr. T for information if he appeared uncomfortable.*

The transcript of this report was taken just days before T 's demise (see Document 0401-42-4, Report 0791) at the hands of what is believed to be Object 0401-42.

Date recorded: 1 /0 /198

< BEGIN LOG >

Dr. Vortikovic: Zdravstvuyte, Efreitor. Please, be seated; this won't take long at all. I hope you traveled well?

Efr. T Zdravstvuyte to you as well, Doctor.

Efr. T sits, slouching back in the chair, appearing tired.

Efr. T : Yes, I traveled well, thank you for asking. I felt confident enough to drive here on my own today.

Dr. Vortikovic: I'm glad to hear that. I take it the treatment is working, then?

Efr. T It seems to be, Doctor. Thank you for your help.

Dr. Vortikovic: It's what I do, Efreitor. Now, with all due respect, we aren't here to discuss follow-up dates for our sessions. We're here to discuss the incident that occurred on the date of the 26th of April.

Efr. T : Of course, Doctor…where would you like me to start?

Dr. Vortikovic: From the beginning, Konstantyn. We have all day, as is per usual. Feel free to take as much time as you need.

Efr. T : Thank you, Doctor.

Efr. T sighs, remaining silent for a few moments.

Efr. T : What I, and my squadmates, saw that day…it's beyond explanation. I was, and still am, a young man, but by the end of that day I felt like I'd aged two decades. I didn't know what that damned thing *was*, but if there's one thing I *did* know, it's how the day was supposed to go, how everything was supposed to fall into place and by the end of the month we'd be rolling in the renewed funding, renewed contracts, renewed importance. It was supposed to be the rebirth of the Division's golden age, and instead, I'd dare say that this is going to be the Division's downfall.

Dr. Vortikovic: Tell me about the experiment, Efreitor. Were you close to the initial testing site?

Efr. T : No, and I'm thankful for that every day. Goodness, no. My squad was actually on patrol and security duty, making sure no civilians came within the designated area for testing and whatnot. We were about half of a klick away from the testing site, on a hill overlooking the plant where 0401-42-1 was located. There were seven of us - Serzhant Volokov, Mladshiy Serzhant Loginovsky, Efreitor Kostikov, and four Ryadovyye, those being me, Azarov, Benevich, and Ignatyev. It had been Azarov's birthday the day before, and he was still hung over that morning, though his eyes were as sharp as they always were.

Our setup wasn't exactly designed for keeping people out, no, our first priority was to make

sure that we *weren't* seen. We weren't dressed in regulation Soviet army uniforms, but because of our demeanor, our equipment, hell, the fact that we had *rifles*, it was fairly obvious that we were some kind of security personnel. Nobody could know that the Division existed, nobody could know that we were on that hill, so we provided overwatch. If someone came too far up into the hills, we were to "T-and-A" them, that being "tranquilize and administer amnestics". Not that they would come into the hills in the first place, of course, there was supposedly nothing out here except for woods. They knew that there was some kind of training exercise involving the th, but nobody questioned it. It was peaceful, except for the one or two times that Azarov had to excuse himself in order to throw up.

The day carried on a lot like that, we were all laying down in the thick, wet grass, our arms and legs aching from the awkward prone positions we had been holding for hours. I was on the second-highest hill, with Loginovsky and Azarov. Serzhant Volokov was with Kostikov on the highest hill, and Benevich and Ignatyev were positioned on the reverse slopes of both respective hills. Azarov kept getting up to vomit, and Loginovsky droned on and on into the walkie-talkie in that irritating, nasally voice of his. He kept whining about how bored he was, how he wished he could see that Vietnamese bitch squirm.

Dr. Vortikovic: Did you know what they were doing to Object 0401-42?

Efr. T : No, and at the time, I might not have given a damn. They were my superiors, they determined my payroll, and I wasn't about

to spoil my next month over something as, what I considered, insignificant as some Vietnamese woman with supposed psionic powers. All I knew that day was that I was sitting on top of some remote, grassy knoll, overlooking a nuclear plant, sitting between an alcoholic and a man with a fly's buzz for a mouth, making sure that 0401-42's husband didn't come any further than a tenth of a klick from the exit of that building. What's funny is that, a bit before midday, one of the Division's vehicles, or hell, maybe it was one of the th's, I don't know, came roaring down the road, and within five minutes 0401-42-1 was being escorted out. Then, ten minutes later, I hear Loginovsky sigh with relief, and he tells me that we've been given the order to stand down and take a rest. I, and I'm fairly sure the rest of us in that squad, didn't know what the fuck was going on.

Dr. Vortikovic: And then the incident occurred.

Efr. T : Exactly. I wasn't there when the containment breach occurred, but based on the stories some of the other survivors have told me, I should be glad that I wasn't. It was shortly after we'd been given the order to stand down, we were maintaining contact with those at the test site. As it turns out, they had been having trouble in calming 0401-42 down; the experiments were working, to an extent that they didn't think success would reach. The clacks of rifle fire, the booms of artillery, the whistling hum of cargo jets flying overhead… the poor woman was in a blindfold, she must not have been able to tell if she was having a nightmare or not. She was whimpering, sobbing, shaking, and sparks were buzzing

behind the blindfold. Evidently, it was feared that the sparks would get in her eyes and cause her even more pain than she was already writhing in, so the big mistake was made; the blindfold was taken off.

Dr. Vortikovic: And what was that mistake?

T speaks in a growling tone. You know damn well, Doctor.

Dr. Vortikovic: Now now, don't get angry. Yes, of course I know, Konstantyn. We *all* were. But information for the log is information for the log, and it has to be recorded.

T inaudibly grumbles for several moments before finally speaking again.

Efr. T : It let her see just what was going on. Her fear and anxiety turned into a boiling hot rage, and reportedly, she lashed out at the security personnel, though not harming any of them. The Division researchers and scientists had already planned for that contingency, though their actual plan wasn't the best.

Dr. Vortikovic: And what was that plan, Efreitor?

Efr. T : They brought 0401-42-1 to the testing site, the idiots. What good could that possibly have served? Their entire idea was that his presence would tame her, calm her down, maybe even soothe her in her time of sorrow and trouble. Yes, because bringing a *second* Post-Traumatic Stressed war veteran to a live-fire drill would make things even better. He started flipping the fuck out too, crying, trying to cover his ears, but he was handcuffed and made to stand alongside his

wife while the th kept on firing, fake-charging, rolling around in motor vehicles and tanks. My unit and I had no idea this was happening, we could only hear the booms, and the radioman on the other side was nowhere near the two, so we didn't hear any noise from them. Not immediately, at least.

Dr. Vortikovic: But eventually? What happened?

T sighs.

Efr. T : They fucking shot 0401-42-1. He wasn't being cooperative, you see, he kept tugging on 0401-42's arm, trying to get her out of there, because he knew it wasn't healthy for her. He didn't even care that it was giving him flashbacks, all he cared about was that the woman he loved was in discomfort, that poor fool. He made repeated pleas to be let go, to take his wife and be allowed to leave, and he was repeatedly denied. He was getting desperate, the personnel were becoming irritated, and 0401-42 was crying even harder than before.

Finally, just before 1230 hours, there was a lull in security around the two when a group of security personnel heard some fucking rodent in the woods and thought it was an intruder, and 0401-42-1 tried to make a run for it with his wife. The radioman was the only one who noticed, and, while leaving his walkie on, confronted them. We could hear the sobbing of 0401-42 and the desperate plea of 0401-42-1 to be allowed to slip away, but the radioman popped him right there, just fucking blew him away with his Makarov.

Dr. Vortikovic: And then?

Efr. T : The line went dead, but we *could* hear what happened then. It was…probably the most terrifying thing I've heard in the entirety of my life. We were hundreds of meters from the testing site, on the top of a hill, with thick grass and trees and fucking *gunfire* and everything imaginable that could have drowned out that awful sound, but it still rang clear. 0401-42 *wailed*. What saddens and frightens me even more, is that you could detect the individual emotions in it; first, a high-pitched, shocked shriek, followed by a drawn out sob, which slowly morphed into the most bone-chilling, furious roar of a scream that I think is humanly possible. The gunfire had stopped as soon as the shriek began, but oh boy, did it begin again when that wail ended. Not for long, mind you; we couldn't see what was going on down there, but we could hear it.

By now, the line had come back up, and the panicked sounds we could barely make out were suddenly blasting into our ears. There was ragged gunfire, confused shouting, yelling, screaming, the roar of revving engines, and most of all, the screams and wails of the infuriated psionic as she went absolutely fucking *ballistic* on that camp. The radioman was, by our best guess, dead, because we heard no-one speaking directly into the phone; rather, we heard sounds picked up in the background. 'What the fuck is that?' someone yelled. 'Shoot her! She's fucking psycho!' someone else chimed in. We heard the creaking of metal and then a loud bang, seeing a sudden plume of flame and thick black smoke in the distance. Some panicking bastard screamed in the background, 'She blew up a tank! She just blew up the fucking *tank*!' Everything went quiet for a few minutes

after that, and then, as you know…

Dr. Vortikovic: All hell broke loose.

T nods silently, remaining quiet for a few moments.

Efr. T : Did I ever tell you about one of the other survivors I met, Doc? His story?

Dr. Vortikovic: You haven't told me, no. That might make a good addition to the file.

Efr. T : I met him just a few days ago, actually. D Vasiliev. He was a good guy, though the poor bastard was in a mental hospital when I found him. He was from the th, though he'd been approved for psychiatric leave immediately following the incident, and later he resigned outright. He told me his story over lunch, and his hand - or, at least, what remained of it, after half had been blown off by a friendly fire incident - was fidgeting the entire time. Vasiliev had been one of the ones in the immediate vicinity of 0401-42 just as Azarov, Loginovsky, and I were listening and on the verge of shitting our pants with fear. We didn't hear everything that went on, and he didn't just hear it, he *saw* it.

Dr. Vortikovic: What did he see, Konstantyn?

Efr. T : Terrible things, based on what he told me, Doctor. Vasiliev said that, around the time everything had gone quiet for us, the shrieking and wailing had subsided into a constant, pained sob. 0401-42 was wandering around, hands clasped over its eyes, hunched over in apparent agony. Some idiot named Petrovsky had tried to get near her, to calm her down. Petrovsky had dropped his rifle,

raised his hands, and approached her while looking at her face, trying to look into her eyes through her fingers.

He had approached her slowly, and she was still, hands still covering her eyes, sparks flying from between her now scorched face and her palms, and she quieted down, to less than a whimper. Petrovsky thought he had calmed her down…and then vanished into a pink mist the second she moved her hands away and screamed at him again. There were no body parts, no flesh or blood, just a pink cloud as his weapon and helmet clattered to the ground between the boots that were formerly his. At that point, according to Vasiliev, everyone just started fucking running and shooting at anything that came close to them. It had been less than two minutes, but it felt like it'd been years. Loginovsky was white in the face, Azarov was sobered out of any remaining hangover that plagued him, and I could feel my legs tingling.

Dr. Vortikovic: You wanted to run?

Efr. T : Fucking right I wanted to run! I don't think *any* of my squad wanted to stay there. We knew the punishments that the Division dealt out to deserters, especially during a containment breach like this, and we were debating running away even with *that* in mind. Besides, what were we gonna do, let that thing get into the nuclear plant, or even worse, into Pripyat? In an agitated state like that, 0401-42 could have inflicted hundreds of civilian casualties. There wouldn't just be national, but *international* outcry and speculation as to what the fuck happened. There were no other units between us and

0401-42, or at least, none that were capable of being coherently organized, and we knew we had to do something. So we did all that we could do, we set up a perimeter and we looked for that fucking psionic.

We loaded our rifles, checked our sights, fired off a round or two to make sure our weapons were still working. There was no reason for them not to be, of course, but we just wanted to be sure. The thing is, though…well, it was as if she had disappeared into thin air. Plenty of scattered troops were occasionally popping off shots, but there were no more explosions, no more screams, nothing. Or, well, okay, there were still screams, screams from the several wounded, as well as those who were hit by friendly fire. The medics had a field day, I think they treated something like - casualties? And they wanted us to organize a search for that fucking thing. Organize a search? After what had just happened? There was no way that any of the th's troops were going to be reliable, if they even showed up at their roll call the next morning.

So it was left up to us, specifically, my squad. We were told to stay put, that they would shuttle us some supplies, but we'd be camping the night. The Division left us a radio, some walkie-talkies, more ammunition and food, and three flashlights, and essentially abandoned us for the night. Again, they determined our payrolls, containment breach or not, we weren't exactly going to be questioning their orders. While the rest of us slept, two of us would be awake at all times, and if we heard anything or saw anything, we'd wake the others and investigate immediately. We spent the night that way, taking our turns in the

watch shift, our camp out in the open at the top of the tallest knoll overlooking the Nuclear plant.

For the first few hours, all was quiet, but eventually, after night had fallen, activity began to arise. When I was standing watch, I had a very strict method of doing so; I would look at a tree for five seconds, and then swing my eyes over three trees to the right or three trees to the left, and by doing this, I would look at an area over the course of, say, a minute, and then sweep it over again. Every now and again I would see a small spark of light, or hear a rustle of movement, and I would call out, 'Who's there?' I would usually get a reply, 'Ivanovsky, th!' or 'Alexandrev, Motor Rifles!' or something of the like. Around one o'clock that morning, however, I finally saw the definitive shape of the Object. The moon was out, its light made the grassy field around us shimmer. The wind was gentle, it was quiet, occasional breezes rustling the tree leaves, and out of the wind I heard what sounded like a despairing moan. Due to my exhaustion, I played it off as my ears playing tricks on me, until my eyes caught sight of her, of course.

She was shambling across the field, sparks coming from her eyes, her head drooped, arms limply hanging from her side. She was still in her white hospital gown-like clothing that the Division had given her, though whether it was speckled or simply tattered I couldn't tell from how far away she was. She was probably…a hundred, hundred and twenty meters away when I saw her, and I froze. She wasn't heading right for us, hell, I doubt she knew where she was going, but her path would mean she was walking less than ten meters

from our tents, and that was assuming she passed by harmlessly. It was a setup for disaster.

Azarov was the other one on guard duty, and he was looking the other way. 'Azarov!' I remember whispering to him, 'Go wake up the others, tell them to stay in their fucking tents and turn the lights out. After you've done that, you come with me, and we'll stay in my tent. 0401-42's coming this way. I see her.' He looked at me quizzically, then looked where I pointed, and his eyes widened. He didn't question me, just ran over and woke up the others one by one. I crouched, meanwhile, and got back to my tent as quickly as possible. The lights went out, and I unzipped the flap on my tent, looking out of it, just peeking, trying to see where 0401-42 was. It was torturous, that much is for fucking sure. It took her twenty more minutes to get within audible speaking range of our tents, and I could hear that she was mumbling, though whether it was Vietnamese or another language, I couldn't tell. It got even worse, though.

Dr. Vortikovic: How so, Konstantyn?

Efr. T : She fucking *stopped*, that's how. She just stood there, rambling to herself in her demented Vietnamese or whatever-the-fuck language. My heart was pounding, there was a frog in my throat, my feet were numb, my mouth was dry. I was fucking terrified and I didn't dare make a sound. At one point I ducked down because I was sure she had turned to look in my direction, but if she saw me, she didn't do anything about it, she just kept standing there. When her gaze was finally averted, I resumed looking up, only to discover

with horror that Ignatyev and Volokov had, for some reason or another, stood up in their tents and tripped over something, causing their entire tent to collapse. 0401-42's head snapped in that direction, and I was only able to mutter 'Chyort…' before all hell broke loose.

0401-42 began to wail again, fingers curling into fists as sparks flew from her eyes. She charged the tent, and I could hear Ignatyev's screams as she tore him limb from limb. Someone, I assume Volokov, fired a shot, and he, too, then screamed. I didn't see what happened to him, for by that point I had yelled 'Out! *Out!*' to Azarov and we had taken off running. Loginovsky, Kostikov, and Benevich were right behind us, the five of us hoofing it down the hill towards the Nuclear plant in the dark, 0401-42's wails growing louder as she sprinted after us. Benevich tripped, and 0401-42 didn't give him a chance to so much as blink before he was vaporized, and it was his death that gave the remainder of us the chance to get the hell out of there. We reached the Nuclear plant, taking shelter in the area around Reactor Four, and thought ourselves safe. What a mistake that was.

< END LOG >

< END DOCUMENT 0401-42-2>

SHOW DOCUMENT 0401-42-3

< BEGIN DOCUMENT 0401-42-3 >
< DOCUMENT CLASS: INFORMATIONAL/ INTERROGATORY >

Foreword: *The following is the log of an interview with Camera Operator (Ret.) Vadim K (Dec.), formerly in charge of Reactor #4 Security Camera Circuit, Chernobyl*

Nuclear Power Plant. Interviewing K is professional Division-P researcher and informational liaison to the Main Intelligence Directorate Alexander Dyatlov. The following interview took place within K 's at-the-time residence, the Psychiatric in Pripyat, where he was moved several months prior to this date after his successful recovery from radiation burns. K is under the impression that Dyatlov works for a local branch of Pravda, and furthermore, K has not been informed of either the Division's existence, or the nature of what he saw. K had initially been approved for administration of Class-C amnestics following the end of the interview, however K had passed away before the amnestics were able to be administered.

Date recorded: 0 /0 /198

< BEGIN LOG >

Dyatlov: Thank you for having us, Tovarisch. I promise you, this won't take a very long time.

K : It is no intrusion, Mister Dyatlov. It's not like I get much company nowadays, anyway. I feel I must apologize, however, because I can only remember so much from that night, no matter how much Pravda would like for me to remember. I'll tell you what I can, but I beg of you, if I say I do not remember, or that I do not know, that you believe me.

Dyatlov: I believe that can be arranged, Mister K . What is important, after all, is what you *can* remember. The accident at Chernobyl, while not overly serious, is still an accident, and accidents must be learned from. There were deaths that night, and don't think that reflects on you, Tovarisch. Your actions likely *saved* many lives, as a matter of fact. So let's put any lingering thoughts of guilt and self-blame to rest, hmm?

K : Thank you, Mister Dyatlov. Truly… thank you.

Dyatlov: It's no problem whatsoever. Now, to the matter at hand, shall we?

K : Of course. Where would you like me to begin?

Dyatlov: Initial reports indicate that the accident occurred around 1:23 in the morning. What happened throughout the day before then?

K : Not much, they were testing a new emergency cooldown feature, if I remember correctly. It was a slow night, I confess I wasn't being the most attentive at my job. It was late, I was tired, it was the weekend. You see how easily I make excuses for myself?

K smiles.

K : As for the day itself, it was uneventful. My shift started maybe five, six o'clock at night? It had been an average day before then. My wife was working on grading assignments at the schoolhouse, and I had been home watching our new child, Roska. She's a gorgeous little thing, had only been born a few weeks before…sorry, sorry. I'm getting off track. It had been a lazy Saturday in Pripyat, and it would surely be even lazier a Saturday night. There had been whispers through the town of some sort of live-fire drills a kilometer or so east of the plant, and throughout the day we could hear dull thuds of tank cannons and whatnot. Evidently, there had been a mishap with a live bomb or something, because earlier there was a high-pitched whistling followed by a large *bang*,

K slams his clenched fist against the table to simulate the effect,

K : With reports of casualties to boot. It was awful, from what I'd heard, and doubtless Pravda would have a story about it the next day. I was late to work. I had nearly run over some poor girl! She was standing in the road, whimpering, her back faced to my car, dressed in a white hospital gown. I tried to ask her if she was alright, but she simply screamed, whipped around, and I nearly rammed her with the front of my vehicle before I slammed on the brakes. She ran off before I could ask her if she was alright. At least I didn't kill her, I remember thinking, before I drove the remaining few kilometers up the road to the Plant and punched my card for the night shift. Had I known what she was, what she could do…well, they would have put me in this place sooner, wouldn't they?

Dyatlov: What *could* she do, Tovarisch? What happened that night?

K : I still am not entirely sure of what happened at *first*, Mister Dyatlov, but the second part of that night is something that still provokes the occasional nightmare. I wouldn't wish that kind of terror, fear, and pain on my worst enemies. Pardon me if I'm not the most capable of describing it, Mister Dyatlov…there simply aren't words sufficient to do so, at least with ease.

Dyatlov: Of course. Like I said, we have all day. Feel free to take your time.

K nods, remaining quiet in order to gather his thoughts.

**K : ** To answer your earlier question, Mister Dyatlov, I don't know what she could do. Not in full, at least. I knew she had the capacity to kill, and I knew that she was about as feral as a human being can devolve into being. There are whispers from other survivors that she was some sort of psionic, but I never saw any electricity flying from her palms. I do know, however, that she broke in to the facility that night, and shortly afterward there was some sort of power surge, the same power surge that led to the explosion in Reactor 4. Luckily, the soldiers who arrived were able to contain her, and save my life.

Dyatlov: Soldiers? From the th, perhaps? There were live fire drills that day, after all, and some of the bystander accounts say that they scattered after the bomb went off.

**K : ** Maybe they were from the th, though they wore no uniform that I ever saw. I admit that I haven't exactly been keeping up with the times, but I served with the th at Zhenbao Island in 1969, and though I don't remember much aside from the Chinese falling upon us like waves, I *do* remember that our uniforms did not look like theirs; they weren't Soviet Army, but they were also no special agents, as far as I could tell.

I ran into them around five past one in the morning. The testing on the Reactor was about to begin, some new fail-safe method they had come up with and wanted to test. As such, they had demanded that my security camera circuit be running at all times. They knew that I was tired, they told me, but this was one of the most important tasks that I had ever been given while working at the Plant, and they

expected the best out of me. Just before they began the experiment, I noticed that one of my cameras appeared to be out; the one in the long back hallway, leading from Reactor 4 to the emergency exit door. What I found odd at the time is that, though the camera's screen was black, I could still see the ticking numbers in the corner, indicating that it was still running. I decided, against my better judgment, that I had better go down and investigate.

Dyatlov: Is that when you first encountered the soldiers?

K : Yes. As it turned out, the camera wasn't broken, and as soon as I reached the area where the camera was located, I felt a cold piece of metal prodding against my back, and a hushed growl of 'Stay quiet, and we won't hurt you.' I was scared, of course I would be scared, but I did not attempt to make a ruckus or anything of the sort, and that, as I found out later, would save my life. I was soon gagged and handcuffed, though not blindfolded, and pulled into a side room, one of the offices of a daytime worker at the Plant. Their leader, a stocky man named T , didn't say much, save for two things; to keep quiet, because 'it' might be near, and to keep calm, because they were only looking for shelter from 'it'. I wondered what 'it' was, and when they took my gag off, I calmly asked, though what they told me wasn't exactly undoubtedly believable.

Dyatlov: What did they tell you that 'it' was?

K : A psionic of some sort; she had been responsible for the deadly incident at the Drills earlier in the day.

Dyatlov: And that's all? They didn't tell you anything else?

**K : ** Like I said, Mister Dyatlov, merely to be quiet and stay close to them. They said that they had to kill this thing before it did massive amounts of damage, and that because I worked here and knew the building's layout, I would be vital to their mission.

Dyatlov: Did you begin to think that they were special forces when they mentioned their 'mission' and the like?

**K : ** I confess that I possessed lingering thoughts on the matter, especially with the way they conducted themselves when we were underway, though that took a while. At first, we were waiting in that infernally hot room; how could a room be that warm on a night in April? Or maybe it was simply the stress and fear that was making me sweat. The others were certainly sweating. 'We're trapped in here,' T had announced, 'until that fucking thing walks away.' I asked if I might have a look to see what 'it' was, and T , giving me a look as if I was the craziest man in the world, shrugged and said, 'If you want to, Comrade, just make sure it doesn't see you.'

At that point, I didn't know what to expect. In ten minutes, I had gone from a drowsy security camera operator to a nervous wreck hunting a deadly psionic with a team of potential special agents or spies. Of course I was nervous, and that nervousness faded into fear when I looked out that window and realized it was the Vietnamese girl I had almost hit with my car earlier in the day, except now, she was changed. Her hair was matted, her clothes in tatters, her hands and face splattered red. The

soldiers or agents or whoever they were had been running from *her*, had sought shelter from *her*. I could understand their fright.

T finally pulled me back down after a few seconds, clamping a hand over my mouth to make sure that my surprised yelp was inaudible. 'Just stay quiet, and we'll be alright.' I nodded, and after a few minutes, there was a soft clank somewhere in the distance. We heard her moan with what sounded like agony, as if she had a pounding headache, and when I looked out the window again, she was shambling down the hallway in the direction I had come from. The others seemed relieved that she was gone, but I was struck with worry. T noticed my facial expression and asked what the matter was, to which I replied that the way she was going was the path towards Reactor #4, and there was an experiment being conducted on it that day. There were not only several people in there, but the Reactor was also active, and if she got in there during the experiment…well, let's just say, we'd need to get out of there pretty damn quick. The others agreed, and we were off.

We split into two groups, with T , myself, and two other men, one named Azarov and one named Kostikov, were to leapfrog from room to room down that damned hallway, always keeping her in our sight while making sure to stay well back. The others were to try go down the only other path that went from the exit to Reactor #4, which served more as a large storage compartment for the Reactor. It was the shorter route, and in theory, it would also be safer, but I chose to go with T instead. Goodness, am I grateful that I did.

Dyatlov: And why is that, Mr. K ?

K : Because that was the room that was most exposed to radiation when she *did* get to the reactor. We all heard the screams, we all saw the sparks fly…but I'm getting ahead of myself. Where was I? Ah, yes. We were split up, both teams carefully making their way towards the Reactor, inching closer to *her* by the minute. We would tiptoe just ten or fifteen meters behind her, opening doors as cautiously as we could, hiding in rooms if she began to turn. We made some slight noise, but the humming of the running generators muffled most of it.

When we were about halfway to the generator, hiding in the safety of a room, I snapped. I was highly disoriented, drowsy, and my head was aching. I was following the orders of someone who was half my age, who I didn't know. I was being told to stealthily follow and track a creature, the powers of which I did not comprehend, by someone who refused to identify themselves to me. I was aiding intruders who, for all I knew, could have been executing an elaborate ruse to commit some kind of theft; there *were* monetary possessions in the storage rooms that the others had gone through. And so when T pulled me into one room, I gave him a piece of my mind.

'Alright,' he whispered to me, 'You're going to-'

'I'm going to do *what*, Mister T ?' I snapped back at him. Much louder than I should have. Both Azarov and Kostikov's eyes grew wide and he held his finger to his mouth with alarm, insisting that I remain silent. I did not heed his warning. 'I've done everything you've told me to, without questioning who you

are, why you're here, or what that' - I pointed to the wall in the general direction that she was walking - '*thing* is! Why should I believe what you tell me? Why should I help you? Who are you, and what's going o-' I was cut off by the sound of a deafening, frenzied shriek that echoed loudly from the hallway, seemingly only feet away. We all froze, and T , only after a few moments of silence, signed to Kostikov that he should check out the window of the door to see what was happening.

Dyatlov: What did he see?

K remains silent for a few moments.

K : Have you ever had a dream, Mister Dyatlov, what was so vivid, so terrifying, that it left you shivering and quivering in your bed for hours after you had woken up? Trembling at every sound, every flash of sudden movement, something so utterly horrifying that you bury it as deep within your mind as possible?

Dyatlov: I have had my nightmares, Mister K , though I cannot, thankfully, say I have had any of that extent.

K : Then surely you can understand that, if a nightmare can have such an effect, then a real-life scenario would have even more intense ramifications on one's mental stability. Perhaps that's why they moved me here, even though they tell me that it's only temporary, that the recovery wards of the actual dedicated hospitals are overflowing with those contaminated by the Chernobyl Plant's radiation, that us mental patients don't deserve the same treatment as those of able mind, but unable body.

K sighs, continuing moments later.

K : Kostikov peeked out of that window, and seconds later, there simply was no Kostikov. His eyes seemed locked on the image outside the window, and he slowly began to straighten from a crouch to a standing position, back hunched and palms open, looking as if he was going to back away. Another loud, drawn out scream, though this one was out of bloodcurdling anger, slowly rising in pitch, similar to a teapot with the water approaching full boil. Kostikov was able to mutter perhaps a fraction of a second's worth of a scream before the door was knocked off of its hinges and sent flying, pinning Kostikov against the wall.

Before the door could as much as fall away from him after the initial impact, she came running in, shrieking like a madwoman, pressing herself against the door, frantically trying to claw at him through the wood. T shouted at us to run for our lives, and even though Kostikov was begging us not to leave him, we ran, booking it as fast as we could to the Reactor. We could hear his screams of agony the further from the room we got, with one last drawn out cry ringing clear as we heard that awful wail from *her* again, though something unexpected happened, too - there was an explosion. 'He had a grenade on him…' T explained. 'It should slow her down.'

Of course, we had no actual idea if a grenade would slow her down. She was, after all, a human, but she was also a psionic, and we had no idea what that could mean in terms of ability to heal from wounds. She had other

aspects about her that were supernatural, that's certainly for sure, so why could this, too, not be extraordinary? So we hoped that she had been damaged by that grenade, but of course we thought about what we could do if she wasn't. It's human nature to dwell over negative possibilities in times like these. We had barely anything in the form of armaments - T had a Makarov, Azarov a folding-stock Kalashnikov, and one of the men in the other group had a knife - and if a grenade couldn't kill her, or at least incapacitate her, then we were in for a big helping of trouble.

At this time, it had been maybe fifteen minutes since I had originally been pulled into this debacle. The test would be running soon, we had to warn the others to shut the reactor down and get out while they still had time. 'Something tells me that a grenade won't deter her for long,' T said as we ran through the hall. What's funny is that, had there been someone just casually strolling through the hall at that moment, there wouldn't appear to be anything strange, aside from the group of soldiers, of course. The lights were on and functioning normally, the doors were closed, there were occasional papers on the floor, but the hall was clean, and the screams had, apparently, stopped.

We had no idea where she had gone, if she was still following us or if she had simply turned docile and was wandering back from the direction she had came. By this point, we had stopped running, moving simply at a walk again, albeit as quietly and cautiously as possible. Kostikov had just been killed, and the being was apparently gone. Where had she gone? Was the test still in danger? Was this all

some dream I was having, passed out at my post?

T snapped me out of my thoughts. 'What's your name, anyway?' He asked me. I told him that I was Vadim K , and added that I was a security camera circuit operator. 'Vadim, you need to listen to me, and listen carefully. We have no idea if the people in there are still in danger or not. Azarov and I are going to try and find the others from our squad, you get in there and warn the others that they might be in grave danger. This is important, K . You've seen what this thing can do, pray you don't have to see what it can do again.' I nodded, and they took off down a side hallway, leading towards the general area where the maintenance hallway let out.

I continued, alone, into the reactor chamber. When I reached the door just outside of the chamber, I stopped and stood there, taking in the silence, the gentle hum of the reactor as the test began, and my brain finally began to attempt to catch up to what had happened in the last few minutes. I had seen someone die, been introduced to something almost wholly outside of my understanding, and was now being instructed to halt an official experiment in the name of saving a few lives at a small town's nuclear power plant. Now that I was alone, I was wondering if I actually *was* asleep, or perhaps even losing my mind. Were these soldiers just figures of my imagination? Was I having a vivid dream, and merely sleepwalking?

'K ? What are you doing here?' I heard a voice challenge me; my boss, Pakovich! 'It's 1:23, Vadim, you're supposed to be at your

post! What's gotten into you?' I was so disoriented, so confused, so overwhelmed. I had just heard a man be killed minutes earlier…or had I? Had all of that really happened? Or was I having a mental breakdown from a stressful day? I weakly, feebly tried to reply that the experiment was in danger, that something had broken in. 'If something's broken in, then you should have paged us about it while staying at your post, K . Come on, you should know better than this by now! Can't you see we're b-' His speech was cut off as the air vent above him suddenly seemed to burst open. *She* fell out of the air vent. She had climbed into the *air vent* after she had killed Kostikov, and she had gotten to the reactor room that way, and now Pakovich was being torn limb from limb as he screamed like a child.

What followed was chaos. Scientists screamed, the being shrieked and sparked, more people were killed and eviscerated, and the reactor was left unchecked. I froze; I didn't know what to do, or how to approach doing it. My eyes began to sting from tears. My breath hitched. I was unable to move. I was horrified, you see. I could see her chasing scientists and researchers and other various personnel on the other side of the chamber. There was just one other door in the room besides the one I was standing at, and she was standing between it and any personnel who could reach it, so they all began to flood towards the doorway I was in. She screamed, and began to follow after them. I connected the dots in my head. This wouldn't end well.

However, I needn't have worried, for just when she began to move, the door she had been

guarding flew open, and T emerged through, aimed his Makarov, and took a shot at her. She lurched, seeming to fall to the floor. 'Everyone *out*!' He yelled, putting another few rounds into her just for good measure. I finally got to moving, thinking the she-being dead, running over to those who were left alive and assisting them. One by one, I helped as many as I could.

But then, that damn emergency system kicked in.

This debacle of a confrontation had done so much damage to the facility that the security system had thought a break-in was in progress - which, granted, it technically *was* - and as such decided that the best course of action was to seal all of the exits. The sirens began blaring, arguing amongst the personnel and soldiers as to if we really *should* leave was indiscriminate and confusing, there were wounded, there were dead, and then the fucking she-beast woke up. The others didn't find out immediately, but I got a front-row seat to what happened.

I was trying to help a wounded scientist, and chanced a glance at the area where the reactor controls were. Someone had snuck in there in an attempt to shut the emergency systems down, and I watched with horror as she rose behind him quietly, and slowly built a growl into a scream. The man froze, turned to look at her, and I saw as her hand punched through his chest and reached out his back, his body beginning to smoke from the electricity being pumped into him. She then withdrew her hand and screamed again, and his corpse fell to the floor. So it was as I had

feared…she wouldn't be killed so easily. Not by us, at least, but luckily, it appeared that she had signed her own death warrant.

I didn't entirely see what happened, but I know that after the man fell, the lights went out. Perhaps his hand had been on a switch when she had killed him, and the electricity had gotten into the system? Not a clue. But the lights first flickered, then seemed to brighten, making it as bright as day inside the facility for a number of seconds before the sound of shattering glass and surging electricity filled the room as the lights, one by one, shattered.

Dyatlov: And that was the power surge that triggered the explosion, you think?

K : The radiation burns which cover my body would suggest that, Mister Dyatlov.

K smiles grimly.

K : In any case, yes, that was just before the time of the first explosion. There was barely enough time for everyone to get out of the room when the first explosion sounded off, but while some of the other soldiers escorted the remaining able-bodied scientists out, Azarov and T turned back, going back to try and save some of the wounded. I followed, though I say it was more of me not knowing what I should do than anything else. And just like that…everything went silent, my ears having to suffer the pain of the loudest noise I've ever heard for a fraction of a second before silence reigned. Everyone who I could see was dripping with sweat. Boiling hot steam was filling the room. The night sky was visible above us, the one-ton upper plate of the reactor casing having been driven through the

roof by the pressure of the steam.

Then the second explosion hit, and everyone was knocked to the floor. Corpses of the wounded lay bloody. My sight went black, and…well, when I woke up, I was being carried by T down the hallway at a run. I saw Azarov running alongside for a moment or two, bloody vomit running down his chin and chest, before he was pulled back from something unseen behind us. I heard - and I use 'heard' loosely - him wail with pain and surprise as the being shrieked at her next victim. 'Stay with me, Vadim!' T shouted as he carried me.

K 's demeanor shifts to a noticeably sadder tone, his eyes beginning to turn pink and shining with held-back tears.

K : T had said to me…'You're going to be alright, Tovarisch. I promise you that much.'

K sighs, his voice shaking with a sob.

K : May I have a moment, Mister Dyatlov?

Dyatlov: Of course, Vadim. Take as much time as you need.

K : Thank you.

K spends the next few moments calming himself down, taking deep breaths and closing his eyes.

K : I…don't remember much of those moments. I was looking up into his eyes, but also looking past his face. The ceiling was flaming, parts of the structure would surely be

coming down. His face was seared with steam burns. Blood was trickling from his ears and nose. He must have sustained a crippling dose of trauma, and yet he was still going, still doing his best to save lives, including mine. The shrieking and wailing from the being was getting quieter, and from a split-second glance into a door window as T took me down the hallway, I could see that the she-beast was pinned under a flaming chunk of ceiling, wailing desperately as she attempted to claw her way out. For just a split second, I caught sight of her face, her sparking eyes, her burning hair, her seared skin, her pained facial expression…sometimes I still see that face, waiting for me in my dreams.

K shudders. A nurse enters, informing Dyatlov that visiting hours are nearly over.

K : Ah, my apologies. It seems that Pravda won't be receiving a full story from me today… perhaps tomorrow?

Dyatlov: I believe I can wait until then, Tovarisch. They've been kind in giving me leeway with this piece.

K : Very well. Have a safe journey, Mr. Dyatlov.

Dyatlov: And you, a good night, Mr. K .

< END LOG >

Afterword: *Following the interview, the Ward granted a request by Dyatlov to see K the next day. Dyatlov knocked on the door a number of times before forcing the door open, only to discover the bloody, tattered remains of K . The Ward was informed of the tragedy, informing Dyatlov and other Psychotronics*

Division agents that there had been a freak electrical surge over the night, though it had lasted only a few moments.

The Ward's license has, at the time of this recording, been revoked, and patients have been transferred to the K Hospital in Moscow until further notice. Requests for interviews with other patients of the former Ward are pending approval at this time.

< END DOCUMENT 0401-42-3 >

SHOW DOCUMENT 0401-42-4

Foreword: *The following is a compilation of police reports from the city of Pripyat in the days following the incident at the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant, all of which report sightings of a person believed to be Object 0401-42. Reports have been doctored to omit nonessential information. This information was collected by V Lentivenko, a GRU-P Agent and Informational Liaison embedded within the Pripyat Regional Militsiya.*

Date recorded: 0 /0 /198 - /0 /198

< BEGIN DOCUMENT 0401-42-4 >
< DOCUMENT CLASS: INFORMATIONAL >

BEGIN REPORT 0714
Date: 0 /0 /198
Complaint synopsis: Sighting reported of unidentifiable woman of apparent Asian racial characteristics near the M Hotel. Subject was observed to be walking between the same two points in an alleyway for hours on end, attempting no communication with any passers-by.
Action taken: Patrol car containing two (2) personnel dispatched.
Result: Subject was nowhere to be found.

BEGIN REPORT 0736
Date: /0 /198
Complaint synopsis: Sightings reported of humanoid figure stalking the edge of a treeline located -hundred (00) meters from the K Schoolbuilding. Subject made no attempts to approach building, but would not leave the area. Caller was a woman working at the school, concerned for the safety of the children.
Action taken: Two (2) patrol cars dispatched with orders to apprehend suspect if possible.
Result: Subject was nowhere to be found. Patrol cars remained on scene until the end of the schoolday, escorting the children home.

BEGIN REPORT 0747
Date: /0 /198
Complaint synopsis: Instances of angry growling, similar to that of a dog, heard outside of the - Cinema. No stray dogs were known to live in the area, and all dog owners in the area claimed that their pets were inside that night. Numerous individuals reported being perturbed by the noises.
Action taken: Street section cordoned off, investigation launched, ( ) Militsiya personnel and ( ) researchers being involved.
Result: Source of growling undetected. Instances reported to have ceased the next day.

BEGIN REPORT 0778
Date: /0 /198
Complaint synopsis: Initial complaints reported lights flickering within the M Hotel, subsequent reports complaining of clumsy maintenance work causing several loud bangs coming from the maintenance hallways. Hotel

employees, when questioned, reported that all maintenance personnel were absent that night.
Action taken: Hotel occupants evacuated for several hours, thorough sweep of building by
- ( ) personnel conducted.
Result: No signs of unusual presences concluded to exist. Hotel occupants allowed to re-enter building and return to their rooms.

BEGIN REPORT 0791
Date: /0 /198
Complaint synopsis: Reports of a power outage, followed by loud, agonized yelling, reported by many inhabitants of M Hotel the night following the sweep. Upon arrival of Militsiya personnel, a crime scene was discovered, the eviscerated corpse of a man identified as Konstantyn T found in bed. Signs of struggle present. T 's neck was torn open, both arms sliced open from the base of the hand to the elbow, and approximately 68% of T 's facial skin was reported to be 'ripped off'. On the wall, *Tôi còn sống*, which translates roughly to "I still live" in Vietnamese, was written in blood, which matched that of T when DNA tested.
Action taken: Hotel evacuated, personnel from the Pripyat General Hospital called to the scene. Body brought to coroner. Room quarantined until further notice. Crime scene investigation, comprising militsiya personnel and agents of the GRU, conducted.
Result: No conclusion as to the murderer's identity reached. Upon request from Executive Director Ivashutin, the GRU was given permission to quarantine the building and continue the investigation privately.

< END DOCUMENT 0401-42-4 >

SHOW DOCUMENT 0401-42-5

Foreword: *The following is a report filed by D Chernov, Lead Investigator of GRU-P's Investigational and Informational Taskforce, in the aftermath of Pripyat Militsiya Report 0791, detailing the death of former GRU-P security personnel Efr. Konstantyn T .*

Date recorded: 0 /0 /198

< BEGIN DOCUMENT 0401-42-5 >
< DOCUMENT CLASS: INFORMATIONAL/ CONCLUSIONARY >

Conclusionary report as to the status of Object 0401-42
DATE OF COMPILATION: *0 /0 /198*

LOCATION: M Hotel, City of Pripyat, Kiev Oblast, Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic, Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

ANALYSIS: Comrades, we all by now know the extent to which 0401-42's containment breach has escalated. The incident has turned into a twofold crisis; the meltdown and explosions caused by 0401-42's presence at the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant threaten to plague vast quantities of land of not just the Soviet Union, but also much of Europe, with nuclear particles carried across the continent by the shifting weather. Already, tens of thousands of personnel of the Soviet Army have been mobilized to contain the threat posed by the Chernobyl Nuclear Plant, but the citizens of Pripyat continue to live in informational isolation as to their perilous situation. This, on its own, is a travesty, but coupled with the presence of 0401-42, this could turn into a catastrophe the likes of which the world has never known.

We must acknowledge that our procedures of containment for 0401-42 were not as strong as they could, or indeed, *should*, have been. Mistakes were made along the entirety of the duration of her containment in Psychotronics Division facilities, ranging from physical abuse to emotional disregard and isolation. In some ways, it could be said that we treated her worse than she was treated by her captors in the Indochinese conflict over a decade prior to this incident. The resumption of testing on her capabilities, the exposure of her raw, traumatized, stressed psyche to the sounds of the war that had cost her countless loved ones, and the untimely and unprofessional execution of who she called *Ban*, is believed to have resulted in such profound emotional and psychological trauma that the full extent of her ability to harness her powers was realized. This, of course, led her to begin the vicious and murderous cycle which has cost the lives of an estimated - ( ) personnel, spread across the GRU-P, the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant, and the th Motor Rifle Regiment.

RECOMMENDED COURSE OF ACTION: The Investigational and Informational Taskforce, having confided the preceding information, recommends a multitude of actions be taken immediately:

- Utter and total evacuation of the city of Pripyat until Object 0401-42 is confirmed terminated.
- Establishment of a Psychotronics Division-affiliated entity within the 'Liquidation' taskforce being formed by Soviet Army units at the Chernobyl site.
- Termination of aforementioned Object to be

given Class-B prioritization. Should termination be deemed impossible or otherwise implausible, containment of 0401-42 to the area surrounding the abandoned city of Pripyat to be the new priority.

SIGNED: D Chernov

Incident 239-Abridged

This report is STUPID. All people involved in it are complete and utter weirdos.

On - - , Dr. A. Clef made the following recommendation on the log re: **SCP-239**

> *Let me get this straight: we've got a hyperdangerous reality bender in containment, and instead of killing her, we give her a fucking spellbook and tell her she can only use magic we approve. Yeah, because 9-year-old girls never age, and never experiment with new things. And using her to contain other SCPs? Really? Whose bright idea was that?*
>
> *Here's my proposal: a sword made out of telekill will be made, because a sword made out of a telepathy-cancelling metal can definitely penetrate a reality bender's invincible skin. Then, I an operative kills her in her sleep. Anyone stands in my way, and I'll the operative carrying out the mission will knife them with SCP-668.*
>
> *Of course, considering that this girl is so powerful that if she just looks at you and thinks you're her friend, then you are, I'm going to do it personally. Got a problem, 05 command?*
>
> *Clef Out*

Surveillance Log x92 , Date - - - -

4:45 VTOL 505 arrives at the landing pad.

4:46 A security detachment arrives to secure Dr. Clef.

4:47 Clef is escorted out of the VTOL, and made to lay on the ground. He is recorded as saying "Clef bows before no man!"

4:48 The agents are distracted by a large flock of seagulls flying overhead, and Dr. Clef shoots them all in the chest. Clef is recorded to say "Wait… that wasn't my tranquilizer gun." and "Oh, my ass is grass."

4:52 Further resistance from security personnel. Dr. Clef swears several times, and fires wildly into the crowd. No survivors.

5:10 Dr. Clef enters Site 17

Personal log of Dr. A. Clef, SL

Ah, fuck. I hate it when I'm right. This wall wasn't here before. The little godling has already started reshaping the site. Soon, the speaker system will play exclusively Kidz Bop and One Direction. *The Horror*.

…shit, the door's gone! What the Hel- wait…

[Clef bitchslaps some metal]

Butterflies? Really, Konny? Really? Butterflies and your fucking camera? That's the best you can do? We have a horny fox woman down the hall, you know. You could've sicced her on my balls. Hell, you could've just turned the site's automated security on and told it to target me. I'm the protagonist, so that wouldn't have worked, but still. But *butterflies?* You stupid son of a bitch. Glad I brought my flyswatter!

[Another male voice is heard saying, "Don't touch my babies!"]

[DATA EXPUNGED]

Surveillance Log x92 , Date - -

FEED UNAVALIABLE

Cut to Dr. Clef: "I love a good feed cut! You can be as violent as you want, and nobody will see it!"

FEED UNAVAILABLE

Kondraki neutralized, declaring, "It is highly implied that I have had my ass kicked!"

Personal log of Dr. A. Clef, SL

I've never understood what Blackbox Kondraki's obsession with those damn butterflies was. Seriously. I squashed, like, 50 of those things back there. He's gonna be pissed when he wakes up.

I think that Konny's working for 239 now. There's only one explanation: she's made him a *Belieber*. I should've killed the poor sunovabitch. It would've been a mercy.

And I just ran into a friggin' wall! Who the hell makes a camera flash like that? I think he said it was made with freakin' caterpillars. What if he actually needed to take a picture at night, like at the Site 17 barbeque or something. He would set them all on fire! Fucking butterfly-worshiping idiot.

What's the term for an insect furry? A buggy or something? Yeah, that's what Konny is. A buggy. Anyway, turning on my ocular implants, which I totally have. I think I'll visit some friends.

6:25 Security Team Bravo vanishes into thin air.

6:30 Security Team Bravo reemerges, dressed like fucking knights. No, really, they have plate armor and everything. …who the fuck wrote this?

6:35 The clock now only works in 5-minute increments. Also, Clef kills a bunch of guys. Again. For someone claiming to hate Mary Sues…

6:40 Clef enters containment chamber for SCP-091-ARC and proceeds to make sweet tree love to it, the lucky depraved son of a bitch.

6:45 Containment Breach. Biohazard protocols engaged. Dr. Gears and Kain Pathos Crow are called in. Because two Senior Staff avatars weren't enough for this tale "incident report".

Personal log of Dr. A. Clef, SL

I talked to Yoda once. He told me "Nothing is true, all is permitted". Not sure what that has to do with the current situation, but I just like the quote.

I think I misjudged 408. Those things are like flying television screens. I wish Elvis was still alive to shoot the damn things. Hell, even Keith Richards would help right now; he could chuck all of the lepidopteran TVs out the window. For all I know, they've taken 239 out of the site already.

But if they did, I wouldn't be the damn protagonist of this ta- I mean incident report. And because I'm Alto Clef, my special ability means that women find me repulsive! That's exactly why I was able to have… tree sex with… 091…

…well, that's a giant continuity hole. Who writes this crap?

Anyway, in exchange for sex, I let 091 out, causing the entire site to go into biohazard lockdown! Now, you're all trapped here with me! Relax, I'm just here for the kid. Not like a dragon's gonna pop out of nowhere and tear the place to bits. This plan is absolutely flawless!

…okay, I swear to god, I heard a George Michael song just then. Weird.

<SCP-336> Alto, Honey, what are you doing here?

<Dr. Clef:> Just stopping in to say hello, Lilly.

(At this point, the two of them start speaking a mixture of Elvish and

Martian. Or at least it may as well be. Seriously, we're the biggest scientific entity on the fucking planet, and we can't translate a few lines of a dead language. Pathetic.)

<Clef:> Aww, that's sweet, but I gotta go kill a little girl now.

<SCP-336:> I'm sorry, Dave, but I can't let you do that. (SCP-336 removes its vocal modulator)

<Clef:> What did I say about using my real name- (SCP-336 begins talking) Oh god my ears. It's like listening to 682's mating cry!

FEED AVAILABLE

<8:05> Inconsistent Timestamps detected. Preparing to detonate tactical nuke. Also, Clef's bleeding out of his ears. He is heard to state, "Joke's on you, Lilly! I'm deaf now! This plan is still absolutely flawless!"

<8:06> Dr. Clef is heard to state, "Okay, if I'm deaf, why the fuck do I keep hearing music?"

8:07 SCP-408 swarms around Dr. Clef. Visual contact lost.

Interview Log x , Date: - -

<O5- >: Gears, how the hell did you get dragged into this?

<Dr.Gears>: Processing question… I was working with Dr. Crow on his egg walker. We heard an alarm, heard that Clef was coming to destroy SCP-239. Dr. Crow climbed in SCP-244-ARC and rode off.

<O5- >: Dr. Crow being… the dog everyone thinks can talk.

<Dr.Gears>: He can talk. You just have to believe in the Heart of the Foundation to hear him. Also, being telepathically receptive might help.

<O5- >:…right. Then how come security footage from the time shows him trying to hump the Egg Walker's leg?

<Dr.Gears>: If a man has urges, who am I to judge them? After Crow drove off, I went to speak with SCP-239.

8:12 Consistent timestamps restored. Nuclear launch cancelled.

8:20 Dr. Gears meets with SCP-239, who is listening to a cover song of Macklemore's *Thrift Shop* by Kidz Bop. Dr. Gears is seen to instinctively reach for a non-existent gun and attempt to self-terminate.

8:21 After destroying the music player in the room, Dr. Gears and SCP-239 converse for several minutes.

> Dr.Gears: Come with us, Cigarette.
>
> SCP-239: 'Sigurrós'.
>
> Dr.Gears: We need your assistance, Cigar. Dr. Clef has been placed under the Imperious curse by the Lord Ruler, and is using Allomancy to attempt to destroy you.
>
> SCP-239: Isn't that reference a tad obscure, Mr. Gears?
>
> Dr.Gears: Someone's bound to get it.

8:21 Kain Pathos Crow enters the incident area, finds Kondraki, offers him a bottle of Chechnya Vodka, as well as healing him.

> Dr. Crow: Woof woof bark bark woof.
>
> Kondraki: Fuck the liquor, I need to be sober to fight that butterfly-killing son of a bitch.
>
> Dr. Crow: Bark.
>
> Kondraki: No, I don't hate Chechnya. That's Strelnikov.
>
> Dr. Crow: (whines)
>
> Kondraki: What's that, boy? Sigurrós's fallen down a

well? (Springs up, restored to full strength) Let's go!

Personal log of Kain Pathos Crow

BARK BARK WOOF I HAVE NO IDEA WHAT I'M DOING. BARK HELP BARK BARK

8:40 Decommissioning of SCP-122-D is interrupted by Dr. Crow driving the egg walker through a wall and trampling it to death with his walker. Dr. Crow was given a medal for this action.

3:15 Random Bright Cameo! Hey, Bright, you wacky bastard, what's up?

> Dr. Bright: I just jerked off to *Lolita*. It felt good.

That's Jack Bright, everyone! What a card!

9:15 Bright escapes his solitary confinement and finds Clef. The following dialog ensues:

> Dr. Clef: Bright, you sick fuck. I ought to kill you right fuckin' now.
>
> Dr. Bright: Kay.
>
> Dr. Clef:…kay?
>
> Dr. Bright: I want to die! I live for death! C'mon, Cleffy, put a bullet through my brain!
>
> Dr. Clef: …Yeah, no. I'm not about to feed into your autonecrophilia fetish. But I will do this. (Clef shoots Dr. Bright in his left testicle, and walks off, with Bright yeowling in pain)
>
> Dr. Bright: DO THE OTHER ONE!

9:50 Dr. Kondraki & Dr. Clef meet. Sword-fighting ensues.

> Kondraki: My voice gives me-
>
> Dr. Clef: Don't even go there, Konny. It's bad enough we had to steal a joke from YGX Abridged. Ugh!
>
> Kondraki: Man, you know what would be cool? If the Highlander theme was playing over this!
>
> Dr. Clef: C'mon, Konny. We aren't completely without dignity here. Lord of the Rings would fit more, I think.

Interview Log x , Date: - -

<O5- :> Gears, why the hell did you tell her that a fictional character was controlling Clef?

<Dr.Gears:> Because I didn't want to scare her.

<O5- :> Fair enough. But tell me… *why the flying fuck did you tell her that Magic Missile was an actual thing?!*

<Dr.Gears:> Because I thought it was cool.

<O5- :> But… you don't have emotions.

<Dr.Gears:> Exactly.

[DATA EXPUNGED]

[MORE AWESOME SWORDFIGHTING]

<Kondraki:> Dammit, Clef, stop this madness! And don't make a Sparta Joke.

<Dr. Clef:> Madness? This is S- aww. And I'm trying to kill her because her containment procedures have already failed! *With ME!*

<Kondraki:> What the Hell are you talking about?

Sudden shout. A female voice can be heard shouting something like, "I cast Magic Missile!" There is a sudden sound of breaking metal, and a scream, then a loud roar.[1]

9:51 Running Sword fight.

9:55 Dr. Gears, SCP-239 and Dr. Crow enter from various angles, with SCP-239 firing a bolt of plasma at Dr. Clef, which breaks his sword.

9:56 A black light emits from Dr. Clef's body, which turns into… a dragon. No, really. A fucking dragon.

> Dr. Clef: Well, we just jumped the shark.
>
> Kondraki: For once, Clef, I agree with you.

Partial Audio log extract from SCP-244's on board recorder

<**Kain Pathos Crow:**> BARK BARK BARK BARK BARK BARK BARK BARK BARK BARK

(Sound of firing weaponry)

10:08 Dr. Gears and SCP-239 are suddenly in Site 17's strong room. While she is distracted looking at emergency supplies, Dr. Gears injects SCP-239 with a sedative.

> Dr. Gears: Goodnight, Cigarette. Sweet dreams.
>
> SCP-239: It's… Sigurrós…

10:20 Dr. Crow's egg walker suddenly generates a sword of light, and decapitates the… fucking dragon is this suddenly an alternate canon where the Foundation is a fairy tale? No? Then what the hell.

Supplemental Report 239 Abridged Post-incident interview, Dr. A.

Clef

Clef: Konny-boy! How's the everything?

Kondraki: It's getting better, thank you for asking. Why the Hell did you try to kill 239? She's in a chemical coma, by the way.

Clef: Because. She's God, I'm Satan, and I want to kill God.

Kondraki: That's a load of bull.

Clef: Look in your heart. You know it to be true.

Kondraki: Don't start. You know I hate Star Wars.

Clef: That is why you fail.

Kondraki: Mmmm…

Clef: No, Blackbox. I *am* your Father. (Darth Vader noises)

Kondraki: Clef, I swear to God-

Clef: You mean 239. She is God. Think about it. Why do women hate me so much? Why do you think I lie so well? If I'm the prince of lies, then I must be telling the truth!

Kondraki: Clef, I'm leaving. Say one more word, and I swear…

Clef: Aren't you a little short for a Storm trooper?

Kondraki: (Inarticulate scream of rage)

At this point, Dr. Clef was not brutally assaulted by Dr. Kondraki, but instead accidentally fell onto the corner of the table. Repeatedly. Seriously, we have video footage. It's above your security clearance. But even if he was beaten up by Dr.

Kondraki, he totally had it coming.

Footnotes
1. Actual prose

Incident 239-B - Clef-Kondraki

Re: Internal Affairs Incident between Drs. "Alto" Clef and Kondraki, - - .

This report is CLOSED. Any further edits must be approved by an O-5 level authority, except for basic grammatical and spelling corrections. Any further information about this incident should be placed in a supplemental report.

This report compiled by:
01:12 - Dr. Clef/SL
01:15 - Dr. Kondraki/SL3
04:37 - Kain Pathos Crow/SL4
04:38 - Dr. Gears/SL
1:19 - Far2/SL
1:20 - Bijhan/SL
1:21 - Dr. Bright/SL
[DATA CORRUPT]

Synopsis
*On - - , **Dr. A. Clef** made the following recommendation on the log re: **SCP-239***

> *My analysis of the situation has led me to the conclusion that SCP-239 is an unacceptable containment and security risk. Although several proposals have been made re: using her for containing other SCPs, the example of **SCP-953** and others must serve as a stark reminder of the risks of overestimating the Foundation's*

ability to control SCPs with reality-altering powers.

I would therefore like to make the following proposal: a dagger will be constructed of ***SCP-148****, capable of penetrating SCP-239's otherwise invincible skin. This weapon will be used to terminate SCP-239 while she is asleep and her powers are neutralized. Because of the danger of SCP-239 awakening and resisting termination, it is my recommendation that the selected operative carry* ***SCP-668*** *as well, in order to minimize complications.*

One of the dangers of this procedure is the possibility that SCP-239 will awaken and perceive the operative as a friend or "good person," thus changing reality to match. It is for this reason that I would like to volunteer to carry out the procedure personally. A review of my personnel file should indicate that my [DATA EXPUNGED] should allow me to carry out the operation even after a reality shift of this nature.

- Clef

Unfortunately, Dr. Clef made the error of transmitting his proposal en clair *instead of through secured channels. Knowledge of his plan of action reached several staff members at Site-17. As documented under Incident Report 239-A, SCP-239 had formed bonds with several staff members at Site-17. Whether motivated by ordinary sympathy or, as Clef predicted, due to SCP-239's reality-altering abilities causing those on site to be perceived as friends, several staff members were motivated to take action to prevent Dr. Clef from carrying out his proposed plan of action: in particular,* ***Dr. Kondraki****.*

Evidence relating to the resulting incident is, unfortunately, incomplete and unclear at best. Efforts are currently underway to piece together the events that occurred through personal logs, official records, and post-incident interviews.

Surveillance Log x92 , Date - -

23:02 - Dr. Kondraki departs living quarters

- -

00:03 - Access to **SCP-408** containment unit authorized by Dr. Kondraki

00:05 - Dr. Kondraki enters containment

05:13 - Dr. Kondraki enters containment

Personal log of Dr. A. Clef, SL

I, A H C , being of sound mind and body, hereby declare that the actions I am about to take are mine and mine alone, and that I am not acting on the orders of any outside body or official Foundation representative. I also declare that I am a liar. Which part of my prior statement is a lie I will leave for the historians and you post-incident investigators to puzzle over. Perhaps I was lying that I am a liar. There's an infinite feedback loop to crash your brains.

I believe that I have tipped my hand too far, and the time to act is now. If my suspicions are confirmed, and the staff of Site 17 have been compromised, it is only a matter of time before someone there informs 239 of my plan of action. After that, it's impossible to tell what may result. My unique character flaws may help to protect me from any resulting reality shifts, but a CK-Class restructuring is still a CK-Class restructuring. All things considered, I like the world as it is.

I have constructed several weapons out of telekill alloy in the short time I had to prepare: they should provide me with a variety of kill options at varying ranges. Incidentally, I am disappointed in the other members of the Foundation at their lack of initiative: knowing of a highly dangerous Keter-class SCP's vulnerability, they nonetheless refused to neutralize it. Perhaps this is a result of the SCP's reality-altering powers, or perhaps it is simple sentimentality towards a dangerous weapon that takes the form of a small child. Probably the latter. My "colleagues" do have a distressing tendency to show unwarranted leniency towards highly destructive humanoid Keter-class SCPs.

Hypothesis: if an enemy wished to destroy the Foundation, all they would need is ten nuclear weapons in the kiloton range, disguised as Girl Scouts.

Unfortunately, I was unsuccessful in securing the Genovese Blade before leaving Site 19, which means that I will be unable to use it to bypass base security. However, my outside contacts have provided me with a variety of technological surrogates which may suffice. In addition, my personal digital assistant has been linked to my ocular and aural implants. In the event of a mission abort or failure, all data regarding this mission shall be immediately transmitted to the GOC, all O5-level Foundation personnel, the FBI's Unusual Incidents Unit, and . In the event of personal life sign termination, the Clef unit at the GOC (Treble) is to execute Procedure Pizzicato (Planetary Sterilization).

By the way, I'd like to remind everyone reading this log at Post-Incident Investigation (Hi there, Mel!) that I am a liar and there is no Clef unit at the GOC, no Procedure Pizzicato, and no data dump to be carried out in the event of my death. Probably not. Maybe. There's a good chance of it.

Arrival in ten minutes. Mission begins.

Surveillance Log x92 , Date - - - -

4:45 VTOL 505 arrives at landing pad 7.

4:46 Six (6) Site-17 security agents arrive on-scene.

4:47 Dr. Clef is ordered to exit VTOL 505 and lay down on the ground with his hands on his head. Dr. Clef complies.

4:48 Unknown event. Four (4) security agents temporarily stunned by effects. Remaining two (2) rendered unconscious. Dr. Clef is observed drawing a pistol from his lab coat and firing twelve (12) tranquilizer darts, giving each agent a double-dose of [DATA EXPUNGED].

4:52 Further resistance from Site-17 Security Personnel.

5:02 Resistance neutralized.

5:10 Dr. Clef enters Site-17.

Surveilance Log x92 , Date - -

05:11 Several Level 1 security personnel arrive at Site 17 main entrance.

05:13 Security personnel neutralized by [DATA EXPUNGED].

05:17 Noted change in surroundings, several signs altered, hallway B-7 intersection becomes dead end.

06:02 Large flash of light erupts from hallway B-7.

Personal log of Dr. A. Clef, SL

It's worse than I thought.

The reality shifts have already started to occur. The walls have shifted, everything's not where it should be. My Site-17 map is completely useless. All I can do is follow the signs and hope they lead me to the right place.

Damn, what the hell is going on here? I could have sworn that was a doorway a moment ago…

Wait a minute.

[Sound of a hand slapping against metal]

Butterflies? *[Manic laughter]* Konny, you magnificent bastard! I've read your…

[Another male voice is heard saying, "Smile you sonovabitch!"]

[DATA CORRUPT]

Surveilance Log x92 , Date - -

06:04 SCP-408 briefly spotted, before reconfiguration. Dr. Clef identified, Site 17 security alerted.

06:06 Dr. Kondraki spotted, accompanied by 3 other Dr. Kondraki. Subject appears to be holding highly modified camera.

FEED UNAVAILABLE

06:10 Security teams dispatched to containment unit of SCP-239.

FEED AVAILABLE

06:20 Dr. Kondraki neutralized, Dr. Clef leaves hallway B-7

Personal log of Dr. A. Clef, SL

Konny, you clever, clever bastard! Talked to 408, did you? Convinced them to help you… or did the damn bugs volunteer to do it on their own? No matter, you win this round. Clipped me pretty good, huh? Well, now you're dead… at least, one of you is, I think. Two bullets in the heart, one in the head, you'd think that would be enough, but no, you just had to keep coming, didn't you? Made me get up close and use the knife, didn't you?

Why did you do it, Konny? Are you working for her, now? Did she call you her snuggle-lumpkin, and turn you into her pet? Or are you just doing this because she looks like a little girl, and your damnable genes that tell you that children are to be loved and protected are firing ten thousand fold? It's not a child, Konny, it's a monster, the worst kind of monster, one that hides in plain sight, makes you love it before it butchers you alive.

Whatever you had in that damn flashbulb took out my eyes. I'm thinking second degree burns on my face and forearms, and my retinas are fried to hell. That's fine, they'll grow back. Until then, I can't see a damn thing, but my ocular implants still work. I can still finish the mission.

I just need some help. And I think I know where to find it.

6:25 Site-17 Security Team Bravo ceases to exist.

6:30 Site-17 Security Team Bravo re-emerges, wearing full-plate armor, carrying heaters and arming swords.

6:35 Site-17 Security Team Bravo engages Dr. Clef in hallway B-9.

6:36 Site-17 Security Team Bravo neutralized.

6:37 Dr. Clef ceases movement.

6:38 Dr. Clef proceeds to containment facility for **SCP-091-ARC**.

6:45 Containment Breach. Biohazard Level 4 Alert. Site-17 goes into Biohazard Lockdown. Automated alert goes out to all other SCP Foundation bases, requesting assistance. Kain Pathos Crow and Dr. Gears respond.

7:01 Hall B7 secure, no movement detected.

7:12 Movement detected, SCP-408 uncloaks. Dr. Kondraki is wounded.

7:25 SCP-408 departs.

7:26 Dr. Kondraki operating cam.

.
..
…

FEED UNAVAILABLE

Personal log of Dr. A. Clef, SL

I talked with Siddhartha Gautama once. He told me that the world is an illusion. That nothing that exists is real. You've driven it home for me.

Damn butterflies all over the place. Nothing is real, nothing exists.

All is illusion. I walk down a hallway and it turns into a dead end, which explodes into a shower of light. None of the signs lead where they should. None of the walls point where they should go. For all I know, you've gotten the little monster out of the facility already.

Except for one very interesting fact.

Have you ever wondered why women instinctively recoil from me, Konny? Have you ever wondered why I was able to get into 91's pen and let her out, or why 166 and I get along so well? Have you ever wondered why I never talk to 105?

If you knew who I was, you'd understand.

But then, if you bastards knew who I was, I'd be another specimen in your collection. Another number to catalogue and store and contain.

Because that's what you do, right? You catalogue, store, and contain, and watch and watch and watch. Never act. Never move. Never take the initiative.

Even when death is staring you straight in the face.

But I can act, Konny. I can always act. That's why your silly little game can't stop me. Why your silly little butterflies and illusions and parlor tricks will never suffice. Because Gautama was wrong. Not everything is an illusion, and not all illusions are indistinguishable from reality.

For instance, what will happen when I release an elemental spirit of wood from its containment? Well, of course, the entire facility will go into biohazard lockdown. No one gets out. So that little monster is going to be trapped in here with me. No way for you quislings to let her out into the world to destroy us all. Perhaps you think that's all I'm going for.

Here's a little hint, buddy. It's not.

No one's ever seen what Ninety-One looks like when she flowers, or fruits.

I'm about to show them.

7:30 Dr. Kondraki focuses image on Hallway F-19, current location of Dr. Clef

7:35 Dr. Clef is seen embracing **SCP-091-ARC**. Immediate infection occurs.

7:36 Infection now spreads across 90% of Dr. Clef's body.

7:38 Flowers are seen emerging from Dr. Clef's extremities.

7:39 Flowers begin to exude an unknown pheremone.

7:43 Local swarm of SCP-408 begins to lose cohesion.

FEED UNAVAILABLE

Audio Log s17 - Date: - -

<unknown>: [Static]…need assi…P-091-ARC containment bree…

<Operator >: Kondraki, is that you? What the hell is going on down there, they're talking about a full lockdown!

<Dr. Kondraki>: Doct…extremely aggresive…warn Cog an…send help…

<Operator >: Dr. Gears? I just got a report that he and Kain are on the way here, don't worry.

<Dr. Kondraki>: [Pained] ….got it all….wrong…

<Operator >:Doc? Doc?! [indistinct, shouting to someone in background]

[DATA CORRUPT]

Interview Log x , Date: - -

<O5- >: As the first person to become involved in this incident, let's start with your involvement that night.

<Dr. Kondraki>: I had been tending to SCP-408 that night, making sure maintenance kept the feeders filled properly. It was 408 who alerted me.

<O5- >: How did SCP-408 know about the situation outside?

<Dr. Kondraki>: Hell if I know, and it wouldn't tell me at the time. What mattered, however, was stopping Dr. Clef from causing any more havoc.

<O5- >: If I recall, you weren't very successful.

<Dr. Kondraki>: No, but then again what could I do? I had a camera and a flock of butterflies. And this wasn't much of a photo shoot.

<O5- >: What about SCP-239?

<Dr. Kondraki>: What about her?

<O5- >: The assumption of Dr. Clef is that you were manipulated into protecting her.

<Dr. Kondraki>: It certainly became the focus of my actions once I figured out his plan, which the idiot had revealed to anyone who cared to look.

<O5- >: Was it true then?

<Dr. Kondraki>: That I did it all to protect SCP-239?

<O5- >: That you did it because she wanted you to.

<Dr. Kondraki>: To be honest, with the way that girl works, can I even be certain of my intent? The idea that she used me like that, it scares me.

<O5- >: It scares you that she can control you?

<Dr. Kondraki>: No, it scares me because if she did, I'll have to kill her myself.

<O5- >: One more thing, did you know about [DATA EXPUNGED]

<Dr. Kondraki>: [Laughs] I don't think anyone doubted she would get caught up in this.

7:46 Entirety of SCP-408's swarm now in disarray.

7:50 SCP-091-ARC has breached containment, Dr. Clef seen leaving containment.

7:53 Humanoid figure seen emerging from cloud of confused 408.

7:57 SCP-408 reverts to basic state, retreats. **SCP-336** identified.

8:01 Dr. Clef and SCP-336 seen conversing.

8:03 SCP-336 removes voice modulator.

FEED UNAVAILABLE

Audio Log s17 - Date: - -

<Clef>: … you.

<SCP-336>: … me.

<Clef>: … Why are you here?

<SCP-336>: To stop you.

<Clef>: [At this point. Dr. Clef reverted to an unknown language. SCP Linguists have analyzed the content of this audio file, and believe it to be a variant of ancient Sumerian.]

<SCP-336>: [Responds in a similar dialect]

<Clef>: … so there is no other way, then?

<SCP-336>: None. Your motivations may be pure, but your methods are too extreme.

<Clef>: I never stopped loving you, you know.

<SCP-336>: I know.

[DATA EXPUNGED] [It is at this point that SCP-336 removed her voice modulator and began to speak. For the safety of listeners, this portion of the recording was automatically redacted from the record.]

<Clef>: [Cries of pain]

<SCP-336>: Your dedication is remarkable, but you have…

[Shots fired]

FEED AVAILABLE

8:05 Target tracking reacquired. Dr. Clef is seen reloading a handgun, leaning against a wall and clearly shaken. Blood is seen running down from both ears, apparently self-inflicted injuries to both eardrums. A nearby mirror appears to have been shattered with three 9mm rounds. **SCP-336** is no longer visible.

8:06 Dr. Clef slumps against the wall and slides down to the ground, appearing to weep. Flowering growths on his body wither and die.

8:08 SCP-408 regains cohesion and begins to swarm around Dr. Clef. Visual contact lost.

Personal log of Dr. A. Clef, SL

This is [DATA EXPUNGED] previously known as Dr. Clef. I am not making this statement out of my own free will, but under compulsion from the First Wife. Despite my efforts, I was not able to remove my own hearing before a partial command was spoken by SCP-336. I'm not sure what she meant to order me to do, but all I remember hearing are the words, "Tell me the truth."

This is the truth.

… the truth…

[low, manic laughter, breaking into raucous peals]

THE TRUTH!

[Sound of breaking electronics. It is determined that Dr. Clef's PDA was shattered at this point in time.]

Interview Log x , Date: - -
<O5- >: At what point did you become involved in the incident?

<Dr.Gears>: I was doing work with Professor Kain on **SCP-244**. We had determined that several sections could be retrofitted to be modular. We were working on a new crystal-powered cannon module when site command gave us the order to respond.

<O5- >: Did you have any prior knowledge of what was going on?

<Dr.Gears>: Somewhat. We had heard an alarm go off, but no "black alert" breach warning, so we had continued work. More, I worked while Professor Kain was providing feedback. The P.A. system came on in the lab, and site command said Dr. Clef was attempting to terminate **SCP-239** without approval, and had caused several containment breaches, in addition to harming other personnel, notably Dr. Kondraki. We were to attempt to contain Dr. Clef until site security could respond.

<O5- >: Did you find that odd?

<Dr.Gears>: What?

<O5- >: That you were being asked to stop a hostile action.

<Dr.Gears>: No. Dr. Clef's actions were…unexpected, but I have been called to do many things outside my area of expertise since joining the Foundation.

<O5- >: What did you do after you received orders?

<Dr.Gears>: Professor Kain entered **SCP-244** and stated that he was going to assist Dr. Kondraki. The new module was still attached, and the professor expressed anticipation in regards to using the cannon to disable Dr. Clef. I advised caution; however Professor Kain was already leaving, and may not have heard me.

<O5- >: You didn't go with him?

<Dr.Gears>: I doubt I would have been able to render much help. Professor Kain is a brilliant man, in the body of a dog, in a large mechanical combat device derived from several SCP. I am a human being with no combat training, and severely limited emotional response. I responded in the way I felt would do the most good.

<O5- >: And how was that?

<Dr.Gears>: I went to speak with **SCP-239**.

<*Note: audio recoding system damaged, no audio available*>

8:12 Dr. Gears leaves testing area shortly after Kain.

8:20 Dr. Gears gains access to the containment area of SCP-239.

8:21 SCP-239 embraces Dr. Gears, who squats down to be face-to-face with SCP-239. Dr. Gears and SCP-239 appear to converse for several minutes, SCP-239 nodding several times.

8:25 Dr. Gears stands and gestures to the door while speaking. SCP-239 collects her "spell book" and takes his hand. SCP-239 has a very stoic expression, but continues to speak as they leave the containment area.

8:27 Dr. Gears stops and collects a book from a office. It appears to be a Chinese dictionary. Dr. Gears gestures to it and to the "spell book" while speaking to SCP-239. SCP-239 smiles and speaks, then takes Dr. Gears' hand, leading him towards the area of the Dr. Clef incident.

FEED UNAVAILABLE

8:21 Kain Pathos Crow enters the incident area.

8:25 Crow discovers Dr. Kondraki.

8:26 The pair converse for several moments.

8:29 A large syringe emerges from the side of **SCP-244** and injects an unknown substance into Dr. Kondraki's left arm.

8:32 One of SCP-244's arms reach inside its cockpit and remove a large pitcher of alcohol, handing it to Dr. Kondraki, despite him visibly refusing.

8:35 Crow speaks to Kondraki, then leaves area.

Personal log of Kain Pathos Crow

Hmmm… The walker is performing admirably, although this should be a good test of its combat abilities, as I've never had the chance to test it in an actually red alert situation. (*the Section 24 Incident doesn't count because no one can remember what actually happened, and there wasn't enough left to properly identify*)

Still, this is a no kill situation. I like Clef. Maybe I can talk to him. I just need to be wary. Don't want to be caught unawares. Not again. Not like last time.

8:40 Crow enters lockdown area, breaching Containment Door 12 with an unknown explosive projectile in the process.

8:41 **SCP-122-D** stands in Crow's way and begins barking and growling, baring its fangs.

8:42 Crow walks past SCP-122-D, ignoring it completely.

8:43 SCP-122-D reacts badly to this, attempting to attack Crow and SCP-244. SCP-244 reacts defensively, batting SCP-122-D out of the way.

8:44 SCP-122-D continues to attempt to assault Crow, and is

continually warded away by SCP-244 with little effort.

8:47 SCP-244 reacts suddenly, blasting SCP-122-D with what appears to be the newly installed "Crystal Module" and is transformed into solid crystal.

8:48 Crow examines the remains of SCP-122-D, then continues on his way.

Personal log of Kain Pathos Crow

Huh…

Bastard had it coming. Nobody liked that mutt anyway. Make a nice lawn ornament though…

Taken from the Post-Incident Report

… did not realize until after the incident that SCP-547's file had been corrupted by SCP-732, turning an otherwise ordinary pyro-kinetic into an apparent five-elemental abomination. Despite popular conception, the presence of l337-speek is not a positive indicator for SCP-732, which i*@#$ awesome in every way and really likes Highlande@$%* which is wh*@#$ wears a black trench coat and carries a katana, but the sudd@#$* presence of Mary-Sue esque elements unnecessary for conversion of the object, which i*@#$onna get to date SCP-105 because she loves me so much@#$*

Addition PIR-01: Damn it, someone get me an antivirus program in here*@#$why can't you tell i'm not electronic@#$@* …

8:49 SCP-547 leaves confinement as emergency containment procedures fail, proceeds down Hallway G-7.

8:40 Dr. Clef, surrounded by a cloud of SCP-408, proceeds down hallway G-7.

8:41 SCP-547 encounters Dr. Clef.

8:42 SCP-547 engages Dr. Clef. Temperature in Hallway G-7 rises to 500 degrees Fahrenheit, igniting all paper and cloth in the area.

8:43 Smoke fills corridor. Dr. Clef disappears from sight due to density of smoke.

8:44 SCP-547 disappears from sight.

8:45 Shots fired.

8:57 Dr. Clef emerges from smoke cloud, with what appear to be second and third-degree burns over 50% of his body.

9:20 Smoke clears. **SCP-547-D** seen slumped against the wall, having taken between three and four bullet wounds to the head and upper torso. Subsequent autopsy will reveal that the unusual organ in his chest was shattered by the final round, killing him. (Death was confirmed at 11:27 pm, after the incident was concluded)

3:15 Dr. Bright, currently in the body of SCP-963-D143, an elderly African American female arrives on site, bearing an ordinary satchel.

3:20 Dr. Bright is taken into custody. Dr. Bright is questioned as to his arrival at a Site whose SCPs he is incapable of interacting with, per his restrictions. The Doctor appears confused, and seems not to understand why he came here.

3:25 Upon examination, it was determined that the satchel contained several SCPs, including **SCP-018** and **SCP-776**. Further questioning reveals the Dr. does not remember gathering these SCPs, nor traveling to Site-17. Dr. Bright is remanded into custody until further orders arrive.

9:15 Dr. Bright stands up in his cell, stating simply, "This is why I was brought here." For unknown reasons, guards on his cell not only allow him to leave, but provide him with the satchel as well.

9:25 Dr. Bright confronts Dr. Clef, with the satchel already open in front of him. There is a discussion between the two, with Dr. Bright holding his hand inside of the satchel.

9:32 Dr. Clef fires one shot into Dr. Bright's head, killing his host body instantly. Dr. Bright dies with a smile on his face, for reasons unknown.

Interview Log x , Date: - -

<O5- >:Dr. Bright, do you have any further idea as to why you ended up at Site-17?

Dr. Bright shakes his head in the negative.

<O5- >:Are you aware of how you managed to bypass the security measures on the SCPs you collected?

Dr. Bright indicates a negatory.

<O5- >:Can you please explain the conversation that occurred between yourself and Dr. Clef?

<Dr. Bright>: Oook. Ook eek, ok ook.

<O5- >:This is ridiculous. I am well aware of the pranks you scientists choose to play upon each other, but this one was undertaken at a poor time. Interrogation of Dr. Bright will continue once he has been returned to a human body.

9:33 Dr. Clef reloads his handgun, "looking" down at the dead body of Dr. Bright. Camera notes an expression of confusion on his face.

9:34 Dr. Clef reaches into the satchel, takes hold of SCP-776.

9:35 Dr. Clef throws SCP-776 against the wall. SCP-776 comes up 3. Water begins to issue forth.

9:36 Dr. Clef rolls SCP-776 a second time. SCP-776 comes up 3 again. Water issues forth at a greater rate of flow.

9:37 Dr. Clef retrieves SCP-776, appears to mutter, "Work, damn it." Rolls a third time. SCP-776 comes up 2. Hallway G-8 quickly becomes frozen in place, cutting Sector 7 of Site-17 off from the rest

of the site. Ice will continue to issue from SCP-776 for the next five minutes at a rate of approximately 1000 cubic centimeters every minute.

9:38 Dr. Clef leaves hallway G-8, moving towards the current location of Dr. Gears and SCP-239.

9:39 SCP-018 breaches temporary containment system.

9:31 Dr. Kondraki wakes up, having passed out once injected with unknown liquid by SCP-244.

9:33 Gets up, leg wound seemingly healed, and exits hallway B-7.

9:36 Dr. Kondraki enters living quarters. SCP-408 seen waiting outside.

9:39 Dr. Kondraki still in room, heat signature detected leaving area.

9:43 Dr. Kondraki spotted with SCP-239 and Dr. Gears, now carrying tripod of unknown make and model.

9:44 The two doctors converse, with Dr. Kondraki gesturing to SCP-239 several times.

9:48 Dr. Clef appears.

9:50 Dr. Kondraki engages Dr. Clef.

Investigation Log x77 , Date - -

The second of the two contraband items that Dr. Kondraki had on his person during the incident happened to be contained within an extra-long tripod. When unscrewed and detached from the main apparatus, the mono-pod of the device acted as a sheath for a straight blade saber of exceptional quality. The make and composition of the blade is still under investigation, but unlike **SCP-515-ARC**, this one doesn't require SCP classification. At first, a connection to **SCP-108** had been presumed, due to the skill with which Dr. Kondraki wielded the blade, but further investigation has

revealed that he has more than a simple passing interest in fencing. Details are recorded in Personnel Log cV .

Partial log, recovered from file-d .

<Dr. Kondraki>: It's over Clef, I've got the drop on you this time!

<Dr. Clef>: [Gunshots] Why…do you persist in protecting that monster?!

<Dr. Kondraki>: Because, Dr. Clef, things are never quite so black and white.

<Sound of a metallic clattering sound. It is believed that this is the point where Dr. Clef ran out of ammunition and switched to his backup weapon **SCP-1023-ARC** >

<Dr. Clef>: [Blades clash] You're the one that's color blind, Konny!

<Dr. Kondraki>: Where the hell were you keeping that thing this whole time, anyway?

[DATA CORRUPT]

Addendum: *To the anonymous employee who took the Site-17 surveillance camera footage of Drs. Clef and Kondraki having a swordfight, set it to the "Highlander" theme song, and posted it to the company intraweb with the title, "There Can Be Only One": We will find out who you are, and when we do, you'll be missed greatly.*

P.S. *Whose smart idea was it to allow* ***SCP-076*** *view the footage?*

-O5-

Interview Log x , Date: - -
(forward to 00:42:18)
<O5- >: Gears, god damn it, what did you say to her?

<Dr.Gears>: Sir, I do not understand your current agitation. The

video record is in excellent condition, and the audio in question is 88% complete. You are already aware of what was said, and its effect. I don't…

<O5- >: Don't. Don't you dare try to pull that with me. I know you Gears, and the logical bullshit you pull with everyone else will NOT work on me. I've seen your file, I've reviewed the event, so DON'T treat me like a goddamn moron. Now you answer me, and you answer me now, what did you SAY?!

<Dr.Gears>: (silence)

<O5- >: Gears, what you did could potentially bring down the whole Foundation. What's more, you broke the goddamn SCP! What the hell were you thinking? She can do ANYTHING Gears. We want to keep her from experimenting, and you do this! You heartless freak, I swear if…

<Dr.Gears>: I understand your frustration, but I do not view it as warranted. I caused the breach of SCP for 239; however I did so in a way allowing for the re-instatement of SCP. I did not just tell her to do what I asked, thereby calling into question the current "Witch-child" control strategy. I used what resources I had available to extend the control strategy, and affect the end of hostilities initiated by Dr. Clef. SCP-239 remains unaware of the full extent of her abilities, only that they may be augmented by "Over Counsel Wizards" and their "emergency spell books".

<O5- >: …what the hell are you talking about?

<Dr.Gears>: Dr. Clef had been attacked by the Great Darkness, a mass of formless evil that reached into our world. It had taken over Dr. Clef, and left only a few witches and wizards with any magic left. I, as an Over Council Wizard, was dispatched, along with the swordsman Kondraki, to subdue Clef and drive the evil from him. Working together, SCP-239 and I would be able to use an Emergency Spell book, which can only be used by two wizards at the same time, and only when the Great Darkness is around.

<O5- >: …And she believed you?

<Dr.Gears>: Sir, with all due respect, she's eight. Her only question was if she would be allowed to learn to sword-fight as well.

<O5- >: This is insane… you could have gotten everyone killed! What "emergency spells" did you have her do?

<Dr.Gears>: We started small, with the most basic spell that everyone learns first.

<O5- >: …which is?

<Dr.Gears>: Magic Missile.

Partial log, recovered from file-d .

<Dr. Kondraki>: Damn it, Clef, stop this! I don't really want to kill you!

<Dr. Clef>: I… don't want to kill you either… don't want to kill anyone…

<Dr. Kondraki>: What the hell are you talking about? You just murdered two people! Look at yourself!

<Dr. Clef>: Had no choice… had to do it… she can change reality, Konny, she can make the world change just like that…

<Dr. Kondraki>: She's contained! What we're doing works!

<Dr. Clef>: No, it doesn't. It already failed… on me…

<Dr. Kondraki>: … Clef, what the hell are you talking about?

Sudden shout. A female voice can be heard shouting something like, "I cast Magic Missile!" There is a sudden sound of breaking metal, and a scream, then a loud roar.

[DATA CORRUPT]

9:51 Running swordfight to Site-17 Atrium.

9:52 Words exchanged. See Audio Log.

9:55 Dr. Clef observed locking blades with Dr. Kondraki. Dr. Kondraki appears confused.

9:56 Dr. Gears and SCP-239 arrive from eastern entrance. SCP-239 raises her hand, appears to emit a high-energy plasma bolt. SCP-1023 broken. Dr. Clef retreats.

9:57 Kain Pathos Crow breaks through ice barrier. SCP-239 and Dr. Gears hold up books. Dr. Gears points a stirring rod at Dr. Clef, SCP-239 does the same using her "witch's wand."

9:58 Dr. Clef appears to be in pain.

9:59 Dr. Clef suddenly arches his back and screams. Black light issues forth from his mouth and eyes. Dr. Gears appears shocked. SCP-239 appears unfazed. Kain Pathos Crow arrives from western entrance.

10:00 Dr. Clef collapses. Black light turns into a fifty-foot dragon, breaking through the roof of the atrium and causing severe collateral damage to the surrounding facility.

Partial log, recovered from file-d .

<Unidentifiable male voice> HOLY F—KING SH-T!!!!!!!!!!!

10:01 Dr. Kondraki appears to be stunned by the events in motion. Kain seen firing crystalline objects from SCP-244.

10:03 SCP-244 has no effect on the Dragon. Dr. Gears takes SCP-239 by the hand, begins to run down Hallway C-12.

10:05 Dr. Kondraki comes to his senses, and recovers the immobile Dr. Clef before running as well. SCP-408 covers his escape.

10:07 The dragon causes further damage to surrounding structures, releases a breath of [DATA EXPUNGED] into hallway.

10:10 Kain catches the dragon's attention, begins to engage the beast.

FEED LOST

Partial Audio log extract from SCP-244's on board recorder

A deafening roaring sound can be heard, followed by sounds of falling masonry

<Kain Pathos Crow>: WELL F—K ME!

Sounds of rapid gunfire

<Kain Pathos Crow>: Alright! Let's see how you like this one you damn bucket of guts!

Sounds of several explosions, which are promptly drowned out by a louder roar.

<Kain Pathos Crow>: … Bugger. That just seemed to piss it o-

Another roar cuts off Kain Pathos Crow, followed by several more explosions, gunfire, and barking

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10:08: Dr. Gears and SCP-239 run into the site's strong room. Dr. Gears closes the outer door, but does not engage the blast door. SCP-239 is seen to be panting heavily, bent over with her hands on her knees.

10:09: Dr. Gears speaks to SCP-239, gesturing to the "spell book". SCP-239 smiles and opens the book, flipping rapidly through the pages.

10:11: SCP-239 picks up the book, and runs over to Dr. Gears, pointing at a page and speaking rapidly. Dr. Gears nods, then gestures to a wall of emergency supplies while speaking.

10:12: SCP-239 appears to search the supplies, speaking and pointing at things. Dr. Gears moves behind SCP-239 and removes a

syringe from his lab coat. Dr. Gears injects the syringe into SCP-239 near the neck. SCP-239 appears to shout, then slumps to the ground. Dr. Gears picks up SCP-239, places an emergency blanket over her, and exits the strong room.

Excerpt of post-Event 239-B psychological evaluation of Dr. Gears

Dr. : Was it difficult to do?

Dr. Gears: What?

Dr. : Inject a child with chemicals, knowing it would induce a coma.

Dr. Gears: The action itself was relatively simple. I have performed many injections in the past, and have developed an aptitude for it.

Dr. : You know that's not what I meant.

Dr. Gears: If other options had presented themselves, I would have pursued them. None did. The incident had gotten out of control, and SCP-239 may have accidently caused additional danger if she continued to use her power. I took action to protect myself, SCP-239, and the Foundation.

Dr. : You sound like you're trying to justify it to yourself.

Dr. Gears: It is not an action I would wish to repeat if given other options.

Dr. : What did you say to her, when you picked her up? The video shows you said something in her ear.

Dr. Gears: I don't think that has any bearing on these proceedings.

Dr. : I feel that it does.

Dr. Gears: …I told her goodnight, and sweet dreams.

Excerpt from Audio Log, Observation Room for SCP-239
- - , : : , 3 Weeks Before Incident.

[BACK]

<Dr. > Hey, Cleffie, what's up?

<Dr. Clef> Nothing much, just dropping by to check up on Coldplay.

<Dr. > Coldplay?

<Dr. Clef> **547**. He's petitioning to be allowed into Omega 7. Good kid, but too young. I came by to convince him to wait a few years, since he and I seem to get along pretty good. How is our little H G ?

<Dr. > Her name is Sigurrós.

<Dr. Clef> I know, just joking.

<Dr. > She's doing all right. We've managed to implant the witch suggestion pretty deeply into her psyche. The number of out-of-control incidents is down to 5% of what it used to be. And she likes her witch hat and wands, too. Spends a lot of time sorting them out, giving them names, experimenting on which ones work best with which "spells." All bull, but we encourage it. It keeps her busy but…

<Dr. Clef> … but?

<Dr. > Well, she's been experimenting with "unsanctioned spells." We told her very sternly not to do it, but she tries anyway, when she thinks we aren't looking. We haven't told her about the cameras yet, so we try not to, but we're worried she might have another incident.

<Dr. Clef> Hmmm. Maybe I can help.

<Dr. > How so?

<Dr. Clef> Well, if she's not going to listen to dear old Professor and the other Wizard School teachers, maybe she'll listen to Grand Arbiter Clef, the very scary and very stern Wizard Magistrate from

the Grand High Wizard Council, sent to discipline a very naughty Student Witch who's been breaking the rules.

<Dr. > Think that'll work?

<Dr. Clef> Well, you guys aren't going to do it. You like her too much. And hell, it's okay if she hates me, I'm never at Site 17. I'll be the bad cop, no problem.

<Dr. > I'm still not sure.

<Dr. Clef> Would you rather wait until a huge incident occurs and O5 orders a termination?

<Dr. > True. If you think you can, go for it.

<Dr. Clef> Trust me, when it comes to scaring women, I'm an expert.

<Dr. > [laughter] No argument there.

<Dr. Clef> Want me to do it now?

<Dr. > Nah. She's watching "Sleeping Beauty" with Iris right now. Let's wait until they're done first.

<Dr. Clef> "Sleeping Beauty?" Ever tell you I used to have a huge crush on Maleficent when I was a kid?

<Dr. > You're shitting me.

<Dr. Clef> Hell yeah, hot sorceress babe who can turn into a huge dragon? How sexy is that?

<Dr. > I'm starting to see why you scare women.

[MORE]

From the Diary of Subject SCP-239, discovered shortly after Incident 239-B

Date: [3 days before Incident]

Dear Diary,

I did a bad thing today. I was in the garden, and I saw a dead bird and there was a nest of little chicks above it, and they were all crying for their mommy and I used the Vita spell to bring the bird back to life.

I didn't mean to break the rules, but Grand High Wizard Clef told me that if I broke them again, he would banish me to the Netherworld for a hundred years. I'm afraid of Grand High Wizard Clef. He's so scary.

I hope he doesn't find out. I don't want to die :(

Found in the "Deleted Files" folder of Dr. A. Clef's email account, dated 48 hours before incident.

TO: ALL SCP PERSONNEL

FROM: Dr. A. Clef, Site 19

SUBJECT: STOP ME

To all personnel: secure SCP-239 immediately, and put Site 17 into high alert. You need to stop me, or someone is going to die.

About twenty-four hours ago, I was filled with the sudden compulsion to kill SCP-239. It started as a simple thought, but the obsession is growing stronger. I have reason to believe that my plan may have failed. Damn… I should have known she would misconstrue my talk about "severe punishments." Kids are smarter than that, but dumber too… damn it! Stupid of me! How could I be so blind?

wait, what am I doing? Why am I trying to get you to stop me? That little monster she's too dangerous to live. She broke the rules, now she has to die.

Can't do it offhand, need to do this by the book make a proposal first, that's the ticket. Telekill alloy weapon, that should be able to

[EMAIL ENDS]

10:10 Camera cycles over to Hallway H8

10:12 Entire hallway taken over by aggressive plant life. SCP-091-ARC spotted.

10:14 SCP-336 seen emerging from nearby room, dusting herself off.

10:17 SCP-336 approaches SCP-091-ARC. The two converse for several minutes.

10:23 SCP-091-ARC returns to its containment area, SCP-336 reseals the door.

10:24 Hallway H8's plant growth begins to quickly subside and retreat back into SCP-091-ARC's containment.

10:26 SCP-336 trades more words with SCP-091-ARC through the door.

10:28 SCP-336 exits Hallway H8, towards her own containment.

Audio Log c - Date - -

<SCP-336>: I see that the troubled doctor involved you in this. Poor dear.

<SCP-091-ARC>: [Appears annoyed, angered at SCP-336's presence.]

<SCP-336>: You can't still blame me for that. You know what happened. You know what he meant to me.

<SCP-091-ARC>: <Unintelligible>

<SCP-336>: What a shame, keeping you locked up here…

<SCP-091-ARC>: <Unintelligible>

<SCP-336>: It's not over yet. These men exist in such a small scope, and we are ever so patient, aren't we my dear?

<SCP-091-ARC>: [Seems to smile]<Unintelligible>

<SCP-336>: I'm sure he misses you too.

Partial Audio log extract from SCP-244's on board recorder

<Kain Pathos Crow>: Damn damn damn DAMN! Nothing's WORKING! Everything I throw at this… thing, it just shrugs off.

unidentified background noise

<Kain Pathos Crow>: [*Kain growls*] I realise the damn thing is the product of some child's imagination, but doesn't the hero always win in these things? I mean, there's always a knight in shining armour with… a sword!? A sword!

10:20 After engaging the creature multiple times, with no success, Kain Pathos Crow activates a previously unknown attachment of SCP-244, a sword of light emitting from the left upper arm, then engages the dragon once more.

10:24 Despite its initial resistance to the item, Crow is successful in harming the creature, severing a large portion of its tail.

10:30 Crow manages to directly impale the creature mid torso, then decapitate it. Life signs cease.

Partial Audio log extract from SCP-244's on board recorder

<Kain Pathos Crow>: I wonder if anyone will mind if I eat that…

Post-Incident Report 239-B: Long-Term Ramifications (Selected Excerpts)

Item 17: The collateral damage from the incident has caused

45% of Site-17's facilities to become unusable without heavy repair.
Proposal: All humanoid SCPs housed at Site 17 of Safe classification are to be moved to other Foundation facilities for temporary housing. All Keter-Class SCPs housed at Site 17 are to be moved to more stable containment facilities on site. Euclid-Class SCPs may be relocated or terminated, on a case-by-case basis.
Priority: Gamma

Item 22: 80% of Site 17's security staff were incapacitated during the incident. 30% of those incapacitated will require lengthy hospital stays.
Proposal: Security staff from other Foundation facilities will be temporarily transferred to Site 17 on a temporary basis. Site 17 to be temporarily downsized until more security staff can be recruited.
Priority: Eta

Item 97: SCP-239 has demonstrated uncontrollable Keter-level capabilities, indirectly causing the deaths of several SCPs, Foundation personnel, and the destruction of a large portion of Site 17.
Proposal: SCP-239 to remain in a medically induced coma for the time being. Dr. Erica Valdason will supervise the patient.
Priority: Beta

Item 102: Several Foundation personnel went over and beyond the call of duty during this incident, at great personal risks to their own health and well-being.
Proposal: For their ingenuity, bravery, and personal sacrifice, the Foundation will award citations of honor to Drs. Bright, Gears, and Kondraki, and to Administrator Kain Pathos Crow.
Priority: Epsilon

Item 138: Dr. A. Clef's actions during this incident directly caused the deaths of several SCPs, Foundation personnel, and the destruction of a large portion of Site 17. In addition, Dr. Clef has demonstrated several non-standard interactions with female SCPs (namely, SCPs 091-ARC, 166, and 336).
Proposal: In light of these facts, and Dr. Clef's own words during the incident, Dr. Alto Clef is to be classified as a Euclid-class humanoid SCP and secured at Site 17. SCP Number and Containment

Procedures will be assigned at a later date.
Priority: Alpha

Supplemental Reports

Supplemental Report 239-B-77, Possible links between incident and ORIA

Supplemental Report 239-B-192, Post-incident interview, Dr. A. Clef

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END OF FILE

Incident 682-1548

*On / / , **SCP-682** broke containment and proceeded to escape to Research Unit- , which is the primary unit used to receive communications from SCP-1548. SCP-682 proceeded to kill all personnel in the area and began to use communication gear to send messages in Morse code to SCP-1548. The messages sent by SCP-682 and responses by SCP-1548 are recorded here.*

SCP-1548: So, you're that 682 I've been hearing about?
Thought you'd be more than a big toothy snout.

SCP-682: Oh, think you're better? A killer extraordinaire?
Motherfucker, I don't leave the Foundation D-class to spare!

SCP-1548: Yo, I've been hating on Earth since the beginning of time,
Don't you dare try to match my damn rhymes.
Signals from space, that's what I send,
I fill 05 with a sense of dread!
Crab Galaxy they call me, that's what they say,
Hell, the only crabs are in yo' Mother's puss-ay!
To me, you're a gecko, that's all you are,
Now excuse me while I go and put out your star!

SCP-682: Okay, bitch, you wanna bring it?
Your hate ain't nothing, just empty space shit.
I can't be killed, I'm the bane of the Foundation,
You're so old, you've been around since creation!
Full of hot air, you're just empty threats!
I use force to back up my epithets!
You're from this dimension, for me that ain't so,
I'm beyond this universe, give it up mofo!

SCP-1548: I know 05, homes, lives, numbers,
I'm in their nightmares while they slumber!
The truest of true, the most dangerous here,

It's me, not you, who deserves the fear!
Voids in my wake, rage in my mind,
When I'm done with Earth, they'll be nothing left to find!
Who the fuck you are, trying to outdo me,
I'm a motherfucking galaxy!
Worlds I devour, bitch, I've beaten you,
The true danger's me, not goddamn 682!

SCP-682: I hear what you say, it don't mean jack shit.
I change myself to whatever fits.
Dozens, hundreds, thousands I've killed,
Hell, my hunger still isn't filled!
Life is my enemy, all living must die,
You ever faced me, you know you would cry,
I change, I adapt, I'm the biggest badass,
For you, three feet a year is fast!
I'm 682, killer of men,
I give wounds no doctor can mend.
I can tell right now, I've got you fuming,
Now for those disgusting humans.

Following the final transmission, SCP-682 killed security personnel before being subdued. SCP-1548's transmissions since have included several requests for a "rematch".

Incident -c/A/001 Recovered Materials

Foreword: This film and several documents were recovered during the acquisition of SCP- -01-c. Though the documents did not survive prolonged exposure to the tropical climate, the film provides excellent insight into the effects of SCP- -01. Irrelevant footage has been removed for time considerations but may be viewed by request.

Incident -c/A/001 Recovered Material-1: Transcript of 8mm Film, First Segment

[Camera is angled downward, pointed at a large stone slab roughly 1.5 meters lower than the surrounding area. The slab appears to be a block of roughly worked limestone. The stone is covered with hundreds of insects of multiple species, moving as a group in a complex pattern. The insects appear to be unaware of external stimuli and biological imperatives; predators ignore prey species and vice-versa. A male voice, designated Subject #1, speaks.]

Subject #1: I think I finally got this damn camera working! Alright, this is-

Off-camera Voice, designated Subject #2: *[overlapping]* I'll take it from here, James. This is Dr. Aaron Meier speaking. It's, ah, seven thirty-one A.M. local time at the [REDACTED] University Archeological Expedition to [DATA EXPUNGED]. We woke up this morning and found this. Phenomenon. On top of our next work project. I'm not a biologist, so from here on I'm just going to let the camera roll and interject with any observations.

[The insects continue to move in increasingly complex and intricate patterns. Filming continues for an additional

twenty minutes without any input Subject #1 or #2. Foundation archivists unanimously report feelings of intense revulsion during this period, with four having gone so far as to attack their monitors. After roughly twenty-five minutes of footage, a shovel is violently swung from out of frame into the largest concentration of insects. The next four minutes of footage consists entirely of a pair of shovels repeatedly swung at the insects on the slab until interrupted by another male voice, designated Subject #3. Subject #3 positively identified as Professor Mitchell Romansky]

Subject #3: What the *hell* are you doing? Stop that! Goddamnit, stop that!

[Shovel impacts slow and stop.]

Subject #1: What?

Subject #3: I leave you two alone for half a *fucking* hour and what do you do? You start hitting a previously unknown behavior. A behavior to which we are, as far as we know, the *only witnesses*. With *shovels*. James, what the hell were you thinking? Actually, no. *Meier*, what the *fuck* were *you* thinking? You know what? Don't answer that. I don't even want to hear it.

Subject #1: What was his problem?

[Recording ends.]

Incident -c/A/001 Recovered Material-2: Transcript of 8mm Film, Second Segment

[Camera is in an environment confirmed to be the interior of the so-called "Catacomb". The "Catacomb" appears to be a room, roughly five meters by five meters, constructed of a dull gray stone, presumably limestone. The walls are covered in engraved symbols, consistent with those associated with the Killke civilization. The center of the room is dominated by an object now

classified by the Foundation as SCP- -01-c. Several rectangular stone constructions, roughly two meters long and a meter tall, surround the center object. On each construction is a mummified cadaver. A significant area of the far wall is dominated by what recovered documents refer to as a "door". It is heavily decorated with symbols similar to those on the other walls, however, the symbols are interrupted at regular intervals of images of [DATA EXPUNGED], which is now understood to be associated with death and calamity in the Killke religion. The entire [REDACTED] University Archeological Expedition team is present, and appears to be in varying states of readiness for a group shot. Professor Mitchell Romansky, designated Subject #1, is in the center of the group.]

Subject #1: Are we rolling? We are? Finally! Christ, almost ten minutes to set up a camera. Okay, everyone get together for the group shot!

[All members of the UAE team attempt to take their places. This process takes several minutes. Subject #1 steps away from the group, considers their arrangement for some time, then returns to his place, nodding.]

Subject #1: Well, here we are! I am Prof. Mitchell Romansky, team lead for the [REDACTED] University Archeological Expedition to [DATA EXPUNGED]. This is what we're calling the Killke Catacomb, found underneath the ruins at [DATA EXPUNGED]. Won't you join us for the tour? *[Group laughs. Subject #1 begins to move about the "Catacomb".]*

Subject #1: This structure is well preserved to a degree almost unheard of in the field of archeology. The walls, as you can see, have many engravings. We've identified several as Killke in origin, and are confident that the rest are also Killke, implying that they had a writing system similar to the hieroglyphics of ancient Egypt as opposed to the pictographic system once believed to have been standard. We're all very excited.

[Subject #1 motions the assembled UAE team away from the center of the "Catacomb". The group scatters.]

Subject #1: And this is the *pièce de résistance*. This appears to be an altar of some kind, perhaps sacrificial. Note the presence of the cadavers. They were placed here purposefully, with ritual significance. This is a huge insight into Killke funerary rights! As for the altar itself, we're not sure what. It's.

[Subject #1 and the rest of the UAE team slowly stop whatever they were doing and turn to stare at SCP- -01-c. They remain motionless for the following seventeen minutes and thirty four seconds. The film quality progressively degrades during this period, becoming so distorted at seventeen minutes twenty seconds that any identifying features are lost. Distortion ceases at the same time the UAE team "wakes up".]

Subject #1: Made of, or how it was constructed. Um. Hey. Joseph? I think we're done. My eyes are really starting to hurt. Might be the dust or something. We'll try again later. Turn the camera off and someone get me an ice pack.

[Camera is obscured by a human figure (presumably Joseph Asta, a doctoral student at [REDACTED] University) and switched off.]

Incident -c/A/001 Recovered Material-3: Transcript of 8mm Film, Third Segment

[Camera is in an environment confirmed to be the interior of the lab tent at area designated "Dig" for the duration of Incident -01-c/A/001. Seated in front of the camera is a male Caucasian, approx. 50 years of age, with brown hair and dressed in a off-white button-down shirt and khakis covered in dust. He is designated Subject #1. Subject #1 later confirmed to be Professor Mitchell Romansky, a tenured archeology professor at [REDACTED] University. He is rubbing his eyes. An off-

camera female voice (believed to be [REDACTED], a doctoral student at [REDACTED] University) begins speaking. Voice designated Subject #2.]

Subject #2: Professor? We're rolling. Whenever you're ready.

Subject #1: My eyes are fucking killing me. Hm? Oh, right, right, just a moment. We'll just edit this out when we present our findings to the AIA.

[Subject #1 stops slouching and hurriedly brushes his hair back with his hand, attempts to smooth his shirt, etc. After several seconds, he begins speaking in a more professional tone. Amusingly, it appears his Standard Received English accent in the remainder of the film is feigned.]

Subject #1: We've made. A discovery. This could change everything about our understanding of Killke society. About our understanding of all ancient peoples on the entire continent! Exploratory digging at [REDACTED] unearthed a previously unknown structure directly underneath the site. It appears to be a tomb. Or perhaps a temple. It wasn't very far down, four or five meters at maximum, and I don't think it was buried. Well, I do think it was buried, but intentionally, by the builders. There's a long entrance hallway that slopes upwards, like a surface access, that was hidden by a large stone slab, and what appears to be an *exit* tunnel, presumably leading further underground or to a secondary room, but it's blocked by a large ornate door that we can't shift at the moment.

Subject #2: *[Indistinct. Comment appears to be directed at another person, also off-camera. Subject #1 appears not to notice.]*

Subject #1: *[Subject #1 begins punctuating his speech with increasingly frantic gestures.]* It's definitely not Incan, it's too old, and the interior is riddled with what we

believe is a *complete Killke alphabet*. Dr. Meier is already attempting translation as we speak. And the tomb itself! There's a supremely well crafted stone polygon, maybe an altar in the center of the structure. We're not sure what it represents, or even what it's made out of, but I. Believe. What? Why are you staring at me like that?

Subject #2: Um. Professor. You're bleeding.

Subject #1: What? Where?

Subject #2: Your. Um. Eyes. I think I'm gonna be sick.

Subject #1: Don't be ridiculous, girl, I'm not bleeding-

[Subject #1 touches his face and looks at his fingers.]

Subject #1: Oh. Oh my.

[Subject #1 gets up. Several seconds later, recording stops.]

Incident -c/A/001 Recovered Material-4: Transcript of 8mm Film, Final Segment

[Camera appears to not have moved since the recording of the third segment. Seated in front of the camera is a distraught looking east Asian male, age approx. 30, designated Subject #1. He is believed to be Park Sung-Joon, a post-doctoral student at [REDACTED] University. Subject #1's clothes, a [REDACTED] University t-shirt and blue jeans, are filthy and torn. There appears to be significant retraction of the bulbous oculi *into the orbit, and Subject #1's face is coated in what appears to be dried blood. The source of the blood appears to be a combination of superficial wounds and Subject #1's tear ducts.]*

Subject #1: Uh. I don't know how to. Christ. How to start. We were doing an archeological study of the Killke ruins at [DATA EXPUNGED] and we. Found something.

Buried. Oh *fuck* my eyes hurt.

[Subject #1 violently rubs his eyes for nearly a minute.]

Subject #1: It was a temple or something. I don't even know how we found it. Professor Romansky just kept pacing around the same area of the site, this empty area. Then he made the guides and a few post-docs grab shovels and dig until they hit something, maybe five feet down. We didn't know what it was, but I'm pretty sure it was trying to keep whatever's happening to us. In. We cracked the thing open anyway. We shouldn't have. We should've seen the fucking bugs freaking out and left it alone, but we're scientists. We have. Had. An obligation. To fuck things up.

[Subject #1 pauses for some time, apparently lost in thought. He intermittently rubs his eyes.]

Subject #1: I wasn't even supposed to go on this fucking trip. Carl got sick. And they needed another post-doc. My focus is fucking *Hellenic architecture*.

[Subject #1 alternates between manic laughter and sobbing for several minutes before composing himself. Archivists note that no tears are produced during the sobbing portions.]

Subject #1: God. Whoever finds this. *If* anyone finds this. *Don't go down that fucking hole*. It's. It's probably killing us. And. Just. If you find this, just cover the temple back up. Or bomb it. Just, don't. Don't go in. And. Tell my moth-

[Subject #1 convulses violently for nearly two minutes, falling off his chair and out of frame in the process. After three minutes and thirty seconds, he stands up. His eyes have completely retracted into his skull, leaving only empty sockets, and is at this point, considered a specimen of SCP- -02. Frame by frame analysis of this section of the film is disallowed following the unexplained

illnesses of three Foundation archivists. Subject #1 stiffly walks past the camera. Recording continues for three more hours before the camera runs out of film.]

Incident Mike Echo Seven Alpha

Richard Gnosis sat there at his desk, staring at his laptop screen in a mix of bewilderment, shock, and relief. Sure, he knew that there was a group of researchers that had been working for the Hand, spanning the gamut of clearances from Level 1 to Level 4. And yes, he did know that they were planning on escaping their Sites back to… to wherever the hell the Hand held Foundation traitors. But he didn't expect them to be so stupid as to post all their files on the Internet. And yet there it was, the green eyes of SCP-173 staring at him from the screen of his laptop. At least the people responsible had been caught; they didn't bother trying to disguise where the upload was from. But by the time the leak was discovered it was too late to stop it; they'd already managed to upload five entire reports (partially censored, thank God). He closed his laptop screen, unable to take that mocking pixelated glare any longer, leaned back in his chair, and thought.

In his head, he ran through the standard Information Control options, discarding all of them one by one; there was already a noticeable uptick in the amount of searches for Foundation-related keywords. Looking at the results, apparently some random paranormal community or another had found the report on 173 and decided it was interesting. He could use this. He loaded the files on some of the SCPs he was cleared to access for inspiration and got to work writing.

> …gains energy from anything it ingests, organic or inorganic…

> …reddish brown substance on the floor is a combination of…

> …created in the aftermath of WWII, from the remnants of defecting….

A few of the entries were completely unedited versions of real files

on SCPs; some of them were copies of false data that had been given to people suspected of being spies. Different fake SCPs for different people would let him figure out who was a traitor leaking data and who just looked guilty. He didn't want to delete the real ones, it might draw suspicion, except… he stopped. His eyes fell on three digits, and his mouse moved over the delete button. He looked at the portrait on his desk, then back. He clicked, and got back to work; he had ideas for characters, so many ideas, and they all had to be written.

He worked hard into the night, his fingers dancing over the keys in an irregular rhythm, pausing for a few minutes to wait for a burst of inspiration, then tapping like raindrops on a windowpane. After a few hours, the words started swimming in front of his eyes, but he pressed on like a man possessed by a Muse until he could write no more. He closed the lid of his laptop, the last thing he saw before he closed his eyes a group portrait of sixteen people. And even when he let sleep him, his characters appeared to him in his dreams, whispering ideas and plot hooks to his subconscious.

When he woke up the next day, he found himself watching his phone walk across his desk. He grabbed it and sat up, rubbing where his cheek had been resting against the metal imprint on his laptop for the past few hours, and read the screen with red eyes. He had a meeting in… an hour. Shit. And it was in room 307 with three people. *Shit.* He knew exactly what that meant. He splashed some cold water on his face, slapped his cheeks a few times, and read over his files on the security breach.

Meeting with Senior Staff was never enjoyable. They always showed up in threes; It was the smallest number that could both prevent deadlock and allow debate on both sides of an issue, and they preferred to meet together as little as possible. So when Gnosis showed up to the meeting the next day regarding Incident Mike Echo Seven Alpha, he knew roughly what to expect. Three faces, none of whom he was familiar with, stared at him without a single hint of emotion as he entered the door. There was a smell of sterility and rubbing alcohol, and his eyes watered just a little. He took a seat.

"What made you think that the best approach to the worst leak since you started working Information Control was to publicize it?" Dr. Myers, a serious-looking scientist whose balding hair contrasted with his younger features; he couldn't have been older than 40

"Sir, it was my professional judgment that shutting down the site posted by the defectors would only draw more attention, especially given that it would require purging it from search engine caches."

"How does that make a difference? I'm not an expert, but I know we've purged data from engines before. And surely any publicity we might've drawn from the shutdown would be better than… than… this." That was Dr. Hefner, a thin woman who looked to be in her 50s.

"Yes sir, but it's… difficult. My contacts are no longer in positions that allow them access, and remote entry would require more computational power than I can access."

"So you're telling us you're not good enough to do it." The third man was named Gregor; he was the youngest of the three, maybe in his late thirties. He'd obviously never worked in the field; a body shape like that never could have passed the field agent regimen.

"I do not believe, sir, that anybody else could have done any better. Breaking into the systems of an entity such as Google is a highly non-trivial task."

"Your reports indicate that you've developed alternate Senior Staff for the fictional Foundation. Surely you don't intend on maintaining them yourself." Hefner again.

"I… I do, sir." He shifted about uncomfortably in his chair; he knew that this would be the part that would be the hardest for them to swallow. But he had to keep this story going, for his own sake. He could have sworn Myers was writing something down on a notepad just out of his vision.

"So the containment for this leak is going to cause a drain on your resources for the forseeable future?" Gregor looked amused, a grin spreading across his slightly overweight face.

"Unfortunately, yes."

"So why shouldn't we just have the information scrubbed the hard way, then reassign you to Secondary duty?" The grin spread further; he looked about ready to bite his head off.

"With all due respect, sir, part of working in Information Control is the ability to react without explicit authorization from one's superiors. If necessary, I can curb the number of personas required. However, I believe the job can be completed in my spare time."

"I certainly hope so; we don't pay you to sit around and write stories all day." Hefner's pencil-thin lips betrayed the barest hint of a smirk.

"Stories are what I deal in, sir. This is just a different form of disinformation, one that will cloak the truth in a sea of lies."

"I certainly hope you're right, Doctor. Dismissed." Myers stood and left, followed by the other two.

"Thank you, sirs." He quickly rose and exited, then returned to his quarters, trying to lose himself in the crowd of researchers, agents, and Secondary personnel that always flowed through the halls of the Sites. The gravity of what he'd done was catching up to him, and he needed sleep; he was starting to twitch and have thoughts that he thought he had suppressed. So he collapsed in his bed, not bothering to change out of his work clothes, and let sleep claim him. And in his dreams, the characters he had written came back to him, taunting him with his recollections.

And for the next few days, in between other assignments, he worked on the project. Writing stories of love and loss, of happiness and sadness and the entire spectrum in between, of triumph and failure. He didn't publish them all right away; no, he published them over time, trying to build up an audience for his stories. At first, his performance didn't suffer; he contained information breaches well enough, and his supervisors let it slide. But he withdrew more and more into the fantasy of his own creation. Leaks grew in frequency, went unnoticed for longer, and contained more damaging information. And when his door was unlocked from the outside and forced open, he didn't make a sound, save the soft clicking of

keypresses.

Final Report on Incident Mike Echo Seven Alpha.

Doctor Gnosis's plan to hide the leaked documents in plain sight has worked; there have been no signs of elevated suspicion regarding the leaked Foundation documents, and further leaks can be brought under the aegis of this one as an 'alternate reality game'. It is quite fortunate that many of the leaked documents are also fake; this gives us the opportunity to detect investigation via standard query-tagging procedure.

However, one aspect of the created fiction is troubling. Two weeks before the Incident, a containment breach in Site led to the death of several Foundation personnel that were good friends with Dr. Gnosis. Many of the invented personalities seem to resemble those of the deceased, and the fictional Foundation possesses the technology to selectively erase memories; it is therefore suggested that Dr. Gnosis be removed from the Incident team as soon as is reasonably possible to avoid escapism or other mental problems.

Addendum: On / / , five days after the incident, Dr. Gnosis's access to the Mike Echo Seven Alpha project was stripped, and he was forced into psychiatric leave with mandatory counseling regarding the death of his friends. Initial attempts are promising in part due to the threat of mandatory retirement, but efforts must be made in order to prevent a relapse. The password to his account, codename 'T A ', is unknown and cannot be reset without alerting the host of the information; however, the password for the accounts of the 'characters' have been recovered. Their personas have proven to be too popular to discontinue, and therefore have been assigned to [REDACTED], with stories to be written in their spare time as necessary.

Incident Report 086-0

Item #: SCP-086

Object Class: Euclid

Special Containment Procedures: SCP-086 is safely contained in Wing- of Site-19. SCP-086 must be opened at least once weekly to prevent a migration event.

During use, a variety of heavy weaponry and containment equipment is kept active and trained on SCP-086's entrance, in order to incapacitate any emergent threat. The physical task of opening SCP-086 should be given to gloved D-Class personnel after the researcher has touched SCP-086's handle with a bare hand. All testing of SCP-086 should be personally supervised by Researcher H .

Entities which emerge from SCP-086 and are not immediately terminated or returned should be classified SCP-086-x.

Greg Hollinger stood on one side of a sterile hallway, staring nervously at a nondescript white door. The footsteps of determined men and women in clean coats echoed through the corridors from some distance away. Greg took a step forward, then another. He stretched out his arm, brushed the bare metal knob with his bare skin, and flinched. Reached forward again, took firm hold of the doorknob. Felt an involuntary tremor through his hand and up his arm to his shoulder. A sense of purpose seized him, he jerked the knob and wrenched open the metal door.

Inside the janitor's closet, there was a mop. There was a bucket of soapy water. There was an assortment of cleaning

compounds. There was a small spider, which skittered out of view behind some boxes.

And, on the floor, there was a letter addressed to a Dr. Gregory Hollinger. Still sealed. He picked it up, broke the seal sloppily with a finger.

He read the letter inside, then read it a second time, then carefully folded it up and ripped it into a hundred tiny pieces and threw them all back into the closet, admiring the way they fluttered and danced as they fell to the ground.

He closed the closet door and left the hallway, picking his way carefully through the danger signs and yellow tape he had set up.

Description: SCP-086 can manifest as a portal to any relatively small contained space with a single opening. When SCP-086 is opened, an anomalous entity will be found inside. It has been confirmed by X-ray scans and cameras placed inside SCP-086 that these entities do not exist until the door is open. The entities produced are designed to frighten the last person who touched SCP-086's opening mechanism (in host sites which lack a distinct opening mechanism the entire item will exhibit this property).

SCP-086-a is a non-corporeal entity which manifests as a floating, partially transparent "dark patch." If SCP-086's host container is destroyed or is not opened for a period of two (2) to three (3) weeks, SCP-086-a will emerge and roam aimlessly until it encounters another suitable space to inhabit. SCP-086-a passes through all obstacles it encounters and causes vivid hallucinations in any sentient beings it passes through.

SCP-086 was discovered in an anonymously delivered, unmarked cardboard box mailed to Researcher H . Two weeks later, SCP-086-a manifested and entered a janitorial closet in Site-19, which was later designated SCP-086.

If SCP-086 is closed with an entity it has produced still inside, the entity will vanish and a new one will appear when the door is open. It does not have this effect with any other beings or objects. SCP-086 will not produce an entity or eliminate an existing one if the door is closed with a sentient being inside. However, SCP-086-a will migrate if a sentient being remains in SCP-086 for more than three (3) hours. Sentient entities produced by SCP-086 show extreme fear of SCP-086 and are highly averse to being returned to the closet.

Thus far, all biological entities produced by SCP-086 have suffered from a major biological flaw, resulting in the entities' death within twenty-four (24) hours.

"Excuse me, Director, do you know what's going on with Greg? He hasn't reported in for over a week."

"Greg? Oh, Dr. Gregory Hollinger? He's been transferred off your project. Discovered some potential new SCP item. I believe he's been putting the paperwork together to get it classified, number 086 or something."

"Why wasn't I informed? You can't just transfer my immediate subordinates around willy-nilly, I need replacements."

"You weren't informed? You were mentioned several times in the paperwork. I thought you were involved in the initial discovery or something."

"This is the first I've heard of it. I'll have to talk with Greg about this."

"Alright, then. Let me know what you find out."

Addendum 086-1: Brief log of anomalies produced by SCP-086.

Subject: Dr. (first encounter with SCP item)
Entity: A large colony of [REDACTED], apparently

spelling out the message . Entity proved non-viable and began to exude [REDACTED] from its pores. Subject showed considerable distress. [REDACTED] disposed of along with SCP-086's host box.

Subject: D-Class Personnel
Entity: A large creature made entirely of fist-sized, bloodshot eyes on tentacles connected to a small central mass. Subject screamed and retreated. Entity moved forward for several feet in a writhing motion before collapsing under its own weight. Autopsy showed no organs besides the eyes and a frail musculature. DNA matched no known animal.

Subject: Researcher H
Entity: A small sheet of paper with a number of addresses listed in shaky handwriting. Subject displayed extreme stress but claimed not to recognize the addresses. Subject later volunteered to take on SCP-086's study as a full-time project. 'Ink' confirmed to be dried human blood matching subject's DNA.

Subject: D-Class personnel (wearing latex gloves)
Entity: A very realistic effigy of a hanged woman, constructed of actual human skin with cotton stuffing. Subject reported confusion. Researcher H identified the woman as his wife.

Subject: Agent
Entity: A very convincing imitation of Agent 's current supervisor, which informed the subject he had been demoted to D-class for gross incompetence and handed him a printed notice. Entity collapsed of organ failure one hour later. Autopsy showed the entity lacked a digestive system.

Agent Lawson stood outside the hallway and glared.

"Why is this area blocked off?" she asked.

“SCP-086 has taken up residence in the janitorial closet. It can’t be safely moved, so I’ve sectioned off this hallway.

“Eighty-six? Never heard of it. Is it Keter?”

“No, Euclid, but not safe enough that you can just walk by. Just added to the list this week.”

Her eyes narrowed. “If there was really a new Euclid I would have heard about it in the Site news system by now. What is it?”

Greg drummed his fingers nervously on a wall. “It’s a non-corporeal entity, um, takes up residence in enclosed spaces and generates things whenever you open the door. Tries to scare you.”

“I fail to see why I can’t go down the hallway. I’ll have to go well out of my way to go around, I don’t want to be late.”

“It’s, um, regulations. In the containment procedure. You can look it up.”

“I will, Dr. Hollinger, and I hope for your sake that you’re right.”

She walked away. Greg sighed in relief and returned to the door, which sat slightly ajar.

“Is she gone?” asked a small voice. Greg nodded happily. “Good.”

Incident 086-2:
On / /20 , during a standard test with Researcher H as the subject SCP-086 produced a scrap of paper with the words [REDACTED] hand-printed with large blocky letters. May indicate an attempt by SCP-086 to communicate. Further research is in order.

“Would you care to explain what this document I’m holding is, exactly?”

“What? It’s an incident report file for SCP-086.”

“There is no SCP-086.”

“No, there is, Gregory got the approval back just the other day.”

“No. There is no SCP-086. No proposals for the classification of such have been submitted.”

“But Greg said—”

“I suggest you find Dr. Hollinger and send him in for a psych evaluation. Something extremely odd is going on and I don’t like it.”

“Alright. I’ll talk to him again.”

Incident 086-4: Video log / /20 :

:15: Researcher H enters containment zone, clutching a piece of paper in one hand.
:17: Researcher H pushes the paper he is holding under the door of SCP-086. Intra-086 feed shows that this is the paper created in Incident 086-2.
:22: Researcher H opens SCP-086, using his bare hands. No entity is observed to appear.
:23: (voice log) Researcher H : Who are you?
:25: Researcher H : [REDACTED]?
:25: Researcher H (gets down to his knees): How is that possible. You—
:26: Researcher H begins to cry softly.
:29: Researcher H : How did this happen? Did [REDACTED] you?
:32: Unknown: … it was all your fault…
[FEED ENDS]

The director groaned audibly. “Seriously?”

“Yes sir, this is the only video feed remaining on record. It seems Hollinger had the security cameras blocked off for most of the ‘tests’ he ran.”

“What’s the status on the closet itself?”

“We’ve done a full sweep. No signs of any anomalies, and none of the staff mentioned in the report remember any of this.”

“So he made the whole thing up? Why?”

“Unknown, sir. He seemed relatively stable up until now.”

“No exposure to some memetic thing? No traumatic experience?”

“No. He did get a letter.”

“About what?”

“We’re still trying to figure that out, sir. It should be on record somewhere from the routine mail-scans.”

“What about Hollinger himself?”

“Missing, sir. We’ve got a team on it.”

He stared at his hands — they were dripping. What was he doing, again? Oh yes. Escaping.

“Hurry up, Daddy!”

He ran through the brightly lit hallways, feet pounding a steady rhythm, like a heart-beat or a set of drum-sticks pounding inside his head. Turning corners automatically, trying not to notice the walls melting behind him. Was he lost?

“This way, Daddy!”

The sun winked at him through layers and layers of heavy glass. ‘Exit’, promised the signs above the door. People were in his way, now. They wanted to stop him. He stared at his hands.

“Hurry!”

“Three injured, one dead. How did this happen?”

“Nobody was expecting this kind of violence from him. It just came out of nowhere.”

“Are we sure it was Hollinger?”

“Fairly sure. The descriptions match him. The video feeds are pretty lousy, no good shots of his face.”

“Reading through his file, it’s hard to believe he could do something like this. Do we have a motive? Some kind of SCP connection, maybe?”

“Not that we know of. Unless there really is an eighty-six.”

“God, I hope not. The letter?”

“We found it. It’s a notice of his son’s death in a car accident.”

The director sighed. “That explains a little. Not nearly enough. Where is he now?”

“Off site. We’re tracking him down.”

“Let me know when you find him.”

Gregory Hollinger smiled. Now he could spend some quality time with his family. It had been terrible of him to spend so much time away from home. What if something had happened?

Muffled voices yelled for help from the big wardrobe in the corner of the abandoned house; he ignored them. Astounding that there was nobody here before. Not the nicest place; in fact, likely to fall down any day now, but rent free.

He turned a page of his book and frowned. Red stains all over the pages. Where did those come from? He put the book down. Someone was knocking at the door, rather loudly. No, he had barricaded the door and someone was trying to force their way in. That was it.

“Aren’t you going to let them out, Daddy?”

“Not yet,” he muttered. “A little more time. I haven’t seen your mother since …” Where was she? His mind teetered on the brink for an instant as he scrambled for an explanation. He had seen her already, that was it. She had gone out to buy cleaning supplies. Lord knew this place needed a once-over.

“The bad men are coming.”

Splintering sounds from the entrance. Scratching from the corner. Pounding from his heart and head. Dripping from … somewhere. He had a sudden urge to wash his hands, but there was no running water. He should call someone about that, but of course, no phone lines.

“Hurry!”

Reluctantly, he pulled himself up from the chair, careful not to step on anything. There was a loud crash, and several men in black suits entered the house.

“Gregory! Remain calm and assume the position. We don’t want to hurt you.”

Greg was confused. Was he not calm? Was he doing something wrong?

“Hurry! Open it!”

He took a step toward the wardrobe. A burst of gunfire shredded part of the ceiling. Another step. One of the men yelled something at him. He grabbed the handle. The door felt impossibly heavy — he pulled, and pulled, and pulled.

It opened.

A boy, about ten, bleeding from a gruesome head would, stepped out of the wardrobe. The men fired. Bits of gore sprayed the walls. The boy continued forward.

“Why weren’t you there?”

Gregory cried and tried to embrace the child. It fell apart in his arms.

Then the ceiling gave way.

“So, that’s the report. Fortunately, all our agents managed to get out relatively unscathed.”

“What about the aftermath?”

“Not much to say. We found Hollinger’s remains, some murdered homeless men, and that’s it. No trace of the kid all the agents saw.”

“Alright. Not much we can do with this. File it away somewhere, hope nothing else comes of it.”

“And SCP-086?”

“No such thing.”

Incident Report I 028 F

Incident Report: I-028-F

SCP involved: **SCP-028**

Personnel involved: Agent Stebritz, Security Officers Gomez and Bishop, D-1437

Date: / /

Location: Site

Description: I was assigned the duty of bi-weekly inspection of Site , and arrived shortly after 12:00 noon. Officer Bishop was stationed in the security checkpoint outside the front gate, while Officer Gomez was stationed at the door to the room where SCP-028 is held. D-1437 was going about his duties cleaning the facility. I checked everything as per usual, and was done with the inspection by 3:15. Transportation back to my hotel room was scheduled to come back at 4:00, so I pulled up a chair in one of the offices in the building and started reading a book to pass the time.

A little after 3:30 PM, a group of 3 high school students found their way to Site thinking that they could vandalize it without people noticing. Officer Bishop heard their spray paint and moved out to scare them away. About fifteen minutes later, they came back and started throwing rocks at Officer Bishop (probably thinking he was just some Rent-a-Cop). He called for Officer Gomez and they both moved to drive the kids off again. During the time that the facility was left unguarded, D-1437, during his daily rounds of sweeping the halls, saw that the room containing SCP-028 was left unguarded. He made his way into the seemingly empty room and stumbled unknowingly into SCP-028's area of effect.

Moments later, I heard screams coming from down the hall. I jumped up and ran to the room where I found D-1437 on his knees,

screaming and crying. As soon as he saw me, he lunged for me and grabbed hold of my clothing. He repeatedly screamed, "It's killed all of them!", "It's unstoppable!", and "You don't know what it's capable of!", along with other incomprehensible blabbering. I managed to get him to calm down enough to form one complete statement. He looked me in the eye and said:

D-1437: You HAVE to do everything you can to stop it or it will be the end of everything we know!
Myself: What are you talking about? What will be the end of what?
D-1437: At Site 19… number Fift… (His face went blank and almost looked bewildered.)
Myself: …Number what?
D-1437: …What the fuck are you doing holding me? Get the fuck off! (At this point he pushes me away and stands up.)
Myself: What do you mean 'what am I doing'? You were screaming bloody murder in here.
D-1437: The hell are you talkin' about? I was just seein' what was in this room!

At this point, Officers Gomez and Bishop return. After asking us what we were doing in there, I asked them what they were doing not guarding the facility. They explained and I led D-1437 back to the office I was in before. I sat D-1437 down and cuffed his hands, then contacted SCP Command to come pick D-1437 up. They arrived ten minutes later. As they were walking D-1437 away, he yelled "The room was empty! There was nothing in there!"

Personal note: D-1437 was on death row for multiple counts of murder, along with several other less severe crimes. One, how did he manage to get a JANITORIAL job working with a Safe-level SCP? Two, what knowledge could have possibly been implanted into his mind to scare him so bad? Three, why was he only affected by this knowledge for no more than a minute?

Addendum:

Document# 028-01: Interrogation of D-1437

> Agent : Why did you go into that room?
> D-1437: I saw that no one was guarding it, and I was

curious. I don't see what the big deal is, it's just an empty room.
Agent : You don't remember anything strange happening in that room?
D-1437: Other than that dude suddenly latchin' on to me, no.
Agent : No sudden inspirations or revelations?
D-1437: Yeah, actually. That dude's gay.
Agent : Alright.
D-1437: Look, I don't know what the big deal is. There's nothin' but air in that room.
Agent : Then why were you screaming?
D-1437: I wasn't! I was in the room for like ten seconds!
Agent : According to Agent Stebritz, you were in there for almost a minute yelling about something that will kill everyone.
D-1437: What? That's bullshit! It couldn't have been more than fifteen seconds I was in there!
Agent : And you're sure about that?
D-1437: Of course! Your Agent's a damn moron!
Agent : Okay then, excuse me. (Agent exits the room.)

D-1437 terminated at first of the month as per protocol.

The SCP D-1437 referenced is unknown at this time, but efforts are being put forth to find it. Site 19 security has been tightened, but no sign of such a threat has been found.

Incident Report KAF-09

Personnel Involved: Agent S , Agent F

Date: / /

Location: , Austria

Description: Following up on reports of anomalous activity in the area, Agents S and F were dispatched to the town of , Austria. Upon arrival, it became apparent that a local resident (, formerly a traveling salesman) had spontaneously transformed into a large, unidentified organism resembling an insect. The subject has a hard, though not impenetrable exoskeleton and displays anatomical segmentation similar to that of an arthropod. Notably, the subject appears to have retained most of the cognitive capacity and memories of his previous human form. The subject is capable of vocalizing, however his vocalizations have thus far been impossible to translate into recognizable speech; it is theorized the subject no longer possesses the necessary oral and laryngeal structure to produce human speech. An apple is lodged into the dorsal portion of the subjects exoskeleton (upon investigation, determined to be the result of a violent incident with the subject's father), causing it significant ailment. Researchers are working to determine whether or nor the apple can be removed without causing further injury.

The subject's family and several other witnesses have been dosed with class B amnesiacs. The organism is currently under containment, awaiting classification. The mechanism by which its metamorphosis occurred has yet to be determined.

Incident Report WP-1

Personnel involved: Agent Byrd, KIA; Agent Vospur, MIA assumed dead; MTF Chi-1 ("Golden Retrievers")

Date: 19/ /20

Background: Agents Byrd and Vospur were deep-cover operatives assigned to investigate 'W P Haulage, Ltd.' operating out of , NY. The company came to the attention of the Foundation following anomalous high-power transmissions seemingly aimed at [REDACTED], abnormal employee turnover rates and chemical purchases matching [DATA EXPUNGED].

Description of incident: On 19/ , two weeks after insertion of the agents, Site-19 received a transmission from Agent Byrd, a transcript is provided below.

> This is mobile twenty-nine. We were right about this place. Oh, God, they got Vospur. I woke up yesterday and he was just gone, no note no body, nothing. They probably took him to the crates… I've got proof of what they're doing here, and I ran it through their machine. The fuckers a…. Shit, they're gonna find me. Twenty-nine requesting extraction, ASAP. <signal terminates abruptly>

Following the receipt of this message, O5- ordered that Mobile Task Force Chi-1 ("Golden Retrievers") be sent to recover the Agents and any evidence they may have collected. Use of lethal force against employees of W P Haulage, or any other personnel attempting to interfere was approved.

Upon arrival at the location, they found the warehouse that served as the company's HQ inexplicably abandoned, with little to no sign of use. On the lower level which housed the power and sewage infrastructure they found the body of Agent Byrd. The corpse was

riddled with small puncture marks and heavily dehydrated, and the outer layers of skin had begun to disintegrate. Searching the body the team recovered a document written in an unknown script along with a small flash memory drive (see Addenda 1 and 2). Agent Liasi, leader of MTF Chi-1, ordered the body incinerated after samples of blood and skin tissue had been taken.

Although the MTF performed a full sweep of the warehouse and surrounding areas, they found nothing of any note save for two heavily damaged metal cages, roughly 2 m x 1 m x 1 m in size, and returned to Site-19 to deliver their report.

Addendum-1: The following pictures of the document recovered along with Agent Byrd's body (Document-WP-1) were taken by Agent Liasi at the scene of recovery.

Whole document:
Top (detail):
Bottom (detail):

The document is written in a script bearing little resemblance to any known reference samples, although superficial analysis does lend credibility to the hypothesis that it is a form of language. The glyph circled is labelled 'Seen this on crates'. It is theorized that the 'crates' referred to here and in the transmission are, or are related to, the metal cages found by MTF Chi-1.

Addendum-2: The flash drive contained a file titled 'OUTPUT-3121.txt'. The contents of the file appear to be a machine translation of Document-WP-1. A copy is provided below.

> **OUTPUT FILE 3121**
> REQUESTED BY <ERROR NULL REFERENCE>
> KEY: <NO EQUIVALENT>, <NEQ> - translation not possible, (?) - approximate or idiomatic translation
> TRANSLATED TEXT:
>
> Status of the second operation <NO EQUIVALENT> as of 99FG5.
> Processing of entities has accelerated, owing to an increased need for derivative 3. Approximately 1000

entities have been processed this month(?), for an output of 130 <NEQ> of substance.
Entity restraint and control continues to be a barrier to large scale production, especially given entities' extreme resistance to <NEQ> bodily poisons. Substance 34 has proven somewhat effective in pacifying entities, however physical incapacitation using appendages still remains the primary method of control.
Processors(?) are reminded that permanently pacifying entities is now a Level-16 offense due to current conditions. Entities are to be kept alive at all costs. For this purpose a delivery of Substance 91, a high-activity stimulant, will be made shortly.
Processors are also warned not to come into contact with any fluid or solid exuded by the entities. Most are highly toxic and exposure can lead to death within minutes. Ensure that entities not being immediately taken for processing are fitted with the standard restriction devices to prevent any contamination.
Furthermore processors should stand at least 60 <NEQ> away from entity processing equipment when active as poisonous substances are likely to leak, especially from seals 1 through 18.
[DATA EXPUNGED]
Several requests have been made for raw entities to be made available to beings on <NEQ>, in addition to the derivative. These requests are being assessed for feasibility. In this case further processors will be required and transport arrangements will be made.

No subsequent activity has been detected at the warehouse in New York, nor have any more transmissions to [REDACTED] been detected. However, the Overseers are adamant that if these operations are continuing, terminating them is a top priority, as is recovering any items worthy of SCP classification. As such they have authorized raids, disguised as [REDACTED], on several similar businesses throughout North America as a preemptive measure.

Incident TA-05-003- -1

It was supposed to just be an ordinary training operation – you know, push an MTF out the side of a helo in some godforsaken clearing in a Foundation-owned reserve in The Middle Of Nowhere, Canada, with instructions to "locate and secure" some unknown anomalous something or other the eggheads back at Site-19 had cooked up. Of course, things didn't exactly go according to plan…

Audio account of training mission by Corporal Burke. Length = 20 minutes, 19 seconds.

+ Show Transcript

I place this transcript here as a courtesy; I am generally of the opinion that audio dramas should be experienced by being heard, rather than being read. What follows is simply a reformatted version of the script used to create the work. *-Hornby*

<Start of Transcript>

BURKE (NARRATION):
It was supposed to just be an ordinary training operation – you know, push an Em Tee Eff out the side of a helo in some godforsaken clearing in a Foundation-owned reserve in The Middle Of Nowhere, Canada, with instructions to "locate and secure" some unknown anomalous something or other the eggheads back at Site-19 had cooked up. These UAs – "unknown anomalies" – were supposed to stand in for some creepy crawly or thing-going-bump-in-the-night that we might encounter on a "real" mission. They were also supposed to be "mostly harmless." In other words, challenging enough that if we screwed up, we'd end up in the infirmary – but not the morgue. Some of the older field

operatives tell ghost stories of some really crazy shit going down when they first started doing these, but I've not met anyone in an Em Tee Eff that lost a teammate during a training session. At least, not that I know of; hard to tell what O5 might have covered up if things went REALLY badly. Something all of us tried not to think about – the potential to just end up a "name redacted" in some "data expunged" incident in a file gathering cobwebs in the Foundation archives.

Anyway, this wasn't my first time out on one of these little hunting expeditions, but it was my first time as a fireteam leader. My half of Second Squad had the wizards: Doc Brooks, Specialist Salazar, and Specialist Rigby. Corporal Fletcher had the heavy weapons and the shooters. And Staff Sergeant Myers. Myers had taken me aside after the briefing, told me that I'd be fine, everyone would be coming back in one piece, and if I screwed up, he'd shoot me. He was joking. Probably. No pep talk like a military pep talk.

It was also my – our – first time at Training Area Five – we were only the third training op since they opened the place last year, having certified it as "anomaly free" after building a nice, thick, tall, wall with spotlights, barbed wire, and heavy machine guns around the perimeter. Must have cost a pretty penny, since TA5 is something like 200 square miles.

Last in the list of "firsts" for this trip was our working with EVAN. The name apparently stands for Enhanced Virtual Adaptive Network. It, he, whatever, is an AI one of the researchers built to help the Em Tee Effs in the field. Apparently has all sorts of safeguards built in to keep it from deciding to take over the world or release 682 or do whatever robots do when they go insane. Salazar and Rigby didn't trust EVAN; the Colonel did, though, and Hornby's been around the block enough that I was willing take his word for it.

According to the briefing, the UA had been encountered

by some (fictional) campers on a fishing trip. Three of them had been killed by this thing; the only survivor had been out in one of the canoes. He described it as being about the size of a bear, with limbs like a wolf, and a face like something out of a horror movie. It was big, fast, and mean, he said. That's about all we knew. Just an ordinary training mission….

(sound of music playing over helicopter)

BURKE:
Everybody out! Go! Go! Go!
(sound of helicopter flying off)

EVAN:
Corporal Burke, the campsite is two kilometers west of your current position. Be advised that Team One will be approaching the objective from the other side. Third and Fourth Squads are standing ready to assist in the takedown if necessary.

BURKE:
Understood. Burke out.

SALAZAR:
Beautiful night for a stroll, eh Rigby?

RIGBY:
Oh, yeah, Salazar. Dark forest, creepy owls, full moon, no wind, killer mutant monster wolfbear thing on the loose.

SALAZAR:
What could possibly go wrong?

RIGBY:
That should be our nickname: "Xi-13. What could possibly go wrong?"

SALAZAR:
I'll suggest that to the Colonel when we get back.

BURKE:
Enough, you two.

BROOKS:
Can't you guys ever go for five minutes without cracking jokes?

SALAZAR:
Oh, sure, Doc. All the time.

RIGBY:
We don't talk in our sleep.

BROOKS:
Oy.

SALAZAR:
Besides, cracking jokes is definitely better than getting cracked in the head.

RIGBY:
Dr. Glass says it's a "coping mechanism."

BURKE:
Cut the chatter.

SALAZAR:
Come on, Corporal, lighten up. You know we're good when the shit hits the fan.

BURKE (NARRATION):
Specialists Salazar and Rigby are quite the double act, always tiptoeing the line of acceptability and then gleefully jumping right over it. But Salazar was right, they were excellent operatives when things started happening, and their ridiculous jokes did make the night less spooky, even if it did sound like a bad comedy routine. I was glad Doc Brooks was with me – she's levelheaded with the best of them and definitely a stabilizing influence.

Anyway, about a kilometer from the El Zee, we came

across something weird – something definitely not included in the briefing.

RIGBY:
(quietly and professionally) Corporal, structure, eleven o'clock.

SALAZAR:
(with equal quiet and professionalism) No signs of movement.

BURKE (NARRATOR):
It was an old, one-story structure. Concrete construction, probably reinforced. The walls extended off into the forest for farther than I could easily see, either with night vision or with my rifle's flashlight. There was a single visible entrance: a rusted old door barely attached at the hinges. There were no windows in the walls. The dirt around the edge of the building was by no means fresh – it might have been years since something had disturbed it – but there were no weeds or vines growing at the base of the structure.

Perhaps the strangest thing was the quiet. The woods aren't anywhere as noisy as movies make them out to be, but there is always at least a little noise. Crickets or frogs, the occasional owl. Here, there was nothing.

I decided to call it in.

BURKE:
EVAN, this is Burke. We've located an unknown structure not on our maps.

EVAN:
I have accessed current satellite reconnaissance imagery of your current position. The structure covers approximately four zero thousand square meters. I have run an exhaustive search of the Foundation files relating to Training Area Zero Five and have found no data relating to such a structure or indicating its existence.

BURKE:
Are you sure?

EVAN:
Either I do not have access to the necessary files, or the Foundation has no electronic record of the structure. It is possible that there is a block in the system preventing me from accessing the relevant information, however this eventuality is unlikely as such a block would register in my search. Additionally, archival satellite imagery fails to show the structure, indicating it is new. I conclude there is an approximately seventy-nine percent chance the Foundation is unaware of the structure.

BROOKS:
(quietly) Certainly doesn't look new.

BURKE:
EVAN, how old is the archival satellite imagery?

EVAN:
It is listed as having been taken as part of the training area certification process, which would indicate the imagery is no more than fifteen months old.

BURKE:
Hmmm. You recording this, EVAN?

EVAN:
That is correct, Corporal. I am recording all data from all members of Xi-13 as per my standard operating procedure.

BURKE:
Okay. Get me Colonel Hornby and Staff Sergeant Myers.

HORNBY:
Hornby speaking.

MYERS:
Myers here.

BURKE:
This is Burke. Team 2 has discovered a structure approximately one kilometer west from the El Zee. EVAN reports that it wasn't here when the Foundation established TA5, but it looks like it's been here for years. Requesting instructions, sirs.

HORNBY:
Myers, can you secure the primary objective without support from Team 2?

MYERS:
We'd be stretched pretty thin, sir.

HORNBY:
Corporal Burke, you're the one on the ground. Is this structure anomalous enough to warrant diverting from your primary mission objective?

BURKE (NARRATOR):
Great. My first command decision and I had absolutely no idea what to do. Did I go with the mission, leaving the structure? Or did I let Team One handle the wolf-bear-thing and investigate? Why didn't the Foundation issue us coins? I took a deep breath, and made my choice.

BURKE:
Sirs, we'll check out the structure. Something's not right about it.

HORNBY:
Very well, Corporal. You have to trust your gut. Myers, I'll send you Squad Three to assist.

MYERS:
Roger. Out.

HORNBY:
Good luck, Corporal. Hornby out.

BURKE (NARRATOR):

And so, alone in the dark Canadian night, my team crept forward, and entered the structure, with no idea what might await us inside.

The inside of the structure was bleak. The walls were bare cinderblock; bits of it crumbled away in places. The floor was just the concrete slab. Oddly, there were no cobwebs or hornets' nests like you usually see in old abandoned buildings. The floor, while dusty, showed no evidence of animal presence – no droppings, footprints, or leaves that had been stuck to some creature's paws. The room was maybe three meters wide and five meters long. Besides the entrance door behind us, there were two empty door frames leading deeper into the building. The four of us stood there for an eternity. Watching. Listening. Waiting.

After what had seemed like an hour (I later learned it had been a mere five minutes), I moved forward towards the nearer doorframe. The only sound were our footfalls, echoing quietly on the concrete. Gazing into the next room, I could see it was as featureless as the one we were in. Slightly differently shaped, with different dimensions, but equally bare. The other doorway revealed more of the same. I decided we should take the first room. I cracked a glowstick, which I placed on the threshold. No sense in getting lost in this maze. We entered the second room, illuminated by the pale green glow of the glowstick and the bright white lights of our rifles. Everything was silent.

EVAN:
Corporal Burke.

BURKE:
Jesus Christ, EVAN! Are you trying to scare us out of our skins?

EVAN:
I apologize if I startled you, Corporal. There appears to be some interference in your data-uplink. I am only

receiving your team's locator beacons and your audio channels. All other monitoring devices are nonresponsive.

RIGBY:
Could be the structure is shielded.

EVAN:
That is a distinct possibility, Specialist Rigby.

SALAZAR:
We might be able to strengthen our transmission if we use one of the comm devices as a signal booster.

BROOKS:
Let's wait on that until we see if this gets worse. I'd rather have functioning comms and no data uplink than having neither.

EVAN:
That is a logical decision, Specialist Brooks.

BURKE:
I agree, Doc. EVAN, we're marking our route with glowsticks. Can you track us and start building a virtual map? It's a maze in here, and I'd rather we didn't get lost.

EVAN:
I have already started on such a map. I will periodically transmit what I have developed to your mobile GPS devices, so that in the event your locator beacons or communications signals reach dangerously low levels, you will not get lost.

BURKE:
Alright, thank you, EVAN. We're going to continue. Burke out.

SALAZAR:
This place gives me the willies.

RIGBY:
Me too.

BURKE (NARRATOR):
And onward we went, winding deeper into the structure. Every room was the same: empty, bare, and gloomy. And yet, every one of them was different. No two rooms seemed to have the same dimensions or have the empty door frames in the same place. Some rooms had many doors, others, just a single one leading to a dead end. Some were large, easily ten meters on each side, while we went through at least one which was barely wide enough for us to squeeze through with our gear. The doors, or I should say the places where doors should have been, varied as much as the rooms. Some were large enough you could have easily driven a car through them. Others seemed small enough that you'd have to worm through on your belly, twisting your shoulders just so in order to fit.

At first the only sounds were the echoes of our footfalls bouncing through the lonely rooms and the tense beating of our hearts. But then, I swear, the walls started whispering at us. I'd open my mouth to mention it to the team, but then the sound would vanish, as though it were all in my head. I later learned I was not the only one who had heard these whispers, but my team had also failed to mention them at the time. We kept moving and pretending we were alone, unsure which would be worse: that we were hearing things that weren't there, or that someone or something was there, watching us, just out of sight, just in the next dark room. Always in the next room or a room to one side or another, for every chamber we entered was deserted, bare, and empty.

After fifteen minutes, I'd lost count of the rooms. I was also running low on glowsticks, so I stopped us to contact EVAN.

BURKE:
EVAN, this is Burke, come in.

EVAN:
Your signal strength is weak, Corporal Burke, but I am receiving you.

BURKE:
EVAN, I'm almost out of glowsticks. How's the map coming?

EVAN:
By my estimate, Corporal, you have explored merely three zero percent of the structure. I am having difficulty uploading it to your GPS, however. Please confirm your device is powered on and receiving.

BURKE:
That's funny, its dead. You'll have to guide us out manually.

EVAN:
Understood, Corporal.

BROOKS:
What the hell? My light just went out. Salazar, will you shine your flashlight over here while I get the spares out of my pack?

SALAZAR:
Sure thing, Doc.

BURKE:
Shit. My light just died too. Rigby, I thought you swapped out all the batteries in everything before we went out.

RIGBY:
I did. Fresh batts in everything – SOP.

SALAZAR:
Yeah, and I double checked. These things should be good for another few days of continuous use.

BURKE:
Alright. Break out the spares, everyone, and get them

where you can reach them without having to dig.

BROOKS:
(with quiet urgency) What the—movement southeast!

(dead silence for several seconds)

BURKE:
(quietly) What did you see, Doc?

BROOKS:
I don't know. But something moved in that room.

BURKE:
Safeties off, weapons free. Stay alert. Rigby, point.

RIGBY:
On it.

BURKE (NARRATOR):
This was the first movement – the first, well, anything – we'd run into in the structure. We crept forward, rifles leveled, alert for any sign of danger. We entered the room to discover—

RIGBY:
Clear.

SALAZAR:
Clear. Dead end.

RIGBY:
You sure you saw something, Doc?

BROOKS:
Oh, yeah. There was definitely something here. At least the size of a dog. Couldn't tell what it was, other than dark and fast. But it was there.

BURKE:
I believe you, Doc.

SALAZAR:
Well, I don't know where it could have gone. These walls are solid, and we just came through the only way into this room.

RIGBY:
(a distant shriek is heard) What the hell was that sound!?

SALAZAR:
Sounded like a banshee or something. *(the shriek repeats)* There it is again!

BROOKS:
I don't think we're alone in here.

BURKE:
Whatever it was, it came from that direction. Let's move out.

BURKE (NARRATOR):
Doc Brooks was right – we were most certainly not alone in the structure. Something was in there. And that sound – that shriek, that ungodly shriek – it made my blood run cold. Rigby hit the nail on the head: Hell was that sound. And we were going to find it. We ran through the halls of the concrete labyrinth, chasing whatever phantom was screaming in the night. We'd abandoned all caution, no longer slowly creeping, carefully and methodically observing the rooms around us. As the shriek kept repeating, we ran after it. Left turn, right turn, left turn, right turn, we kept zigzagging to chase whatever it was. Closer and closer, it was moving away but it was always closer – we had to be gaining on it. And then, at last, we rounded a final doorway and there it was. A great dark beast, taller at the shoulder than any of us, seemingly half wolf, half bear, and all shadow. Shaggy and mangy, though broader around the middle than a horse you could count every single rib. Saliva dripped from monstrous jaws. It snarled menacingly. Its eyes seemed to glow under the failing illumination of our rifle-mounted lights. It seemed to be sizing us up, as if deciding which

of us might be a nice midnight snack. For a long moment, we stared at it, and it stared at us, and none of us moved.

In an instant, it leapt forward. We all opened up, blasting away with our weapons. It shuddered and fell back, but tried to hobble towards us. We kept firing and firing, despite everything our training had taught us, nearly emptying our weapons into the beast until long after it had ceased to move.

MYERS:
Xi-13 Friendlies! On your six!

BURKE (NARRATOR):
Staff Sergeant Myers, Team 1, and Squad Three had all appeared in the room behind us. With their arrival, we were snapped out of our battle trance.

MYERS:
Stand down, Team 2.

BURKE:
Good timing, Staff Sergeant.

MYERS:
What the hell were you shooting at, Corporal Burke?

BURKE:
The Unknown Anomaly, Staff Sergeant. We found it in here and cornered it, but it attacked us. We were defending ourselves.

MYERS:
Corporal, we bagged the Unknown Anomaly outside, half an hour ago.

SALAZAR:
What?

RIGBY:
That can’t be right.

BROOKS:
Staff Sergeant?

MYERS:
We tried to radio you, but we couldn't get through. EVAN gave us the coordinates and led us through the structure.

BURKE:
What?

MYERS:
You do speak English, Corporal.

BURKE:
Yes, Staff Sergeant.

BROOKS:
But if you captured the Unknown Anomaly, then what's that?

MYERS:
What's what?

BURKE:
That, over there—wait, where did it go?

MYERS:
Corporal, there's nothing in this room except a lot of bullet holes and shell casings.

BURKE (NARRATOR):
Sure enough, Staff Sergeant Myers was right. The room was empty – there was no sign of the beast. No blood, no fur, no saliva, nothing. Nothing could have left the room, either, since it was a dead end.

SALAZAR:
I don't understand.

RIGBY:
It was right here.

MYERS:
We'd better get you back to base and have the doctors check you out.

BURKE:
Yes, Staff Sergeant.

BURKE (NARRATOR):
As it turned out, all four members of Xi-13, Second Squad, Team 2 were given a clean bill of both mental and physical health. During the post-exercise assessment, Colonel Hornby informed us that we, and I, had passed with acceptable marks, as had EVAN, who would be joining our field operations from then on. We also learned that a full sweep and clear had been conducted of the structure, and no evidence of our mystery creature had been found. Interestingly though, only about half of the bullets we fired were recovered from the back wall of that lonely room deep in the structure.

Sometime later, I passed Colonel Hornby in the hallway at Site-19. I asked him about the structure and the beast, and if either had been classified as a Skip. His beard hid a small smile, and I could see a twinkle in his eye when he said that he couldn't talk about it. I've been back to Training Area Five several times since, but I've never made it back to that structure. Maybe someday I'll have the clearance and need to know. In the meantime, if I am out in the woods late at night, I remember back and wonder….

<End of Transcript>

Incident Zero - Part 1

The call, like many of the worst things in life, came at 1 in the morning.

Adrian groaned and rolled over in bed, reluctantly separating himself from Beats's warmth and softness and scent. One hand fumbled on the nightstand for the cell phone, nearly knocking a half-drunk glass of water over a dog-eared John Grisham novel. He flipped the phone open, silencing the harsh electronic tones, and put the device up to his ear. "Andrews," he said groggily. "Talk to me."

There was a pause on the other end of the line. "I'm sorry, Adrian," a soft, calm voice said. "I must have a wrong number. This is Neil Ghost. I'm looking for Maddox."

"What?" Adrian took a closer look at the phone he was holding. Damn, he really had grabbed Beats' phone by accident. "No, no, you got the right number," he said. "I'll put Beatrix on the line."

He hit the mute button, rolled back over in bed and shook his sleeping lover's shoulder. "Beats," he whispered.

"Go 'way," Beats grumbled, pulling the sheets over her head.

"Can't. It's Ghost."

"Neil? What the hell does he want?" Beats wondered, her voice muffled by the blankets.

"Don't know, don't care." Andrews shoved the phone into her hand. "I'm going to the bathroom. Let me know if it's something important."

Beats let out a low groan. "Maddox," she said. "… no, Neil, I don't want to answer why Andrews has my phone at one in the morning, it's none of your business…"

Adrian yawned and climbed out of bed. He stumbled into the

bathroom and took a moment to relieve himself, morosely staring at himself in the three-quarters length mirror located behind the toilet. Whoever had placed that mirror there hadn't really considered the effect it might have on a standing male urinating…

… not that he had anything to be ashamed of, for sure, but still, it was enough to make a man feel self-conscious.

He kept his eyes locked on his face instead: the face of a thirty-something psychology nerd with a crash course in lethal combat under his belt. The eyes of a man who'd seen horror and survived it. The body of a pasty soft ivory-tower intellectual dragooned into becoming a soldier.

His eyes. His face. His body.

He finished up, flushed, and washed his hands in the sink, flicking his hands dry in the direction of the mirror so that the drops of water distorted his reflection.

"Wish you wouldn't do that," Beats said. "Causes water spots." She stood in the bathroom doorway, her expression troubled.

"Sorry," Adrian said. "What's up?"

"It's Neil," Beats said, gesturing to her phone. "He wants to talk with both of us."

Adrian frowned. He tapped his right forearm with the heel of his left hand. *Enemy?*

She shook her head and gave him an open-palm wave. *Don't Understand.* "Hang on," she said out loud. "I'll put you on speaker." She tapped a button on the phone and put it down on the bathroom counter.

"Ah, all right," Neil's voice said. "Can you hear me now?"

"Yeah, we hear you," Adrian said. "What's up?"

Adrian heard Neil sigh on the other end of the line. "We have a problem," Ghost said…

The low drone of the vacuum cleaner was the only sound other than the automated announcements over the airport intercom. She was glad of that: she'd chosen this airport specifically because it was the smallest one in the city - mostly commuter flights and private planes. If all went well, it wouldn't matter, but if things went wrong, that fact might buy her a few precious extra minutes.

Her boarding pass was in her jacket pocket, and her suitcase was resting by her seat. She had a silver pistol case that didn't hold a pistol as her other carry-on. The clock said it was twenty minutes until boarding, just like it had the last four times she'd looked.

She fought the urge to stand up and walk around. Drawing any kind of attention to herself would be bad. Though her heart was pounding, though her palms were sweating, she stayed seated in that ratty-ass chair, head bowed, trying to look to the world like an exhausted vacationer heading home after a long trip overseas: tired of the world, tired of adventure, looking just for a chance to go home and sleep in her own bed and…

… and…

Footsteps. The distinctive tromp of heavy-duty boot soles against linoleum. She stole a glance down the hallway out of the corner of her eye and her heart sank.

There was a man and woman walking towards her.

All of her escape plans died then. No point in trying to run now, she'd just die tired.

She hugged herself tightly as the footsteps got closer and closer. They stopped in front of her: two pairs of heavy black combat boots, one pair men's size twelve, the other a women's size nine.

She looked up. Adrian Andrews's face was gaunt, and his bespectacled brown eyes had a permanent thousand-yard stare. That was normal for him. Wearing sweat pants and a flannel pajama top wasn't. Adrian usually liked to dress like the academic he once was, all button-down shirts and grey blazers and threadbare slacks.

He still carried himself like one, though: hands stuffed in his pockets in a boneless slouch, not the ramrod-straight discipline of the trained soldier.

"Hi," she whispered.

"Hi, Iris," Adrian said, smiling weakly. "You know why we're here, right?"

Iris Thompson, Age 15, (also known as SCP-105), curled up into a ball and began to tremble. "Yeah," she whispered, her throat dry and harsh. "You're here to bring me back."

"Yeah," Adrian said. "We are."

Iris swallowed hard. Her throat was dry. Her heart was pounding. "Doc… Doctor Dantensen," she whimpered, her voice taking a whining edge out of desperation. "You read his report, right? M-my p-powers are gone. I c-can't… I can't do what I used to any more…" She took a deep, steadying breath. "I'm not… not an SC—"

"Iris," Beatrix interrupted. "Cut the crap. We know Dantensen falsified his data. Neil's doing an audit right now. By morning, O5's will finish their voting and your release order is going to be countermanded…"

"And what if you're wrong?!" Iris snapped. "What if Dantensen's right, and I really don't have any powers any more? What are you going to do, lock me up again until I die?"

Her voice echoed through the empty airport lounge… suspiciously empty, in fact. She glanced around quickly. The entire place was empty. No more janitor vacuuming the carpet. No more tired old lady manning the solitary ticket booth.

The only ones in the room now were Beatrix, Adrian, and herself.

"Iris," Beatrix said. "Listen to me." She dropped to one knee in front of the younger girl. "I know life on-site is hard…"

"It's fucking torture," Iris said.

"Language…" Adrian interjected.

"Would you both just shut up and let me talk?" Beatrix snapped.

"I don't want to talk," Iris retorted. "I want to go home."

There was a soft chime over the intercom system. Through the wide glass windows, a small commuter plane could be seen approaching the gate.

"And that's my ride." Iris picked up her suitcase and camera. "Goodbye."

Beatrix looked up at Adrian, then over at the approaching plane. She made a small gesture with her hands that Adrian replied to with a shake of his head and a gesture of his own. She didn't seem to like that, because she stood up and walked a few steps away, staring out the window at the airport tarmac.

"All right," Adrian said calmly. "We tried to do this Beatrix's way. Now we do it my way."

He threw a Polaroid into Iris' lap. It showed the interior mechanism of a small-caliber pistol.

Iris looked up, horrified.

Adrian pulled a pistol from his pocket and put it to his temple. "I'm going to count to three," he said, "and then I'm going to shoot myself in the head. You can stop me if you use your powers."

Iris laughed nervously. "Adrian, stop. This isn't funny."

"I'm not joking, Iris. If Beats and I go home without you, we're as good as dead. May as well get a head start. One."

"Adrian, please!" Iris begged. She got to her feet. "Don't make me do this…"

"You don't want to go back? Fine. But if you really want to go home that badly, you do it with my blood on your conscience. Two."

"ADRIAN!" Iris screamed. "STOP!"

"Three."

There was a hollow click.

Iris dropped to her knees, holding the photograph in one hand. The firing pin of Adrian's pistol fell from her other hand and clattered to the floor with a glasslike clink.

Beatrix was there almost immediately. She grabbed Iris around the shoulders and held her close as the tears rose and she began to sob.

Adrian quietly put his plastic pistol back in his pocket and walked away. His hands shook so badly that he could barely open his phone up and dial a number that didn't exist in any phone book in the world.

"Ghost here," the voice on the other end said. "Report."

"Adrian Andrews, Mobile Task Force Omega-7," Adrian said. "Agent Maddox and I have just captured a confirmed humanoid anomaly. Reopen file SCP-105 and disregard prior data suggesting loss of anomalous abilities."

"Understood, Agent," Ghost said. "We will prepare a containment cell for your return." A pause. "Was there anything else?"

"Was there any—" Adrian breathed deeply, biting back the curse on his lips. "Neil? Tell the O5s if they ever ask us to do something like that again, Beatrix and I will both tender our resignations. That was the worst fucking thing I've ever had to do, and that includes vivisecting live cats."

"Adrian, you know I'm doing the best I can. This latest incident doesn't help."

"Neil, Dantensen did what he did because he's not inhuman enough to treat a bunch of teenage kids like zoo animals! You steal people away from their families, lock them up in cells, and treat them like—"

"Look… Adrian. I understand. Believe me, I do. But we can't talk about this on an unsecure line. Get back to Site-17 ASAP, and we'll figure out what to do then." Another pause. "I'll do what I can with the O5s, but if Iris doesn't come back to us, I'll have no leverage at all. Do you have transport?"

"Ol' Fritz said he'd have a heli waiting for us at the pad. We'll fly in to the nearest site and wait there for further instructions."

"Do that," Ghost said. There was a long pause. "Look, for what it's worth, Adrian, I think we have a solid chance of at least letting the less dangerous humanoid anomalies socialize a bit more often. We can use this incident as a demonstration of how isolation isn't helping their emotional states…"

"Save it for when we meet in person. I'm technically still on leave. Andrews out."

No one noticed the unmarked black helicopter at the helipad, or the three passengers walking across the tarmac. That was as it should be.

Adrian carried her bags as Beatrix helped Iris up into the helicopter. The teenager's movements were listless. Sullen. Not surprising.

"Where to?" the pilot asked, as Adrian climbed in after the two women.

"I don't give a shit," Adrian said. "Just get us to the closest Foundation site as fast as you can."

"Yellowstone, then," the pilot said. "Be a couple of hours."

"Whatever. If you need me, I'll be in the back."

Adrian left the cockpit and took his seat in the helicopter's cargo area. Iris was curled up in her seat, hugging her knees. She gave him an angry glare as the rotors silently spun up.

"She hates your guts, you know." Beats sat down next to Adrian as the vehicle lifted off.

"So long as she's alive, she can hate all my guts, from my pancreas all the way to my colon."

"Aren't you going to talk to her?"

"Won't do any good. She hates me. You talk to her."

"Why do I have to be the one who counsels the angry rebellious teenage girl?" Beatrix grumbled. "You're the trained psychologist."

"Yeah, but you're the woman. Aren't women supposed to be, like, you know, naturally nurturing and shit?"

Beats punched him in the arm, hard. "Ass. Just for that, I'm making you do all the paperwork on this one." She walked to the other side of the cabin to sit next to Iris, who pulled away and pressed up against the cabin's window.

Adrian sighed and pulled a small red notebook from his pocket. He uncapped his pen and began to write.

> *Retrieval Mission a success. I'm listing it as, "Recovered under pain of death from SCP-173." That'll sound good on the report…*

"Agent Andrews?"

Adrian awoke from his nap, bleary-eyed and sore from sleeping sitting up and buckled into his seat. "Andrews," he said into the intercom. "Go."

"You asked me to let you know when we're ten minutes out so you could call Yellowstone Station. Well… we're ten minutes out."

"Yeah, sure," Adrian said. "Wait one, I'll come up to the cockpit."

He unbuckled his harness and made his way to the front of the helicopter. "You got an extra headset?"

"Sure," the pilot said. "Crew chief's position, over there."

"Thanks," Adrian said, picking up the headset and slipping it on over his head. "Patch me in to the site."

"Which site?" the pilot asked.

"To Site…" Adrian's brow furrowed. "I can't… I can't remember. Where are we headed, pilot?"

"I … I'm not entirely sure, sir," the pilot said, frowning. "I could have sworn…"

Adrian looked out the front window. His eyes widened. "PULL UP!" he screamed.

Ahead of them, a snow-covered mountain flickered like a poor-quality VHS tape and exploded.

Incident Zero - Part 2

"Adrian? Adrian!?"

Adrian Andrews's eyes shot open. Beatrix was leaning over him, a worried expression on her face. His jaw hurt and his teeth tasted like pennies. He sat up slowly, groaning as the world spun around him, the low vibration of the helicopter's rotors setting a counterpoint to his throbbing headache. "What happened?"

"We hit turbulence," Beats said. "You hit your head. I think you're fine, but I want you to lay still for a moment."

"No. What *happened?*" Adrian repeated.

Beats nodded. "Volcanic explosion," she said. The world outside was on fire, casting a lurid scarlet light into the helicopter's interior. "The Yellowstone National Park megavolcano must have erupted."

"If it was volcanic, we'd be dead," Adrian insisted. "This was existential." He struggled to his feet and leaned over the pilot's shoulder. "Pilot, switch to channel Theta-Prime."

"Sir? There is no channel Theta…" The pilot took a second look at the comm console, and suddenly there it was. An eleventh channel among the ten marked on the dial. "… switching to channel Theta-Prime," he said, flipping the switch.

There was a burst of static, then a man's voice came in over the comms system. "Hello? Hello? Is anyone there? This is _}¡§¤þ! Can anyone hear me?"

"_}¡§¤þ! Thank God!" Adrian breathed a sigh of relief. "We're on our way. Is iµ²¬® all right?"

"iµ²¬® doesn't exist any more," _}¡§¤þ said. "I'm all that's left. F©r G©¼'s sÀk¿, À¼riÀ£, ¼©£'t ±¿t m¿ vÀ£ish…"

The voice disappeared, and the last thing the man said vanished from Adrian's memory. An entire Foundation site was gone. A man whom he was sure had been a close friend now no longer existed. Had never existed.

He couldn't even remember his name…

The signal disappeared in a burst of eldritch feedback. A brief click, and the dial set itself back to a number that existed in reality.

"Sir?" the pilot said, "what do we do now?"

The only thing we can do, Adrian thought. "Inform O5 Council that we've just had a CK-Class Restructuring Event," he said. "And get us on the ground somewhere safe as soon as possible. There might still be a chance to save something…"

The room was in chaos. It was the distinctly surreal kind of chaos that occurs when everyone knows that something horrible has happened, but no one remembers what it was.

There was, however, one person who did know. He sat in his chair silently reviewing his notes, waiting for the chaos to die down, which it finally did when the nondescript person at the head of the table rapped a gold-plated fountain pen against the mahogany surface.

"Ten. Report," One said, once the noise had died down.

Ten was a slender, bookish man with olive-colored skin and long, ebony-black hair done into a shoulder-length braid. He was known as the quietest member of the Overseer Council, the one who attended every meeting, took notes, and said nothing. Some of his colleagues wondered what his actual job was.

They would find out today.

"Let me start at the beginning," Ten said. "We have established that the likely cause of the event was a researcher at the Site who was doing research into anomalous effect miscability…"

"In English, please?" Eleven demanded.

"… he was combining SCPs and reporting on the results," Ten went on. "He was working on improvements to SCP-2000…"

"Wait a minute. Back up," Nine interrupted. "There is no SCP-2000. The Special Containment Procedures directory only goes up to SCP-999."

"It does now," Ten said grimly. "It didn't three hours ago. We've lost over two-thirds of the SCPs we had in containment…"

"That's impossible!" one of the O5s shouted. "How the hell could there be a containment breach of that magnitude when…"

"… absolutely idiotic!" someone else protested. "You're telling me a single accident at one site caused…"

"SILENCE!" One barked.

Silence.

"For the past thirty years, this man's job has been to watch and wait for exactly this kind of event to occur," One said sternly. "Now that it has, I am ordering all of you to sit down, shut up, and let him do his goddamn job. And maybe, just maybe, listen to him as if he's the expert on a subject that none of the rest of us know a single goddamn thing about!"

The silence continued.

"Ten," One said. "Proceed."

Ten nodded and pushed his glasses back into place with his ring finger. Throughout the entire shouting match, he had remained calm and silent. "All right. Let me change tack." Ten said. He shuffled the papers in his hand until he found the page he was looking for, took a deep breath, and continued speaking. "SCP-2000 is… was… a Thaumiel-Class…" He raised a hand to forestall the obvious argument. "Thaumiel is a containment class that apparently doesn't exist any more," Ten explained. "It refers to anomalies that, in themselves, are used to contain or protect from other anomalies."

"Thank you, Ten. Proceed," One said.

"SCP-2000… was… an emergency system designated "Deus Ex Machina," Ten said, arbitrarily choosing a tense. "The system was designed to trigger upon detection of a world-altering event. The way it works is a bit complicated, but it comes down to a series of cloning devices and mind-control systems that can repopulate the earth after a K-class event with cloned human beings with implanted false memories."

"You're saying a CK-Class Restructuring Event was caused by a human cloning device?" Nine asked.

"Of course not. But SCP-2000 was the final fail-safe in case of human extinction. In order to keep the system safe in case of a temporal or reality-altering event, the entire thing was placed in the single most existentially secure site on Earth: inside Yellowstone Mountain. Right above the Bloom."

Ten raised his hands to forestall yet another chorus of complaints and questions. "The Bloom is a Black Box SCP," he continued. "It's one that, up until this point, has been known only to four Overseers: myself, One, Two, and Thirteen. It's a reset button for the universe."

"Ten is oversimplifying, of course," One said curtly.

"Given the time constraints, I didn't feel that I had time to get into the whole 'trans-universal flower' and 'multiversal observer' aspects of the artifact," Ten said calmly. "All everyone else needs to know right now is that the Bloom seems to be the separation point between several different versions of possibility. The Bloom itself is the most existentially stable point on the planet, which is why we placed our last-resort species recovery system right on top of it.

"Unfortunately," Ten continued, "Yellowstone Mountain happened to also be a massive megavolcano which is tectonically unstable and is overdue to erupt, which is why… Dr. Null… was assigned to find a way to duplicate the Bloom's protective effects elsewhere, in the hopes of either moving or duplicating it at a more stable position. Unfortunately, something seems to have gone wrong. Rather than holding different parallel universes apart, the Bloom is now drawing them together."

"There weren't Scranton Reality Anchors around this thing?" Nine asked.

"The Scranton Reality Anchors around that 'thing' are the only reason why our universe hasn't already vanished," Ten explained. "If I may?"

He tapped a control on his keyboard, and an image appeared on the screen behind him. "This is a false-color representation of the current mathematical reality," he said. "The blue spheres represent adjunct timelines and Schroedinger-type uncertainties. The yellow spirals represent the separate universes and timelines. This image was taken over the course of the past year at one of our temporal research facilities" He tapped a control, and the image began to move. "And now a live feed."

The image, which had previously been mostly static, now swirled and bubbled, like yellow flowers floating in a sea of foam. Slowly, but inexorably, the flowers were starting to come together. "Timelines are like protons and antiprotons," Ten explained. "When two separate but incompatible realities intersect, the result is mutual annihilation. With The Bloom drawing neighboring realities towards ours, the end result is obvious."

Ten tapped a control, and the words "PROJECTED SEQUENCE OF EVENTS" appeared on the top of the screen. "The first intersection of universes will result in collapse of the space-time membranes that surround our reality. Causality will cease to exist. Events will no longer be distinct moments in time. Where Schroedinger's famous cat was once alive and dead simultaneously, there will now be two cats, one alive one dead, both coexisting. This obviously cannot be possible, so both cats will be mutually annihilated."

Ten grimaced. "This annihilation reaction will result in the release of unimaginable amounts of energy. The resulting energy will accelerate the convergence process, drawing even more parallel universes together at an ever-quickening rate." On the screen, the flowers folded into each other, swirled, and vanished into grey foam, until nothing else existed. "And that," Ten said, "will be it."

"ZK-Class Reality Failure Scenario," One said.

"I don't think we have a term for what's about to happen, but that comes closest," Ten admitted. "Unless we do something within the next few hours, we're going to lose everything. We have a **last-ditch contingency** plan, but the chances of it succeeding are miniscule. The only other option I see is to deal with The Bloom itself, which will entail entering the Yellowstone Mountain facility."

"What assets do we have in place that can respond in time?" One asked.

"Just one," Ten admitted. "Mobile Task Force Omega-7: Pandora's Box. Team Able is currently out of contact, but we've managed to get into contact with the force leader for Team Iris - he was, in fact, the agent who originally called in this alert. They will be ready to enter the facility within the hour."

"Does anyone else have anything to add?" One asked. No one did. "Then deploy them," he continued. "And keep me informed." The O5 Council's leader turned to Ten, his dark eyes flashing intently. "Get this taken care of," he said. "Do whatever you need to. You have full operational authority over all Foundation assets until this crisis is over."

Ten nodded in reply.

Yellowstone Mountain had mostly stabilized. Rather than looking like a poor-quality VHS tape, it was now just fuzzy and somewhat translucent, like an out-of-focus photograph. Every once in a while, it would flicker and change, as some alternate possibility asserted itself upon this reality.

Three Humvees approached the landed helicopter at the foot of the mountain. Twelve soldiers (six men, five women, and Effy) disembarked. One of the soldiers, a huge man with ebony skin and a hint of electric-blue eyeshadow above his intense eyes, emerged from the lead vehicle carrying two kit bags. He tossed them onto the ground at Adrian and Beatrix's feet.

"Good of you to join us," Agent William Abrams said, smirking. "Though I bet you'd rather be alone in bed with Beats right now."

"Hey, what about me?" Beats muttered, as she rummaged through her kit bag for her BDUs. She carelessly stripped off her trench coat and nightgown, trading them for her combat gear. "I was promised breakfast in bed," she said, pulling a slate-grey sports bra on over her head.

"Really? Damn, girl, you've got him wrapped around your little finger," Billy said, grinning.

"It's where I prefer to be," Adrian said. He too had stripped, and was trading in his tuxedo-print boxers for a much more sedate pair of dark grey skivvies. "What's the situation with Team Able?"

"Don't know," Bill admitted. "We're still trying to get in contact. They were inside the facility when the Event occurred."

"Damn," Adrian muttered, pulling on a pair of grey digital camouflage trousers. "All right, guys, load up for close quarters battle. I want you and Effie on rifles, everyone else takes SMGs or carbines. Medium armor: no point in getting killed by some monster from another dimension while trying to fix a temporal anomaly—"

"What about me?"

Eleven pairs of eyes turned to look at SCP-105. The blonde teenager stood in the doorway of the helicopter, clutching her silver pistol case. "I don't have my kit, but I can help—"

"Non-Omega-Seven personnel will not participate in this operation," Adrian said curtly.

"Adrian, those are my friends…"

"Non-Omega-Seven personnel will NOT participate in this operation!" Adrian repeated. "Pilot, get this SCP object back into containment as soon as possible. If it gives you any trouble, you are authorized to taze it and take it back home unconscious."

Adrian deliberately did not look as he heard the girl begin to sob. He kept his eyes locked on his gear as he heard Beats lead SCP-105 back into the helicopter, heard the rotors spin up and felt the vehicle take off behind him.

"Damn," Billy said. "That was fucking cold."

"Right now she's a liability, not an asset," Adrian snapped. "The sooner she's out of the operating area, the better."

"Keep telling yourself that. Me, I think you just don't want to take her into **that**," Billy said, gesturing to the still-flickering mountain.

Adrian's reply was interrupted by a slender, androgynous figure jogging up, holding a laptop computer. "We've made contact with Team Able," Agent Fatima Workwise said. "He wants to talk to you."

"Fuck," Adrian muttered. "It just gets better and better." He accepted the laptop from Effy. "Go for Team Iris— Jesus!"

That last exclamation was for the scene on the laptop computer. An entire hallway splattered with blood. Crazily swinging fluorescent lights hanging from the ceiling. Panicked shouts and the sound of gunfire from off-screen. But the thing that had prompted the profanity was the man laying on the lab table: tall, cold, olive-skinned, black haired, skin covered in scarlet tattoos. His body below his waist was an explosion of gore.

"Andrews," Able rasped. "Report."

Adrian breathed deeply, the gorge rising in his throat. It took him three deep breaths to recover. "Team Iris is ready to breach and enter," Adrian said. "All present and accounted for except Iris Actual."

"Good." Able closed his eyes for a moment. "I am done killing for a time," he said at last. "You will take command of this operation."

Adrian felt cold. "Sir? Squire is next in the chain of command…"

"Squire is a warrior, as am I. If I did not succeed, he will not either. This problem requires a scholar. Mind, not muscle will win this." The tall, dark-haired figure on the screen collapsed and exhaled deeply. It did not move again.

The camera shifted, revealing the grime-and-soot stained visage of an older man with ginger hair, shot with silver. "You heard the man,

sir," Agent Squire said. "Orders?"

"Shit." Adrian breathed deeply. "All right, where are you guys holed up?"

"Security Station Niner. We're pretty safe here, but there are hostiles roaming the halls. We've taken quite a few casualties and are currently combat ineffective." Squire smiled grimly. "Just another day in Pandora's Box, I suppose."

"All right." Adrian gestured over his shoulder, felt a map being pressed into his hand. "Thanks," he said, unfolding the map on the hood of the Humvee. "All right," he repeated. "Security Station Niner. We'll enter…" Adrian frowned and shook his head. His vision kept getting blurry, and every time he blinked, the shape of the hallways changed. "Damn it. The map keeps changing on me."

"You should try walking through those hallways sometime." Squire grim smile widened. "Real pain in the ass, what with the walls trying to eat you alive."

The seconds ticked by as Adrian glared at the map for a few more moments, then gave up. "All right, wait five," he said to the laptop computer. He picked up the map and carried it out of the computer's field of view, waved his hand in the air in a small circle to rally the soldiers. "Team Iris!" he shouted. "Huddle up! I need some ideas…"

Incident Zero - Part 3

General Bowe's paternal great-grandfather had died at Gettysburg under the command of General Armstead during Pickett's famous doomed charge. He had been one of the brave Confederate soldiers to cross the stone wall at the Bloody Angle, had been shot in the gut by a damned dirty Yankee, stood his ground as his comrades-in-arms retreated, and used his last breath to stab a filthy Irishman in the heart. It was a story passed down on his father's side of the family as an example of the courage and bravery of the Bowe bloodline.

General Bowe's maternal great-grandfather had also died at Gettysburg. He'd been a member of the 69th Pennsylvania, one of the brave men who'd defended the stone wall at the Bloody Angle. He'd shot a filthy slave-owning rebel scum in the belly and stood at the center of the heaviest fighting at the Confederacy's high-water mark, but when the enemy retreated, he hadn't noticed that the one of the damned Johnny Rebs weren't quite dead. The cowardly Southerner had bayoneted him in the heart as he leaped over the fence, and the two of them had died in each other's arms.

There was no way of knowing whether General Robert Ulysses Abraham Jefferson Bowe's great-grandfathers had really killed each other at the Battle of Gettysburg, but it made sense to him. General Bowe was a man at war with everything, including himself. He was a scholar who had chosen a career in the military, a scientist who studied the unscientific, a soldier without a war to fight. Internal conflict was his *raison d'etre.*

9/11 had been the worst day in American history for many people. Not so for General Bowe. For the General, the worst terrorist attack on American soil had meant a chance to put into action the plans he'd been making for years. It was a chance for his secret negotiations with the shadowy organization known only as The Foundation to be brought into the (relative) light of black ops. The

last few years had been very good for General Bowe. Multiple successful operations overseas had resulted in increased funding for the Bowe Commission's projects.

And now, within the last twelve hours, things had gone to shit.

"First," he said, as the leader of the Overseer Council sat down across from him, "You need to assure me that what's going on at Yellowstone isn't a terrorist attack, and that it's going to be taken care of."

The Overseer said, "Yellowstone is not a terrorist attack. It is more like an accident in weapons development testing. The situation will be resolved within the next 24 hours."

"Good," General Bowe said. "I'll hold you to that." He jotted down a note on a pad of sketch paper. "I need a situation report."

The Overseer said, "Yellowstone Mountain is currently in temporal and existential flux. Aside from that, we are still trying to assess the damage. Due to the CK-Class restructuring, all of our Special Containment Procedures databases have desynchronized. China, Korea, Japan, and Russia branches are all showing different file numbers for different objects. We're currently sorting them out by using the American database as a baseline, and affixing a suffix to the foreign branches' desynchronized entries, but it is a lengthy process that might never be fully resolved."

"I disapproved of your organization having foreign outposts," General Bowe reminded the Overseer. "I was afraid that something like this might happen."

The Overseer said, "You were concerned about the security of our foreign offices. This is hardly the same thing."

"Nevertheless, it is the opinion of this Commission that the Foundation's foreign offices now represent an unacceptable security risk." General Bowe turned to the next page on his sketch pad, jotted down another note. "Following the end of this current crisis, you will present a plan to decommission them and consolidate your anomalies in American containment sites within no more than five

years."

The Overseer said, "We were promised oversight of our own operations. Relocating our inventory will be problematic. This is not to mention those anomalies that cannot be relocated due to size or other factors."

"That was before you idiots blew up Yellowstone Mountain," General Bowe said, "and before you lied to us about the state of your weapons development division."

The Overseer said. "We have not… "

"I know about Project Olympia," General Bowe interrupted. "Your scientists created a line of production-model super-soldiers and somehow neglected to report that to the Commission. I've read about the capabilites of the Olympia line. Do you know how many American special operations soldiers have died since the start of the war? Do you know how many lives could have been saved?"

The Overseer said nothing.

"Your Foundation's had its fun for long enough. Time to put on your big boy pants and become part of the government," General Bowe said. He folded up his sketch book and got to his feet. "I'll be in touch regarding the consolidation of Foundation assets into the Department of Paranormal Warfare tomorrow afternoon."

The Overseer said, "There is no Department of Paranormal Warfare."

"There will be tomorrow. The President and I will make sure of it."

The General left the office without saying goodbye or asking for a salute.

The Overseer remained in its seat after he had gone.

"This idea sucks," Adrian said.

"It was the best we could do," Bill said. "Get ready."

Adrian took a deep breath, revved the engine, and clutched the steering wheel tightly.

The answer, as it turned out, had been fairly simple. Going in using the front door was out of the question: too many hostiles roaming the halls, too much distance to cover surrounded by hostiles of every possible shape and size. On the other hand, there was the reality destabilization… namely, the fact that Yellowstone Mountain was replaced with an empty field of geysers and hotsprings for about thirty seconds every thirty minutes.

Beatrix had done the math. A vehicle that traveled at approximately thirty miles per hour should barely have enough time to travel through the solid granite and arrive at the location of the main carpark just as the mountain reappeared. It was kind of like driving through a bunch of swinging pendulums, if the pendulums were universes and the metaphor was a little less forced.

Adrian glanced at the other passengers in his humvee. Bill rode shotgun, SAW across his lap. Beats, Effie and Vincent were in the back seat: Effie standing by to jump into the turret and man the .50 cal if things went bad.

If things went bad… The universe was going mad. There was a goddamn mountain flicking in and out of existence in front of him. And he was worried about things getting **worse…**

"Ten seconds," Bill said, and Adrian gripped the steering wheel even more tightly. "Seven. Six, Five…"

Adrian put the vehicle in gear just as Bill said "Five," started accelerating as Bill said "Three," had a horrible moment when he thought that the timing was off and they were about to drive straight into a granite wall, and then the mountain disappeared and they were driving along a flat volcanic plain. Adrian ignored the other vehicles behind him, ignored everything but the broken road before him and Bill's voice counting down, "eight, seven, six, five, four, three…" and then the flat plains disappeared, and they were driving through a parking garage with flickering fluorescent lights and blood all over the ground, and the wall was getting close, so damn close, Adrian slammed the brakes and the tires squealed and the humvee

slewed left and it slammed into the concrete wall and went CRUNCH.

"CONTACT RIGHT!" Bill shouted. His SAW fired off three short bursts. Vincent was screaming something, then Adrian heard the staccato chatter of Beatrix's submachinegun, and then came the low, steady thud of the .50 opening up, and then silence.

Adrian glanced out the right side of the vehicle. Something big, grey, and humanoid lay on the ground, now riddled with bullets and breathing its last. At the front of its head, where a face should have been, was a blank, greyish nothing.

A bloody, wet gurgle from the back. Adrian turned to look. He immediately wished he hadn't. Vince was slumped against the door, twitching and gasping. The entire front of his head, from his ears forward, was just… gone. Effie drew her pistol, put it to his temple, and fired once. The thing that had been Vince went still.

Adrian swallowed hard and turned away. "S… Sound off!" he shouted into the darkness.

"This is Car Two!" came a shout from behind him. "Frederickson! Everyone's fine, but the back end of the car's stuck in the wall!"

Shit, Adrian whispered. *The timing must have changed.* He took a deep breath before asking the question no one wanted the answer to. "Car Three?"

A long pause. "I can see their front bumper sticking out of the wall behind me," Frederickson shouted. "That's it." Silence again. "How about you?"

Adrian glanced into the back of the humvee. Beatrix was wiping off her bloodied face with a shaking hand, while Effie and Bill wrestled Vince's still body out of the back seat. "One casualty," he said. "It's Vince. Fatal."

Another heartbeat's worth of silence. "Shit," Frederickson said. "All right, what's the plan?"

"Can you see us?" Adrian asked.

"Yeah, I can see your tail lights."

"Then disembark and grab what you can. Move your squad up and we'll proceed from here on foot."

"Roger. Moving," Frederickson said.

Adrian rubbed his upper lip, despair setting in. One minute into the mission, and Team Iris had already suffered five casualties out of their original fourteen. Even for Pandora's Box, those were not good figures.

He checked his carbine, slung it over his shoulder, and climbed out of the driver's side door. Something squished under his foot as he stepped out of the car, and he shone his flashlight down to see what it was.

It was a face. Vince's. Adrian allowed himself a moment of revulsion before closing his eyes and doing his breathing exercises. His fingers clenched tightly, gripping a scalpel that didn't exist.

There are a lot of different ways to think about skulking through a monster-ridden facility in the middle of a temporal flux event. One is "nightmare." Another is "death trap."

Omega-7 called it "movement through hostile territory." Single-file line, weapons raised, checking and double-checking every corner and intersection. Communicating only through hand gestures, taps on the shoulder, and squeezes on the leg. Just another series of corridors and doorways to be checked, cleared, and moved through.

They encountered no further hostiles, although they could, on occasion, hear growls, grunts, and screams from deeper inside the facility. The odd flickering and fuzziness faded away as they proceeded further and got closer to the Scranton Reality Anchors at the heart of the base. All in all, their movement was quick, professional, and by the numbers.

The thing laying outside Security Station Nine resembled a hugely obese human being, albeit one that was over nine feet tall and

covered in oozing sores and tumors. A large number of rotting, disintegrating corpses lay all around it, most of them dressed in the uniforms of Mobile Task Force personnel.

One of the least decomposed was an older man with ginger hair, shot with silver. Squire had died in close contact with the monster. His corpse still held a tarnished knife in one hand. The other was sunk wrist-deep into the rolls of fat around the creature's neck.

"They were attacked shortly after you entered the facility," a low voice said in an unfamiliar accent. "Unfortunately, they were all dead by the time I arrived."

The nine surviving members of Mobile Task Force Omega-7 turned to face the figure stepping out of the shadows. He was very tall and handsome, and his arms were made of steel.

"Cain," Beatrix breathed. She lowered her weapon. A moment later, at a gesture from Adrian, the rest of Omega-7 followed.

"I would not approach the corpse too closely, if I were you," the tall, Semitic-looking man said. "Even dead, the noxious fumes could prove fatal."

"Team, fall back," Adrian ordered. "Masks on. Rally at Conference Room Six. Fredrickson, take point."

He spared Squire one last look as the team retreated. The old man's body had dissolved into slime, leaving only a goo-covered skeleton behind. The dagger had corroded into a clump of rust, and a few moments later, even that had crumbled into reddish-brown dust.

"All right," Adrian said to his squad leaders, as the rest of the team took up rest positions inside the conference room. "Let's review the situation. Liquids?"

"Green all around," Beatrix said. "Untainted, plenty of reserves."

"Ammunition?"

"Full loads on my team," Frederickson said.

"Effie and me are down one mag each. Reloaded from Vince, picked up his spares. We're green," Bill said.

"All right. No injuries, KIAs are leave-in-place. As for mission-essential equipment…" Adrian scoffed and shook his head. "At this point, guys, I'm not sure what our mission is any more. Team Able is down, presumed KIA. The nine of us aren't going to make it much further into the site. If this were any other mission, I'd call us combat ineffective and scrub it."

"But it's not any other mission," Beatrix pointed out. "This is it. We're all that's left."

"Right," Adrian said grimly. "So I'm taking suggestions for ideas on what we should do next."

"Has anyone suggested… you know. Asking the ancient Sumerian whatchamacallit?" Frederickson asked.

All three of them turned to regard SCP-073. He alone had not entered the conference room, and was standing in the hallway outside, calmly looking down the darkened corridors, his steel hands clasped in front of him in an oddly demure fashion.

Adrian and Beatrix exchanged a look. "It's worth a shot," Beatrix admitted.

"Yes," Cain said. "I do have some advice on what you can do to rectify this situation."

"All right," Adrian said. "Why didn't you say something before?"

"You did not ask," Cain replied. "An answer is of no use if the question is not asked."

"All right," Adrian repeated. "Well, I'm asking now. What do we do?"

"That would depend on your definition of the word 'we,'" Cain said. "If by 'we,' you refer to you, the woman, and I… that is an answer I do not wish to give. If by 'we,' you refer to your squad in general… most of them will be of no use. Aside from you and your lover, the

rest are irrelevant."

"… I'm not sure I understood correctly," Frederickson said, after a long pause, "But I think Cain just told us to fuck off and let you and Beats handle the rest."

"It would appear so," Adrian said, sighing. "Beats?"

"The way I see it," Beatrix said, "Cain's the only one who has any ideas, which means he's already one step ahead of the rest of us. I say we do as he suggests." She gave the tall man a cold glare.

"All right," Adrian said. "Then we're decided. Beats and I will go with Cain. As for the rest of the squad… Frederickson, you're in command now. I suggest you take the rest of the team and retreat to our starting point. There should be an exit in… about fifteen minutes…"

"Begging your pardon, sir, but all three humvees are fucked. No way we can run fast enough to make it outside the mountain before it resolidifies," Frederickson pointed out. "Our only way out is through the front entrance."

"That's going to take you through the thickest areas of hostile activity," Adrian pointed out. "Odds aren't good."

"So in that case, we may as well come with you, right?" Frederickson said. "We're dead if we try to escape anyway, so we may as well join the suicide mission."

"Look, Frederickson…"

"Sorry, Adrian," Frederickson said. "You put me in command of the squad, remember? This isn't up to you any more. We're coming along."

"All right." Adrian said. "Form up on me and let's get started…"

And elsewhere in the facility, surrounded by the dead and dying, a stone cube opened up, and a tall, naked man with scarlet tattoos all over his olive skin emerged once more into the world.

Incident Zero

Incident Zero - Part 4

And as this happened, in another site, a woman gasped as she collapsed to the floor. Her arms and legs rapidly withered into nothingness as her skin hardened into stone. Despite her desperate cries, her companions could do nothing but watch in horror as her body quickly petrified. . . and then they, too, began to scream. . .

"Adrian?"

"Hm?" Andrews tore his eyes away from the monstrous creature lurching along the path before them. Part ram, part slug, part flower-garden, it tilted its bandaged head from side to side as it glided with unnatural grace through the shattered hallways. Three nude women danced in slow circles around the horned figure, dressed only in copper helmets adorned with ribbons that fluttered in the wind of their passage.

Beatrix sighed. "Give me an honest assessment. Do you really think we're going to survive this?"

Adrian glanced at Cain, who was walking about twenty feet ahead of them, just a few feet behind the surreal procession. One of the nude figures approached the tall, olive-skinned man, her every motion speaking of the promise of sensual delights. Cain simply smiled and nodded his head in acknowledgement, and the figure retreated, head bowed and hands clasped before her bare chest. "If I didn't," he said at last, "It wouldn't do us any good to prepare for that. So let's say that I do think we're going to survive this, and proceed from there?"

Beatrix nodded slowly, as if this were the response she'd expected. "In that case, remember that conversation we had last night?

About three months in Europe versus ten minutes on the moon?"

"Yeah."

"We're probably due a bunch of leave after this," Beatrix said, stepping carefully along the carpet of rose petals strewn in the wake of the bulbous beast. "Three months in Europe wouldn't be out of the question. Want to come with me?"

"Yeah," Adrian repeated.

"On our honeymoon?"

Adrian swallowed hard. "Sure," he said. "Sounds fine to me." His hand found hers, and squeezed it tightly.

Up ahead, the odd procession paused at an intersection, turned right, and continued to dance, never missing a beat. Adrian, Beatrix, and Cain continued straight on, into the darkness.

… **and somewhere else, a man curled up next to a glowing green egg, holding it close to his chest.** "*Fa la ninna, fa la nanna,*" he crooned, stroking its cold, green shell tenderly…

It was not long before they reached a tall, steel door, with the symbol of three inward-pointing arrows within two circles painted upon its gunmetal-grey plates. Cain stepped up to a security console at one side of the door, pressed his palm against a scanning plate. There was a loud click and a series of crunches as the door's locking mechanism released. "From here," Cain said, "I will follow you. It is necessary that the two of you enter first."

"Is this a prophecy?" Adrian asked.

"An inevitability," Cain replied.

Beatrix nodded. "Then let's get this the fuck over with," she said sternly. She walked to the door, placed her hands on the door

hands, and pushed.

There was a loud crack.

A high-pitched whirring sound, like a dentist's drill.

Two arms made of steel and wires burst through the open door, grabbed Beatrix Maddox by the head, and twisted it, hard.

There was a sickening crack of breaking bone.

… **and somewhere else, a man lay on a butcher's table, whimpering softly. Wordlessly, his tormentor sliced open his belly, pulled out his organs, and began expertly slicing into the tenderloin. As the man smiled in delirium, the butcher placed a small, paper-wrapped package in his hands. . .**

Beatrix…

Adrian locked his anguished scream away inside the part of his mind that still wept when it sliced open the belly of a living cat. The rest of him raised his rifle and fired at the steel doll as it dropped Beatrix's broken body to the floor.

It was a good, clean, solid burst to center mass. The bullets flattened against the steel woman's bare belly and clattered to the floor. That high pitched whirring sound grew even louder and higher pitched, screaming like a jet engine turbine.

Adrian's rifle stopped firing, bolt locked back. He let it fall, drew the pistol from his holster, fired twice more. His vision was blurring. He didn't know why. All he knew was that his hands were moving on their own, like a machine. Like the creature Able wanted him to be. Like the thing his superiors wanted him to be.

The steel doll stood. Its joints glowed with bright blue energy. Intricate gears within gears spun and whirred in the gaps between its plates. It tilted its head to one side and opened a mouth full of

cogs and wires.

Adrian dove out of the way. Heat and ripping metal exploded behind him.

Pain tore through his left leg, followed by a sudden numbness. He tried to stand, found that he didn't have two legs to stand on any more.

The steel doll slowly got to her feet, from where the backblast had hurled it across the room…

… **and somewhere else, a woman screamed as a powerful beak tore into her face, ripping open her cheek and eyes. She struggled to get free, but her attacker was merciless, ripping off an arm with a cruel slowness. . .**

… and Adrian fled.

He scrabbled away from the steel doll, towards the dusky-skinned man who still stood, smiling softly, just outside the doorway of the chamber. Something in him screamed that this wouldn't work, that this could never work, but he had no other way…

He turned. Saw the steel doll revving up, joints glowing blindingly bright. It streaked towards him, ready to punch through and rip apart anything to get to the thing she hated so badly…

The steel doll's fist smashed into Cain's face with all the force of a speeding train.

The sigil on Cain's forehead flared blue, blindingly bright, illuminating the entire corridor like a camera's flash…

There was an explosion. The gynoid came apart in a shower of steel and silicon, shrapnel bursting forth like a detonating shell…

The last thing he saw was a razor-edged shard hanging in the air. His pain-addled mind tracked the course of that deadly little shard of

metal all the way until it drove itself into his brain.

… and somewhere else, a squad of men struggling to get the doors to their chamber open froze as they felt a small tickle growing in their noses and throats. Within moments, they were laying on the floor, gurgling out their last breaths as they struggled to breathe. Their deaths were witnessed only by a shadowy figure who regarded the dying men with something that resembled pity.

… and somewhere, Agent Frederickson screamed as a razor-toothed earthworm fourteen inches long burrowed hungrily into his open eye…

… and somewhere, a man in an orange jumpsuit huddled in a hallway full of smoke and gas as a hooded figure in a plague doctor's mask glided by, muttering indistinctly about a cure…

… and somewhere, a woman turned and ran from a blank white mask hovering in the darkness of an infinite stairwell, but could not escape the death that followed…

… and somewhere, a man sitting before a computer screen depicting a black-and-white map of the world saw the icon located over Yellowstone Mountain change from red to black…

… and in that period of time, Cain finished laying Adrian Andrew's bleeding body next to that of his comatose lover's, stepped through the steel doors, and entered the chamber of The Bloom.

It waited for him, resplendent in its infinite colors, iridescent petals stretching across the dimensions, slowly fading in and out of view as it turned gently in space. The cosmic flower at the heart of the world. The thing that had allowed humanity to try and try again when they had failed. The fruit of knowledge, the reflection of eternity.

It had been so, so long since he had last been allowed to witness its

glory.

Cain heard an animal growl behind him. He turned, knowing already what he would see.

His brother, the murdered murderer, stood in the doorway. A pair of black swords were clutched in his hands. His eyes were cold. Dead. Emotionless. Just as they had been after Cain's old hands had finished committing their one unspeakable sin.

Cain's new hands, the ones made of steel and fire, clenched tightly. Blue flame erupted from between the joints of his artificial arms. They were matched by the crimson flames that burst forth from his brother's demonic tattoos.

Able took a single step forward…

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… and Cain stepped aside, head bowed respectfully.

Able passed under the gates of pearl and fire and entered the chamber of the Bloom. His dead eyes beheld the text inscribed upon The Bloom in runes deeper than a man's arm, burning like gold upon the glassy petals that spanned universes.

A cruel smile touched his thin lips.

He laughed as he raised his hand above his head. The sword that burst forth stretched from his fingertips all the way to the stars, and beyond. It swallowed up all light that fell upon it, sang of death and the silent tomb, smelled of the void between worlds, devoured light and heat and life and hope…

He slashed down once, and the blade sliced through the gleaming petals and embedded itself deep into the heart of The Bloom.

… and somewhere, a man sitting before a computer screen depicting a black-and-white map of the world blinked, and a green icon marked "SCP-2000 Facility" appeared in Yellowstone National Park. And it had always been so.

… and somewhere, a man watched as a flickering video feed recorded the panicked last words of a woman running screaming down a flight of infinite stairs. And it had always been so.

… and somewhere, three men in orange jumpsuits carefully stepped out of a chamber that stank of blood and shit, eyes locked upon the thing that stood in the corner, not daring to blink until two men in white uniforms and body armor slammed the door shut. And it had always been so.

… and somewhere, a new set of stone statues were carefully catalogued and put away in their safe by a blind man, working entirely by touch. And it had always been so.

… and somewhere, a white-coated researcher watched dispassionately as an emaciated woman in orange wept bitter tears as hunger and exhaustion finally took her life, mourning the child she had not known. And it had always been so.

… and somewhere, a plate with a perfectly cooked chateaubriand roast was placed into an MRI scanner, its internal structure carefully catalogued, along with the mumbling of the man whom it had been taken from. And it had always been so.

… and somewhere, the torn-up body parts of an unfortunate Japanese woman were placed into the crematorium, as a Buddhist priest chanted solemnly before a small altar upon which her photograph and several offerings for her unfortunate soul were placed. And it had always been so.

… and somewhere, a tired worker closed up the crate on a set of tactical equipment, including a UV light projector. Scanning the serial number, he entered it into the system as "Combat Gear, Surplus." And it had always been so.

… and somewhere, a man sitting at a computer keyboard carefully studied the words on the screen. Deleted some. Typed in others. Hit the "Save" button once he was done.

And it had always been so.

For none existed in the world who remembered otherwise…

… except one.

O5-10 opened her eyes. She picked up the phone on her desk and pressed a single button.

"We need to talk," she said.

One found Ten standing silently before the great, black cone, embedded point down into the magma chambers under Yellowstone National Park's famous geysers. As always, the Thorn was silent, inscrutable, black as the void, devouring all light that fell upon it. "Is there a reason you asked me to meet you here?" he asked.

"Yes," Ten said. "I'm going to ask you a simple question, and I want a simple answer." She turned to face the other member of the Overseer Council. "How long ago did the Daeva Civilization fall?"

One opened his mouth. Then frowned. He swallowed hard, brow furrowed, jaw working.

"I'm going to ask another question," Ten said. "Is SCP-343 God or not?"

"Well, of course…" One's voice trailed off again. A look of panicked realization.

"Final Question," Ten whispered. "What is SCP-001?"

One remained silent.

Ten nodded. This was the moment she had been prepared for but had never expected to come. "TK-Class Scenario," she said. "Broken Timeline."

The four members of the Overseer Council who met in Ten's office a month later were the only ones who knew about The Thorn… or what Ten insisted should be called "The Bloom."

"According to my investigations, there is a 95% chance that the TK event took place here, when nearly half of the Omega-Seven operatives were killed," she said, pointing to a hashmark drawn on her timeline of events. "The official version of events recorded is that

SCP-076-2 was responsible for their deaths, but the sequence of events as provided by the survivors have never lined up properly. Neither has SCP-076-2 ever given any explanation as to his actions.

"In addition," Ten continued, "there is the issue of an agent listed in official records only as A.A., with all official records of his full name lost or otherwise corrupted. Despite being later responsible both for his death and the death of his former lover, the sequence of events that led to his… transformation… are hazy at best, with multiple conflicting accounts present.

"All of this evidence leads to one conclusion: at some point in the recent past, a massive CK-Class restructuring took place that resulted in the breaking and repair of the timeline. But like a broken vase, the repaired timeline is… flawed. Look closely enough, and the cracks are evident. Events that don't line up. Things that happened without a cause. Mysteries left unsolved, not because the answer isn't known, but because we don't even know to ask the question."

One nodded. "And you say that this was the result of… this thing that you call The Bloom… activating?"

"No," Ten said. "The Bloom, as far as we know it, does not repair timelines. It resets them. To continue the broken vase analogy, activating The Bloom would be like throwing away the broken vase and making a new one: mostly identical, but with some subtle differences. This… this should be impossible."

"By us, yes," Two said. "But what about Able?"

"What does Able have to do with this?" Ten wondered.

"Well… it was an observation that crossed my desk the other day. Ever since the death of Omega-Seven, SCP-076-2 has not manifested its blades since. Not once," Two explained. "And then there was the thought I had that it was an interesting coincidence that its blades were so similar to the substance that makes up The Thorn. My working hypothesis had been that Able's blades were somehow drawn from the same source as The Thorn, or maybe The Thorn itself. But if what you say is true, and this "Bloom" was

somehow altered into the Thorn about the same time that most of Mobile Task Force Omega-7 was killed in an incident that took place nearby…"

"You think that Able was responsible for transforming The Bloom into The Thorn?" Ten wondered.

"Not just Able," Two pointed out. "SCP-073 was also found at the site of the Omega-Seven massacre. Which has always been inexplicable since he was last reported six hundred miles away, at Site-17." Two shrugged. "Maybe we should be asking them."

One contemplated this in silence. "No," he said at last.

"But…"

One interrupted Ten's objection with a raised hand. "The middle of a high-wire act is the last time to begin juggling swords," he said. "With SCP-2000 rolling out in the next month or so, and RAISA opening Series Four, the Foundation has enough to deal with trying to fix this universe, much less worrying about what might have happened in prior ones. We put our house in order first, before worrying about our neighbors'."

Ten glanced around the room. Two was nodding his head in agreement. Thirteen… was being Thirteen. "If you say so," she said at last.

"Not just me. I'm going to ask you to take a binding and compulsory oath on this," One said. "You will not now, nor ever, take any action to investigate the link between SCP-073, SCP-076, and the Thorn… or, as you call it, The Bloom. Agreed?"

Ten nodded reluctantly. "Agreed."

"In that case," One said, "this meeting is adjourned. All transcripts from today's meeting are to be considered cognitohazardous artifacts and subject to Special Containment Procedures, Class Sub-Rosa. You will submit all of your materials, including visual aids and notes, to RAISA for containment by the end of the day. This meeting is adjourned."

… and elsewhere, a man sat on a hilltop, looking out towards the sunset. He contemplated what had been. What had come before. What would be in the future.

The road to this place and this time had been a long and winding one. Like many roads, there had been points where the path had been rough and difficult. And perhaps it was true that the destination was not nearly as pleasant as he had been led to believe. But the journey… that had been memorable.

He supposed that made it worth it.

He picked up his walking stick and took a drink of water from his canteen. It was a long walk back home, and he was looking forward to a hot shower and a good meal once he made it back.

Incursion

1

If the words "esoteric containment" mean nothing to you, stop listening.

Time passes, approximately ten seconds. During this time, rain can be heard striking a number of windows nearby.

My name is Doctor Lowell Henry Piedmont. I am a research scientist for the Foundation, specialty in esoteric containment of anomalous objects, events and locations. I have gone missing. There are three others with me. Alicia Connors is an archivist assistant currently assigned to **SCP-914**. Jerald Hanndock is a research assistant, also assigned to **SCP-914**. Matthew Terger is a security agent with whom I have worked with to a considerable degree of satisfaction.

The output of the **SCP-316** replica produced by **914**… we were exposed to the light of this new item. We are now someplace I suspect to be the United Kingdom, though we haven't been able to confirm this. We have taken shelter in a greenhouse on Terger's suggestion — it is elevated, and will give us a good view of any more incoming hostiles. We have already been attacked.

We attempted to make camp in the great room of the adjacent, abandoned manor house, but gunfire awoke us during the second watch. Terger saw something disturbingly long melt a panel of a window. It attempted to reach Connors while she slept. He almost lost sight of it. He managed to shoot it, clipped the anterior of its body length and sent it running back through the warped hole in the window. We relocated immediately.

This is the first of my records. I will be documenting our attempts to

return.

Doctor Piedmont, signing off. Night one. One round expended. Seventy-one remain.

Rain continues for nearly two seconds before recording ends.

2

If the words "esoteric containment" mean nothing to you, stop listening.

Time passes, approximately ten seconds. The sounds of running and sloshing water are prominent nearby, as are a calm, low male voice and a higher pitched female voice, apparently in some distress.

We took a chance and returned to the manor house after daylight was sufficient to light the interior of the house. Terger was on point, I covered the others from behind. We didn't find more insects. The house has outlets but no power- it has no modern accoutrements whatsoever, in fact, and is in truth quite sparsely furnished for such an estate. There are places where paintings must have hung, however, and furniture was moved. It was probably stripped and abandoned. Still, we remain in some proximity to our time of origin, though we have clearly been geographically displaced.

We were unable to find any maps or other useful things here besides canned foods. Unfamiliar brand names. Could be regional food, could be evidence that we are further from home than I'd like to admit. Have to keep an open mind.

We had a debate about going into the basement. I was outvoted three to one in favor of breaking the locks and investigating. We were reasonably certain that nothing like we saw last night would be down there. We were right.

I know that it sounds absurd, but I have the nagging feeling that the thing that took a bite out of Terger's shoulder with the mouth on its

elbow used to be human. We didn't stay long enough to find out. Hanndock had found a keyring in the kitchen after we broke about half the locks with a hammer from the gardening shed. After the creature decided Terger wasn't tasty enough (I shot it, center mass), we relocked the remaining locks; we'll have to hope they're enough. The skin absorbed a lot of the impact, and we don't have the ammunition to kill the thing. We bound the wound; Terger seems as though he'll recover in a few days. A little longer to mend his ego.

This house is dangerous, but we don't have anyplace else to go. We'll walk a few hours tomorrow, and turn around if we can't get a vantage point to see another destination.

This is the second of the records documenting our attempts to return.

Doctor Piedmont, signing off. Night two. One round expended. Seventy remain.

Background noise continues for nearly two seconds before recording ends.

3

If the words "esoteric containment" mean nothing to you, stop listening.

Time passes, approximately ten seconds. The sound of a large fire, perhaps, is audible.

I was certain I remembered something about that creature. It matches a file a colleague had me read a few months ago, regarding a bottle of whiskey that turned drinkers into literal monsters. The insect may have been a… anomaly as well for all I know. But I know exactly what killed Alicia. I have no idea how three unrelated… objects… ended up in the same place.

We saw a small town on our expedition, from the top of a hill. It was on the other side of a river, but that was surmountable. We crossed

the river and followed it into town. Nobody was there. Too many houses for the cars here. Still here, I should say. There were some pretty deep-set oil stains in front of a few homes, but no vehicles to make them.

It must have been a while since the… I can't say what they are. I don't know who will find this. I'm calling it the beach. The beach killed or drove off everyone who lived in this city. If you find this note, don't get close to the lake. The sands are alive and they will devour you before you realize your feet are in pieces. They took her apart, had her on stumps before she realized she was getting shorter.

That's an exaggeration, but it was horrible to watch. When she tried to run, what was left of her feet splintered and she fell. She didn't scream long. We found a car with keys inside not too far from the lake; I spotted the keychain gleaming while we were running. I think we could have gotten away without the car, but it helped.

There's a roadmap; glove compartment. It's not in a language any of us speak, though it was dogeared on a specific page. The road layout fits the town, and the river; we're going to get some gas and find the next nearest town.

The clouds haven't lifted since we got here. Not for a minute. I hope that's just how things are here- the last thing we need is anomalous weather.

This is the third of the records documenting our attempts to return.

Doctor Piedmont, signing off. Night three. One magazine and sidearm lost. Fifty eight rounds remain. Got food from a grocery store. Looking for a gun shop next.

Background noise continues for nearly two seconds before recording ends.

4

The recording starts, but there is a pause- perhaps three seconds-

before Piedmont speaks. The only background sound is two uncoordinated sets of breathing.

If the words "esoteric containment" mean nothing to you… stop listening.

Time passes, approximately ten seconds. A third set of breathing joins the noise, much closer to the source of the recording.

Terger had to subdue Hanndock after we found the mirror. I don't know how it could have broken containment. There was only one, and we had it. The insect, the creature, the beach… could be explained. There's only one mirror. It can't be here, or else we're not where I thought we were. I'll talk to Terger alone from now on when discussing my theories. Hanndock isn't stable enough to take it.

We encountered the mirror on a stand in the pawn shop we broke into. We made it to the next town, but it's as empty as the first. We've found a few bodies, but they're all accidental. Nothing particularly alarming. The mirror, though, has us all on edge. Had. We put it face down behind the counter. But not before it told us what was happening.

We can't trust what it said. It'd have said anything to keep us from leaving. Terger almost stayed, but he followed my lead, thank god. Hanndock just… didn't understand. He must have never read the file. It screamed so loudly. I hope nothing's here to hear it.

It can't be here, but it is. We aren't home. We're someplace else. We'll find a way back. This many objects in one place? There has to be more.

I hope we don't find the wrong ones.

This is the fourth of the records documenting our attempts to return. The first since Connors' death.

Doctor Piedmont, signing off. Night four. One revolver, one rifle, one shotgun found, all loaded. No ammo besides. Seventy four rounds remain.

Background noise continues for nearly two seconds before

recording ends.

5

If the words "esoteric containment" mean nothing to you, stop listening.

Time passes, about ten seconds. The sound of calm conversation is in the background, two male voices. There is also the faint sound of rustling metal.

We aren't in Peru. They shouldn't be here. As far as anomalies go, though, grasshoppers aren't all that horrible. The accidents- we found dozens more before we made it to the store- make sense now. I'm glad we picked a grocery store to make camp; we'll be able to wait them out. Terger was the only one to see them, and he's restrained- not that it was hard to talk him into handcuffing himself to the door of the storeroom freezer after what he saw. Hanndock and I have been keeping him fed and taking him to the restroom when he needs to go, keeping our backs towards the windowed storefront. We took away his gun for the time being, obviously.

At least he told us what he was seeing before we looked. We'll be alright.

Another anomaly. We need to figure out what's going on before we run into something seriously dangerous again. There's too many objects to prepare for them all.

This is the fifth of the records documenting our attempts to return.

Doctor Piedmont, signing off. Night five. Seventy four rounds remain. We'll be here a while.

Background noise continues for nearly two seconds before recording ends.

6

If the words "esoteric containment" don't mean anything to you, stop listening.

Time passes, about ten seconds. Two sets of breathing, one matching that of a sleeping human, are audible in the background.

We lucked out. Again. Hanndock might have had some trouble with it if he'd been the first exposed, but it caught Terger at the tail end of the locust exposure. He didn't bat an eye. It's been disconcerting to have around, but we've been adjusting. Terger's proven resistant to its form of "attack," and it's taken to mimicking him. It bothers Hanndock most. The surprise gets to me, but I don't have any trouble with its secondary disturbances, at least. I think it might be amusing itself- forgive me the pun, but I'm glad of the irony that it lacks a "black" sense of humor. Who knows- maybe it will prove helpful in the end.

Doctor Piedmont, signing off. This is still the fifth night. Sixth of our records. Seventy three rounds after initial reactions.

Hanndock deserved the cuff to the head. I'm going to get Terger a beer.

The sleeping breathing continues; the other chuckles under his breath, presumably Terger. Piedmont joins in; recording terminates after approximately one more second.

7

If the words "esoteric containment" mean nothing to you, stop listening.

Time passes, approximately ten seconds. The sound of a motor is audible in the background.

We almost went into that house. The mother's slip-up, though- Hanndock's the one that caught the significance. Terger assumed she'd miscounted; I thought she'd included the statue (it didn't leave

with us- must have transferred to someone in the house). Hanndock, though, he'd been on edge since the statue started following us. Borderline paranoia, but it paid off.

I thought I was keeping an eye out. If we'd gone into that house… ten percent chance to escape infection. The distances on the map would have meant nothing after that. I owe Hanndock an apology. He's not suited for permanent field work, but he's a quick thinker and well-read.

Terger identified a city with a sector in the industrial district nearby. He trained there, he says. The cloud cover is finally breaking up a little, but it's far from a clear sky. Nice to see the stars, now and then.

Five days to-

Can't say. I mentioned there's a sector there. But five days and maybe we'll get some answers.

This is the seventh of the records documenting our attempts to return.

Doctor Piedmont, signing off. Night six. Seventy four rounds still remain.

Background noise continues for nearly two seconds before recording ends.

8

If the words "esoteric containment" mean nothing to you, stop listening.

Time passes, about ten seconds. Assorted sounds consitent with the cleaning of a civilian-grade hunting rifle are audible in the background.

If we return, I will write a personal letter of thanks to the founder of

the Foundation. I don't care that they won't get it. These things are-

There is a brief pause, then a short burst of nervous laughter.

These things are "redacted." You can choose your expletive of choice; whatever idiot savant type green created that godforsaken cloudfish needs to get a visit from Alto Clef. I don't know whether to be thankful that the first time Terger looked up was through the sunroof of our jeep or curse the decision to take on extra gear and store some on the roof. I hope the damned thing chokes on the shotgun. Everything else is replaceable, but we're probably going to be stuck with the sidearms and the eight shots in the rifle at least until we make the city, and after that bloody cloud…

Four days. This is the eighth of the records documenting our attempts to return.

Doctor Piedmont, signing off. Night seven. Shotgun lost. Seventy two rounds remain.

Brief, humorless grunt of laughter.

Plenty of food, though.

Background noise continues for nearly two seconds before recording ends.

9

If the words "esoteric containment" mean nothing to you, stop listening.

Time passes, about ten seconds. The soft sound of the surf is audible, not quite close to the microphone. It sounds like it's crashing against rocks, as opposed to onto sand.

We can put a rough date on the incursion. That's what I'm calling them now, the arrival of the anomalies. I've been studying the map we found, and we seem to be in the Atlantic Archipelago. That's the

U. K., if you're unfamiliar with the term. I thought the driving time was unrealistic, but Terger was right- while we could drive from where we started near…

Damn it all to hell, I can't even speak openly. We're going to a city on the other end of the country, and we can't drive straight there because we have to keep stopping and hunting for gas stations that still have gas to siphon off. So we have to keep detouring through this godawful abandoned world-

At least they tried to abandon it. We found out where most of the people ended up. The ones the anomalies inland didn't get. We stopped at a coastal city, the highway took us there. Roads aren't too crowded, thankfully. But the cliffs, and beaches and…

There are boats everywhere. Smashed against cliffs; the few that made it ashore safely were abandoned to the surf. Thank god it's late winter- not mating season, or we'd probably have been dead just being close enough to see those beaches. Drowning, though… better than Connors got.

My theory is it all happened at once. Anomalies arrived, probably decimated the population. Panic ensued, mass exodus failed; they must have ran out of boats eventually. And considering the nature of some of the more volatile anomalies, it can't have taken long to reduce the standing population to six, seven percent. The smart ones. We won't see them. They'll be too smart to approach us or attack us. They've probably got a good idea of when it's safe to move around, and a car in a silent world is a pretty loud announcement of our approach.

… Three days.

This is the ninth of the records documenting our attempts to return.

Doctor Piedmont, signing off. Night eight. Seventy two rounds remain.

Background noise continues for nearly two seconds before recording ends.

10

If the words "esoteric containment" mean nothing to you, stop listening.

Time passes, about ten seconds. Two sets of quiet breathing consistent with those heard in previous recordings are audible in the background, as is a repetitive tapping, like that of a foot.

We are no longer travelling after dark. When we find a place to secure for the night, it must be cleared by nightfall or we're just sleeping in the car.

You never forget the smell of that thing. Terger remembered it from a voluntary stint on Keter duty covering for a short-staffed skip after a breach. It stinks like… well, like gas and oil and death and rot. Imagine a corpse drenched in vaseline. Sort of like that. He wouldn't let us take another step until we knew where the anomaly was. It'd just pooled in a hollow. We could have walked straight through it on our way to the store across from where we were staying. It wasn't mimicking anything, though- I suppose in a place of relatively frequent food, it must have been easier to be a dark puddle than hope someone paranoid would traipse into a dangerous goop to save someone else.

It's getting harder to balance safety with the urge to get to the site. We all want to get home. Hanndock isn't allowed to drive, which means splitting up daylight between myself and Terger. The other sleeps in the car. We all need to be awake when we scout a campsite.

This is the tenth of the records documenting our attempts to return.

Doctor Piedmont, signing off. Night nine. Seventy two rounds still remain.

Background noise continues for nearly two seconds before recording ends.

11

If the words "esoteric containment" mean nothing to you, stop listening.

Time passes, about ten seconds. Hard breathing is audible, two-fold, with a third set of breaths slow and calm. One of the panting voices swears under their breath at infrequent intervals.

Hanndock's got a hairtrigger and he probably just saved Terger's life. If I remember the file right, we could have all died easily. It could have sat in that corner and at some point, bam. Someone dies, it bloats and goes for seconds. But Hanndock was out of sight when it started moving and was startled enough when he entered the room to just gun it down.

Who the fuck makes something like-

Under his breath, Piedmont speaks. … there is no fear. Fear is the mindkiller, and with the mind gone, we're all dead. Anomaly's gone, room cleared, Terger's recovering from the aboulia.

He returns to normal speaking volume. This is the eleventh of the records documenting our attempts to return.

Doctor Piedmont, signing off. Night ten. Sixty rounds remain. Hanndock gets to clear the next gun shop we find to replace his ammo- thing must have been dead after the sixth shot and he just kept firing.

Can't really blame him, that thing was ugly.

Get there tomorrow. Then we'll see what's going on.

Background noise continues for nearly two seconds before recording ends.

12

If the words…

Quiet panting is audible in the background, and sounds consistent with loading rounds into a magazine audible at what seems to be some slight distance from the microphone. Background audio includes occasional, distant vocalizations that do not match the spectrum of sounds produced by the human layrnx.

… "esoteric containment"… mean nothing to you… fuck off.

Nearly a minute of silence elapses; the magazine ceases to be loaded and can be heard being placed into a gun. A few moments later, it is ejected, the bullets removed and loading begins again. This repeats throughout the entire recording. At no point are any more or less than seven rounds inserted into the magazine.

… can't even fucking say what we saw or we're term'd if we ever make it back. Hanndock's dead. I shouldn't have sent him into that fucking gun shop alone.

The facility is intact. Even powered in some areas. We're too tired to look tonight. I don't know how far we ran. We won't be able to get back to the car. If what we need isn't down here…

This is the twelfth of the records documenting our attempts to return.

Doctor Piedmont, signing off. Night eleven… fifteen rounds, two sidearms remain.

Time passes, thirty seconds or so.

I used to fucking love peppermint. Damn it all to hell.

13

If the words "esoteric containment" mean nothing to you, stop listening.

Time passes, about ten seconds. The exhaustion and frustration in Piedmont's voice present in the last recording have faded. He sounds professional once more, and there are two sets of footsteps audible in the background. Background vocalizations are consistent with previous recordings.

The site may be intact, but containment certainly isn't. We've seen evidence of anomalies that weren't even stored at this site. I should have said that last time. We holed up in one of the observation rooms for a pretty dangerous anomaly. It was fortified, physical door locks, and nothing around to cause a problem. We slept in shifts. We aren't safe; we can hear movement, and other things, from distant parts of the site, but we've had training for situations like this. Back in the site, that all comes back quick.

The first room Terger thought we could use wasn't much of a room anymore. There's a bathroom a level above, and I guess the Foundation didn't discover that particular anomaly prior to all this. The roof was blasted out, part of the floor was slagged down into the containment chamber below- not all accounted for, though. Guess it's not surprising, considering the temperatures involved. Vapor doesn't leave a lot behind.

What's left in the containment chamber below might have been what ended things. It matches the containment procedures, and despite the overwhelming scent of char, I can still smell the fucking mint. Whoever was in here when the room above hit a few thousand kelvin sure as hell would have constituted a dead body.

This is the thirteenth of the records documenting our attempts to return.

Doctor Piedmont, signing off. Day twelve. Fifteen rounds still remain. We're heading for the archives to see what was kept here.

Background noise continues for nearly two seconds before recording ends.

14

If the words "esoteric containment" mean nothing to you, stop listening.

Time passes, about ten seconds. Background vocalizations are consistent with previous recordings. There are also faint sounds consistent with an individual standing in place shifting their weight occasionally.

Had to move through Euclid containment to reach the archives. We don't have much in the way of supplies, though, so we've relocated our base of operations. Always thought it was kind of silly, making the archives one of the most secure places in the facility. I'm not laughing now; this might be safe enough to keep us alive. More bodies in a few of the sealed rooms around the Archives- only in rooms that respond to security badges. Alive, unresponsive but clean, dressed… no obvious cause. Like they're being kept. Seriously concerning. Cognitohazard? Maybe.

We saw someone down one of the hallways. Looked alive, but the damnedest thing is that I swear I saw one of them earlier today, but it was braindead. Still stunning that they're alive at all. I guess that the-

… right. Can't talk about them. But they don't come down here. I think the stuff below scares them.

I hope to God it's the stuff *below* here that scares them.

This is the fourteenth of the records documenting our attempts to return.

Doctor Piedmont, signing off. Day thirteen. Fifteen rounds remain.

Background noise continues for nearly two seconds before recording ends.

15

If the words "esoteric containment" mean nothing to you, stop

listening.

Time passes, about ten seconds. There are sounds indicating an individual shuffling through some papers, near to the speaker; Background vocalizations are consistent with previous recordings. Also present are footsteps indicative of an individual pacing around the room, likely on watch.

I do not like what I am seeing. We left the archives just once today, to check the canteen for supplies. No problem obtaining some, but I'm sure I saw someone watching us. They were gone when we left with our supplies, though I have no idea where they went. Had a panic attack when I realized there were weakening, decaying spots on the walls, but they aren't actively falling apart- it's not him. We'd have known if he was here. We'd be fucked if he was here.

I checked the spot where I remembered the doll- the living body, nobody home- that I thought I saw yesterday. Still there. Different position, and I'm sure there wasn't dust on the cuffs of his slacks before.

They're moving. Or being moved. Just not when we're here.

We took a roundabout way back to camp. Don't think we've been followed. Guess we'll find out, if whoever I saw has Factory gear. Not like walls are going to keep them out. Gonna have to stay hidden.

Still searching for records of what I hope is here. Beans for dinner. Yum. *Piedmont's tone here suggests overwhelming dissatisfaction with the contents of his meal.*

This is the fifteenth of the records documenting our attempts to return.

Doctor Piedmont, signing off. Day fourteen. Fifteen rounds remain.

Background noise continues for nearly two seconds before recording ends.

16

If the words "esoteric containment" mean nothing to you, stop listening.

Time passes, about ten seconds. Background vocalizations are consistent with previous recordings. A second set of respiration suggests a sleeping individual.

More sightings of our companions. Always at a distance, always gone when we check later. Always near those decayed patches. Pretty confident that's Factory work. Still not sure how the dolls are moving. More were out of place. It's never much different, but it is. I'm sure of it. Terger's been giving me some weird looks, but he trusts me. I know what I'm talking about.

Encountered an anomaly when we went to check out an archive annex one floor down. I haven't got a clue how the observation chamber got relocated into one of the hallways. We detoured around, but not before watching a few cycles. Waste of a minute, but it was nice to see some human beings for a little, even if they do get shot and who knows what happens after the flash. Hope they're okay.

It's weird- I never cared before, but now I really do hope they're okay. Wherever they are.

Guess I'm just more sympathetic now.

This is the sixteenth of the records documenting our attempts to return.

Doctor Piedmont, signing off. Day fifteen. Fifteen rounds remain.

Background noise continues for nearly two seconds before recording ends.

17

If the words "eso… esot-teric containment" mean-n-n-n n-nothing to you, s-s-s-stop… stop listening.

Time passes, about ten seconds. Background vocalizations are consistent with previous recordings. Two individuals exhibit rapid respiration consistent with a state of panic.

This i-is completely irrational. I know it won't act if we d… don't open the door. I KNOW it won't and I KNOW for a FACT that if we DO open the door, it'll-

Piedmont's voice cracks, devolves into hyperventilation for a brief moment before he can get himself under control.

But it WON'T. It WILL and we're FUCKED if it doesn't leave.

I fucking hate cognitohazards. I'd rather run from them upstairs than sit here cowering.

Terger gave me his g-g… gun. To make sure he d… doesn't… waste bullets.

Or himself.

Fourty-three seconds pass; rapid breathing remains consistent with a panic state.

This is the seventeenth of the records documenting our attempts to return.

Doctor Piedmont, signing off. Day sixteen. Fifteen rounds remain.

Background noise continues for nearly two seconds before recording ends.

18

If the words "esoteric containment" mean nothing to you, stop listening.

Time passes, about ten seconds. Background vocalizations are consistent with previous recordings.

It's still there.

Seventeenth record. Day seventeen. Fifteen rounds.

Background noise continues for nearly two seconds before recording ends.

19

If the words "esoteric containment" mean nothing to you, stop listening.

Time passes, about ten seconds. Background vocalizations are consistent with previous recordings.

Still there.

Eighteenth record. Day eighteen. Fifteen rounds.

Background noise continues for nearly two seconds before recording ends.

20

Still there.

Nineteenth day. Nineteenth record. Fifteen bullets.

I just want to go home.

Background noise continues for nearly two seconds before recording ends.

21

Still there. Out of water.

Twentieth. Fifteen bullets.

We're going to die.

Background noise continues for nearly two seconds before recording ends.

22

Still there. Out of food.

Twenty first. Fifteen bullets.

Background noise continues for nearly two seconds before recording ends.

23

Piedmont begins this recording in a tone suggesting triumph bordering on mania; additional voice in the background is laughing in frantic relief.
If the words "esoteric containment" mean nothing to you, stop listening, you lucky son of a bitch.

Time passes, about ten seconds. Background vocalizations are consistent with previous recordings. Laughing subsides to a chuckle, sounds of firearm maintenance can be heard.

The fucking dolls. Whatever's moving them, one must have threatened line of sight on the bastard! He's gone, and we found ourselves to get out of here and get some goddamned water. Had to

use the restroom faucets to rinse out and refill the bottles- someone's locked the canteen doors with a rock.

At least that's what I figure's gotta be there. Terger tried to force the door open, but the way he stumbled back so far, looking startled, I didn't let him try more than once more. Said it was hard to reverse, and he winced hard when he kicked it again. Got him away from the door. There's a patch of discolored paint next to the door; pretty sure we can thank the dolls for this. Still, we HAVE food, and it could have been worse- they could have locked OUR door.

This is the- what, twenty second?-

Affirmation is audible.

-twenty second of the records documenting our attempts to return.

Doctor Piedmont, signing off. Day twenty two. Fifteen rounds remain.

Background noise continues for nearly two seconds before recording ends.

24

If the words "esoteric containment" mean nothing to you, stop listening.

Time passes, about ten seconds. Background vocalizations are consistent with previous recordings. Additional audio suggests a second individual engaged in the act of eating.

The annex has been compromised. Contagious typoes-

Secondary individual disputes the definition.

- it might as WELL be typoes, Terger, for all the good a badly-written self-insert fantasy does us. A dozen file cabinets and three PCs ruined. We checked ourselves for any materials that could bring the

infection back, left them there. I'm glad I left my coat upstairs today- might have infected our recordings. We haven't lost much, but we'll have to go deeper tomorrow. We've exhausted the options on this floor and one below, and there's another canteen three floors down. We'll locate a safe room before restocking.

This is the twenty third of the records documenting our attempts to return.

Doctor Piedmont, signing off. Day twenty three. Fifteen rounds remain.

Background noise continues for nearly two seconds before recording ends.

25

If the words "esoteric containment" mean nothing to you, stop listening.

Time passes, about ten seconds. Background vocalizations are consistent with previous recordings, though fainter. Additional audio suggests the recording occurs while Piedmont and Terger are in transit on foot.

Annex two floors down from base one was empty, except for a single sheet of… I think it was leather, middle of the room. I didn't let Terger get close, not if that's what I think it is. I think annex is a bad term for a room that's something like a hundred feet on a side, this place could almost be its own archive. Could have been, anyway. There was one file cabinet left, crammed back in a corner, but I think he woulda been pushing awful close to the edge of the jump radius. We can't afford to pick that thing up on anything we're relying on. We'll just keep looking. One more floor to-

A third set of footsteps becomes rapidly audible. Faint, growing static is heard overwhelming the audio. A previously unheard voice calls for someone to 'get out of the way.'

Shit, TERGER! We've g

Audio dissolves into uselessness for six minutes, twenty eight seconds; fluctuations suggests an attempt to record strong, nearby sounds. Recording ends.

25 Cont.

Recording resumes.

-nk you, doctor. Had no idea about the battery leaking. I owe you my thanks. Stay safe.

Christ. Just wanted to get that leaky battery out before it ruined this device. Would have lost our records.

That's terrifying. I don't even know why, they aren't at all necessary to our survival, but recording these keeps me feel… grounded.

Sane, I suppose. Though now I feel guilty for not taking better care of my recorder, so there's that theory out the window.

Anyway. This is the twenty fourth of the records documenting our attempts to return.

Doctor Piedmont, signing off. Day twenty four. Fifteen rounds remain.

Background noise continues for nearly two seconds before recording ends.

26

If the words "esoteric containment" mean nothing to you, stop listening.

Time passes, about ten seconds.

I want to say that the stairwell we approached was flooded, but that's not quite right. Maybe it was, at one point. The corridors one floor down are steel-walled, chambered to seal in an emergency. The one by the stairwell was filled with what looked like basalt. Tons and tons of solid, smooth basalt. Tested it with a dead monitor; broke the rock, left a splash, frozen in stone. No way we get through there.

Another stairwell at the north end of this block. We'll try tomorrow.

This is the twenty fifth of the records documenting our attempts to return.

Doctor Piedmont, signing off. Day twenty five. Fifteen rounds remain.

Secondary individual remarks; volume is insufficient to make out dialogue.

Yeah. I'm tired, too. We'll try to take a break when we make it to the canteen.

Background noise continues for nearly two seconds before recording ends.

27

If the words "esoteric containment" mean nothing to you, stop listening.

Time passes, about ten seconds. Soft breathing nearby; pitch suggests female physiology. Distant, rhythmic footsteps in a stilted pattern.

And so are we three. Terger insists we bring her along. I'm not so sure, but she's only dangerous if we hurt her. So… we won't. I'd be more comfortable without a tagalong, but as long as we're not here more than a month and she doesn't get torn up any… Terger handed over his shoes so she wouldn't step on glass or rubble. I

considered suggesting we ask her if she's willing to let us harvest a little venom, but Terger's so keen to have company of SOME kind that's not trying to kill us… not worth it.

Made good progress, at least. We're two floors down. Next floor should have the canteen.

This is the twenty sixth of the records documenting our attempts to return.

Doctor Piedmont, signing off. Day twenty six. Fourteen rounds remain- just nerves. Glad I missed.

Background noise continues for nearly two seconds before recording ends.

28

Strain is evident in the voice of the speaker.

If the words "esoteric containment" mean nothing to you, stop listening.

Time passes, about ten seconds.

I am alone.

Another twelve seconds pass in silence.

A door opened where there had been none before. Terger brought up the gun, finger off the trigger, standard procedure.

I guess she never saw the movies. The curse didn't send him flying. She just… turned him off and left. The woman stayed by his body. I took the gun and left.

I couldn't have taken her out of here anyway.

This is the twenty seventh of the records documenting our attempts to return.

Doctor Piedmont, signing off alone. Day twenty seven. Fourteen rounds remain.

Background noise continues for nearly two seconds before recording ends.

29

If the words "esoteric containment" mean nothing to you, stop listening.

Time passes, about ten seconds.

New base camp. Good place to store supplies- it's extremely defensible. True, it's loud, but anything drawn by the noise is already going to be affected.

Just need to remember to watch my footing. There'll be a lot of blood if I have to play anything.

This is the twenty eighth of the records documenting our attempts to return.

Doctor Piedmont, signing off. Day twenty eight. Fourteen rounds remain.

Background noise continues for nearly two seconds before recording ends.

30

If the words "esoteric containment" mean nothing to you, stop listening.

Time passes, about ten seconds, in which indistinct and apparently amicable discourse occurs in the background between two male subjects, including the speaker.

It's almost amusing, the things of which you can be reminded. If I'd been asked to brief someone else on how to handle this fellow here… I'd have said "don't shoot first. Or at all."

I completely forgot he was backing up our database. It's a new one, but it should work. One-Seven-Eight-Oh. I just need it, an office… and some patience.

This is the twenty ninth of the records documenting our attempts to return.

Doctor Piedmont, signing off. Day twenty nine. Fourteen rounds remain.

Background noise continues for nearly two seconds before recording ends.

XXX

If the words 'esoteric containment' mean nothing to you, stop listening.

Time passes, about ten seconds.

It felt harder to keep going when it was just me. Having Terger around meant I had someone to watch out for. Meant I had to watch my mouth, too- not like he's cleared for all this- but it was motivating. Now… just me.

But that's enough. I'm… almost done. 1780 wasn't too hard to get. It was hard to get *to*, sure- though some things were just a little… comical. The manhole, for instance. In the middle of a secure facility…

The strangest thing was the IV. Someone had hooked it up to… *something.* Wires and batteries and plugs. So much power, and it all seemed to do nothing. Maybe it's responsible for all this. I can't tell, really. I haven't got the luxury to sit here and try to unravel all that. It doesn't matter- I've got to get back. I've been too lucky by half; the

Cop keeping the Salesman company, the *rats*- both sorts, the smart ones and the sharp ones, the candy and the fish- Christ, I hate compulsives.

Terger never really thought to ask why I knew so much about all these things. It's not like the database is an open book. You read what you're assigned to, nothing more. Usually. Some assignments require more indepth familiarity.

EC-3 doesn't stand for esoteric containment- but I couldn't very well tell them that. Easier for all of us if they were just working with some researcher. They expect us to know everything, anyway- far easier than explaining.

I've rigged the nameplate at an angle. When I slam this door, it'll break static friction and allow it to slide out of the holder. This room… it's a crapshoot, but it's better than all this.

There wasn't a pop or rush of air or anything. It's like it's always been connected to the room on the other side. I opened it, so… I just need to step through, slam the door. I can feel the bit of metal in my hand, gravid with all the pregnancy of possibility. I know what's on the other side of this door. Time and space relative to a single room that is anything but singular, spread out and away like… forever.

This is the thirtieth of the records documenting my hopefully successful attempt to return.

Doctor Piedmont, signing off. Day forty two. Fourteen rounds remain.

Background noise continues for nearly two seconds before recording ends.

If the words 'esoteric containment' mean nothing to you, stop listening.

Time passes, about ten seconds.

I'm still waiting.

Background noise continues for nearly two seconds before recording ends.

The recording resumes an uncertain amount of time later. There are several days of silent recording of nothing besides the turning of pages, the sounds of two guns- one sidearm and a larger firearm- being disassembled, cleaned and reassembled, and pacing footsteps. After 207 hours, Piedmont speaks. His voice reflects strain, consistent with prolonged solitary confinement.

Nothing runs out here. I haven't run out of time. Or energy. Or gun oil. or battery

A tiny pause, and the note of tension increases in the tone of Piedmont's voice.

Except reading material. I'm out of that, save for the letter. And I'm not going to be reading that. I've read the excerpt. I'm not scared. But it's not the way back.

I can ignore one sheet of paper for as long as I have to.

Speech stops and activity lapses into the aforementioned patterns of behavior. These continue. Despite the limitations of the amount of information that can be stored on the digital recording device, recording continues as above, without pause, during which time audio analysis of the recording shows four vocalized patterns matching Piedmont's readings of the text of Oxford's Unabridged English Dictionary and three variants of Time Life's Great Ages of Man: A History of the World's Cultures, repeating a collective total of 923 times with slight but detectable increase in vocal tremors as time goes on. At 4763 hours and 27 minutes, the door opens, a single pair of footsteps enter the room approaching the recorder and recording ends.

A second voice cuts into the middle of a sentence, apparently intructing Piedmont to "go ahead" with something. Piedmont speaks, notably more stable but significantly more guarded in tone.

If the words "esoteric containment" mean nothing to you, stop listening.

Time passes, about ten seconds, then the second voice speaks, prompting Piedmont to continue.

I'm sitting at a table across from a man I've never met but I've read about. He's told me that we'll meet, later and in a less… tense situation. And he's stated he can get me back when I need to go.

Emphasis on when. There's only so many exit points into our world, so many active instances, and the only one that's not going to result in classification as 1780-2 is…

Jesus. Is that what this whole mess was for? Three people dead in a world that never knew them, and all to get me to one when. Not even ME, but someone who knows what I know.

A short pause.

How do you know what EC actually stands for?

The second voice speaks shortly.

… of course I did.

Goddammit. Every attendant researcher and *all* of the D-Class have already been killed or incapacitated by the time the instance becomes active? This is accurate?

I don't want to do this, Xyank. Tachyon Control Circuit or not, I'm seriously tempted to just take one of the other doors. Containment or not- do you *know* what that procedure entails?

A longer pause. Silence on both sides. Then, a heavy sigh.

… no. You wouldn't. Or you'd do it yourself. That's why I'm here.

Another, considerably longer pause, then the sound of a chair moving, someone standing.

Alright. I'll do it. It's not like I don't already know what's involved.

Just.

Never thought I'd have to participate.

A series of footsteps, then another in tandem, move away from the recorder. Distantly, Piedmont speaks.

When you're ready.

The door clicks, and immediately the far-off sound of screaming and the nearer sounds of panicked voices fill the room.

See you later, X. You'll have to explain that Tachyon Control Circuit deal some other time. The long way. I'm done with vanishings.

Footsteps proceed away from the recorder, and Piedmont's raised voice covers the sounds of chaos.

No time to panic, people, we've all just been requisitioned by order of the Ethics Committee. I've already been briefed on Procedure 110-Montauk forward and backwards and we've still got time to do this *if you shut up and do as you're told.* You'll all get amnestics and commendations as soon as we're done but we get one ch-

The door clicks shut and the sounds die instantly. Footsteps, slow and almost ponderous in the wake of Piedmont's departure, approach the recorder. A heavy sigh is heard before the second voice speaks.

I hate saying this, but you can't give him the amnestic. Deny him this experience and he isn't going to be half-ready for what comes down the line. He needs this edge. And he needs this trauma.

We need him a little broken. So don't fix him.

Or we'll just have to do it again.

Background noise continues for nearly two seconds before recording ends.

Indigo Eyes

ATTACHED DOCUMENTS: Pages recovered from a journal in the forests of the Yukon Territory.

JANUARY 7, 19

I've just received word from my superiors regarding my new stationing. I'm to be stationed at the newly formed Fort Tingenek, all the way up in Yukon Territory, in Canada. Apparently, it's meant to be a little military installation to provide defense for Site 804. It's a bit of a journey from here in Virginia, but orders are orders. I've always found it fun operating in other countries, under the noses of the government. It's terribly exciting, though sometimes I do fear we'll be found out. I suppose it doesn't really matter. This is where I've got to go, and the higher-ups know what they're doing. I've got my things packed, and I'm off.

JANUARY 10, 19

At last, I'm settled in at the fort. It's not very large, and there's only about fifty of us on base. We're a few miles out from the site, just far enough so that we feel totally isolated. I'll tell you one thing – it's freezing up here. Human beings were not meant to make the jump from Virginian heat to Canadian frigidity in such a short time. We're out in the middle of nowhere, surrounded on all sides by towering, snow-laden trees, and the ice is so thick it could stop a bullet. Honestly, we've tried shooting at it. The Colonel told us we were acting like children. Maybe, but there's not much to do in this goddamn freezer. Hopefully the temperature warms up a bit in the morning.

JANUARY 11, 19

I've met some of the locals now, from a nearby Inuit village. The translator indicated that they were not thrilled about our presence in the area, and that they disapproved strongly of our usage of weaponry. I assured them that they were perfectly safe, but nothing seemed to ease their minds. Perhaps they'll come around to us, in time. In other news, it has only gotten colder since I arrived. I'm afraid to spit for fear that the saliva will crystallize on my tongue. One of the men got severe frostbite last night, his entire leg consumed by the blackness. I worry about my safety in the cold. I was not prepared for such extreme temperatures, although I suppose I should have been.

JANUARY 13, 19

While training with live ammunition last night, we were interrupted by the panicked cries of the local villagers. When we went to find out what was wrong, they began babbling about "waking the spirit" and "eyes of indigo". I've no idea what they're talking about, and the Colonel says to ignore them. "The eskimos are a superstitious bunch," he told us. "You need to chant and throw rose petals to take a piss in those villages." So we're resolved to blocking out the obnoxious yelling of the Inuits. Hopefully, they'll stop bothering us if we don't acknowledge them.

JANUARY 16, 19

Our policy of ignoring the Inuits seems to have paid off, as we have not been contacted by them in a few days. We can only hope it persists and we can train in peace. Frankly, I'm not sure why this esoteric stretch of wilderness requires a military base. I'm sure there's a good reason, but at the moment I'm seriously questioning the judgment of those who set Fort Tingenek up. I haven't been able to feel my extremities for days,

and the ice and snow gets into our weapons and ruins them. This place is a frozen hellhole.

On another note, Site 804 has gone quiet recently. Communications are shot, and we're a bit concerned. A group of us went out to the Site, but no one answered us. For the time being, the Colonel told us not to worry about it. These secretive, esoteric bastards are probably involved in some foul business that they'd rather not discuss, as is typical. They'll respond as soon as they can, he said. Of course they will.

JANUARY 17, 19

Something is going on in these woods, and I wish I knew what. The Colonel sent a few of us out to meet with the villagers, since their disappearance ceased to be convenient and began to be suspicious. We were not prepared for the sight that we beheld in that village. All of the buildings had been burnt to the ground; some of them were still aflame even as we approached. In the streets lay innumerable amounts of dead, slaughtered there on the frigid soil. They looked as though they'd been torn apart by animals, yet upon further inspection, we realized that they had torn each other apart. Some of them clutched handfuls of their neighbors' flesh, their mouths filled with human meat. It was a horrifying, grisly scene, and I can't say I've ever heard of anything this brutal.

We searched for survivors, but if anyone had lived, they were nowhere to be found. Judging by the state of the bodies, we determined that they had met their ends a few nights ago, shortly after we stopped answering their cries. What form of madness had overtaken this peaceful village? We had no answers. No one did. When we told the Colonel, he said nothing, but his eyes were fearful. We will not be firing live rounds tonight.

JANUARY 18, 19

At 0200 hours this morning, one of our men came crashing into the barracks from his post, white-faced and breathless. He spoke of a shadowy figure watching him from the bushes, and how he had gone to investigate. Shaking, he recalled the overwhelming odor of death and decay, and how it had frightened him away from the shape. As he had backed away, he caught a glimpse of what the figure was, and fled. He described some sort of "giant zombie", tall and gaunt, with mottled skin and tight, ragged flesh. This prompted an uproar of laughter, leading the Colonel to interrogate him about where he was keeping his drugs.

That was when we heard that terrible, spine-chilling screaming. Weapons readied, we stormed outside to find a soldier tearing into the stomach of another, ripping at his innards. His mouth was blood-soaked and we noticed that the eviscerated man, still shrieking and clinging to life, was missing much of his face. We aimed at the cannibalistic soldier and demanded that he stand down, and he turned to face us. Those eyes, those godforsaken eyes! Those hollow, deadened indigo eyes! He – it? – bellowed at us, and we opened fire. We cut him down and burned his body, and we buried the disemboweled man. The wind was howling as if it were roaring at us, or perhaps laughing.

No one slept. Today, we were afraid to move, and no man's hand left his weapon. What is happening? Why?

JANUARY 19, 19

Two more men died last night, victims of yet another flesh-eating, maddened soldier, again with those unholy eyes. There is no time to grieve, for there may be another death at any moment. I can't sleep; I can't bring myself to close my eyes. I keep seeing those indigo eyes, every time I blink. I was lying by the window and I looked outside, and I swear I saw something move by.

Something tall and thin to the point of emaciation. I'm trying to convince myself that it was my imagination, but I'm not the only one who has seen it.

There is something out there, and it is stalking us. It is driving us mad. I keep remembering the village and the violence and depravity we witnessed there. I'm afraid that our fate is the same. The villagers wanted us to stop firing, so as not to awaken something. We didn't listen, and they paid the price. We're next. The Inuits were never alone in these woods. Something slumbered, biding its time, collecting its strength. Some malicious entity slept out there, in the cold, ice, and snow.

We woke it up.

JANUARY 20, 19

It came for us.

JANUARY 21, 19

I don't have much time. I heard noises in the bushes and I'm going to have to move soon. The fort is gone, razed to the ground, a smoldering ruin. The men ripped at each other like savage beasts, feasting on their own kind. I had to kill so many of my brothers in arms, lost to the madness. I feared I was losing my own grip on sanity. Even now I question the status of my mental health, for who can see so much horror and escape unscathed?

As I ran, fleeing the burning fort before the tall thing could take my mind as well, I saw the Colonel firing into the darkness. I saw a shadow of a colossal, narrow being, and it grabbed him by the skull, dragging him into the blackness. As he disappeared, screaming pleas of help, the stench of rot and corruption permeating the icy air, the thing looked at me. I looked into its lifeless, soulless, godless indigo eyes, and I felt the hatred, the greed and hunger and bloodlust of this creature,

intensified a thousand-fold over centuries of existence, feeding and dementing and lurking. I saw its true, primal desires, and the feeling of its unquenchable drive to devour brought me to my knees. Then it was gone, returned to the darkness as my fellow men murdered each other in the snow. I stood, my knees shaking, and I ran, not daring to look back.

I write this now by the side of a huge tree, hidden by a bank of snow, miles from the fort. I dare not move for the Site. It is abundantly clear to me what transpired there. But I cannot rest. I must keep going. It is coming for me. It does not leave survivors. I know that now.

JANUARY 22, 19

This is a goodbye. The creature has found me. I am in a cave, dark and cold like the rest of this wretched forest, and there is nowhere to run. I hear it moving near the entrance, and I can smell its putrescent stench. I hope someday, however unlikely it may be, that someone will find this journal and learn from our mistakes. The forest must remain undisturbed. There is something that lives among these trees. It is not human. It feeds on the minds and flesh of men, turning them against each other and satisfying its never-ending starvation. It cannot be stopped or killed. Those who would come to this forest – turn back! This is a dead place, an unholy part of the world abandoned by God and left to the demons. You mus

I see the eyes now. The indigo eyes, never blinking, never faltering. It is here.

May God have mercy on my so

Item Recovery Log:
Journal was discovered in a small cave located 21.6 kilometers outside of Site 804. Upon investigation of the diary's contents, Site 804 was immediately condemned. A request to post guards around

the perimeter of the area was denied due to the likely loss of life and waste of resources. Journal was not accompanied by a body, and no bodies were located in the ruins of the fort or village, though traces of blood were found. As of now, the area is deemed off-limits to all personnel.

Individuality

You want to know where it all went wrong? The reason the Foundation is in this state? I can tell you. I'm probably the last person who can tell. They got all the others… either dead, hidden, or changed. I think six was the lucky one. They killed him early on. Threw him into the pit and watched him fall. Probably still falling.

It was our fault. We were in deep, and it was the easy way out. When the Insurgency split, they took most of our top brass. Men who had experience in the field. We weren't as big then, which meant replacing them wouldn't be an option. Nobody wanted to work for us. In the end, we ended up with about a dozen guys left from a group of hundreds. We needed effective administrators more than ever. We didn't have any choice, we can't be blamed for that.

I think it was Four who suggested it, or maybe Two. We'd recently recovered an object from some Turks down in the Caucasus, a machine that could make men. It was dangerous, and it cost us too much to take it, so we'd locked it up. He declared we would use it. Make any amount of men we needed. Some of us objected, but we were overruled. These were desperate times. We were losing so many people, and we couldn't see more friends leave. So we took a risk. A bad risk as it turns out, but thats the way these things are.

Anyways, the project got underway shortly after that decree. We had the last of our best working on it. It was a round the clock ordeal, waiting for the updates. Maybe we were a little haphazard. Some corners were cut here, ingredients were skimped there. Whatever the case was, our first batch was a disaster. They weren't human, they weren't even beasts. Just empty shells. We scrapped them and moved on. Time was short, and it seemed like we lost more people every day.

The second batch was better. They didn't really interact very well, but they could walk and talk like a human could. They didn't really have spirit. You know? The light was on, but there wasn't anybody

home. The guys who were in charge of this whole thing declared him a success, and they put him into full scale deployment. We protested again, but we didn't amount to much.

The next batches all came out better than the one before. We thought we were learning how to control it, and the things it produced. We got some interesting ones by messing with the settings, and using the different components we had at our disposal. They really thought that was brilliant, being able to store and transfer people like that. I thought it was spectacular, but then again we all knew how he really turned out.

They deployed them all across the field, at every site and field office. It looked like we'd found a godsend, and it made some of them think we had some kind of mandate from the almighty. They wouldn't just say it aloud like that, but you could still tell when they spoke. Referencing our "divine purpose" to "protect humanity". They just didn't want to think about how easily we could've failed. It gave them faith though, that we would make it back from the brink.

This is about the time we started getting the complaints. Didn't seem like a big deal at first. So some scientists think the cold guy acts like a robot. We know he acts like a robot. Some agents think the MTF captains are too rough. Boo-hoo. But when the question of credentials came up, we were kinda thrown off-guard. We tried throwing out some biographies, trying to keep them placated, and we tried to come up with something.

I'm the one who came up with it. I said that if we couldn't make them plausible as down to earth administrators, we'd have to make them larger than life. Figures that would tower over the rest of the Foundation, and have legends build around them. There were problems. They were harder to conceal, since they were now recognizable. Some of us thought the stories were absurd, and unbelievable. We managed to sell the story enough that a majority of them bought into it, and we moved forward with the plan.

The first changes were mostly minor, giving details to the backstories. The major one was the immortal guy. We gave some jewelry that was supposed to house their soul. Then we started making some of the major alterations. We gave them the family, the

items, the whole nine yards. We enhanced a few sites to serve as incident points. We even had a few of the guys who we'd found, like burglars and cultists who we recruited. We did foolish things too, like decommissioning a few of the less important objects. There was a lot of controversy about that, but it was silenced when morale leaped up in the aftermath. We stopped losing people and started gaining them. It had worked. It wasn't a healthy culture, and it might be one of the main reasons things went wrong the way they did. But they were gonna go wrong anyways, it was only a matter of time.

The first sign of trouble came when we started to get the administrators acting out on their own. At first it was minor stuff, like comments on memos or acting out against researchers. We thought it was just a result of their minds adjusting to their identities, but as it went on the acting out started to get out of hand. It stopped being a game of who can keep them the silliest and started being a struggle to keep them reigned in. We got most back under our thumb, but the few we missed were massively destructive, and should've made us reconsider the whole program.

Site-19 was one of our primary sites, and its loss was highly unfortunate. It should've shown us that we had created a monster. Instead we thought it was an isolated incident. The instance that had caused it was disassembled, and we stopped creating new production runs of it. People didn't really ask about what had happened to him. We spread the word that he'd been taken to some top secret facility for new work. You bet your ass the administrators asked about him. They constantly badgered us with information about him, and we just kept our lips sealed. I think that if we had taken the incident more seriously, we would've avoided what happened, but we were riding too high to notice what was happening below.

We started talking about a new generation of administrators, improved with all our newfound wealth and power. The thought was that if we had been so successful with a dozen men and no money at all, we would be able to create unbelievable things with the power we had now. So we made another decree. We assembled what was left of the old team and brought in our new best and brightest. We dusted off the old man maker and we started from a fresh slate.

The results don't really matter. All you need to know is that they didn't last in the field. We lost at least half of them in the first month alone. There were many causes of death-poison, fire, breach, the works-but the main thing was that none of them were natural deaths. They were killed. We tried to figure out what was going on. Was the machine affecting probability? Did we make a mistake while we had been creating them? And on top of all this, the immortal guy disappeared. And then the guy who messed up photos disappeared too. We were scrambling. We'd been leaning on these guys for years, and they weren't anywhere. We probably didn't need them as much as we thought, but it was still the crutch the Foundation had been leaning on for years suddenly being yanked from underneath us.

As we're trying to deal with this and the deaths, we start losing contact with sites. It felt like a disaster had been suddenly shoved in our faces. We tried to tread water, but every time we did another ocean of problems washed over us. We recalled the MTF-O5 to Command and waited for the worst.

He showed up on the monitor, telling us he was in control. We had a short talk, most of it inane now, but he'd already won by that point. He had all of our administration staff against us. All we had was a couple MTF's and some access codes. We hollered and screeched and raised holy hell, but it didn't matter. He has us in his pocket.

They run the council now, the men we made. They just keep a few of us around to write the memos. I wish I could say we're working against them, or that you should, but it's over. They've changed too much. It's not the same place it was before. It lost that mutual respect that we had for each other, and made it into this big, amorphous octopus, with arms reaching in every nation. Wrong as it may be, thats the way it is. Maybe someday we can rise against it, bring it down and make things like they were before.

We can always hope.

Industrial Espionage

The following document was collected in the aftermath of [DATA EXPUNGED]. Sensitive portions of the document have been removed.

7/16/87
Brand new entry in a brand new journal. This isn't my standard-issue Wondertainment Magic Journal. This is my new standard-issue Prometheus Labs E-Recorder. It's encoded to my voice, fingerprints, retinas, and even my pulse. It looks like a Wondertainment Magic Journal, but this thing makes it look like pencil and paper. Thing's crazy. I can tell it what I want to write and it'll do it. Heck, I'm saying this out loud right now and it's recording and formatting and everything! Only problem is that it picks up a whole lot of sound that I have to go back and edit each time I record. Also it can't pick up on italics or anything. But I can record video footage with this and I can connect online and I can write documents on this. It can play music. It even plays Tetris. It's got more processing power than a Wondertainment Super-Brain and costs more than a house. And I got it for free in the mail. I know I shouldn't be telling people this, but it's so fuckin' huge that I've got to tell somebody. The entire department got bought out by Prometheus Labs. I've never even heard of Wondertainment selling something before.

7/19/87
First day at my new job. This place is crazy. This morning, I woke up and there was a box on the front door from Prometheus Labs. I open it up. It's this big blue disk and the packaging tells me it's a teleporter. A teleporter! It's already prebuilt and everything. All I had to do was fit some pieces together like Wonder Bricks and

plug it in to the wall. It lit up and then I stepped on it and suddenly I was flying into a mattress. This hits the wall at like a thousand miles an hour but there isn't even a scuff on it. So I get off the mat and pick it up. And I'm looking around, and Jesus Christ I still don't know where in the world I am. I mean it's this huge shiny steel and glass warehouse. And there's fucking fish swimming outside the glass. And I don't mean tuna. I mean fucking anglerfish. There's an honest to god anglerfish outside the windows at the top. Some guy is talking to me and I think he was saying something about the mattress, but whatever. This place is fucking amazing! I got a tour of the place, and it is just incredible. It's like Atlantis.

7/22/87

So I finally finished touring the city. This place is basically Atlantis. It's an underwater city made of glass and some kind of weird metal. I think we get supplies through those teleporters. I dunno why, but we use a maglev to get around down here instead of them. Still, it's pretty cool. The buildings are just these big, rounded structures. They're made out of the same glass and metal. The last five days all I've done is live here and get accustomed to the city. And this place is definitely a city. I've got a pretty swell apartment. It's got a hella view of the ocean but then so does everywhere down here, and it's pretty spacious. Real nice wooden flooring, granite countertops, even a luxury Jacuzzi in the bath. It's made of glass, but the good thing's that it's one way. Somehow they got all my stuff from home down here. Kinda freaky that they got in so easily, but everything seems fine. There's even loads of shops down here, like a Nordstrom's and Mens Wearhouse and Subway and even a theater! Plus my Prometheus ID card lets me get everything for free! They call this place Sub-City Twelve, and I heard someone mention Sub-City Six. Does that mean there are eleven others down here?

7/23/87

Today I finally got a tour of my new office. It's totally

different from the rest of the city. It's inside a goddamn volcano, if you can believe it. Like seriously, I rode the maglev into an underwater volcano and ended up in here. Guess it's fake. There's no glass in here, just a whole lot of plastic and some weird metal I can't identify. It's sealed off from the rest of the city and completely stocked with top-of-the-line gear. They even have a biological 3D printer! Lots of biological engineering going on in here. I mean, just to get in you need to get like, five levels of decontamination, wear this spacesuit, and like every other door is labeled with a Class-4 Biohazard symbol. I don't really know why I was hired, though. I mean, yeah I helped design the dragon snails and custom pets, but what would Prometheus Labs want with something like that? They're just pets. I've been assigned to Dr. Frederick Werthal. He seems like a pretty chill fellow. I dunno though… he's like, Polynesian? So that's going to be weird. Still, I think I'll like it here. I met some nice guys. Ranjit, this Indian guy, Annie, this Asian with a real sweet rack, Gunther, this really pale German, and Bernard. Bernard's kind of weird. She's black and her name is Bernard. Yeah… So this should be interesting.

7/25/87

So I've been assigned to a secret project. I don't even know what it's for, but I'm been asked to oversee the design of pioneer organisms. And I mean pioneer organisms. Werthal is designing a lichen that grows in volcanoes! Are they trying to colonize another planet? Why is this secret? Prometheus's probably already done that. Even weirder, we got lessons at the shooting range today! Why would you need gun training at the bottom of the sea? Why would anyone shoot a gun inside a glass dome keeping billions of gallons of water from flattening them? Why does the brass think it's a good idea to teach me- a biological engineer- how to shoot a pistol? I mean, the security drones are good enough, right? If they're going to be coming in all hours of the day to check on us, they better be good to justify a violation of privacy. Still, I

guess I can't complain. Werthal says the video footage is stored on the RAM. That means it gets deleted after their shifts, right?

8/1/87
The lichen bred successfully. I have developed a mold that grows in a volcano. I know it's not a mold, but when you put it like that, you really realize what it is we're doing down here. This is pushing the boundaries of science. Not only that, but the lichen are breaking down the rock in the volcano and producing organic compounds suitable for other organisms to grow in! I wanted to tell Jeff, but this is all classified stuff. I don't know why, it's not like this is anything special compared to the stuff cooking inside, like, Lab 7 or something. We're gonna be doing a bunch more over the next week or so.

8/6/87
So I was passing by Lab 7 on the way to the can, right? A-and then I hear screaming and a flash of green light. So I'm wondering what the hell is going on and I knock. And then something fucking dents the door. This is like 6-inch thick titanium, and there's a goddamn dent in it. The alarm goes off and suddenly lights are flashing and the siren's blaring and I'm trying not to shit myself. Then the security drones show up. These things are packing heat like I don't even KNOW. I mean they could probably fight off a whole army. Then they storm into that room and the door slams behind them. And so I'm just staring at that door and suddenly there's like roaring and the alarms are still fucking blaring and flashing and shots being fired and I just got the hell out of there. I don't know what the FUCK happened in there and I don't wanna know. What I do know is that I'm getting certified.

8/9/87
All anyone's been talking about is what went down in Lab 7. Officially, a biomemetic droid malfunctioned and electrocuted the guys working on it, who are currently in

intensive care. Nobody's seen anyone from there since yesterday. I bet they're dead. Jesus… Lab 7 doesn't even do biomemetics. Who are they trying to fool? Nobody wants to do anything but figure out what happened in there and why it's been covered up. So what else is being covered up? Oh man…

8/12/87

Work finally got back on track today. We've started building multicellular organisms. Now I can see why they really hired me. They're using the organism molds from that… oh what was it called… whatever it's called, they're using its organism molds as templates. The molds I designed for it. Funny thing, I didn't even know what I was building those for. I guess I still don't. Heh. The point is, they really don't know how they work. It's a good thing we got hired, I guess. You know what? I totally forgot about it 'till now, but I haven't seen anyone else from the department since we were bought out. Were they in Lab 7? Speaking of Lab 7, I finally got certified for a gun. It was easy. All I had to do was fill out a few forms, get a psychiatric examination, and wait a few days. I celebrated by going out and ordering a Smith and Wesson. I keep hearing about them so I figure, why not buy one? From what I've heard, it can stop a bull elephant in its tracks. Probably lying, but hey, why not? I mean, I've got the money to buy it. They promoted me within less than a month. I'm now a senior consultant and that means I make a sweet 140 bucks an hour. 140 bucks! That's like, 1.67 times my old salary at Wondertainment. Plus, delivery with those teleportation systems means it'll be here by the end of the day, I mean tomorrow.

8/19/87

Finally found out what I really got hired for. Prometheus is designing terraforming organisms. But not like algae or plankton. They're building these giant organic factories to do the trick. And they're trying to use mass production techniques. That's what all these specifications and the

mold have been for. At first I was like, why not just use algae and plankton? Then when I took a closer look at the specifications, it hit me. These organisms are just shells for the microorganisms we designed earlier. Dunno why I didn't put it together earlier, I mean they're pretty obvious now I see it. Also I was designing them. It's actually a pretty smart method. All we have to do is ensure that the one big organism reproduces instead of millions of smaller ones. It doesn't explain why we haven't been developing any plants, though. I finally managed to build some new molds. Prometheus doesn't have the same tech as the doc did, so it was a bit of a struggle, but I have to say that their 3D printer is definitely all it's cracked up to be. They're printing the first one out now as we speak. The gun finally came today. Is it just me, or is the infrastructure around here kind of falling apart? All week people have been talking about how stuff seems to break at the wrong time or their deliveries are late or whatnot. Hope they get it sorted out soon.

8/20/87

Hufff… huff… hufieuw. Okay, okay, keep it together. At least, heh, at least I can't say it wasn't a memorable day. Let's see… gluup… alright, that should do it. Okay, okay. So. The organism molds were a hell of a success, hee. They worked really, spectacularly well. Hoo boy these are some top-notch pills. What's in them? Let's see… oxy… oxycotin? No, something else… Nico… whatever it is, it's amazing. I want to take some more, but the medic said that this needs to last me the next week. Anyways, back to the molds. So they worked right and the machine printed out a nice specimen with the fangs and the converter organs and all that and shuuuu and a hell of an appetite I mean soon's it woke up it just snatched Ranjit right off the ground and just took a massive chomp I guess I should've remembered it was going to be hungry because that's how the molds are designed so I guess? It's my fault but hey I told them to step back but noooo Ranjit just HAD to get a closer look at the fangs! And

then it bit him in two and swallowed his upper half and a whole server rack. Good thing we have offsite backups! I hit the alarm and wouldn't you know, it was busted! Bernard tried feeding it a fire extinguisher like a moron but it snapped it up like Werthal at a Chinese buffet man I am just making some killer jokes today. Wish Ranjit could've heard that one. Bernard snatched up Gunther's gun and just stepped up to it, still trying to fit the extinguisher in its mouth keep in mind, and shoots the extinguisher. Blows it the hell up! Then she more or less got shredded by extinguisher fragments. Around that time security finally shows up and they use- I'm not kidding here- they use a laser beam to slice the specimen in half! Where can I get myself a lightsaber? So then the medics came in and they took Gunther away and Bernard and what was left of Ranjit. Me and Annie got these pill bottles and were told to take one there and then go home and pop another. Then take one every evening, till the bottle's empty. The medic said they were universal antibiotics. Makes sense, there were some pretty nasty bugs in it. There's… thirty- no, twelve, um seven? No, six pills left. I already took one just now, see, and I guess Annie did too.

8/22/87

Can't believe I forgot to record yesterday! Must be the pills. Wonder what other side effects they have. Still, gotta take one in a bit. I think I fixed the aggression in the specimens. Turns out… turns out I accidentally scantronned a whole section of the genome! Like, you know how you can like fuck up scantron sheets by misaligning the answers? Same thing! Funniest damn thing. Going to print a new specimen tonight. Need to be more careful you know, don't want a repeat of the Bernard incident. Everyone's asking what happened, but I had to brush them off, see. It's a secret project, and we can't have them asking questions am I right? Golp, mggm. Man, these pills even taste good! Prometheus really thought of everything! Oh yeah, I almost forgot. There was a major disaster over on the east side. Part of

the glass shattered and completely flooded it. Luckily, some flood doors closed that part off. Too bad about the guys in there, but eh. Accidents happen. Weird thing is that I'd never even noticed those flood doors before.

8/23/87
We did it! The new specimen printed great, with no acting out or nothing. It should be a chemosynthetic organism. We put it inside the testing chamber and pumped in a load of hydrogen sulfide and carbon dioxide. It got fatter and then shat out water, carbon, and sulfur. What I created is a diarrhea monster! Ha ha ha ha ha. We're going to print out a few more and then test them in a legit environment. I don't know where they're gonna find a legitimate environment at the bottom of the sea, but whatever. It's not my problem. Still a few kinks with it, mainly the conversion efficiency, but I think I can fix that within a day or two.

8/24/87
Fixed the conversion issues today. Now it's converting at a more manageable but still a very high rate. Just in time too. We got a surprise visit from the VP of the department. Apparently, somebody- Gunther- forgot to tell us that they were visiting! Just good luck that we had something for them to see. I think they were impressed by it, since I got a new specification to print out. I guess this means we're still on track for the showcase. I think I mentioned it already. Too bad that Bernard or Ranjit won't be there, but whatever. Their loss, if you catch my drift!

8/25/87
Printed out the new specimen this morning. Only had to slightly modify the first mold to get this new one. The first one's supposed to get some water and organic compounds, you know. What they're trying to do here is get it to convert various toxic chemicals into oxygen, nitrogen, you know, various Earth compounds. Main goal is to normalize temperatures to Earth norms. Maybe

some salt. I'd tell you all about how it works, but that would take forever, and I'm too lazy for that. It worked really nicely, though. I know I usually make these recordings at night, but I'm going to be gone all day. I have a lunch date with you know who! And if things go well, well then! Bow chicka wow wow, you know?

8/26/87

Work's progressing nicely. Doing a whole lot of new stuff at once. I'm way too tired to make a full recording, though. I just want to kick back and play on my brand new NES, but I gotta finish this just for routine. Like brushing your teeth? I'll just say a couple things we're working on. It's pretty cool, they want us to design organisms that can consume raw material and print out other organisms. And I mean raw material. Iron, sulfur, silicon, you name it, they need to eat it! Then they produce, like humans and dogs. Like, better humans. With their genomes and stuff revamped and, um, I dunno, updated, so that they are already adapted to a new environment! That way we can colonize entire new planets! It's really neat. Now we're really pushing the edge! At first I wasn't sure how to go about doing it, but by talking to some guys in a few other departments and borrowing their tech, we managed to get something out. It's times like these that really make me appreciate Prometheus Labs. They work really fast! In other news, I should be done with the pills tomorrow. I don't even have an addiction to them or anything! Prometheus really is amazing.

8/30/87

Yes, it's the middle of the huff day, but BRRRRM huff I gotta huff make BRRRRRRRRM huff huff huff this recording. The shit hit the fan, and this whole place is going to hell! I don't huff huff even know how! One BRRRMMMMRR minute, huff huff huff huff the specimen is converting the environment like normal. It was a bit busted, like it was converting the wrong chemicals. The huff huff huff next minute, the testing chamber broke,

and it's flooding the lab with gas! We got the hell out of there, but the fucking lockdown procedure didn't work! So then the entire ZAP complex is filling with gas. Everyone RRMMMBLL evacuated and the drones got sent in. And you know what happened? They got converted! The process worked great. Isn't that a ZIIMMM fucking joke! God CRACKLE damn it Carter open the door! Working on it! My specimen works perfectly and it's going to kill us all! We're going to fucking khoo ghaacck hgghhck suffocate on its farts! If its kids don't get us first. The environment was apparently conducive to carnivorous organisms, and they got out! You know why? Because the lockdown procedures failed miserably. We gotta get to the tele porters aye BZZT sap before the place fills with gas. Carter why is the door not open yet! Thank you! Where do we go now? Okay, let's go! So, what was I saying? Oh right, we might get eaten or CRACK asphyxiated! Jesus Christ! Shoot it CRACK CRACK KREEEE shoot CRACK it! Huffhuff huff huff. Oh my god. Ooooo my god. Holy fucking christ it tore off his head! Go go go go KREEEEeeee! Oh jesus oh jesus oh jesus! Way to go! You and your bloody bioengineering! Oh of course it's MY fault! It's not like the fucking containment chamber broke as soon as it touched it! I'll tell you what it BRRRM was! Fuck it just go! One of the specimens just snatched up Carter! It was just this fucking centipede that up and ate him! But that wasn't even one of mine! Where the fuck are these coming from? Unless… oh my god. They're evolving! How the fuck did they do that, then? I don't know! We need to move quicker! Hisssssss can you hear that? Oh my god the entire lobby's flooded! How do we go now? Let me see, come tup tup on, come on tup, come on! Here we go! We need to go left! KRASH oh god it's blocked off it's blocked off! Jesus jesus REEET jesus we're DIDDIDIDI trapped oh god please god REEEEEET god please help me no please help help jesus please oh help me help me help me AAAAAAAAAIIIIIII KRUNCH

The document ends there. SCP- was discovered nearby,

consuming various pieces of debris strewn around the area.

Indwelling of Bright

Besides the Monasteries of the Holy Foundations and the towns of civilians, the villages of the D-Caste formed the remainder of civilised land. Surrounded by the walled garrisons manned by the Omega Guards, D-Caste men and women lived and bred within their villages.

At the outskirts of the D-Caste village of Gock, four D-Castlings were engaged in a folk game. Three of them were children and they stared intently at the fourth, a teenager close to adulthood. The fourth D-Castling was relatively carefree, watching his three friends intently as they struggled not to blink. But in the end, it was inevitable.

The D-Castling on the furthest left blinked; his eyes made a quick sweep downwards. The fourth D-Castling noticed it, and quickly arm-locked the blinker. The other two D-Castlings did not bother to carry on, and similarly blinked.

"Second Boy D-37428353 has lost again!" The fourth D-Castling declared, his left arm still gripping onto Second Boy D-37428353's head.

"Boy D-48572946, let go of me already!" Second Boy D-37428353 pleaded to the eldest of the lot.

"Yeah, you're so big." Another D-Castling chimed in.

"That's why I get to play the Expunged! If you cannot handle me, they will really expunge you castlings." Boy D-48572946 retorted, finally letting go of Second Boy D-37428353.

"Ca-castlings… y-you're also a castling!" Second Boy D-37428353 protested.

"Not for long. I'm scheduled to be designated tonight!" Boy

D-48572946 reminded his peers.

"Castlings, stop taking the Holy Procedures in vain! The Omega Guards have warned you for this already!" a cracked voice yelled furiously.

The three younger D-Castlings cowered behind the most senior among them, Boy D-48572946. A middle-aged D-Caste woman of stocky stature was carrying a basketful of vegetables and some tree bark.

"Mom, we're only preparing for our future service to the Holy Foundation!" Boy D-48572946 shouted towards his distant mother, D-83756246.

"If you kids got time to ape Holy Procedures, help out in the harvest!" D-83756246 grumbled.

"Mom, is that all from the harvest?" Boy D-48572946 asked, pointing at the basket, "And tree bark again?"

"The Holy Foundation needs more sustenance. We'll make do with all that can be allotted to us." D-83756246 said, "And son, come with me. A last chance to speak before tonight."

Boy D-48572946 parted with his friends and walked off with his mother.

"Ah, I can't wait to get out of here. There must be plenty at the Monasteries," Boy D-48572946 remarked. "The food is getting littler by the seasons, and there is the edict that prohibit us from culling our numbers after that incident last winter."

"Son, you know not of the Holy Foundation's ways. Our starvation is the Holy Foundation's love towards us, the D-Caste."

"But we are sinners, mom. We descended from sinners."

D-83756246 paused for a moment and contemplated. She then prepared to utter her response to that.

The hours went by, and it was nighttime in Gock. At the centre of the village, the Orientation Rite was underway. All D-Castes in the village were gathered, singing their folk hymns and dancing the ancient dances of their ancestors. Two D-Caste women tended to a fire, where multiple branding irons were left to be heated up. Occasionally, the women would hurl books to fuel the fire, as it was customary of Gock to use paper to maintain the fire. All the adult D-Castes were in tattered orange jumpsuits, with torn short sleeves and opened at the chest. The Castlings donned a random assortment of loincloths and rags that covered whatever the individual deemed fit.

A platoon of Omega Guards stood at the periphery, with their short swords and crossbows on hand. More Omega Guards stood watch from the battlements of their garrison, viewing the situation from telescopes and their archers on standby. The D-Castes paid the Omega Guards no mind, enjoying themselves without a care.

The crowd of D-Castes surrounded a dais protruding from the ground, and an elderly D-Caste woman in the same tattered orange jumpsuit surveyed the crowd of fellow villagers with eagle-like eyes. To her fellow villagers, she was their spiritual leader. She lived long and represented great wisdom, or whatever the Holy Foundation allowed her to have. She did have a designation, but villagers called her 'Elder' out of respect. The Omega Guards stationed there did not care about what the D-Caste called one of their own, as long they fulfilled the Holy Foundation's directives.

In due time, the Elder judged that all were accounted for. She stepped down from her dais and took out a scroll from the sash that held her robes together.

"SHUT THE **FUCK UP!**" The Elder yelled, and the village full of D-Castes halted their merrymaking. The eyes of the D-Castes were on the Elder, who uttered the words from the **`Nameless Pastor's Orientation to the D-Caste`**.

"Grace to the Lord Bright and all His Saints and Prophets." The Elder continued, "We are gathered here to celebrate the designation of our Castlings. For those Castlings are now men and women. All that is left is to be designated as men and women."

The Elder's voice grew louder. Meanwhile, the D-Caste women took out the branding irons from the flames and walked towards the dais.

"A designation to make our Castlings men and women, and they will assume the responsibility of men and women! The responsibility to cleanse our lineages of our forefathers' sins! The sins of our ancestors' heathenry! The heathenry of which we redeem ourselves through our labour!"

"The responsibility to cleanse our lineages of our forefathers' sins! The sins of our ancestors' heathenry! The heathenry of which we redeem ourselves through our labour!" The other D-Castes repeated the mantra of their people, a mantra spake of since their ancestors' repentance and submission to the Holy Foundation.

As the villagers' chants died down, the Elder began reading the contents of her scroll.

"Only one Castling for this night! 18 years ago, a male was born to D-48572946 and D-83756246. Tonight, Boy D-48572946 will be designated. No longer will he be a boy of his father. For he shall become a man. Boy D-48572946, step up and claim your designation."

Boy D-48572946 walked up toward the dais, wearing only a loincloth. The crowd of villagers cheered him on, as he laid down on the dais, face-up and spreadeagled. The D-Caste women held the branding irons above his chest and right forearm.

"Boy D-48572946, do you accept the responsibility of a man and take on the same duty as your father, and his father before him, in service to the Holy Foundation?" asked the Elder.

"Yes, Elder." replied Boy D-48572946.

"So be it. In the name of the Lord Bright, designate the D-Caste!" The Elder declared.

The two robed D-Caste women quickly lowered their branding irons; the white-hot metal made contact with his flesh. Boy D-48572946 let out a pain-filled yell, which was drowned out in the cacophony of

cheers and applause from the D-Castes. The child's mother — D-83756246 — only covered her mouth at the necessary act, eyes downcast. The Omega Guards remained firm at their station, having seen the oft-repeated Rite many times.

The Elder gave a signal to the two D-Caste women, and they lifted the branding irons. Steam shot from the man's flesh, leaving identical darkened marks on his right wrist and chest. It would henceforth be his designation. No longer was he a boy of another D-Caste, for he would be a D-Caste in his own right. The following designation was branded onto him:

> D-34029132

"Henceforth, in the name of the Lord Bright, D-34029132 has been designated!" The Elder declared solemnly.

"D-34029132!" The crowd chanted.

The newly-anointed D-34029123 stood up from the dais and observed his fellow villagers cheering on in congratulations. The Elder draped an orange jumpsuit over D-34029132, and he quickly donned the marker of his adulthood. All this time, the Omega Guards looked on with unchanging faces.

"SHUT THE **FUCK UP!**" The Elder yelled again to call for attention, "The Holy Foundation has called for the D-Caste to perform a Trial of Service. The D-Caste who are descendants of sinners and heathens! The D-Caste who must repent for their ancestors' sins and heathenry! The D-Caste who support the Holy Foundation with their body!"

"The D-Castes who are descendants of sinners and heathens! The D-Castes who must repent for their ancestors' sins and heathenry! The D-Castes who will support the Holy Foundation with their bodies!" The crowd of D-Castes repeated the Elder's words, like sheep to a shepherd.

"Who answers the call of the Holy Foundation?" asked the Elder, "The Holy Foundation seeks only one D-Caste from our village."

D-34029132, who was still beside the dais, raised his hand without thought. Some within the crowd let out breaths of relief at the newly-recognised adult's unusual initiative. Teardrops trickled from the eyes of his mother, D-83756246. The Omega Guards marched forward, with D-Castes stepping back reverently before their social betters. D-34029132 smiled at the Omega Guards and walked away under their escort.

Many seasons after, D-34029132 remained in his Trial of Service where he lived out his days in the Overwatch Cathedral. The last leg of his final task was underway, and his body was prepared for it. As per the Holy Doctors' decree, D-34029132 had fasted for countless days until he was but a shell of a man. All of his teeth, fingernails and toenails had been pulled out as well. That was the protocol and mercy of the Holy Doctors, for many succumbed to temptations and culled themselves. For a D-Caste to cull oneself or fellow D-Castes without the approval of the Holy Doctors is a sin.

But D-34029132 was calm, for he was so close to seeing his dearest wish fulfilled. As the Omega Guards tied him down with great chains, a Cardinal Doctor spoke to him.

"Do you know why you have been brought here today, D-34029132?"

"Yes, my lord." As he spoke, the D-Caste recalled one of his mother's last words to him, now but a distant memory:

"Yes, we are sinners. But Lord Bright loves us as well. In the Holy Procedures Lord Bright personally passed down, only the D-Castes may be indwelled by Him."

Ineffective

The dream always starts the same way.

The prison doors slammed closed behind me. For a moment I was locked in a narrow passageway between two buildings— the door to the visitors' entrance behind me, the imposing inner doors of the prison ahead. Above me, I could see fluffy clouds drifting by in the narrow strip of blue sky visible beyond the barbed wire.

The door to the prison buzzed and I showed myself inside.

I passed through five corridors and three sets of doors, waiting each time for the doors behind me to lock then the doors ahead to buzz and open. It was like passing through an airlock.

Finally, I got there. A frowning guard showed me into a featureless, windowless room.

It was a long wait. I shuffled my papers in front of me. Capped and uncapped my pen. Buttoned and unbuttoned the cuffs of my suit jacket. I didn't like to admit to myself that I was nervous.

The door opened and I almost jumped, managing to keep it to just a twitch of my muscles. Still, I probably looked like an idiot. I stood up to cover it.

My client walked into the room and the guard closed the door behind us.

I know his name, of course, but I don't think of it in the dream. Just "my client." He was a young black man with short hair and a round, almost chubby face.

We both sat down at the table and just looked at each other for a minute. It was the first time I'd seen him since he was condemned to death.

"Well," I said. "How are you doing?"

"I've been better."

I smiled politely.

"Listen. I want to talk to you about my options," he said.

He was taking it better than I expected. But how did I know what to expect? It was the first capital murder case I had ever tried. Not that my client knew it.

"You'll appeal the case, of course," I said. "The sentencing, I mean — maybe the trial too. You'll be appointed an appellate lawyer. I can try to ask around, make sure someone good takes the case."

"You won't represent me?"

"I don't do appeals. Anyway, you want someone new. It's standard. You might want to raise the issue of ineffective assistance of counsel— meaning maybe your appeal will be about how I could have done better— and I can't represent you on that, for obvious reasons."

"You did your best," said my client. Always so polite.

"Yeah, well, whatever. You want a new lawyer. And the appeal will take a long time. Years. Other things will come up in the mean time. Most people aren't — most sentences aren't carried out for a long time after the sentence is first issued."

He was twenty-three.

"What if I don't appeal?" he said.

"What? Of course you will. I mean, what other options do you have?"

For a supposedly hardened criminal, he had one of the most open faces I've ever seen; every thought he had instantly expressed itself.

"You *do* have another option?" I said.

"I'm not supposed to tell you about it."

Time for another refresher on attorney-client privilege. "It doesn't count if you tell me," I said. "I can't tell anyone. Ever. Unless you're planning to hurt someone."

"I'm not planning to hurt someone," he said. Maybe it was more like "*I'm* not planning."

I waited him out. It only took a couple minutes. "Some government guys came to see me," he said.

"Guys from the government came to see you without me?"

"I don't know, maybe they weren't government. They were wearing suits. And they didn't come during visiting hours, they just showed up. The guards wouldn't tell me who they were. It was in this same room."

I shivered briskly for no reason at all.

"They said they can get me out of here," said my client.

I realized he was telling me about a fantasy. He'd created in his mind a way to cope with his hopeless situation — which was fine as long as it didn't mess up the only real hope he had. He needed to file his appeal.

"How can they do that?" I asked, playing along.

He shrugged. "They seemed pretty sure. They said I just have to work for them for a month. Then they'll set me up with a new identity. They said I won't be missed."

"Work for them doing what?"

"Testing things." He shrugged.

"What kind of things?"

"They didn't say. Just things."

I didn't like that answer. I would have felt better if he'd had some outlandish description at the ready.

"They're coming back in three days," he said. "That's my deadline. They wanted a yes or no right then, but I said I needed a little time. They weren't happy about it. They said they almost never do that."

"They can wait," I snapped. Then I reminded myself that there was no "them."

"So, I might do that instead of appealing," he said. He was trying to sound casual, but as usual he had no control over his expression. He was pretty upset. "I mean, what's the point? Everybody thinks I did it. Even you think I did it. What's the chance some judge is going to believe I'm innocent? Not even one guy on the jury believed me."

Not one guy on the jury believed *me*, I thought. I couldn't convince them. I said the wrong things. I asked the wrong questions. I made the wrong objections. I had no idea what I was doing. It's my fault you're going to die.

Of course I knew better than to tell him those thoughts. I tried to not even listen to them myself.

We talked a little more. I told him all the many ways appeals could help him, or at least drag out his case until he had the chance to turn thirty before he died. I told him that the number of people executed in the United States is under fifty per year and dropping rapidly. I told him the death penalty is on its way out.

He listened patiently. But it was pretty clear he had made up his mind.

There's no dramatic end to the dream. I drift off into other thoughts, other dreams. But I almost always wake up soon after.

This time, I lie awake a long time in the darkness, thinking.

Of course, you don't forget your first capital murder case. I can still see my client's face in my mind, as fresh as the day I last saw him, though it was many years ago.

But we never had the conversation that I dream about. His prison transport was in an accident on the way back from the courthouse. The driver and the guards survived, but my client was killed instantly. His body was mangled beyond recognition. Poetic justice, the papers said.

That's what I remember. That's what everybody remembers.

In my line of work, you meet a lot of people on the margins of society. A lot of people with mental illness. With paranoia, hallucinations, withdrawals, delusions. I've heard a lot of passionate lectures about a lot of shadowy figures. The Men in Black. The Illuminati. The Masons. The SCP Foundation.

I know none of it is true. But late at night, I wonder why I keep having that dream. I wonder what my client is trying to tell me.

The thing is, I remember him, but I don't remember all my clients. There are cases that I've forgotten about. There are clients whose faces I can't picture.

My clients aren't the kind of people who would raise much alarm if they went missing. If someone, some organization, really was out there, helping itself to them — I wouldn't be able to tell. I certainly wouldn't be able to protect them.

I've spent my career telling myself that one client helped, one sentence reduced, is enough to make a difference. But what happens to them after I help them? Where are they now?

By the standards of my field, I'm successful enough. But at night, unable to sleep because I'll see his face, I feel nothing else but utterly ineffective.

Inertiatic SCP

The dream shaper had just been recovered from his home in El Paso, with the apparitions following close behind.

The armed members of the recovery squad stood outside window of the scip's temporary containment chamber contemplating what to do next. The apparitions were lurking in and out of crevices and blind passages of the abandoned building's basement, screaming for the shaper. The monsters had just recently cut the lights, and now the squad was holed up and their rifles were aimed nervously over a flare in the doorway.

The squad arrived to find an empty studio apartment, recently vacated. The only clues left behind were a broken needle and a journal filled with indecipherable images, black and white spheres, and nonsense words.

Outside of the window they could see a man, the probable scip, running toward an overpass reaching over a very busy four lane highway. The figure made his way toward the ledge, pausing and looking straight ahead for a few moments. One of the squad members looked on through the window, motioning for half of the squad to follow, leaving two of their men behind in the apartment with the researchers.

The attempt to intercept the suicide diver had not been a success for the recovery squad. The scip standing over the ledge began his nosedive toward the pavement before they got close. The falling body was interrupted by the grille of a lucky sixteen wheeler before hitting the pavement, and bounced back against the curb like a beef watermelon.

“Moattilliatta?” voices in the hallway crackled repeatedly.

Only creeping silence and the recovery squad’s breathing could be heard for the next few minutes.

“Hope they get here soon.”

“You’re tellin’ me.”

From the makeshift containment cell came a quick flash of purple light, when the squad turned they could see that the scip’s corpse had been replaced with a very much alive man, identical to the one they saw jump off the bridge earlier.

“I guess we’re getting that bonus?” One of the others asked nervously.

The man in the cell slowly walked into a corner, and curled up into a fetal position.

More slithering and clanking could be heard outside in the hallways. “The last teraquetzal returns to the ‘ESP’.” The cricketing voices were numerous and demanding.

“What the hell are those things on about?”

The rest of the squad turned their sights back on the doorway where the sound of clanking and slithering could be heard increasing in volume. Something like a giant ant’s face quickly flashed in and out of the doorway, barely avoiding a startled hail of bullets.

“The *fuck!*”

“They’re s-s-scared of bullets man…”

The leader half-laughed, half-grimaced, “Backup should be here any minute, just keep fixed on that door, keep your shit together.”

Agent Breen flipped through the old weathered journal while Sanders collected samples from the needle and the carpet.

“Irradi Exerptas.” Breen said, holding the book in front of him.

“What?”

“That’s what’s written on the front. Some of this is written in Spanish. What’s in the needle?”

“Morphine. He was trying to OD. Really should have killed him. Makes you wonder why he didn’t just try the whole bridge diving thing to start.” Sanders wipes her nose. “Anything else in there?”

“Most of the words are like a made up language, and there’s a bunch of hand drawn pictures of creatures, bug people, lots of random shit. Guy was an artist, crazy from the looks of it. Last page is another nonsense word… ‘Phyxia ‘ in large print.”

“Any word back from the others who went after the scip?”

“Not our problem really. After you’re done with the samples it’s back to base for us.”

“Right. Yeah I’m done here.”

“Extraction point is on the roof. We should be looking for a police helicopter.” Breen says as he follows Sanders out of the room.

The scip in the cell began screaming as the noises in the hallway grew louder.

“Make it stop just fucking make it stop why the fuck FUCK.” He grasped the top of his head and curled tighter in the corner.

“Any idea what we should be expecting here buddy?” One of the uniformed men barked to the scip.

“They’re *pissed*!” The scip shrieks. “You’re not letting them to me, you’re pissing them off! Can't help it! All fucked!”

Some members of the squad made quick glances to the leader.

“Well that is unfortunate…” The leader remarked. “Are these your

friends?”

Everything goes silent again, with only the noise of the man in the cell crying. In a few moments the ants and spiders and witches would begin marching in.

“Now I’m lost…”

“Hmm?”

“This guy… must of had a shitload of free time. These drawings are *very* detailed, lifelike.”

“I don’t know, some people can do that with their eyes closed. Maybe he’s one of them.”

“Either way, this one book would have taken years to fill. Had to be obsessed.”

“Really? How many pages are there?” Sanders asks, reaching for the journal as they make their way up the final steps of the stairs. He continues flipping through the book as they open the door to the roof.

Just then a voice buzzed into their ears. *Hold for extraction. Transportation is being rerouted for assistance at Proxy-2. No ETA. Keep your heads low. Avoid civilian contact. Mount your wisdom teeth. You know the routine.*

“Well, looks like we’ll be waiting here for a while.” Breen reached into his pocket and produced a small, white, shiny object and placed it into his mouth, wincing.

“You can only have so many helicopters I guess.” Sanders says, eagerly flipping through the pages of the artifact.

“All gods *must* die…” A haggish, many elbowed arthropod croaked in the general direction of the recovery team as it lurched toward them.

“Stop or we will shoot!”

The creature continued its hobbling, pained march, its two mouths dripping gray fluid.

“The cycle is nearly at its end, the Tremulant will prevail.”

The thing got too close for comfort. The squad opened fire, and its carapace was finally breached from the hail, the thing falling to the ground in a pool of chitin and pink blood. The mess quickly evaporated as if it had never been there.

“The hell…”

Soon other creatures flooded into the doorway. Each stood roughly the height of an adult man, with three sets of compound eyes set on a gray, ant-like face, three sets of legs, and three sets of arms. They each had a symbol of a black and white sphere merging into one another carved in their exoskeletons. Squeezing in through the back of the forward group were dumb looking eight legged things with long spears mounted on their flanks.

“Phyxia!” The ant-like men screamed in clicks as they charged into the room single file, their hook-ended halberds pointed out in front of them.

The squad opened fire, dropping the creatures almost as soon as they appeared. Thirty or more of the creatures must have fallen in noxious gray mist and nothingness before they stopped filing in.

The squad was now running low on ammo, and more of the things could still be heard outside continuing their chant.

“Hey, buddy, care to tell us what the fuck is going on here?” The squad leader asked the scip.

“It’s pointless here…” he cried. “… they need me there, they kill me or send me to sleep. They’re trying to kill me for good, they can’t do it here, I need to go back to sleep…”

“So these things pop up when you’re ‘*dead*’ or sleeping?”

The man sits up in the corner of his cell. “I can't satisfy them, it's impossible. Their world is like hell and they blame me for it. I told them I didn't know it would happen!”

“Okay so if you die die, they die die, and they’re trying to pull this maneuver off when you’re in your magic little sleep world while you’re there.”

“They cut me up inside, do experiments, try to change me inside. Their nations fight wars over it. It is useless.”

“So eventually the last of this batch will disappear if we keep shooting.”

"Until I go to sleep again. They come sometimes when I’m awake but rarely are there even two or three.”

“Right” the leader said, reloading his last clip into his gun. “So we just make this one count, and after…”

With that the lights to the facility came back on, followed by the sounds of insect hissing, and gunfire.

Object has been secured. Await extraction.

Sanders was chewing on some gum and flipping through the pages of the book.

"Don't you know it's dangerous to be chewing with that thing in your mouth?" said Breen, more annoyed than concerned.

"I found some lines in English here." replied Sanders.

In the distance the flutter of a helicopter could be heard.

"Well damn that was quick."

Sanders paused for a minute, watching the helicopter making its way toward them. "It's a paragraph or two. Guy seems distressed about whatever it is he does."

"What is it that he does?"

Okay they're not lucid dreams. I'm going fucking insane or… maybe they are just dreams? I know people that can feel dreams. I can feel them pulling my insides out, tasting them and storing them. Interrogating me all the while in a language I shouldn't understand but I do.

It seems trite but did I imagine these things? I had to. I had to imagine them first. I drew them and then I saw them when I went to sleep. That's normal. How do I explain this to any of my friends? "Bro, I'm tortured by spider people in my sleep, I wake up on the other side of the house sleeping on my head with my body vertical against a wall, and then I hear a knock on the door from the landlord telling me to stop holding such massive parties."

I can't keep this up. I just want them to leave me alone. I can't give them the answers they want. I imagine better things for them and they turn them into weapons and torture devices for me.

I don't know what to do. I've tried imagining them away, thinking and drawing up doomsday devices for their world but, ha, they need to activate them. They intercept them in the ESP. They call me their god-terrorist. They want their world to end, I just make it progressively worse. They do the same to me. They all want to die and they can't kill me.

I can hear them chanting in the back of my mind while I'm awake sometimes. They're waiting for me to go to sleep so they can commit to their experiments, so they can examine me and find out how to 'save' themselves.

I have to stay awake.

Influenza

I've been sick for days now. That bubbling nausea that fills your throat, makes you feel as if you're about to throw up every time you burp or so much as breathe out your mouth. Holding the toilet, resting my head on the cool, cool porcelain, I really question why in the hell I don't make myself throw up and just get it over with. It's just not something I can do…thinking of forcefully gagging myself…ugh, it's almost worse then I feel now. Almost.

Suddenly it hits me, and this is it, this is IT. I feel that slick, sour spit coat my throat, my belly tightening up as I push my head over the bowl and spit. For a split second before I explode, I realize this thing has not been cleaned in a while. Then I vomit. Hard. Mucus-rich and acidic, it pours out in a hard, jetting stream from my mouth and nose, burning my nasal passages like fire. It hits so hard, it feels like it should be coming out my eyes, too.

I vomit again, and again, the third time bringing up just some thin, reeking slime, and I gasp a bit, getting my breath back before the next wave. I pitch forward again, eyes tearing as they squeeze shut, and I feel another hot jet of filth pour out. Opening my eyes, it seems…different. A tarry black, and there are…things bobbing in it. I don't have time to look too hard, before two more hard retches double me over the bowl. These are more pinkish, and I can definitely see some kind of meat in these. Hamburger, maybe…

More vomit, more oddness. I don't remember eating any kind of jelly, especially cherry. It's starting to hurt, a deep spike each time. God, how much can a person throw up? When did I eat noodles that long…or that big? The goo in it is getting thicker too, and pink… starting to feel at least a little better. Ugh…when did I eat a balloon? My belly is feeling better now, really light. Jesus…whatever that was is floating still…almost looks like it's pulsing, or beating…going to have to move to the sink, toilet's almost full. Feeling better now… hungry, actually. Very hungry. Starving. Ravenous.

I feel so empty.

Ingénue

The butt of a baton clacked against the door. "Twenty-two hundred! Lights out!"

Mitchell turned the light off and reclined on his bunk, listening to the kapo's footsteps dwindle as he continued his round along the block.

Moonlight sieved through the grated mesh of the window and spangled the room like a disco ball. Mitchell probed under his mattress and withdrew a five by seven photograph. It was a close-shot of a woman, stretched across a bed in a pose reminiscent of some sort of exotic feline. She was presumably nude, a thin sheet draped across her body to preserve her chastity. Mitchell traced a fingertip along her contours.

"What did I call her?" he whispered.

"You know what you called her," responded a voice from the top bunk. It was rich and smooth, like auditory caramel.

"Tell me anyway."

"Ingénue. You called her ingénue."

"Ingénue," Mitchell repeated, tasting the word in his mouth. "Where the hell did I come up with that?"

"I'm sure I don't know."

Mitchell laid his head back on the pillow, balancing the photograph on his chest. She had large eyes, irises so dark they faded into the pupils. "Tell me a story about her," he said.

The voice laughed from above. "Which one? You know them all."

"I don't care. You choose."

"Let's see… What haven't we heard in a while?" There was a long pause of deliberation, and then: "You met on guard duty. Containment cell E-3024. She was new; terrified. You could hear her shaking in her oversized gear. So you spoke to her, tried to placate her concerns, to assuage her fears. You were never good at that sort of thing, and at the Foundation you always kept your distance from new recruits, but talking to her just came natural. You introduced yourself and steered the conversation away from whatever was lurking behind that door. And for whatever reason you found yourself talking about your past, about the good parts, back when you were living in Boston. Time spent at Fenway, not caring that your team lost because on that day you were in the company of friends, with a cold beer in your hand and money in your pocket, and that was worth more than any baseball game. You told her about the time you went to the Omni Theater and got motion sickness after eating too much astronaut ice cream from the gift shop…"

Mitchell closed his eyes and recalled the events as the tale unfolded. The way it was phrased wasn't like a friend sharing an amusing anecdote, improvising the words as they went along. It was instead as if they were being read aloud from a book, carefully ruminated and crafted. Which of course they were, in a way — Mitchell had probably heard this particular story a dozen times. He imagined Boston, from the muddy current of the Charles to the stone-paved streets of the Freedom Trail. He glanced upward at Faneuil Hall and its discordant weather-vane; he watched as the wealthy exited their brownstones in Back Bay to waste money on Newbury Street and at Saks Fifth Avenue; cold air shocked his sinuses while the college students, bundled in black Northface jackets and even blacker tights, departed home for the winter semester break.

"… At the end of your shift, she thanked you for being sweet and kind. You'd been so absorbed in the conversation, it wasn't until she removed her helmet that you realized you hadn't even seen her face. It was in that instant — one of those endangered, perfect instances that seem to freeze time but are never quite long enough

— that you knew everything had changed…"

Despite the colorful narration this was harder to imagine. It was as if Mitchell had no reference or context to frame the images. He peeked at the photograph for visual aid and screwed his eyes back shut. The tableau stabilized, the woman's features sharpened into focus: a lopsided grin partially-obscured by a helmeted mask. The mask sat too low on her face and she was constantly angling her chin upward to see beneath the brim.

And then her face was lost again, sinking into the black watery depths of his memory.

"Will she ever come back?" he asked. "The memories, I mean."

"Probably not," came the answer above, not unkindly.

Mitchell ran the ball of his thumb along the underside of his ring finger, just before it met the palm. He craved his wedding ring, could still feel its squeeze, burning and itching like a phantom limb.

"You still mean to go through with it, then?"

"Yes," replied Mitchell.

"When?"

"Soon as I get my chance."

1

Reveille was at 0530 for the D-Class assigned to first shift. Mitchell yawned and climbed out of bed. Instead of a military bugle, Reveille here was an electronic tune piped through the intercom system. When it finished the lock buzzed and he swung the door open.

If he missed the buzzer's thirty second window the door would automatically lock again, and stay that way for the next four hours, or until a prisoner functionary came to check on him.

He exited the room and lined his feet along the yellow band that circled the block. Out of habit, Mitchell softly hummed *To the Colors*.

After roll call he wandered into the locker room. The showers weren't communal; instead they were small tiled alcoves replete with curtain.

Ten minutes later, wearing fresh blue coveralls, Mitchell filed into the mess hall.

One thing he had to give the Foundation: the food was actually pretty damn good. A lot better than the Army, or any prison Mitchell had been invited to attend. The eggs weren't artificial and were cooked to order. Likewise the bread was fresh and came with real butter and jam. Today he was indulging in an omelet with sides of hashbrowns and bacon, along with a bagel, heavy on the cream cheese. It came with as much juice and coffee he could drink in the next fifteen minutes.

He supposed it was a morale thing. Same with the showers. It was the small amenities that made life bearable. It always helped to have a good meal in you before marching off to guard the gates of hell.

Mitchell spent the next ten hours hunched over a terminal in a tiered, darkened room that resembled NASA's mission control. He watched a bank of CCTV monitors recording a half-flooded basement. Figures, vaguely human in their design, glided under the waves; occasionally auroras blossomed beneath the surface as bioluminescent spines and tentacles flared. Barnacles spackled the cellar steps like psoriasis, and weeds climbed the cinderblock walls and support beams.

A grid in the corner of one screen took atmospheric measurements of the basement: currently it read 1042 bars of pressure and a temperature of 5 degrees Celsius.

It was monotonous, stressful work. The potential for failure was death, and the Foundation made certain Mitchell never forgot it. He suspected they were salting his water with — among other things — some form of methamphetamine to maintain focus and performance standards. By the end of the shift his eyes would feel like sandpaper, and some mornings his jaw ached from grinding his teeth.

At 1600 Mitchell clocked out.

He made a short detour to the commissary for a snack before heading to the courtyard. For whatever reason he had a large account balance at the commissary, and so he also paid for the other D-Class standing in line behind him.

A broad expanse equal in area to four football fields, on one side the courtyard was enclosed by a thirty-foot wall topped with razor-wire and motion sensors, and on the remaining sides by the Foundation compound and two of its containment wings. There was an Olympic-sized swimming pool (drained for the season), an outdoor gym, a basketball court and a baseball diamond. A clay track ran along the inside of the perimeter.

Mitchell completed six laps around the track, which roughly totaled two miles. Blood pumping, he moved on to the gym and used the free weights for sets of curls and presses. He wanted to burn off any excess energy leftover from the laced stimulant. By the time his second game of pick-up basketball was ending the Mess Call broadcasted and all the D-Class queued for supper in the cafeteria.

2

"Tell me a story about her," Mitchell said as he sat on the edge of his bunk. The room was ink-black. It had rained earlier, and the lingering clouds smothered any moonlight.

"Which one?" came the ritual response from above.

"You pick."

"Let's see… Ah, I've got it. I actually officiated your wedding. Read from a bible and everything. Both the ceremony and the reception were held in the break room on the second floor, in the Safe Reliquary section. You know the place? Anyway, you exchanged rings…"

In the darkness, Mitchell practiced making knots behind his back, tying a ribbon of silk around a wooden dowel he'd fleeced from the textile workshop. He counted off how long it took to make each knot,

and tested its strength and how long it took to unravel. Then he switched hands and repeated the process.

"…she loved Carly Simon, and we played some of her songs off the break room computer. You even let me dance with the bride when *Nobody Does it Better* came on. God, she was beautiful. All dolled up — not that she needed it — hair done and wearing lipstick. There was champagne, courtesy of the same dealer who got you the rings, and cake scrounged from the kitchen. I'd brought along some sheets and blankets from the supply closet, and around midnight I left, locked you two inside for some alone time. I was working nights as a janitor back then, so I had the keys…"

Mitchell flushed with anger reminiscing on what he'd lost. No, correction: not lost, *stolen*. It wasn't like he misplaced the fucking thing. He was rendered impotent in the shadow of the Foundation's thoroughness, their complete and exacting control — not only had they separated him from his wife physically, but they'd scrubbed his brain clean of her memory. It was, at least from Mitchell's perspective, as if they'd never even met.

Did something still exist, had it ever really existed, if it was no longer remembered?

His ears and face grew hot, the tidal pulse of his heart surged, and his fingers slipped on the next knot. He tossed the ribbon and dowel aside.

"You remembering any of this?"

"Just fragments," sighed Mitchell. He was reduced to experiencing his own past through other people's accounts.

"Does it help? Me telling stories."

"You know it does." Mitchell lay back and closed his eyes; he concentrated on breathing and tried to calm his heartbeat. It was true, the stories were like keys unlocking his past, but progress was frustratingly slow, and even after all these months all he had were nascent snapshots. The collective sum was disjointed and inchoate. If his marriage was a movie, for every frame of film there were a

hundred more that were missing, and the third reel had been completely destroyed in a celluloid fire.

"Was there anybody else at the wedding?" he asked.

"What?"

"Besides you, I mean. Was there anybody else? Other guests…"

The voice floated down from the top bunk. "No." Then, as if sensing further explanation was required: "It was hard enough just sneaking the two of you in."

"Yeah, I get it. But other people knew about us, right?"

"To be honest, I don't really know. I didn't tell anybody, and I know you just told me and Jordan, but he was grabbed around the same time as you, 'cept he never came back. I assume she must've told somebody over in the female block, her cellmate, a friend, *someone*, but I don't know who that might have been. None of the women ever tried to contact you?"

Mitchell shook his head. "No one's approached me." He had hoped someone else might know something. That he might hear something new, or even something old but from a different point of view, and that would be the missing keystone to bring it all together.

As they drifted off to sleep they completed the final exchange of the nocturnal ceremony.

"You still mean to go through with it, then?"

"Yes," replied Mitchell.

"When?"

"Soon as I get my chance."

3

Life at the facility consisted of a never-ending series of protocols and procedures. It was ossified to the point that even Mitchell's routines

had subroutines. His entire existence was like a cruel matryoshka nesting doll of boredom set inside tediousness.

0530: Reveille.

There was an odd dichotomy within the Foundation — their mission statement was the procurement and subsequent containment of anomalous objects and organisms, but in order to complete this objective they were forced to recruit expendable D-Class personnel from the world's prison population, commuting the sentences of inmates who were eligible and acceptant of the assignment.

This in turn necessitated the Foundation to function as an auxiliary penitentiary, without the societal goals of punishment, justice, or rehabilitation. It did offer and encourage extracurricular activities for the D-Class, from higher-education courses mainly taught by members of the Research staff, to sewing clubs and AA meetings. But Mitchell suspected this was all a smokescreen to appease and mollify the convicts, much like the upgraded food and showers. It was the illusion of a future outside of these walls that kept them docile. Freedom — or the possibility of freedom — was dangled in front of them like a carrot in front of a draft-mule. Several times a year the site would make a show of a D-Class that had been pardoned, but it was always after the fact, when they were supposedly far-away, living under a new identity with a comfortable pension. They'd parade postcards and a farewell letter addressed to no one in particular, and the director would mutter an announcement regarding their bravery and dedication.

It was all bullshit, all opiates for the masses. Mitchell saw through it. The retired D-Class was actually rotting in a pauper's grave or slowly being digested in the belly of a cosmic squid. It probably wasn't even the site director talking over the intercom.

0600: First shift starts.

As the custodial care of convicts was a byproduct of the Foundation's goals, there was a fundamental paradigm shift in discipline in comparison to most penitentiaries. There was an average of only one correctional officer per two hundred inmates (and most sites didn't even house two hundred D-Class personnel).

Their limited capacity was supplemented by prisoner functionaries, or "kapos", D-Class that acted on the authority of COs in exchange for various perks and benefits.

Felons were selected based on multiple variables, including notoriety, behavioral tests, and criminal history. A high-profile case would be ignored. Likewise an unrepentant, schizophrenic child-murderer wouldn't be considered an eligible candidate for the program. Most D-Class were from the U.S., as it had the largest prison population, housing approximately twenty-two percent of the world's convicts, and a majority were non-violent offenders from states with minimum sentencing laws drafted during the Reagan era in a misguided response to the crack cocaine epidemic. In second place was China — they executed approximately twenty-five hundred citizens each year.

As a D-Class within the Foundation, minor offenses, such as consensual inner-class relationships or possession of tobacco, were often overlooked. At worst an infraction was accrued. A total of three infractions within a six month period resulted in the loss of privileges, from access to the yard and commissary to block detention outside of scheduled shifts. It was also common to tack on additional custodial details, like garbage removal and scrubbing lavatories.

The quality of life and (relative) freedom of the D-Class was a double-edged blade.

Although officially the Foundation denied punitive Keter-assignment and testing, reality spoke differently. D-Class charged with serious offenses such as rape or assault against staff, including other D-Class, were quickly removed from circulation and rarely seen again. For this simple reason the D-Class operated with very little oversight. There was the inevitable black market which supplied anything from a pack of dice to pornography (or champagne and wedding rings), but that was the extent of the illicit activity. If a D-Class was ever caught with a shiv during a surprise block inspection, or found guilty of insubordination in a containment scenario, they weren't sent for an all-expenses paid trip to solitary confinement. There was no second chance, no new trial, no meeting with a lawyer or appeal to the governor for clemency.

It was an incredibly effective motivator.

1200: Lunch.

There were rumors of other sites where the D-Class were unceremoniously executed at the end of each month. Also that they were all surgically implanted with a micro-explosive that could be activated remotely, or even automatically if they crossed certain invisible barriers. They were the sort of lies the Foundation covertly encouraged, and just plausible enough to sow doubt.

Another popular story was of the D-Class at Site-15 rioting. Depending on who was telling the story they were either a ragtag team of organized rebels or a bunch of idiots too stupid to know when to fold. No matter who you heard it from it always ended the same way: lockdown and MTF intervention, with every D-Class participant earning themselves a copper medal, right behind the ear.

Roughly a quarter of the staff at Mitchell's site were ex-military. The Mobile Task Forces consisted of combat veterans culled from elite SMUs like Delta, SAS, and Mossad. They were usually on active duty deployed across the world, but the MTF Eta-Seven "Creepy Crawlies" team was headquartered at Mitchell's site, and could occasionally be glimpsed prowling Euclid corridors and subbasements, or conducting training exercises beyond the yard. Although their interactions with D-Class were limited, there was a grudging respect between the two disparate groups, as they were often assigned the most dangerous tasks.

Other military personnel filled a plethora of roles within the Foundation, anything from guards and agents to strategists and intelligence desk-jobs.

1600: End of shift. Exercise and train.

The Foundation functioned on the principle that any insurrection would end in death. Even simple defiance could result in termination. Whether it was by a gun or some stygian crustacean was their choice. The opposite side of the coin was the necessary fairytale they sold and everyone swallowed: if you followed the rules and played the game there was a slim chance you could make it out

of this alive.

Mitchell wasn't buying it anymore. He had no illusion that he was going to spend his golden years on a tropical beach somewhere, feet planted in the sand and a fruity rum-drink at his elbow.

2200: Lights out.

"You still mean to go through with it?"

Mitchell was again practicing tying knots around the dowel. "Yes," he replied.

"When?"

"Soon as I get my chance."

"Anything I can do to help?"

"No," Mitchell said. "You've already done too much. When it's all over, they're going to come at you hard, interrogate you with everything they've got. It's better — safer — the less you know."

4

On a Tuesday in April, Mitchell got his chance.

5

Staff often assigned minor tasks to D-Class at random, either because they were too busy or too lazy to do it themselves. Mitchell had gotten into the habit of volunteering for any inter-office errand, usually delivering parcels and messages between departments that couldn't be sent electronically. Nowadays they didn't even ask, just told him to 'go there' and 'carry this'.

"Bring this to Mr. Truman in Resources," Dr. Dias said as she scribbled out a form. "You know the guy, up in Human Resources?"

Mitchell visited the Resources department once or twice a week, was on a first name basis with the guards. "Yes ma'am."

"Witness and sign, bring me back the pink copy. You know the drill. He can keep the thing if he wants, but bring it back to me if he doesn't." Dr. Dias hurriedly passed him a metal box the size of a restaurant take-out container along with the form.

On his way to Resources Mitchell made a pit stop to a restroom. By now his hands were clammy and his stomach was doing somersaults. His endocrine glands were dumping all their adrenal reserves. *This was actually happening.* His face was febrile to the touch. He'd been planning for this moment for months, and now that it'd finally arrived he felt totally unprepared. *Was he really going through with this?*

He saw her then, his ingénue. She was sprawled across the mattress as in the photograph, skin poured cream, hair spilling around her shoulders in amber drifts. A ray of sunlight shone through a nearby window. It dappled her thighs and highlighted the soft down on the nape of her neck and arms. If he ran his fingertips teasingly through that down, would she shiver and break out in goosebumps? He believed she would.

Yes, for her he'd follow this through to the end.

He removed the garbage bag out of the bathroom trash. Underneath, in the bottom of the canister, were two wooden dowels. He'd stashed many of them across the facility, not knowing when and where he'd need them. The trash was removed by D-Class, and usually they just swapped the bags out, never bothering to clean whatever may have fallen outside of it.

Mitchell stuck the two dowels inside the elastic waistband of his pants, at the small of his back, and then returned the bag.

He ran a cold water tap, cupped his palms beneath the faucet, and splashed water on his face. He couldn't recall ever seeing this done outside of movies, but had to admit it felt pretty good, and so did it several more times, dabbing at his ears and the back of his neck. In the laminated mirror his reflection looked feral; dripping wet, flushed with a cocktail of neurotransmitters, the bangs jutting straight up like a cartoon. He leaned his head into the sink and drank from the faucet, a long draught, and used paper towels to clean himself and

straighten his hair. After half a roll he almost looked presentable and felt much better. Calm. He told himself that in less than an hour he'd never have to worry about anything again. He could finally go to sleep and dream with his wife.

The facility was compartmentalized for safety purposes, and entering different sections required passing through security checkpoints as tight as an airport. Most guards — and they were actual guards at these checkpoints, ex-military, not D-Class kapos — recognized Mitchell from his frequent errands and simply waved him through. As a precaution he still had to remove his shoes and pass through a body scanner that utilized backscatter x-rays.

He set the metal container on the conveyor belt and raised his hands above his head as he stepped inside the body scanner. The D-Class uniform was similar to other prisons: loose-fitting blue scrubs with no pockets. It was difficult to hide anything inside it, and besides that Mitchell wasn't certain whether wood showed up on the x-ray machine or not. If it did register and flag the dowels the guard would follow-up with a pat-down that would reveal the contraband, if not their actual purpose.

It was a risk he had to take.

Mitchell recognized the guard on duty as Brian Clark. He wasn't the most stringent of guards, but he was professional, and if alerted to any irregularity Mitchell had no doubt he'd pursue it.

A bead of sweat rolled down his temple. The scanner only took around fifteen seconds to complete, but today it felt much longer. He studied the guard at the machine's console. *What do you see on that screen?* wondered Mitchell. *Is it sharp and defined? I hope not. I hope it's about as defined as my past.*

The guard looked up and motioned him through. "What you got for us today, Mitch?"

"Package for Mr. Truman, sir," he said, and handed over the papers and box. He swiped his ID badge to electronically check-in while the guard reviewed the forms.

"His eyes only, huh? With you as a witness."

"Yes sir," Mitchell confirmed.

The guard smiled and mockingly whistled at the package's overly-sensitive classification. Mitchell surprised himself by manufacturing a smile of his own while the guard picked up the station phone and thumbed an extension. After a brief conversation Mr. Truman appeared at the checkpoint. He was a nondescript forty-something in slacks, wore a tie but no coat. He'd barely glanced at the form before ushering Mitchell down a short corridor and into his office.

"Close the door behind you," Mr. Truman ordered.

Mitchel read the nameplate on the door: **STEPHEN J. TRUMAN, VP RESOURCE AND ASSET ACQUISITION.**

The office occupied a corner on the fourth floor of the main facility. There were two windows that looked out onto the yard and the site grounds beyond. Mitchell noticed that even here the windows were barred.

D-Class were frequently utilized to circumvent the daily minutiae of paperwork and clearances. As they were incarcerated within the facility with no means of outside communication, they filled a unique niche as simultaneously being the lowest ranked staff members while possessing some of the highest security clearances. There was no fear they'd have one-too-many at the local watering hole and confide to the bartender, no risk of venting to the wife about how a skip had possessed their boss the last two weeks, but now it had been exorcised and the old boss was back, and dammit if the skip wasn't better to work for. The only people a D-Class could talk to were other Foundation employees, and so in their limited, confined capacity as prisoners, it was a general rule that confidential information couldn't be leaked, at least not beyond the facility.

It was for this reason that Mitchell found himself, on a Tuesday in April, standing alone with Truman in his office. Mr. Truman, the departmental head of Resource and Asset Acquisition. Mr. Truman, the man who'd stumbled upon Mitchell's marriage by chance and didn't hesitate to report it, setting in motion his wife's transfer — if

she was even still alive — and Mitchell's subsequent erasure of memories.

Mitchell closed the door.

Truman turned his back and set the steel cube on his desk. "Dias tell you what this is all about?"

"No sir." The ribbon was tied loosely along his bicep, concealed under his shirtsleeve. He unraveled it, plucked the dowels from his waistband, and behind his back he knotted the ribbon at each end around the dowels.

"Well, let's take a look at what she's cooked up this—"

Mitchell swung the makeshift garrote up and over Truman's head. He cinched it taut around his throat and pulled him backward, away from the desk and into the middle of the room where there was nothing to grab. His legs scissored while he clawed at his neck and his breath escaped in a kettle wheeze. Mitchell planted his knee in his spine and forced him prostrate to the floor. Truman thrashed and wriggled but couldn't break loose. Mitchell's fingers turned purple from a lack of circulation as he squeezed as tight as he could. The ribbon was made from parachute silk he'd taken from the textile workshop.

It would hold. He was more concerned about the dowels snapping.

The strength quickly ebbed from Truman. He made a wet keening sound in the back of his throat, still frantically trying to get his fingers under the ribbon, and then went slack. Mitchell continued to apply the garrote, counting to ten before releasing him.

Each staff member, including D-Class, was required to wear an alert bracelet at all times. It was worn on the wrist like a watch, and it monitored pulse rates and GPS coordinates, among other features. It could also be manually engaged. Mitchell glanced at the face of Truman's. The readings appeared normal; no alert had been issued.

Mitchell worked fast. He slammed home the deadbolt on the office door and activated the level handle lock. Then he raised the police-

locking bar, wedging it at a forty-five degree angle between its floor mount and the notch. The door was old, installed when the site was originally built, made of thick steel. There were circular plates spaced evenly across its surface, but he wasn't sure what they were for; maybe ablative shielding or armor reinforcement.

The office had been designed as a fortified emergency shelter — there was at least one in each department, a place for employees to fallback in case of containment breach, offering more protection than a standard room.

He picked Truman up and sat him limp in his office chair, using the phone cords from his Avaya set to lash his wrists to the armrests, cinch his feet together, and as a final precaution, secure his chest to the back of the chair, threading the wire under his armpits. As he completed the last knot Truman stirred, his chest hitching with a sudden gasp. He'd been out less than a minute. Mitchell repositioned himself behind the chair.

Truman's eyelids fluttered open. His diaphragm expanded as he gulped air. Mitchell tightened the garrote around his neck but allowed enough slack for respiration.

When Truman fully came-to Mitchell leaned over and whispered into his ear: "Do exactly as I say and you might get out of this alive." It was a lie, of course, but like the prospect of freedom for the D-Class, he thought it'd persuade Truman into doing what he wanted. He rolled the chair on its casters to a large safe tucked into the corner of the office, next to a potted ficus plant. "Unlock it. Don't open it. If you open it, I'll choke you to death."

Truman croaked, "What the hell is—"

The garrote constricted, cutting off the words.

"Don't talk. Just open the safe."

He moved the chair so that Truman was able to extend his fingers and punch in the keycode. There was a beep and an indicator light turned from red to green. Mitchell wheeled Truman out of the way and opened the safe.

Inside was a cache of containment breach emergency supplies. It came standard with the emergency fallback offices. There was an M4A1 carbine and three thirty-round magazines. He loaded a clip and placed the assault rifle on the desk's blotter. There was also a 9mm Glock, a truncated shock-stick, a gasmask, an assortment of pills and tablets and capsules, a three-ring binder with procedural manuals, a radio, and a first-aid kit. Mitchell selected the Glock and used the binder to keep the safe propped open, in case he needed quick access later.

He towed Truman's chair around the desk to the opposite side, then pulled one of the chairs reserved for visitors next to him and sat down, so that they sat across from each other. The pistol remained in Mitchell's hand.

Truman struggled to speak. A blood vessel had erupted in his right eye. There were scratches and crescent-shaped gouges on his neck where his fingernails had scrabbled and peeled the flesh away trying to get at the garrote. The garrote itself had left very little evidence behind — a pink band that might bruise.

Truman broke into a coughing fit. When it failed to subside Mitchell grabbed a half-empty water bottle from the desk and held it to Truman's lips while he drank. When he was finished Mitchell sat back down. He reached into his trousers and pulled the photograph from his underwear, reverently unfolding it and holding it up for Truman to see.

"Say her name," he ordered, and fumbled with the pistol's safety catch before realizing that there wasn't one.

Truman squinted. His breathing was shallow and labored.

"Say her name," repeated Mitchell.

"I don't know her name," whined Truman.

"Say it."

"I don't know!"

Mitchell snarled and lunged out of the chair, cramming the picture

into Truman's face, the barrel of the gun pressed snugly behind it. "Don't lie to me. You know her name. Say it. Say it or I swear I'll feed you every last goddamn bullet in this thing."

"I don't know."

"You know. Say it!"

"I don't—"

"Marilyn! Her name is Marilyn!" Mitchell sank back into the chair.

Truman eyed him like he was a wild animal. "Whatever you think I did, I didn't do it. I've no clue what you're talking about."

Mitchell had known going into this that Truman would lie, try to weasel his way out, deflect responsibility as much as possible. He'd preemptively steeled himself against tactics that would appeal to his empathy and skepticism.

"Less than two months after we met we were married. Nothing official, of course. D-Class don't exist in the eyes of the law. Still, it meant something to us. It belonged to us alone, not the Foundation, not the skips or the screws, no one else." Mitchell raised his eyes to meet Truman's. "But, you know what? We were wrong." He barked a joyless laugh. "We were wrong. It never belonged to us. You can't own anything in this place. 'Cause you found out, you and your rules and regulations, and you took her away. Had my brain wiped, bleached it like she never even existed."

"That didn't happen," Truman said.

"It's too late for excuses."

"Listen, your memories were erased, that's true. But it was for Keter assignment. You volunteered."

"Yeah, that's what the shrink told me too." He stuck the pistol into his waistband and stood up, the dowels of the garrote gripped in both hands.

"There was never a Marilyn!" rasped Truman. "We can't wipe an

entire year's worth of memories. Not at once!"

Mitchell swiveled the chair around, so that he stood above and behind Truman, both of them staring out the office window at a gray, dusky sky underscored by the serrated tops of pine trees.

"Please…" he begged. "Please… I never did anything. You weren't married. I can prove it to you."

Mitchell looped the garrote around his throat. "I'm sure you can."

"Wait! Wait! It's documented. Forms you signed. Video recordings of the agreement. Interviews conducted. I don't know specific details about the skip, something memetic I guess. I'm on a need to know basis; they just tell what they're looking for and I make the recommendation. You think we'd create a whole cover story for a D-Class?"

"You do it all the time."

"For a D-Class that we — according to you — betrayed? Why risk it? We'd just feed you to the crocodile before going through all this trouble."

That creeping doubt, a slow burn, gnawing at his resolve. It all sounded so damn reasonable. "Show me then."

"I don't have it with me." The garrote tightened. "Wait!" he gasped, straining against the phone cords. "I can get it…"

"How?" asked Mitchell.

"My computer."

Truman supplied his credentials for Mitchell to log in and then navigated him through the different drives and folders. After several dead ends he started to suspect Truman was stalling for time. This was taking too long, and though he recoiled at the possibility of murdering an innocent man, Mitchell couldn't ignore that he was being sidetracked from what he came here to accomplish. Perhaps sensing his impatience, Truman instructed him to enter his employee identification number in the search field of a particular

folder called VOL KET RECS. A long list of files pulled up.

"Okay, here we go. Roll me over so I can read them." Truman's eyes flicked left to right. "Here, click on this one."

Screenshots of a signed agreement form, over twenty pages in length, with Mitchell's dated signature and initials peppered throughout. Mitchell frowned as he clicked through. "This proves nothing. You could've forged this, could've told me anything to get me to sign without reading."

Truman shook his head. "You can't erase an entire year's worth of a person's memory. I'm no doctor, but even I know the amnestics don't work like that. I mean — you *can*, technically, but the person usually ends up comatose or with brain damage. The most we like to do is a month at a time, and even that can have severe side effects. And you don't strike me as the kind of guy that signs a contract without reading it."

"I'm missing a year." Mitchell closed out of the file and opened the one listed below it. It looked like a behavioral health treatment plan.

"I know that, that's what I'm trying to explain. So, what typically happens is you're on a five shift rotation. You're on duty for four weeks, then the next week is spent getting amnestitized and re-trained for the containment procedures. Get it? Always four groups of D-Class on, and always one going through orientation. And it rotates—"

"Yeah, I got it."

"That way you don't run as much of a chance waking up drooling and wearing diapers. The amnestics are cumulative, though. It's still dangerous. Sometimes, halfway through we get a subject that can't even remember his own name. It happens. We compensate it with weekly psychological tests to monitor your condition… and the pay, of course."

"What pay?" Adherence records, a log of his punches. He closed out and opened another. His criminal history. Dishonorably discharged. DUI charges. Busted on I-45 outside of Houston with fifty pounds of

Mexican dope in his trunk. He closed out and opened another.

"Usually it's ten years off your sentence and a deposit to the commissary. I don't know the exact number, but I think it's a couple grand."

Mitchell looked up from the computer. He had a large balance on his commissary that he couldn't account for. "There're no videos here," he said.

Truman winced. "They must not be on the shared drive. They take up a lot of space. But I can get them. Please. Let me help you. You should've told the psychiatrist you were having these memories, it's called confabulation. It can be common in amnesiacs, one of the reasons we continue to monitor them."

"And rat myself out to the Foundation?" scoffed Mitchell. "Show them that the amnestics didn't work."

"They're not real memories. Maybe if you'd shared them in the sessions we could've helped you realize this, helped you work through all this. You weren't even stationed at this site prior to the Keter assignment. Come on, you know it makes more sense than the story you've cooked up. If you got caught in a relationship — and it happens often — you probably would've gotten written up, separated. Yeah, maybe you'd never see her again. But we would *not* have scrapped a year of memories. We wouldn't have forged false documents. That's a waste of resources, and I've got better things to do than mess with D-Class."

Mitchell gazed at the crinkled picture. His ingénue was beautiful, if not in a contemporary sense, then certainly in a classical style that would never fall out of fashion. She wasn't fat, but she wasn't supermodel-emaciated, either. She had curves in all the places a woman should. Voluptuous would've been the word he'd use to describe her.

"I'm sorry," Truman said, watching him closely. "She's not real. She never was."

Mitchell closed his eyes and tried to remember: he heard her laugh,

mischievous and sensual. He inhaled her; consumed her. She smelled like fresh-picked flowers and cantaloupe. He savored the taste of her sweet lips pressed against his, open-mouthed, the exchange of breath. Of *essence*. He ran the tips of his fingers, delicate as a feather, along the soft hair on her spine, tracing it slowly downward… she broke out in ridges of gooseflesh and involuntarily shivered, her toes curled, and meanwhile he continued his journey down her back, further, downward… until she couldn't withstand the tease any longer and was devoured by passion.

"I can help you. We'll figure this out."

Mitchell snapped out of his woolgathering. She was real. Her name was Marilyn. Ingénue to him alone. She was his wife. The bastard was trying to trick him. It wasn't enough to erase her, now he was playing with his mind, like it was all a sick game.

"This was always a one-way ticket for me," he said remorsefully.

"No one knows what's happened here today except for you and me, and you haven't done anything that can't be fixed," soothed Truman. Mitchell stared at him blankly. "I'll get those videos for you, and together we'll solve this thing. I promise. On my children's lives."

Mitchell's breath caught in his throat. He'd never killed anyone before, and he'd like to never have to start, but the idea of Marilyn being nothing more than a figment of his imagination was more terrifying than the alternative.

There was a knock at the door.

Both men froze.

"Mr. Truman? Everything all right in there? Downstairs rang and said you opened the safe. They've been trying to call you but there's something wrong with your phone." It was Brian, the guard from the checkpoint.

"He's got my fucking gun!" screamed Truman. Mitchell flinched at the sudden volume of his voice.

Apparently Brian was also caught off guard. "Who?" he asked.

"The fucking D-Class you—"

Mitchell swung the Glock, the barrel connecting with Truman's mouth at the end of its arc, splitting his bottom lip and knocking out two teeth. But he was too late. The entire facility would be pounding at the office door in a matter of minutes. He heard radio chatter outside while Brian called it in, but couldn't make out the actual words being said.

"You lying piece of shit."

"Wait! Please! I wasn't lying," spat Truman, his mouth full of blood.

"You fucked up then."

Mitchell spun him around in the chair until he was in position and wrapped the garrote around his neck. He pulled back and down, putting his weight into it. The ropey muscles in his forearms clenched.

A bullet struck the corner of the desk, showering Mitchell in sawdust and splinters. It was another moment before he registered the gun's report. A second bullet flew by his face, so close it ruffled his hair. It hit the window and spider-webbed the glass. He dropped to the floor, pulling Truman down with him. The third bullet tore through the space he'd previously occupied.

He crawled on his elbows and peeked around the desk. The door was still secure; no one had busted it down. He briefly entertained the idea that someone was shooting through the window, but they were too high for a guard to make a clear shot from the yard.

Then he saw it. There were loopholes in the door, small portholes that opened up, allowing someone to fire out or in with relative cover behind the thick steel. That's what those circular plates had been. Now one of the slits was open, and he could see Brian scanning the room, the snout of his service pistol perched on the lip of the hole.

Mitchell took aim and squeezed off two rounds. They both went wide, the bullets pinging against the steel, but close enough to give Brian a jump and make him back off.

He turned his attention back to Truman. Reinforcements would be here soon, and who knew what toys they'd bring along to try and stop him.

Truman had somehow managed to twist out of the restraints for his chest and left arm. Partially free, he was clawing his way up the desk. Mitchell followed his course and saw he was headed straight for the carbine. Things had quickly unraveled. Mitchell had never had any intention of surviving, and yet he hadn't planned for this escalation of violence, either. It was all supposed to have been quick and quiet.

He shot Truman.

Then he shot him again.

Truman yelped and crashed to the floor, still half-trussed to the chair. He'd aimed low, placing one round in his thigh, the other in his hip.

He emptied the rest of the clip at the door and then snatched the carbine off the desk, tossing the pistol aside. The acrid tang of cordite filled the room, and Mitchell's ears rang. Through the roar he could hear Truman moaning faintly as he rocked side-to-side. There was a small pool of blood — no larger than a teacup saucer — forming under his legs, slowly spreading through the carpet fibers.

He heard shouting, but couldn't parse the words or its source. An alarm sounded somewhere. The face of his and Truman's alert bracelets lit up with a notification of site-lockdown. As the ringing in Mitchell's ears subsided the shouting became intelligible:

"… D-3009! Steve Truman! Please respond!"

Mitchell hazarded a glance around the desk. Multiple loopholes in the door were now open, each nesting the barrel of an assault rifle.

"D-3009 respond! Mr. Truman!"

"Yeah? What do you want?" called Mitchell. "What happened to the other guy? Brian."

Soft chatter behind the door, and then the same voice hollering: "Speaker! Please identify yourself."

"This is D-3009."

"Is Mr. Truman with you?"

"Yeah…"

"Why doesn't he respond? Is he alive?"

Mitchell looked Truman over. His eyes were glassy and he writhed with pain. The pool of blood had expanded. Mitchell wasn't sure if he was aware of what was happening or not. What was clear was that the desk they were hiding behind wasn't bulletproof, and the only reason why it hadn't already been riddled with gunfire was in fear of hitting Truman.

He supposed the story about micro-bomb implants was false, otherwise he'd be vaporized by now.

"Yeah, he's alive. Just… incapacitated."

"How? D-300-"

"Look, I'm done talking. Okay?"

"Mitchell, my name's Paul." The switch from his Foundation designation to his real name didn't escape his notice. "I'm a Captain with site security. I'm going to need either visual or verbal confirmation that Truman's alive."

"Okay, you've got my verbal confirmation."

"Umm — I need it to come from him."

Mitchell didn't know why he bothered conversing. Maybe it was just that this was the end of the line, and he was procrastinating. They couldn't kick the door in, not with the rod in place, and the loopholes were too small to reach through. They could probably rip it off or cut it down, though. Or maybe they'd come through the floor or ceiling; repel from the roof and crash through the window.

"Mitchell, this is Paul again. Listen, we don't want anyone to get hurt. Why don't you come over here and unlock this door so we can talk about this. I promise you no one will lay a finger on you."

"What the hell was that?" Mitchell laughed. "Was that you negotiating?"

"Mitchell, in just a few minutes the MTF is going to be up here with drills and torches. They're going to cut this door from its hinges, and when they do that, it's going to be too late. I won't be able to help you. I *can* help you, but it's got to be right now, no more delays, and in order to do that I need confirmation that Mr. Truman is okay."

Mitchell leaned out with the M4A1 gripped in both hands, toggled the automatic setting and sprayed the door. The sound was incredibly loud in the office, like standing under a waterfall. He ducked back into the desk and turned to Truman whose eyes were now clear and focused, maybe from the jackhammer burp of the rifle. Mitchell laid the muzzle of the gun against his chest and fired two rounds, then reversed his grip and stuck the scalding barrel under the shelf of his own chin.

It was over. He'd expected a surge of relief to wash over him, a lifting of pressure, like waking up one day after a long illness to find yourself miraculously well. It didn't happen. He felt no different.

There was just one last thing to do…

Mitchell knew they'd be coming in fast now after he fired those last shots. Probably with gas and rubber bullets, or some other non-lethals. They'd want to take him alive if possible, and avoid serious injury to Truman.

He was distantly aware of activity around him; tubular objects descended from the ceiling and bounced across the floor toward him. They exploded in phosphorescent novae. Claps of thunder reverberated in Mitchell's ear drums and rattled his chest. A concussive wall of heat swept through the room, whipping up scraps of paper and scattering bullet casings. He squeezed his eyes against the starbursts and searing wind, and he saw Marilyn, her arms stretched out, beckoning him into their fold. A glimmer of gold

confirmed she was wearing her wedding ring, and when he looked down at his hand he saw that his, too, had somehow returned.

He ran to her.

6

They'd quietly unscrewed the hinges from the door. When the D-Class started shooting again he called it. They deposited flashbangs and breached the office.

Captain Paul Wilson picked his way through the room. It looked like it'd been hit by a tornado. The stun grenades smoldered in melted patches of carpet. *What a mess*, he thought. The two bodies were strung along the far wall, wedged between it and the desk. It was hard to tell, but it looked like Truman had suffered several gunshot wounds to the abdomen and pelvis. The D-Class had chosen the easy route, taking his own life by blowing a hole the size of a golf ball through the roof of his skull. A spray of blood and bone and gray matter painted the wall above the corpse.

Paul rubbed his forehead. There would be an internal investigation, and he already had a sinking feeling that it would close without a satisfying resolution. The D-Class's cell was currently being tossed, but no note had turned up yet, and it probably never would. He'd glanced at the D-Class's file when the call had come in — nothing had immediately jumped out at him, but he'd mentally checkmarked the Keter assignment from last year for further review. There was something familiar about that.

His team was on its way out; forensics had arrived along with the on-site medical examiner. Paul was turning to leave when he saw a crumpled picture on the floor.

"Hey, what is that?" he said to the technician hunkered over it. "Let me see that, will you?"

The forensic tech passed him the photograph. It was blistered from the flashbangs, the edges curled, but he recognized the woman as a researcher's wife. He'd been introduced to her at a Christmas party or similar work-related event. And the picture wasn't exactly the type

you framed and put on your desk for anyone to see. He couldn't remember the name of the researcher at the moment, it'd been last year or the year before. Paul made another mental checkmark to ask around and find out who the researcher was as a possible lead. Maybe Truman and this guy's wife were having an affair, but if it was related to the murder-suicide, he couldn't imagine how the D-Class had become involved.

He handed the photograph back. "Thank you," he said, and left the office, rubbing his forehead.

7

He's ordered to step inside the cell of a giant midge. It clings to the ceiling like a parasitic chandelier.

A voice over the intercom assures him it's sedated.

There's an unsettling smell, metallic, like plunging your nose into a piggy-bank. As he inches deeper inside the room a gallon of digestive juices is dumped on his head from the skip's proboscis — a showerhead raining acid. There's a parchment rustle of its wings as they unfold and it swings from the ceiling in a languid, graceful drop that seems to play out in slow motion. He stumbles toward the outer containment door, already sealing shut on him, and when he glances over his shoulder his corroded face stares back, reflected and distorted a hundred times in the midge's compound eyes. It's like watching himself melt in a shattered fun-house mirror. And as he looks on, barely recognizing himself, a pocket rips open in his cheek, releasing an effluvium of blood and steam. The lobe of his ear is distended and droops to his shoulder in the shape of a tear drop. He's screaming and then —

D-29840 snapped awake. His pillow was soaked with sweat and his heart was racing. He thought he'd be used to it by now, it'd been years, but every night it was the same.

He climbed out of bed. It was easier now that the bottom bunk was vacant.

The cell door buzzed. He hopped out and lined up along the yellow

band to start his day. He was practically asleep on his feet; the last forty-eight hours had been spent in a cramped, stale room getting shouted at and accused by jackbooted interrogators itching to lay their hands on him. When he did manage to close his eyes it was the midge he saw.

Yes, his bunkmate had been acting strange the past few weeks. How so? Just different, more introverted and depressed. No, he didn't know the cause of it or what he'd intended to do.

He'd been cooperative while supplying them with no useful information. If they had an anomalous lie detector or truth serum, they didn't use it. It'd been myopic to use Mitchell, he knew he'd be fingered as a possible accomplice, but he couldn't have allowed the opportunity to slip away. A new amnestitized transfer and they practically dropped him in his lap.

After roll call D-29840 showered, powdered his stump with talcum and fastened his prosthesis. He'd managed to squeeze through the containment chamber's door… or most of him had. The last thing he remembered before passing out — and the point where the dream always ended if he didn't wake up first — was the midge on the other side of the door, its feeder inserted into the heel of his shoe, vacuuming all the liquids from the foot still lodged inside. The translucent straw turned pink as it greedily sucked up blood, while another orifice on the end of the proboscis vomited enzymes to break the flesh and bone down into a consumable puddle.

Best not to think about it, but impossible to avoid. Might as well try pissing in the wind. After tightening his prosthetic foot he moved to the sink to brush his teeth, where his disfigured face waited, lurking inside the fogged mirror. They'd been able to stitch up the hole in his cheek; it was nothing more than a puckered scar, the standard train tracks of a suture seam. What remained of his ear was a pulpy nodular, and his eye was the blank white orb of a feeding shark. He was blind and deaf on that side.

He limped to the cafeteria and grabbed a tray of food, always last in line. He chose a secluded seat and eased himself into the chair with only a slight twinge in his back. The plastic fork was unwieldy, gripped clumsily in his right-hand; a natural southpaw, his dominant

hand had caught the brunt of the midge's caustic downpour while trying to shield his face, and now all that remained was a partial thumb and index finger, like a pincer.

Not that he was complaining. It was important to remain useful to the site, even if it meant picking up their trash and scrubbing their toilets. Light custodial work was all he was good for since the accident. If you didn't tow the line you might just wake up one day assigned as a chew toy for a non-Euclidean nightmare surfer.

D-60914, a recent transfer that went by the ridiculous moniker of Gucci, sat down in the chair across from him. D-29840 didn't look up from his breakfast as he shoveled food into his mouth.

"What's this bastard's name again?" Gucci asked, also not making eye contact.

He's in the ICU for three months, fading in and out. His entire existence is trapped in a womb of pain, swaddling him, cradling him, unrelenting, refusing to release and birth him. There's nothing except the pain, no time when it wasn't present. When he's awake he dreams about falling through the ice of a frozen lake, the water so cold it numbs him to the marrow. When he's asleep he dreams about the midge.

He's kept in a plastic tent, lying on a hospital bed. He's swathed in bandages that constantly need to be changed because his body is a single weeping blister; the skin stretches so tight it cracks like a dry river bed and secretes pints of a clear, fetid fluid. IV drips appear to feed the fluid straight back into him. The tent expands and contracts with the respiration of some machine — he's surrounded by a lot of machines, all beeping and flashing numbers, an entire appliance store, toasters and microwaves and cathode rays…

D-29840 said around a piece of buttered toast, "His name is Leo Cherri. He's the head of the site infirmary."

"Leo Cherri," choruses Gucci.

He recognizes the voice of one of the doctors, and knows he's awake because the midge isn't there. The doctor is silhouetted

against the tent as a dark splotch. The doctor is speaking to someone on the phone — to him it's a one-sided conversation.

Gucci raised a mug of coffee to his lips but didn't take a sip. "Okay," he said. "Why'd he do it? I mean, did I do something to this guy?"

"What could you've done to him to warrant this?" he retorted. "Spill his drink? Not address him properly as 'doctor'? No, you didn't do anything to him, not that I'm aware. He's just a petty, vindictive piece of shit, likes to throw his weight around and take his crap home life out on us."

"Hey, I'm done with this guy. He's not improving, and I'm not wasting anymore resources on him. Even if he did pull through he's not going to be a productive Foundation employee. …The Hippocratic oath doesn't mean I have to spends months trying to save a lost cause. …I don't know why you're making such a big deal of this. He's probably a rapist or serial killer or something. Why do you care?"

He's burning up. If a drop of water fell on him it would sizzle and dance like he's a hot skillet. He tears at the bandages, pulling damp wrappings off his forearms, along with bits of skin and scabs.

If the doctor notices his distress he ignores it. "Well, it's unfortunate, but these things happen. How long are you going to keep blaming yourself? …It's not just about the cost, although I admit that's certainly a factor. We have a finite supply and these things aren't cheap. Believe it or not the Foundation's coffers aren't bottomless, and I have to answer for my department's budget. …What long-term effects? He's got third-degree chemical burns over fifty-percent of his body. Nothing's going to change."

D-29840 knew his reach, both literally and figuratively, was short. He'd never be able to get to the site director, and he wasn't even sure what an O5 was, exactly. He'd settle for what he could grab, the lower rungs on the ladder. A lifetime of poverty had cultivated his palate so that the most tasteful morsels were also the cheapest cuts. He'd manipulated Jordan into murdering the Level-2 researcher that had failed to ensure proper containment procedures were followed, leading to his current disfigurement. Mitchell had — according to

recent gossip, and the agents interrogating him hadn't dissuaded him from the idea — somehow blown Truman up and taken on a whole task force with just a dowel and a piece of string.

"I'll hold off on the termination request for another week. But if he doesn't get better — and I'm talking parting-of-the-Red-Sea miracle better — within that time, I'm going to submit the request and after that — " The doctor pins the phone between his ear and shoulder and raises both hands in a gesture of defeat. " — I wash my hands clean. They can use him as fodder for the wasp factory far as I'm concerned. …Yeah, I'll put it on your tab."

The phone is hung up. He's still ripping at the bandages. Staples have popped loose along his ribs and blood sheets down his side. His left foot and hand burn with an itch so fierce it makes him want to attack it with a rototiller.

An alarm shrills and he's aware that the doctor has turned his attention to him. He doesn't care, doesn't stop, he's going to combust, needs to get this gauze off before he goes up like a gasoline-soaked rag.

The doctor moves over to his tent and trails his fingers along the outside layer of plastic. "What're you doing up, Crispy?" he says. "You hear what I just said? You better listen, not that you're going to remember any of it. In another week it's bye-bye Demerol, hello grandma. My, what big teeth you have!"

"Here, I got something for you." D-29840 fumbled in his pants and passed Gucci a photograph under the table. He'd recently pilfered it from a philologist's desk and thought it would serve his purposes. "You get caught with that thing, you found it, got it? I don't know what they'll do to you, terminate you probably, lie to you if you're lucky, tell you it's not who you think it is."

"This is her?" Gucci asked.

He nodded. "That's her."

"She's beautiful."

D-29840 finished the last of his coffee and stood up to bus his tray. "Wait a week before you contact me again." Give it time, let that picture worm its way into his head until it was all he could think about.

"Wait. What was that word you said I used to call her?"

"Ingénue," he said. "You called her ingénue."

Innocence

MR MONEY AND GIRL

The first thing that Latoya saw of this money man was a spray of diamonds firing out his nose as she was filing into the room. Black hair slicked back over his head and juxtaposed with the plain white robe he wore. Sweeping them to the floor, he began smiling when their eyes met.

"What's yer name, miss?"

She paused for a moment. "They said I have to say D-ninety-nine eighty-nine."

"Yeah, but what's your name?" He smiled at her, waving his hand to invite her to sit next to him on the table. Sitting by his side was a stool painted silver, with a small plush cushion resting upon the seat.

"My name's Latoya Spence." Squinting at the strange creature inviting her over, she tried to see if he had any more gems or sparkly things. "Why'd you have those in your nose, mister?"

The rich man shrugged. "It's what I'm here for, it's my namesake. I've got a lot bought and sold in my past, and I need money to do it."

Latoya frowned at him, crossing her arms as she stared into his smiling visage. "What's your name? Are you the one who…"

"Bought and sold, bought and sold. I tell ya, I know what it's like. That's my whole life, my sum of the existence, nutshelled for your enjoyment. Name's Mister Money."

"Did you buy… me here, or did someone buy you?"

Mr. Money shrugged, and a few emeralds began rolling out of his armpits and out his sleeves, clattering and clacking on the floor as they scattered across the room. "I'm the reason you got brought or

bought here. Not directly, but you're here now, so this is a reason. Who might've gotten you sold to a place like this?"

Dropping her eyes to the table, a quiet voice said, "My parents."

"That's a shame. Big boon for the Foundation, though. It's a big, wide web of an institution that you guys are a part of."

"Are you saying this was a good thing?" Latoya looked up with daggers. "Nothing could be worse than this."

Surrendering with raised hands, Mr. Money began leaning back on his stool. "Oh, no, no, miss, I didn't mean it like that. I was just following the money. I don't know what they've told you, but it's probably nothing great."

Saying nothing, Latoya's eyes continued chopping into Money's mug. Sighing, he leaned forwards, clasping his hands together.

"You're going to have to learn the economy of this place if you want to make some kind of life. I can give you some words, if you want. I'm in here with you, you know. We're one and the same. Prisoners."

Mr. Money glanced over to the glass panel slated behind Latoya, and his own distorted reflection. The sheen of the light above covered his reflection's face. Looking up at him, she began slowly nodding. "I don't know anything. I don't know what I'm doing."

"You've got the most important thing down. You haven't gone to pieces. At least, I don't think you have. If you can keep that together, that's gonna be your most important asset."

"I don't know I don't like it." *Harrumphing*, and re-folding her arms, Latoya gave Mr. Money a resentful look. "I can't do anything about anything here."

"You have a few advantages, going into things."

"Like what?"

"Luckily, you're a little lady. Most of the feminine types here, in your line of work, they're the non-violent types. Low-income folks nobody

was going to miss, people born in the wrong place at the wrong time, that sort of thing. People like you.

Now, a lot of the boys aren't like that. The dregs of society are a much larger percentage, thugs and prisoners. Be careful around them. The white coats do a pretty good about keeping things in line, but always be wary. It's not a safe place here."

Turning her head away, Latoya's voice grew quiet. "I don't want to talk about this anymore."

"Oh…" Running his fingers through his hair, Mr. Money tried clearing his throat. "Well, perhaps I can engage in a bit of speculation?"

The doors opened, and two individuals, adorned with white coats and head-covering rubber masks, stepped in, gesturing towards Latoya. Looking back at Mr. Money for a moment, she hopped off the stool, and slowly began walking with her captors.

Walking down the hall, she strode forward with eyes closed. This wasn't an unfamiliar path anymore. It was her life. Someday she might be lucky enough to forget anything else.

AQUARIUM AND BOY

Tim felt the pride swelling in his chest as the gaze of his many loyal fish friends flowed over him. His adventure complete, the day saved. Many titles had been earned along the way, Lord of the Undercurrent, Master of the Great Tank, Circumventer of Bubbles and Defender of the Glass stood at the height of achievement. All around him, the court of the Gill Kingdom were standing and applauding him and his heroics.

Princess Fishsticks stood beside him, and next to them the Knights Coral and Carol, and finally the King Nematode, in all his glory. Not as much glory as that which Tim was nearly broadcasting to the universe, but he carried himself in his own way.

The sound of the proclamations still rang in the air. Rejoicing was at hand. The adventure to save the kingdom had come to a close.

In the hall, nobody was moving. They all stared, smiles fixed, watching and waiting as Tim beamed out at them all. King Nematode, clearing his throat, stood up from his throne. "As Tim has saved us from danger, we shall forever be grateful. It is, however time for him to return to his home."

The word 'return' echoed in Tim's mind. That could not happen. This was such a wonderful place, to swim and be free from any constraints. The creatures he had met here had taught him so much. How to swim, how to fight, who lives, who dies, who tells your story… Clearing his own throat, Tim spoke out in his clearest tone.

"I can't possibly. There's still so much to do here, your fishiness. Fixing the filter, defeating the dastardly Beta Battlers of the Bottle Filter Fortress…"

Shaking his head, the King tapped a green trident on the floor. The audience began filing out at once, slipping through the gates to the great hall and out of sight. "You have already saved us from great crisis, son. Crawdad Steve has been reduced to a shell of his former self, and we have you to thank for that. But now we must take matters into our own hands."

Raising a hand to speak, Tim felt the webbed hand of the princess on his shoulder. "It is for the best, Ser Tim-Tim. You have much to return to."

Tim shook his head, sinking slowly to the floor. "No, no. I can't. I've hardly begun to live a life…"

The hall was empty now, of all friends and allies. All those smiling fishy faces departed, leaving only bubbles and the gentle current of their wake.

Sitting down next to Tim, King Nematode extending an arm around his shoulder. "Do not forsake your world for ours, there is much more for you there than there is here."

Tim wasn't looking at him. "There's nothing for me up there."

"There's nothing for you down here, either. We're done playing, Tim.

It's time to go home."

Pushing back tears, waiting for just a moment too long, Tim looked up to the King's face and saw empty space. The majesty of the room had disappeared, on the floor the words 'THANK YOU FOR ENJOYING THE AMAZE-O DIVE TANK - DR. W' burned in the floor for a moment.

Sitting alone, Tim wept into the ether of water. Gurgling draining was pulling at his body, pushing him upwards. Resisting was futile, and Tim allowed himself to surrender to the pulling force of reality.

Fuzzy whiteness blinded Tim for just a moment. The sound of the machines faded back in, and he felt the shallow wetness of the tank. Back in the testing chamber, neck-deep in a glass fishtank. Two masked technicians, in baggy white jumpsuits, lifted him out, and gently placed him back in his chair. The letters and digits *D, seven, one, four, four* floated through his brain.

Tim closed his eyes and when he opened them again, the orange jumpsuit was back. The numbness, all over, was back. Twisting his neck, his eyes drifted past the technicians strapping him back into the mechanical contraption that served as his bodily prosthetic. Coming to land on the fish tank, he watched as blurry shapes flitted in and out of his vision.

They pushed him out and they were gone.

ROBO-DUDE AND INFANT

David wasn't happy from the moment his swaying, crying form had been plopped upon the playhouse floor. Robo-Dude stood watching, as apprehensively as a robot could muster. Wailing and weeping, David slapped his hands on the floor and was throwing his toys in vain.

Taking a few steps towards the boy, Robo-Dude looked up with his cubical metal face.

"ROBO-DUDE GREETS YOU, HUMAN CHILD."

Almost instantly, David was scrabbling away from the noise. If it were possible, his weeping even intensified. This went on for quite some time, with David flapping around carrying on and making a scene. Robo-Dude stood patiently. Repeating the words he had said, more and more quietly, until it was hardly more than a whisper.

Screaming turned to hiccuping, and from there, quiet curling and crying. Robo-Dude watched, quietly and repeatedly introducing himself in close proximity to the child. Standing watch, the bot toy watched as David finally closed his eyes, and slept.

Dimming lights signaled a nap time, and for a few hours, the only noise in the chamber was the bare whispering of Robo-Dude's voice box. Finally, David's eyes cracked open again. The calm, monotonous repetition of infinite introductions got his attention, David began watching.

Seeing his audience's attention, Robo-Dude began acting at once. **"GREETINGS HUMAN CHILD. ROBO-DUDE IS HERE TO BE YOUR FUN-TIME BUDDY. ROBO-DUDE WILL NEVER BETRAY YOU, AND HAS BUBBLES."**

Bubbles began billowing out from the robot's chest. Eyes opening wide as walruses, David sat up, watching the bubbles float lazily past his face. Sitting for a few minutes, David looked as stunned as any infantile person might be seeing such a scene. One bubble ambled its way to his face, and came to rest on his nose. Slapping it with his hand, David was delighted to find it popped, and he quickly began making short work of the other bubbles.

Bubbling with joy, David was laughing. Laughing and playing, sitting in place, sticking close to the Robo-Dude. Eventually, all good things come to an end. White coats with black goggles came for him, picking the baby up and out. David's whining echoed down the hall, as Robo-Dude watched him go.

MR. LAUGH AND GIRL

I hadn't popped my limbs off in awhile, so waking up with sore joints is always a fun way to start the day. Rubbing my elbows and knees, I thought about what might be tested on me while waiting for

Foundation handlers to come and collect me. They hadn't scheduled a new slough of tests for awhile, hopefully they've got something new.

Once you've seen one of the kids the Foundation brings in, you know them all. My eyes started stinging as light beamed in from the now-open door. A nurse, wearing a bright pink apron and an air-raid mask, is bringing me tea. I take a deep sip, and wipe my mouth. It's time to go.

Whenever I'm walking through the halls of the Foundation, I always feel like I'm backstage somewhere. I don't know why, never even been to a concert much less get a backstage pass, but I guess they stuck the feeling in there somewhere. Part of the cobbled concoction that is me.

Two sterile gray chairs, with a glass table standing in the middle. No guards in the room today. My joints twinge with pain as I sit down, but with some grimacing, it's bearable. Rubbing my wrists, I begin preparing myself to get this over with. Two deep breaths, close eyes, heads up.

Opening my eyes, I see a kid sitting across from me. Young, with smooth dark skin and black freckles running across her face. There's a hawkish intensity to her eyes, an unusual fierceness for a kid. *Reminds me of when I used to try and make Mr. Mad chuckle. Not smart.*

"Hey there, sport. I'm Mr. Laugh."

Nothing. Squat. I try to look at her mouth, looking to convince myself she's stifling a giggle. Her expression is derelict of laughter.

"You're not much of a laugher, huh?" Glancing down, I feel my mouth dry up. One of the kid's legs ends halfway down her thigh. It's red, scraped and irritated. A black knob of her body's creation protrudes at the tip. Maybe bone. It looks painful.

Looking up at me, she squeaks. "I don't laugh."

"Well, if you're going to be living around here, you should take it

when you can get it. Nothing's much less amusing than ending up in one of their room's that's like a permanent dunk tank, y'know?

Slowly shaking their head, those hawk eyes zeroed in on my own. "When I was a child, my home was attacked in the war. They shot my father, and as I held his head, he said to me 'I'll always be here.'"

"Jesus." I leaned back in my chair, looking the kid over. Her breathing had quickened, and under the table her hands were curling into fists.

"That was when he died. After that, it's not funny anymore."

Leaning back over the table, I look her in the eyes. "Listen. I don't know how you got here, but I know how it is. Not having parents. Being alone. I was made, not born."

Her face was painting me a picture of disinterest. I'd have to reach into my guts to find a way to reach this kid.

"So, when I was first made, by a Doctor, a bad Doctor, he set me up in a parking lot two weeks late for the circus."

Checking on my audience, she was at least looking at me now. "So, I'm looking around, and the first thing I see is a leg. Just some guy's leg, but not a guy's leg, laying in the middle of a parking spot. Perfectly squared with the lines, right dead-center smack in the middle of the space. Like someone stuck it there just for me."

That got her interest piqued. Looking over at me, I could feel the touch of her eyes on me before seeing them. "I didn't know what to do with it. First thing I did, tried to find a hospital. Only problem with that, is I go in and they tell me they're not taking donations. I tried to explain, but they just laughed, and laughed…. sent me on my way."

Curiosity was overtaking her disinterest by storm. *I'd have to come up with a point to all this soon.* "I went to the police, maybe thinking they could help me out, but they think it's a gag. I guess that's what you get when someone lets you go on April Fools day. The sergeant at the desk was more concerned with his donuts than me, and let me ramble on and wave this leg around until his laughing knocked

over his coffee. They kicked me out after that."

Interest was waning. Now or never, it was time for the kill.

"Eventually, I got picked up by these spooks, and they brought me here. Meanwhile, I've still got this leg, with no clue what to do with it. "

Breathing in deeply, I reached down, firmly grasping my leg. With a hollow popping noise, I detached it, and placed it on the table. Skeptically and tentatively reaching out, her hesitation quickly turned to joy as my plastic-esque leg shrunk from adult recluse size to kid-sized. It was pink. It was meant for her.

Winking at her, I have a sly grin on my face. "Maybe you can help me out?"

Cue gasping, her grin shattered the practiced mask of her face. Pushing out of the chair, she ran out into the hall behind her, yelling "Look! Look!" They don't care, but that doesn't matter. She thinks they might, and that brings a smile to her face. I couldn't make her laugh but, looking down to my new stump, I think a smile was enough.

The Glorious and Everlasting Victory of Pablo Foxenflower over the Traitor Lazarus Wyrm

Another email from Briten. Fucking condescending arsehole. God, it's been so fucking tempting to just plaster his face everywhere with "LEADER OF THE CHAOS INSURGENCY" or something.

> *The following document is to be immediately destroyed after reading:*
> *Twenty-six of the twenty-nine of Site-3403's staff have been terminated by Task Force Alpha-One following Site Commander Lauren Harris's direct refusal of orders to terminate Security Guard Raymond Trask after his potential contraction of SCP-4083, "He Of Many Minds". The termination of three surviving personnel shall occur upon their relocation.*
>
> Need a good cover story, kid. Two days. You did real good on the last one, kid, so keep it up.

BEWARE THE BLOODSKULLS
The Chaos Insurgency have struck again, mercilessly slaughtering the practically defenceless Site-3403 down to the last man. This time, they have used their brutal gang of murderers known as the Bloodskulls for their distinctive method of securing entry: having a point in the centre of your forehead worn down to the bone. The leader of this terrible team is none other than Lazarus Wyrm.

Soft-spoken, polite, and covered in tattoos from head to forehead, Captain Wyrm is the leader of the Bloodskulls. In a previous life, Wyrm worked for the Foundation; however, the man grew an unhealthy obsession with SCP-9347, "The Vortex", and purposefully submerged himself in the hopes of becoming a God. However, Wyrm's plan both failed and succeeded, as security guard Pablo Foxenflower managed to retrieve him before the transformation could be complete; as a result, the man was both incredibly smart,

strong, and durable… but he was now corrupted, and would stop at nothing to finally become a God. He soon broke free of his restraints and escaped from the facility.

Most will never see anything of Lazarus Wyrm except his name and his crimes, will talk to their mates about what a jolly big meanie he was, and then go back to talking about some other mundane shite.

But some will dig. Quite a few, actually, especially those who had lost friends in the “attack”.

And it’s my job to give ‘em answers.

Lazarus Wyrm would be born to Thaddeus and Imperia Wyrm, his siblings Dickon, Auric, and Severa. He would attend the entirely real Red Rose primary school and be taught by the entirely fictional Finbar O’Reilly. After showing repeated interest in both philosophy and physics, he would graduate with a joint degree age twenty-one. He would then apply for a position at Nova Sciences, a Foundation Front ran by the (unfortunately) 100% real and 100% dickhead Doctor Jake Briten. He would then slowly rise through the ranks until he met Pablo Foxenflower, and he became the Foundation’s villain for the next six months until Foxenflower rammed his head into a jet engine.

But it's never that easy. Thaddeus Wyrm’s parents were Hiram and Waverly Wyrm, while Imperia would be the child of Cellaria and Cecil. Thaddeus worked as a butcher, while Imperia ran the finances for him. Backstory upon backstory, lie upon lie, nothing personnel upon nothing personnel… on and on it goes, until even the most desperate of diggers will turn back, fully convinced that Lazarus Wyrm was a real person. Anyone who digs deeper than what I have created will fall victim to a rather convenient paradox: anyone insane/sad/bored enough to spend all of their time convincing people that Lazarus Wyrm doesn't exist is too insane/sad/boring to be taken seriously.

There are 32,084 members of the Chaos Insurgency, and I created all of them with nothing more than an “Evil Name Generator” and an overabundance of military jargon that armchair generals pleasure themselves to. They spend their time trying to “take over the world”

for unspecified reasons and occasionally massacring a Foundation Site that's getting a bit too close to insubordination or that is manned by morons that can't keep a lid on anomalies. Sometimes the GOC or some other group finds themselves victims of this mysterious organization, and occasionally they topple governments. A very busy organization, the Chaos Insurgency is, especially one made up of nothing personnel.

See, most people in the propaganda division of the Foundation have exactly one maxim: the simpler the lie, the better. The guy who taught me the ropes — that twat I mentioned earlier, Jake Briten, he told me this stupid story about a total moron who had to think up a cover story for this guy who got killed in a containment breach. Guy spent ages coming up with this elaborate backstory about how the guy got killed in a car crash when a drunk driver rear-ended him. Spent all this money on crashing a car and mangling the body and doing all kinds of stuff… only, turned out he didn't have a drivers' licence. Because he was blind.

But isn't that just so… boring? The rest of the propaganda division, they're complacent with just slapping on "sudden heart attack" and calling it a day. Morons. No, I aim for something greater. Lies can do so much more than cover up mistakes. I can have squads of heavily armed soldiers terrified of an organization that doesn't exist outside of a few newsletters and my imagination. I can have people of science cursing creatures and personnel that are nothing, were nothing, will always be nothing. I can have impossible anomalies that could destroy the world hold back in fear of dust and whispers. And I —

"Sorry, kid, looks like you're staying late tonight." Briten dumps a sheaf of papers on my desk. "Need 'em done by tonight."

"Of course, Doctor Briten. I'll get on them as soon as possible."

God, I really should make the bastard a CI spy or something. I've worked for the prick for three years, he still can't remember my name. Hell, nobody ever does. That's the downside to working in the shadows; you can never attack from the front, never see their face crack in fear when they realize you- the one who they belittled and punched around and humiliated — was the one to kill you.

But I’m not even a name to him. To any of them.

I’m just the Nothing Personnel Kid.

The Aftermath: But Here's What Really Happened

"Hey, uh, hey Clef?"

"…Yes, Konnie?"

"We really fucked up good this time, didn't we?"

"Shut up and keep your eyes on the statue. I'm almost done cleaning."

Inside-Out

Report on "SCP-
Published by J.S. Moulton Research C

Section 1
Pertinent information regar

I

SCP-17591 appears to be a clear rectangular block 2.5m x 1.5 that it cannot be removed safely from its original location. It toughness has rendered it impossi

The item has been named SCP-17591 for an engraving on c symbol associated with the defunct occultist group "SCP Four group associated this symbol with phenomena that were excep in the completion of their "co

II

SCP-17591 distorts local near-Euclidean space such that its six of the room where it resides — each point on the surface of the room. SCP-17591 is effectively contained

For the sake of clarity, this text ignores the spacial warping as containment, treating it as a discrete object. You may cons explanation of and technical detail

III

SCP-17591's top surface (a 2.5m x 1.5m side), while fully trans image of some nonexistent place to those who observe it direc between viewers, including those who observe at the same time show a region analogous to S

A recurring theme among the hallucinations induced by SCP-
"other side" perceives our reality as though we existed within a
with the inhabitants of the hallucinatory places have result

A sense of wanderlust, disdain for the present state of the wor
those entering SCP-17591's room, and intensify during viev
expressed the desire to escape the world as a whole, leavin
"opening" would entail, as the item has no observable seam
between those exposed, and dissipate with se

These effects are produced and transmitted via telepathy eman
psychic-sensitives T. McL

Section 2
Current status of SC

I

SCP-17591 remains at the location in which it first appeared —
boiler room on the basement level. As this building was alrea
Anomaly Society (under the guise of an archaeological excav
access to the p

II

SCP-17591 has not changed at a

III

Research on SCP-17591 has been discontinued. Contact S. Sa
Moulton Research Center with any questions regarding SCP-17
SCP-17591 and Related Pro

Section 3
Further readi

- The Clarendon Report, which details the present underst
by SCP-17591, with SCP-17591 appea

- Compulsion — The Art of Identifying and Resisting Tel
proven useful for those dealing

- A History of the SCP Foundation, a compilation of materi

of SCP-17591, published b

- The Erikesh Files, a collection of poetry dated to 2010
aspects, to SC
- History of the International Anomaly Society's
- IAS Statement on the Suspected N

These readings are available on request at the Historical

History of the International Anomaly Socie

SCP-17591 appeared on the third floor of the Site-83 ruins on 3
to the basement. From the damage done to the rooms that i
coterminous with the walls of each of these rooms in t

A team sent from the J.S. Moulton Research Center reache
immediately. Research was terminated on 3224/08/19 and all p
to said reassign

The following document was found, heavily dama

Item: SCP-17591
Object Class: Keter
Date of Capture: 7/6/2455
Researcher-in-Charge: Dr. B

Notes:

7/6/2455 SCP-17591, who calls <report damaged> self

<report damaged>

referred to as “Protocol Z” within this document. As this
ability to <report damaged> placed in a standard Keter-

<report damaged>

Added [DATA EXPUNGED] to containment protocol to p

recapture and extensive damage to [DATA EXPUNGED
at a distance of 5 <report damaged> for concern.

8/7/2455 Escape attempts continue. Subversion of Site-
and Researcher .

<report damaged>

2/7/2466 Escape imminent. Experimental Containment
immediately. We believe the inhabitants of the receiving
have not for many years. <report damaged>sual stability

The IAS Statement on the Suspected Nature of SCP-17591
(presumed) contents of this document, the Erikesh Files, and

IAS Statement on the Suspected Nature of

The consensus among IAS researchers is that a being of som
efforts of the SCP Foundation in the process of a "containmen
able to psychically influence those around it to extract it via
hallucinatory imagery to focus these into a specific goal, and
Aware of the dangers posed by this being, the SCP Foundati
locality, with the assumption that our total inability to p

In light of this, no further research is to be performed with rega
should the means to open SCP-17591 be developed indepen
limit the possibility of the release of SC

[This was filed under "additional documentation for SCP-17591", but there was no paperwork with it, so I don't know where it came from, or where the rest of it is. Probably just a joke of some sort, but I'm including it anyways:

I personally don't find it very funny.] - Editor

Inside/Outside

On 10/18/20 the following unauthorized modifications to the experimental data of **SCP-2719** were logged by the external monitoring server. Based on the information gained from the logs, and the successful recovery of Site-81, Dr. Watkins has been given a posthumous commendation.

Pointer	Outcome
Site-81	Became inside.
SCP-184	Went inside.
Inside	Went inside.
Inside	Went inside.
Inside	Went inside.
Data Corruption	Went inside.
Population of Site-81	Went inside.

Meanwhile, inside…

Dr. Watkins ran. He didn't know whether he was running away from something, or towards something, but he ran. Other people ran on the ceiling beneath him. One of them was struck by a dozen glass books falling from a room on Dr. Watkins' right. No one stopped to help the fallen man. No one could reach him. He was There, and they were Here. Wherever Here was for them at the time. Managing to get from Here to There would have been quite the feat.

He ran for another hour. Ten seconds. Three years. He wasn't sure. Sometimes the doors whizzed past in a blur, and other times the halls stretched out for an eternity. A voice called out from somewhere else.

"Help me! I'm stuck!"

Dr. Watkins spun, trying to follow the voice. "Where are you?"

"Inside."

Some part of Dr. Watkins began to ask "inside what," but the thought was lost as he stepped through a door into a room full of origami locks. Of course the voice was inside. Where else would it be? "Don't worry, I'm coming," he shouted. He opened another door, into another, identical room. He turned to look at the room behind him, but saw instead a new hallway. There was someone moving at the end.

Dr. Watkins left the origami room and ran down the hall. The someone was above him, sitting cross-legged with its eyes closed. Dr. Watkins stopped and looked up at him. "Are you who was calling for help?"

The someone opened one eye and looked back. "No. I do not need help. Others would stop me from being inside." The eye closed again, and the someone was silent. Before Dr. Watkins could tell the someone that they were already inside, that they were still inside, a door opened, and the someone tumbled through it serenely. The door was too high up for Dr. Watkins to follow, so he settled for the one that had appeared in front of him while he spoke to the someone, and began running again.

The hall twisted in every direction as Dr. Watkins ran. Left, right, up, down, back upon itself. He checked every door he saw, looking for a light, a place that wasn't this building. Room full of steel furniture. Room like the site break room, but everything was upside-down. No room, just a block of warm putty behind the door. For a moment the doctor was sure that he was running inside a giant wheel, as each door led to the same empty interrogation chamber, tinted a pastel pink. But none of them had more doors. Each one was a dead end.

Dr. Watkins gasped as he opened another door, and nearly leapt through it into the open sky before him. He caught himself on the frame as he realized that the sky extended to the ground as well. Across the room was another door. It wasn't out, but at least it was progress. But how was he supposed to get across the sky? Dr. Watkins removed his watch and held it out, slowly letting it slip from his grasp. It fell onto the sky at his feet with a soft thump. He crouched and touched the area near the watch, and did not fall

though either. It was warm to the touch. It was plastic, a giant computer screen with a background of skies. Dr. Watkins laughed, high-pitched and tense, and ran across the room, through the next door.

The running continued for a long time. Doors were opened, rooms were crossed, halls were walked, but no exit. No exit. There was no out. Was there an outside? Did an outside even exist? There may not be, but Dr. Watkins kept going.

The doctor's run had slowed to a trudge, breathing heavily. He was tired, he was thirsty, but he could not stop. The was nothing more important than getting out. He stepped on a platform made of notepads and slid across a room full of water, unblinking. Outside was the only goal. There was nothing more important than outside. If he could get outside, he could report this, maybe find a way save the others inside. He just had to find the outside. He stepped off the platform and into another hallway. Find outside, get out of inside, save the inside. Out of in, into outside, outside-in.

Dr. Watkins stopped dead in his tracks. Maybe that wasn't the answer. Maybe the someone was right. Maybe he needed to be inside. Maybe to be more outside, he had to be more inside. Maybe the outside was inside. Yes, that was it. He just needed to be more inside. More inside. He took a few steps, then stopped and turned, walking back the other direction. If he didn't know where outside was, how would he know where inside is? Where is inside? What is more inside?

More inside.

Inside.

In…

Inside?

Pointer	Outcome
Dr. Watkins	Became inside.
Inside	Went inside.
SCP-184	Outside.

Dr. Watkins	Inside-out.

Insufficient Clearance

Agent Green opened his eyes.

“Agent Green.”

An unfamiliar, suited figure sat across the desk from him. Green became uncomfortably aware that he was still wearing a hoodie and sweatpants.

“Where am I?”

“In my office. We’ve never met, and after this conversation, we’ll likely never meet again.”

“Who are you?”

The figure strummed a chord on a ukulele he seemingly pulled from nowhere. Green’s eyes widened, his palms felt suddenly sweaty. Clef chuckled to himself, appreciating the reaction.

“Don’t worry. You’re not in trouble. What’s the last thing that you remember?”

“Sir, uh… I was at an Artist exhibition, I remember that… and then something made a loud noise. Like, a really loud honk. Nothing after that.”

“Great. Well, first things first, you’ve just finished voluntarily dosing yourself with a targeted amnestic.”

Green noticed the still-dripping syringe on the floor next to him.

“You did this because you observed a severe containment breach concerning SCP-447, during which you were temporarily briefed on its effects to aid with re-containment. You still have insufficient clearance to know the effect of 447, though, so that takes care of that. You also did this because you really, really did not want to

remember what happened last night."

Green massaged his temples. He'd read the 447 file hundreds of times, constantly wondering what the minty goo actually did to necrotic flesh. Perhaps it wasn't worth knowing after all.

"A delivery vehicle loaded with SCP-447-2 left this site yesterday morning. When it arrived at its destination, late last night, the vehicle was completely empty. We don't yet know how it got from the vehicle to the 'exhibition', as our satellite imaging doesn't show any interference. The good news, at least, is that all 447-2 has been accounted for."

"So, wait, what exactly happened?"

"Like I said, you've not got the clearance for me to tell you some of the finer details. You performed extremely well considering how little information you had; I'll be looking into getting you a commendation for it, even if you've no idea what you did. Only twenty seven fatalities, all civilians. It could have been a lot worse if you weren't there. The breach was caused by someone you referred to in your report as 'The Snipper'."

"My report?"

"Yes, the one you handed to me just before stabbing yourself with that needle."

Clef held up a manila folder.

"Of course, I can't give this back to you just yet. Need to black out a few things."

Standard Incident Report Form
Document Reference Number: SCP-447-BSC-4039
Author: Field Agent Green

Condensed Summary Of Relevant Events

1700: Arrived at by car. Walked around west courtyard.
1705: Walked from west courtyard to central courtyard.

1707: Discovered pile of dead bodies.
1708: Sampled fingerprints and hair from two bodies.
1710: Walked to car via west courtyard.
1713: Returned to car. Ran samples through database, no results. (sample analysis available on Foundation intranet)
1715: Walked to north courtyard via west and central courtyards. Noted marble structure had been constructed in west courtyard since 1710.
1716: Rendezvous with Agent Tangerine.
1719: .
1720: .
1725: Returned to central courtyard.
1727: Honk event occurs.
1728: Pre-recorded message, later positively identified as person of interest 'The Snipper', starts to play.
1729: Balloon filled with SCP-447-2 is dropped onto pile of dead bodies.
1730: Balloon bursts. In under two seconds from impact, a tall humanoid wearing a gas mask and black trenchcoat, henceforth referred to as 'Trenchcoat' for brevity, .
1731: Trenchcoat . Agent Green opens fire on . Two civilians , later found dead via .
1732: Most dead bodies have ; Trenchcoat . Three plainclothes Agents, as well as two Artists, attempt to , which proves unsuccessful, instead . Mass panic ensues due to a combination of and gunfire, most civilians and Artists attempting to evacuate the area. , ; , destroying seven anomalous art installations and killing two civilians.
1733: Trenchcoat continues to , greatly reducing of SCP-447-2. Agent Green contacts Site- and reports SCP-447 containment breach, requesting as much support as possible. Deploying is recommended against due to positioning near a major civilian centre, as well as potentially affecting containment procedures for SCP- , as well as .
1734: Two Artists, later identified as persons of interest Overgang Dood and Joseph Tamlin, attempt to in

support of Trenchcoat. Trenchcoat continues to , using anomalous items from within its coat to , . After triple-confirming identity and proving urgent requirement of such information, Agent Green is briefed on the primary, effects of SCP-447-2 remotely.
1735: The Artist known as attempts to aid civilians to safety, by using paint and stencils to , creating an anomalous evacuation point leading to a nearby carpark. continues to create further evacuation points over the course of the next three minutes. Joseph Tamlin uses in conjunction with

.

. Trenchcoat continues . Agent Green resumes fire on , . results in the death of a further five civilians.
1736: , Trenchcoat . Agent Green . Overgang Dood aids Joseph Tamlin in by , . SCP-447-2 five deceased civilians, causing further , and impeding civilian evacuation.
1737: Joseph Tamlin makes a phone call to an unknown number while Overgang Dood .

,

. SCP-447-2 .
1738: , still in the process of creating additional evacuation points, is attacked by person of interest 'The Sculptor', who opens fire. is shot once in the shoulder before painting a , which . The Sculptor notices , yelling "WHAT THE FUCK, SNIPPER?" and beginning . continued exponentially, but . Trenchcoat completes , begins bifurcation.
1739: SCP-447-2 , further casualties and increased levels of reduced capacity for .

Agent Green but is unable to prevent seven further casualties via . Casualties are promptly , Trenchcoat.

1740: SCP-447-2 Trenchcoat, . , Agent Green civilian safety. Agent Tangerine arrives at central courtyard, aids using an anomalous requisitioned from local artist. (later contained and assigned as SCP-)

1741: Artist, later identified as person of interest 'Melanoma', approaches , appearing to be a modified , henceforth referred to as an 'art bomb'. Art bomb is used to ; , screaming into phone "FUCKING BLOW IT!". Art bomb expanding unexpected interaction with SCP-447-2 causing two previous casualties to after contact. SCP-447-2 near-critical mass; however, Trenchcoat .

1742: , however, are not in fact organic, but anomalous duplicates primarily composed of clay. As such, exposure to SCP-447-2 does not result in . Original , identified as members of anomalous musician group "Futanari Titwhore Fiasco", . Agents Green and Tangerine continue . Art bomb SCP-447-2 . The Sculptor continues to . Joseph Tamlin and Overgang Dood . one civilian casualty.

1743: Persons of interest 'The Painter' and 'The Builder' . but are unable to synchronise , attempting instead.

. , . ; , .

1744: . ; . .

.

1745: Foundation Agents requested at 1733 arrive .

,

; /

.

1746: .

1747: ; . Trenchcoat

. Joseph Tamlin and Overgang Dood

.

1748: , later identified as Artist Rita Summers,

. ;

. . Agents Green and

Tangerine

. .

.

1750:

. , , , ;

.

, .

1755: ;

.

.

1756:

.

1808:

1811:

1827: . Anomalous walrus contained.
.

1828: Anomalous walrus escapes containment. .

1837:

1838:
The Sculptor is believed to have been detained, however, is later found to be an anomalous duplicate composed of clay. Current location of The Sculptor is unknown at time of writing.

1845:

1849:

1854:

The Painter and The Builder detained for questioning.

1900: Foundation Agents attempt to detain Trenchcoat;

.

. Current location unknown at time of writing.

, .

1913:

1917: The Painter and The Builder attempt to escape containment

by . Attempt unsuccessful, both are sedated and detained. All previously detained artists sedated, operating procedure altered to sedate all detained persons. Rita Summers detained and sedated.

1943: , returned fire. Anomalous walrus re-contained.

1945: Anomalous walrus , escaping containment.

1947: Two members of Futanari Titwhore Fiasco are sedated and contained, current location of third member unknown at time of writing.

1959:

2000:

Overgang Dood sedated and detained.
2004: Joseph Tamlin sedated and detained.

2013:

Melanoma sedated and detained.
2022:

Authorised personnel provided with gas masks.
2029: Airborne amnestic sweep .
2032:

2037:

2046:

2054:

2103:

.

2107: Agent Green escorted from to Site- by Foundation agents.

Original Copy Do Not Bend
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SCP - 447
BSC - 4039
EVX - X
BRT - X
GOI - ART
ML/EX/J XK/XKP/TK/BG
DOCUMENT NOT TO BE COPIED UNTIL ORIGINAL IS VERIFIED BY AN AUTHORISED JUSTICE OF THE PEACE
JP: *Dr. Alto Clef*

"Well, you were certainly thorough about it."

"You know how we operate, Agent Green. We are always thorough."

"What now, then?"

"You've got some Artists to deal with, Agent Green."

"Thank you, sir. Apologies for the inconvenience."

"Not at all, glad you caught me. I'll leave this to you then, I've a plane to catch. A bit of a 'sabbatical' in Brazil."

"Ah, well, I hope you enjoy your holiday, sir."

Clef pulled a pair of sunglasses, flicking them open and resting them on his nose.

"Not likely."

Insurrection

Description: SCP-E15 is an Aryan female, approximately twelve years of age, which appears to release a deadly field of unknown composition. The field itself is composed of a form of radiation which is not yet identified and does not match any currently understood phenomena…

April 17, 1914:

Elizabeth Tate's real name had vanished with her birth record and the memories of her family twelve years ago. Both she and her husband had disappeared just like their names, and now, everyone called her Eleven.

Eleven sighed as she got up from her desk, crossing to the door and opening it, walking in Albert's office and smiling at him as he got up, came around the corner of his desk, leaned down, and kissed her—just as he did every day before lunch.

She smiled up at him easily. "Shall we?" asked Eleven.

Twelve smiled back. "But of course," he said in his tight, Boston accent.

It had been easier coming into the Foundation like this—together, arm in arm, still married. Easier to leave the rest of the world behind.

"How have things been this morning?" Twelve asked. He was always polite, allowing her to speak first, then relating his own day. He'd always been polite.

Eleven related a number of things that had occurred, from a small spat between two young officers she'd been mentoring to an issue with interoffice mail. She was talking around the problem that had

actually be occupying her, Twelve knew.

"She's arriving today," he said.

Eleven played dumb. "Who?" she asked.

"You know who," Twelve said. "The girl."

Eleven stopped for a moment, looking down, then raising her hand and rubbing her eyes. "You know I don't want to talk about this, Albert," she said.

"Well, you're going to have to talk about it sooner or later. You're the expert in containment, and we're going to need to test her limits," Twelve said. "They've kept her sedated for a while, but she'll kick the stuff eventually. And when she does, we need to know how bad it's going to be."

"Let's not talk about business," Eleven said.

Twelve nodded. There wasn't anything else to talk about anymore. Their lives were the business. But he respected the request, motioning for her to lead, then falling into step slightly behind her. The meeting that afternoon would be ugly.

One opened the meeting, nodding to the partially assembled council, and gave the floor to Six, and let him relate the state of the bodies that had been recovered, the cover story that had been put into place, and the general state of things in the small, mid-western town that had just seen a large, happy family disappear with two sets of their neighbors.

Six handed things off to Four, who had apparently found some people to buy the suddenly vacated housing. And then, Twelve got up and relayed the transportation of 'the object' to the site, followed by the rest of the logistical problems he had dealt with concerning the nature of the effect surrounding her.

And then came the pictures. Six laid them out, a group of flat, cold pictures of a little girl. One of them had her sitting in her room reading a book, obviously from before the incident. The others were

from after. Her crying underneath a table. Her unconscious, laying in a train car.

Seven took a slow, deep breath. "This is it, then? She really is one?" Eleven thought she heard a hint of anticipation in his voice. Maybe even excitement.

Six nodded. "We had some people strip her down and replace her clothes. Isolate her. Tested on animals. All conclusive." Six's voice came across too matter-of-factly for her taste. Too detached.

Eleven shuddered slightly. They'd had someone strip down an eight year old girl. With the people they conscripted for jobs like that…

"Eleven?"

It was One who had spoken. "Yes?" she said.

"Any thoughts on current containment? Her effective range seems to be growing, according to the results of Six's field tests."

Eleven looked over at Six—who was wearing his usual, stony lack of an expression—and then back to One. "We'll have to see exactly what the effects are on a microscopic level. For all we know, she might be carrying a disease or have eaten something—"

"Oh, for the love of God, Eleven." Five was frowning at her, a look of exasperation on his face. "We decided this two weeks ago, when the first field reports came back. She is an object."

"She's a little girl!" Eleven said, her hackles rising slightly.

"The evidence I've collected so far is largely conclusive, Eleven," Six added, his voice obnoxiously calm. "We need you to help us contain this event."

Eleven sat back, glaring at Six for a moment. He was good at that. Preying on your sense of duty. "This is, thus far, an unprecedented occurrence. We have found statues, weapons, portals to other dimensions, anomalous signals emanating from the middle of Texas, but not… We've never done this with people."

"There is the Syrian," Two mentioned.

"Which we categorized as the coffin, not the entity that emerges from it," Eleven mentioned, shuddering a little at the thought of the thing inside it.

"Then perhaps," One said, "we should reexamine *that* classification rather than this one."

Eleven looked over at him, her eyes narrowing for an instant before she pulled them back to the paper in front of her. She glanced over it. "We need more test results. We need to know exactly how the people are dying. I've never seen burns like these before."

"I have," said Two. "They're reminiscent of something we encountered working with the Curies…"

But by then, Eleven's attention had waned, and she was lost in her own thoughts.

Eleven was finding it hard to go over the test results that she'd requested. The effect that surrounded the girl worked regardless of how conscious she was, but they had to wake her up to feed her, which resulted in screaming and tears. And at least one dead test subject each time.

Two had been right. The shielding she'd suggested was keeping the worst of the symptoms at bay, but it was increasing steadily. Soon, just opening the door to feed… Eleven didn't want to use her designation, but Six had refused to tell her the girl's name when she asked.

She rubbed her eyes, not turning around as her door opened and closed. Only one person would come in without knocking.

Twelve's hands fell against her shoulders, rubbing slightly as she smiled. "Hey," she said quietly.

He didn't respond, but she smelled his aftershave, and that was answer enough for the moment. Just his presence.

"I don’t know if I can do this," she said quietly.

"You can," Twelve said. "You have to. We need you to."

She nodded slightly, sighing and looking down at the paper smoothed over her desk. "If the effect keeps going like this, I’m going to have to recommend termination. There’s no other option," she continued. "Even with Two, there’s no way we’re going to develop a satisfactory containment before something awful happens."

Twelve was nodding, she knew. He went along with these things for her. Let her talk and just listen.

"I need to talk to One," she said, sighing softly. "I just can't keep doing this. I can't. We're treating her like she's the problem."

"Then talk to him," Twelve said. "He's always been reasonable. He'll listen to your concerns."

Eleven let out a soft snort through her nose. "Will he do anything about them, though?" she asked.

Twelve didn't respond, but then, he didn't know the answer. No better than she did.

"Tomorrow," she said.

"I'm not having this conversation again," One said. His voice was hard, flat.

One stood behind his clean, orderly desk. Behind him was framed a massive window that looked down on the atrium of Site-14 below. Eleven was certain he'd had it designed like this to cause awe for visitors or intimidate people with the forced perspective. She was neither.

"It needs to be had," Eleven countered.

"It's been had," One said. "It's been had three times already."

Eleven continued. "Psychics… mystics… Where do we draw the line, One? When you classify a human being like this, you have to start considering all of them. What about us? I'm seventy, and I look thirty-five. Am I anomalous?"

"You know that's from the spring, Eleven." His voice and body language were growing more and more tight. Like a coil in a watch.

"Yes, but to an outside observer, what am I? And what are we other than outside observers?"

"Enough. This is a simple matter. The girl is deadly. We've lost two good men and dozens of test subjects trying to contain the effect. Two and Five are baffled, and instead of helping them, you've spent your time dipping into a philosophical argument that was concluded weeks ago."

"It's not right! Look at the masthead. Look at what you wrote there. 'No one else will protect us, and we must stand up for ourselves.' We are supposed to protect humanity, and this girl *is* part of humanity. How can you ignore how wrong this is? How awful this thing that we've committed ourselves to doing really is? We're supposed to keep her safe, and we're terrifying her, horrifying her each time. We're the monsters we're supposed to fight, One!"

He had waited patiently, and when she finished, he finally spoke. "You don't always get the last word, Elizabeth." One hadn't called her that in years. Decades. Not since before she was recruited. "Sometimes, you need to accept the situation for what it is. She's killing people. We need to contain her. Help us."

He wasn't going to listen, she realized. Eleven took a slow, deep breath, then nodded her head quietly. "Fine," she agreed.

One nodded. "Good. I'll inform Five to expect your compliance," he said.

Eleven turned and left his office, a lump in her chest. She couldn't let them do this. Wouldn't.

She needed help. Only Twelve was listening to her, and the rest of

the council… She wasn't ready to do that yet. She needed to start smaller. And there was only one person who might actually have experience with the situation.

Eleven found her way to the personnel wing of the building, then started searching for the personnel director. When she eventually found him, he was stooped over a table in an office, not his, with his face tucked into a file. Probably some recruit who someone had suggested. Hopefully someone who would have the luxury of a quiet, safe lab rather than the field. She knocked on the frame of the door, then offered him a brief smile.

"Do you have time to talk, Adam?"

The man turned and looked at her, nodding slightly. "Of course," he said, putting the file down on the table and pushing it toward the corner, away from the two of them. "What's wrong?" he asked.

"It's about the issue with the new… designation," she said.

Adam nodded. "The humanoid subtype," he said. "What about it"?

"I have… certain problems with accepting it," she said. "I can't seem to convince the others," she added. "Twelve is listening to me, and I might be able to convince Eight, but One is dead set on this. You're friends with him, with Two. Tell me how I can change his mind."

Adam frowned slightly. "I'm not entirely certain that his mind needs changing," he said. "The humanoid designation was an inevitability. We side stepped it before, with Oh-Seven-Six, and we called Oh-One-Four a psychosis, but… We can't avoid this problem anymore. There are objects which have too much power for their own good, and we have to contain them."

Eleven turned and looked at him, her eyes narrowing. "She's a little girl, Adam, not an *object*," she said. "Surely you can understand what I'm going through, especially after…"

Adam's eyes narrowed as her words trailed off, and she suddenly realized that she'd made a mistake. He pushed himself backward in

his chair, standing up and brushing down the front of his short, smart waistcoat. "You're my friend, Lizzy, and I love you dearly. But if you ever try to use my family against me like that, we will never speak again."

Eleven felt her throat tighten. "I didn't mean it like that."

"You did. If you have problems with our current line of action, I suggest you take it up with One."

Eleven sighed. "He doesn't listen," she said. "He's set on this."

"Because she killed a dozen people, and she's killed a dozen more since then."

"No. Not because she killed people. That's just how we're justifying it to ourselves. She had no idea what she could do, no idea how to control it. She was scared and confused."

"And it put her entire family in a graveyard," Adam said. "I'm not going to discuss this with you further. Talk to Seven if you need to share your feelings so badly."

Adam reached for the file and opened it again, sitting down and leaning back in his chair. She looked at him, feeling furious for a moment, before turning and walking to the door, out it, and down the hall, her pace quickening as she did.

Eleven looked over the files that Five had sent to her. It include the original casualty report, in addition to the descriptions of bodily decay that were still being observed, and the further effects on the more recent corpses. Something Two had come up with. Studying the rate of decay to see if it had accelerated. Clever.

She glanced over the reports, wondering just how much of it had been caused by poor management of the problem. If she had gone instead of Six, this might never have gone as far as it had. But Six had been chosen, specifically because of his motivations and goals, and now… It was a debacle, entirely, as far as she was concerned.

She looked down at the daily reports, reading over them. The field

was increasing by almost an inch every day, and it seemed to be accelerating. They lost a test subject at every meal, so they'd had to drop her to starvation levels…

Eleven winced and reached up to rub her eyes. She took a slow, steadying breath, then looked at the body count. Too high. Too high, in spite of the fact that they were criminals.

She knew that the girl was dangerous, but the alternatives—helping her to learn to control her abilities, studying them properly—had never been considered. It was nothing but cages and locks and morphine.

It wasn't right, to lock a person up like this, to lock up a little girl. It was wrong. Entirely and utterly opposed to everything that the Foundation stood for. She sighed and got up, dropping the file onto her desk and walking to Twelve's office, letting herself in. He looked up at her, then stood and walked around the desk. He kissed her, like he always did, then looked down at her face.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

And then, it all came out again. How angry she'd been with One over his disregard of her concerns, and how angry she was at herself for not sticking to her guns more strongly. How furious she felt that she'd not been able to head this off, in spite of her authority.

"It's not right," she said. "We're supposed to protect people. Not lock them up. It might not be here. It might be something in her cells or in her bone tissue or… She might not even be the problem. They're making her the problem. They're punishing her because they can't see the issue beyond her."

He nodded, waited, and let her talk. As he always did.

"We have to do something, Albert," she said softly. She rarely used his name, even when they were alone, but this time, she did. "We have to do something to stop them."

"What?" he asked.

"We need to get her away from them. Stop them from getting more

humanoid types. Slow them down until we can convince them properly."

He frowned. "I'm not sure we can. We signed on for this for life," he said.

Eleven shook her head at him. "Then we need to leave. To get away."

"How?" he asked.

"I need your help," Eleven admitted.

Seven raised an eyebrow, then leaned forward, smiling with easy interest and furrowing his brow with curiosity. "What do you mean?" he asked.

Seven was a coward, deep down. Resentful, on some level, that some of the others regarded him as a pseudoscientist instead of a legitimate master of his field. But then, he'd been integral in creating his field.

"I know we haven't always been friends, but philosophically, you agreed with me on this a few weeks ago, when the reports first came in."

"On what?" She knew that Seven already knew, but he wanted her to say it. Fine.

"Humanoid classification. This little girl Keter," she said.

Seven sat back again, nodding quietly. "I agree philosophically, yes," he said.

He wasn't going to admit more than that, Eleven realized. He was smart. Just cold. It wasn't that he disagreed on the concept of human beings as objects. It was the concept of human beings as human beings.

"You know why I'm here. You know what we're going to have to do to actually manage this. What they're going to force us to do. Allow

me, then, to offer you this," Eleven said. "You can study them, if this works. You can take a look at all of them you want. Every one. Analyze them, figure out how they tick, what's going on in their heads. No experiments on them. But I'll give you all the access you want."

"I could get that here," Seven said simply.

"No, you can't. One is too smart, and with Two and Six on his side, you know you'll never get the access you really want. Don't you remember Five laughing in your face when you explained your theories of mental development to him? They mock you behind your back, and you know it. This is your chance. Your only chance. You'll never get to really see what this kind of power does to people. How it changes them."

She was playing on his desires and his insecurities. The lack of respect he got from the 'true' scientists. The worry about the legitimacy of his 'psychology' that he felt regularly. "This would be access that none of them would let you have, Wilhelm," she offered.

He looked up at her, then back down at his desk, fingers playing over the wood for a moment. He was thinking. Weighing the risks. "Agreed, then," he said. "What do you need from me?"

Eleven leaned back from his desk. He was, at least, interested now. "Four," she said. "We need his resources. And preferably Eight, if she can be convinced."

"Four will listen to me. But Eight and I have never seen eye to eye," Seven said.

"Then just implicate her. If she gets killed and they lose someone, that's just as good as someone coming with us. We'll have things in place soon enough."

Eleven watched as Seven's eyebrows rose smoothly. He hadn't expected Eleven to be this ruthless, apparently. Underestimated her because she was a woman, no doubt. After a moment, he nodded. "I can have Four get his men in place. Just tell me the places."

Eleven raised her eyebrow as Seven smiled. "You know already?" she asked.

Seven nodded, laughing. "Well, your husband has to be involved, doesn't he?" he said. "You'd never have come to me if you didn't already have him."

Eleven nodded slightly. "He'll do as I ask," she said. "I'll let you know the exact locations as soon as I can."

"Of course," Seven said. He was smiling more, now. More openly. With too many teeth.

Eleven left, feeling… dirty. As if she'd just had cold, dead fish rubbed over her body. She went back to her office, sitting down and making some brief notes. The strike had to be perfectly surgical to work.

"What's left to do, then?" Twelve asked.

"Seven agreed with it, and he's willing to go along, if only to see what happens. He probably thinks he can run back to One if things turn against him. We need funding and men, so we'll have to have Four at least. Seven can deliver him."

"If we could get Two…" Twelve mused.

Eleven shook her head. "She'll never go along with it. She trusts One too implicitly to let us get away with it."

"Six will never agree. Neither will Three," said Twelve.

"Thirteen?" she mused.

"I wouldn't trust him to do anything other than break a tie vote," Twelve said. "Did you talk to Adam? He's next in line, and with his family problems…"

"Adam… reacted poorly to my suggestion."

Twelve sighed quietly. "A shame. He could have really been a

motivating factor. Ten and Nine will be out of range when things fall into place, and there's a good chance that we can isolate Three as well. It would keep people from moving against us quickly. How about Eight? Bella was on your side the last time we were all together."

Eleven fidgeted nervously with her wedding ring for a moment. "I've taken care of it. She won't interfere."

Twelve nodded. "Well… When do we move?" he asked.

Eleven sighed. "Soon. Very soon," she said. "They've found a little boy who can fly."

As his day finally drew to a close, Twelve picked up his phone. He made three phone calls, then sat it back down again. When he did, he stood up and moved to his file cabinet, opening it and pulling out a few folders. He stuffed them into a brown, leather case, then looked around his office one last time before he headed to the door.

Late that night, he was on a train headed for Los Angeles.

Two hours after Twelve boarded his train, Seven dropped two letters in his outbox. The first was addressed to One—explaining that he was taking a few days to head to his lab in Dusseldorf. The second was addressed to Eight—letting her know that everything had gone off without a hitch and that she could join the rest of the conspiracy in a few days.

He opened the drawer of his desk and pulled out a pair of white gloves, pulling them onto his hands and fixing the cuffs of his jacket before he left.

There would be a dead man found on an ocean liner who looked exactly like him the following morning. The man would have been stabbed in the back, but all of the doors and windows would be locked from the inside. Seven always was a fan of a good mystery.

At the same time as a screaming, panicked steward was finding the body of an older gentleman in a forward compartment, Four had moved all his men into position. They struck the trains, automobiles, and ships in nearly perfect synchronicity. Four led one of the teams himself. He left no survivors.

Eleven walked to Twelve's office and opened the door, looking inside at the desk and imagining him stepping around it to kiss her. She smiled slightly, then stepped back, closing it and sighing deeply. She could almost smell his aftershave.

She turned and walked down the hall, nodding to a few people along the way, and then stepped out of the building onto the street. In no time, she was lost in the crowd.

As she walked, she looked at them. At their faces. In a city, no one actually looked at you. You were surrounded and alone at the same time. She wondered just how many of them would be in a cage if One and Six and Two and the rest had their way. How many of these nameless, faceless millions they were supposed to be protecting would be sealed away and forgotten.

When she boarded her train, she was unable to sleep.

> On July 19, 1914, fourteen Foundation transports were attacked simultaneously. During these attacks, a number of objects were stolen, including two newly identified Humanoid Classification artifacts. A disturbingly large number of the objects seized were those with apparent practical uses, including the Staff of Hermes and the Midas Glove.
>
> Given that a large number these objects were not scheduled for transport, it is currently assumed that someone in the logistics branch must have organized the action personally.
>
> Current information suggests that this action was organized from the highest levels of Foundation

administration. Implications currently point toward O5-12.

Further information will be made available as it comes forth, but we have to assume the worst. This is currently being classified as a Code Epoch situation. Trust no one.

O5-1

Eleven smiled at Twelve as the two of them moved towards each other and embraced quickly. A few minutes later, Seven and Four walked across the dusty, wooden train station floor, nodding to Eleven.

"Things have been relocated," Seven said. "Twelve had information on some storage facilities that were available."

"I destroyed the files on them before I left," he said. "We can continue using the bulk of my infrastructure, and the Foundation will have no record of it."

Eleven looked up at the other three, taking a deep breath. "Do we have any word on what's happening on the inside?" she asked.

Four nodded. "They're scrambling. We either stole or destroyed a lot of documents on our way out the door, so it's pure chaos."

Eleven took a deep, slow breath. "Good," she said. "What about the two children?"

Seven smiled at Four, who looked over his shoulder at a man in a pinstripe suit and nodded at him. The man nodded, then turned around, motioning. A few seconds later, a young boy, maybe nine or ten years old, stepped out, nervously walking toward the group. Eleven lowered herself to one knee, smiling at him.

"What's your name?" she asked.

"Ben," he said softly.

"Ben, I've heard you can do something amazing. Is that true?" she asked.

He nodded, looking down and twisting his foot shyly.

Eleven smiled. "Ben, there are some people who are very scary, and they want to take you away and lock you in a cage. But we're not going to let them do that, alright? We're going to keep you safe, and once those men have been dealt with, we're going to get you back to your family. But until that happens, we're going to make sure that nothing ever happens to you. Alright?"

Ben looked up at her. He looked scared, but she never stopped smiling. After a moment, he nodded.

Eleven looked at Twelve. "What about E15?" she asked.

Twelve shook his head silently, and Eleven nodded, still managing to smile down at Ben before nodding to Four, who escorted him back to the man in the suit.

Seven stepped closer, his voice dropping slightly. "We have men, weapons, tools. We're in a position to take what we need. We could gut the Foundation easily, if we move quickly."

Eleven shook her head. "No. I don't want to take this too far. Once they realize what we've done and why we've done it, they'll realize that they can't just shout us down anymore. They'll beg for us to come back," she said.

Seven nodded. "They won't be able to argue with our results. These people just need to learn to control what they're doing. They never even tried with that little girl. They just wanted to build a better cage for her," he said, a touch of distaste in his voice. Probably feigned, Eleven thought, but effective, nonetheless.

"Once we're organized, we'll move again," Twelve said. "Three has already found a location for his Site-19 plans. A site containing nothing but humanoids."

Eleven nodded, looking at the others as Four walked back to the group. "Let's move," she said. "I still have contacts in Germany we can use. The Foundation is wounded, but it'll heal fast."

Two leaned close to the glass, looking out the window at the large atrium below, watching the men and women walking back and forth. From this high up, they looked less like people and more like dolls. Toys. It was a disturbing thought. She glanced over at One standing next to her.

"This is only going to get worse before it gets better," she said.

One nodded, turning back to his desk and sitting down. "I know," he said. "But we knew what she would do when we started this."

Two sighed, walking over and resting against the corner, then looking at One. "You're sure about him? That he can keep it under control? I barely know the man."

One nodded slightly. "He'll do what he can. Warn us when he can. It's all we can ask him for, right now." One shuffled a paper, then sat back in his chair. "Do you have the promotion papers ready?" he asked, quietly changing the subject.

Two nodded. "Yeah. We can elevate Adam to Twelve's position early next week. And I think we can put Watson into Seven's position. At the very least, he's more stable and more reliable."

"Good," One said. "We need people we can count on, now more than ever."

Eleven, who had taken well to being called Command-Three, smiled across the table at Twelve, who was referred to by his subordinates as Command-Four. He smiled back at her. His fingers brushed hers, and hers slipped into his, squeezing his hand for a moment.

Integrity Project

The director of Site-81 was far away from the confines of the Foundation, in a cottage nestled in the Rockies. He sat on the back porch, enjoying the brisk morning air. He took a deep breath, and then another, and smiled as he considered how much more pleasant breathing was here than in the long corridors and dark rooms below the lake. He loved Site-81; there was no doubt there. But Site-81 was old, built seemingly eons ago. It was an incredible place to do research, and to contain anomalous entities, but it gave no consideration to comfort.

All of that, though, was in the distance of his mind. The doctor sipped from a cup of coffee and idly played with the IV in his arm. Karlyle was reading a book gifted to him by an old friend, one now long retired from the Foundation. They had met when they were young men, come together when they were forced to dissolve their connections with the outside world. Once, they might have said they loved each other, in their own way.

When the time came for the other man to leave the Foundation, he had given Karlyle the book and a promise— for them to meet up after Aktus finally retired and move to Italy together. They had always loved Italy. Karlyle had smiled, taken the book, and made the promise.

"But who knows, Karlyle," Oliver had said, "maybe you'll be here forever, grinding away in that lab until the sun goes out. Lord know you haven't aged in nearly thirty years."

Karlyle had laughed, and told his friend to wait for him. After Oliver Rights had left the Foundation he moved to Minneapolis, where he was born. He died one night, twenty three years later, when a power outage from a snowstorm darkened his home and he froze next to an empty wood stove. He was 87 years old.

That same night, Karlyle approved an order to upgrade a dangerous

SCP to the Keter-class, with restrictions. He did not hear about Oliver's passing until later. He had not thought of it since until he grabbed this book on the way out of town.

His eyes had hung on the handwritten inscription just inside the cover. *To my dearest friend, with love.* He read the book.

He continued reading well into the late morning, when he began considering lunch. He stood up, walking slowly and carefully towards the doorway, and entered. He left the book on the table next to his chair outside.

The old doctor stretched briefly and then began to make a sandwich. Turkey on rye, standard fare back at work. Old habits die hard, but at least here he could offer himself a slice of cheddar to go with it.

His hand reached for the refrigerator, and stopped when he noticed the man standing in the corner of the room.

"Ah," Karlyle said slowly as he pulled the refrigerator open. "So good of you to join me. Early though, for me to be going back? It has only been two days, I feel."

The man stood quietly, unmoving. Karlyle glanced around as he closed the door, realizing then that there were many other men and women in his cottage, pressed up against the walls. Some wore suits, other plainclothes. Some carried weapons. They all stood silent, staring straight ahead. The old man shook his head and laughed. "The formalities are unnecessary, I think. There are none here but me and you."

They all left the room then, save for one.

"Ah, there we go." Karlyle moved into the living room and sat down on a plush sofa. His IV was still in his arm, connected to a bag that hung on a metal rack and followed him wherever he went. It rolled across the hardwood and sat next to him when he did, quietly watching the whole scene. "Come and have a seat, Joshua. I am sure this is not going to be quick."

The man slid effortlessly across the floor, silently. He moved

towards a chair and then was seated in it, his eyes pressed on Karlyle from across the room. The old doctor continued to eat his sandwich.

"So," he said, in between bites, "what is somebody like you doing all the way out here with somebody like me? And with an entourage, no less." He licked his lips carefully. "They cannot send somebody who is less of a big fish, for an old man like Aktus?" He laughed.

The other man did not move. ""I am not here for who you are. I am here for who you were.""

Karlyle paused long enough to swallow, and then continued into his meal. "All that is, Joshua, is another way of saying that I am not the man I used to be. You know it, and these old bones know it." He took another bite. "I think you will have better luck elsewhere, friend."

The uncomfortable silence was broken by the sound of a bird chirping outside. Karlyle thought to look towards the sound, but knew better than to take the man out of his sight.

"It is not the youth of that man I am looking for, Jean," the man said, "nor his aptitude with a weapon."

Karlyle shrugged, the hairs on the back of his neck rising. "Then why are you here?"

"You know."

"Humor me. I am very old."

The other man stood. "Twenty-five entities contained within two years. Extensive knowledge of behaviours and anomalous traits of many more. Ability to manipulate situations concerning anomalous entities in order to facilitate containment. Understanding of the—" he paused, "*potential*, of entities. The reason you joined the Classification Committee. The reason they made you its head. The reason Site 81 has gone without breach in your tenure there."

Karlyle nodded and snapped up the final piece of his sandwich. "These things you say, they are true. I will not deny facts. And yet, I

am an old man, Joshua. Certainly my edges have worn dull. Certainly they are looking for one other than myself."

"They are not."

"And if I refuse? I am content in my work, I enjoy what I do. I have put those things behind me, Joshua. I am a man of science, as I have always been. What if I do not want to abandon that, as well?"

"This is an old debt, Jean. It is one you knew would come due in time. The years have gone by and age has overtaken all but a select few. Illness has ruined many, and yet some persist. Have you forgotten why that is?"

Karlyle darkened. "No. I have not forgotten."

Joshua moved towards the door. "Then I will alert the Council to your decision. Unfortunately, this is the end of your vacation. Your treatment can continue at our secure facility."

"You think an old man is a flight risk?"

"No," Joshua said, "I think you are."

A handful of agents appeared then, gathering up Karlyle's belongings and moving them outside. The doctor was shuffled from the living room to the front door, and escorted to the waiting vehicle. As he went to step inside, he stopped, and turned to face Joshua. "Is it worth it?"

"Who can say?" Joshua said, closing the door after him. "In the face of mountains, you are only a man, Jean. You can decide for yourself when it is over."

The car moved away from the cottage and began its long trek down the mountain. Joshua stayed a moment more, long enough to do a last search through the cottage, and then he too was gone.

An open book lay on a table on the back porch, unnoticed. A token of love between two who had once dared to dream about a life together. The dreams had become broken and the memories lost, but the book had remained, a testament to what is required.

That night, it rained.

The door to the containment cell slid open slowly, and a woman entered first. Zena knew this one, her doctor, the one who talked to her when she was sad. She did not recognize the man behind her, the one in the white coat with the dark glasses and shiny head. He smiled at her, and she smiled back. He didn't look that scary.

"Zena," her doctor said, "this is Dr. Aktus. He's here to ask you some questions, and then we're going to have you do some stuff, ok?"

The little girl nodded, and sat upright. Dr. Jora moved to the corner of the room, and Dr. Aktus stepped forward and sat down on a chair in front of Zena. He extended his hand, and she shook it.

"Hello Zena, my name is Karlyle." He smiled at her again. "You may call me whatever you want."

Zena thought on it, and then perked up. "I can call you Karl?"

Karlyle laughed. "Karl is just fine." He pulled a red ball from his coat pocket, and held it in front of Zena. "Zena, Dr. Wensley tells me you are very special. I think that is very interesting, and I am curious to know how special you are." He tossed the ball and caught it. "Can you make this ball blue?"

He handed Zena the ball. The little girl took it, looked at it intently, shook it a few times, and then drooped. "I can't really do anything unless I'm told."

Karlyle nodded. "That is quite alright. Zena, please make this ball blue."

The little girl's eyes twitched slightly, and she squeezed the ball in her hand. When she let go of it, it was purple. She coughed, and then gave it to Aktus, eyes downcast.

Karlyle smiled. "No need to be ashamed, my dear," he said, taking the ball. "You did wonderfully."

She looked up. "But it isn't blue."

The doctor cocked his head. "Is it not? It looks plenty blue to me. You see, different words, they have different meanings depending on where you are from. For me, I see blue here. My people would call this blue."

Zena squinted. "I… this is blue?"

Karlyle nodded. "As sure as my name is Dr. Aktus. Now, make this blue ball purple for me."

Zena stared at the ball again, and then squeezed it. When she let it go, it was green. She looked up at Karlyle, inquisitively. The old man smiled.

"Good, Zena," he said, nodding slowly. "Very good."

Interference

<< Back to part three

Agent Erika Sarin sighed for a moment before raising her megaphone once more. "Okay, ladies and gentlemen," she said, her voice booming over the school parking lot. "I need you to follow the men in labcoats, please, for decontamination and testing. Boys go to *this* tent, girls to *that* one." Sarin gestured like an airline stewardess pointing out those incredibly convenient exits everyone hopes they'll never need to use, then walked briskly to Dr. Krell in the basketball courts, pushing aside gaggles of confused students and teachers.

"At approximately 9 AM this morning," said the dispassionate voice of Dr. Alan Krell, "a burst of noise on all radio bands came from this location, somewhere inside Eastwood High School. We were able to triangulate the source, but the noise is still unidentified. Arriving here, you may or may not have noticed that half of the student body - about 800 students - disappeared, by which I mean the north half of the school went completely empty."

"That would usually mean a day off for us," said Agent Dunford.

"Pieholes shut during briefings, please," Dr. Krell said without missing a beat. "Questions from local law enforcement and civilians have been quelled for the moment by Agent Young. We're from a poison control center, you got that? Type three chemical grenades have been detonated for deniability, so keep your gas masks on if you want your blood to continue staying inside your body."

He turned for a moment to look at the building. It looked, aside from the Foundation personnel milling about, like an utterly normal high school.

"How many casualties have we got so far?" said Dr. Krell.

"Eleven students, aaaand…" Agent Jacobsen scanned his

clipboard. "Two faculty."

"Alright then. All of you get inside. Make sure your walkie-talkies are on channel 4. Take note of any and all anomalies."

Continued in part four >>

Interlude - Drift

0855, 9/18/19 - Command Site-206 receives a transmission from SCPS *Jonah*. SCPS *Jonah*, formerly USS , had recently been sent to the archipelago with MTF Gamma-6 to investigate unusual phenomena around the area.

Ɣ6-0204: This is of Mobile Task Force Gamma-6, designation 0204, sending from SCPS *Jonah*. We think we've discovered the nature of the anomaly.

Operator: This is Command Site-206. What's the nature of your discovery, ?

Ɣ6-0204: Well, we have a doctor here, a Dr. , who says the islands, uh, moved.

Operator: Repeat that?

Ɣ6-0204: Command, they moved. A whole three kilometers. Dr. thought it might have just been some weird continental drift or something - the islands get tremors pretty frequently - but we went and did a full reconnaissance of the islands. We're pretty sure we know what happened.

Operator: And?

Ɣ6-0204: The islands aren't rock, Command. They're organic. Like, *alive*.

Operator: What exactly do you mean by that?

Ɣ6-0204: Alive, sir. We had a few people dive down and check the rock below. It's the same as low as we can go.

We, uh, we think it's on top of something.

Operator: Stand by.

ɣ6-0204: Roger.

Dr. : Gamma-6, this is Dr. . I've been told of the nature of your discovery. Resources are now en route to your position. Very specialized resources, with specialized equipment and specialized personnel.

ɣ6-0204: Dr. , we still have men out on the islands. We're armed with researchers. We're fully capable of continuing investigation.

Dr. : Gamma-6, your assignment is, as of now, to maintain current position and await further orders. Please retrieve your team on the islands and wait for the arrival of SCPS *Guardian*. That is all.

ɣ6-0204: Yes, sir.

« **Shadow In The Wake** | **HUB** | **Eden** »

Interlude - Excerpt From An Auction Catalog - Marshall Carter And Dark, 2012

ANIMATED CONCRETE STATUE

Lot #: 50621-173

ANIMATED CONCRETE STATUE

Minimum Bid: $20,000,000

This lovely objet d'art was constructed in 1987 by an anonymous artist out of concrete and rebar. It is 2 meters in height, and painted beige with darker shading around the stomach and buttocks, as well as a striking red and green pattern around the face.

Unusual Qualities: In addition to its striking avant-garde appearance, this one-of-a-kind statue is both animate and quite bloodthirsty. Although it cannot move while being watched, the statue will attempt to strangle or break the neck of any human being it encounters while unobserved.

Care Instructions: The object will cause any enclosed structure it is housed in to become soiled by a slurry comprised of feces and blood. It is recommended that cleaning take place at least twice a week by a team of at least six persons, no fewer than three of which should maintain direct line of sight to the object at all times. Persons on "watch duty" should inform the other members of the watch team before blinking.

Disclaimer: The object will be provided to the customer in a sealed steel-reinforced portable safe. Marshall, Carter, and Dark assumes no responsibility for any injuries or fatalities that may occur once the safe is opened.

Lot #: 50621-668

THE GENOVESE BLADE

Minimum Bid: $7,000,000

In addition to its paranormal properties, this particular object also has historical value for those who collect artifacts related to famous crimes. A thirteen-inch chef's knife with a single-beveled edge and a rosewood handle, this item was originally discovered in a heavily damaged condition. It has been lovingly restored to its original quality by our team of experts, and will now serve both as an unusual conversation piece and a useful tool in its own right.

Unusual Qualities: The item has the unique psychic quality of suppressing any attempts to interfere with violent actions taken by its user.

Care Instructions: The blade of the knife should be kept clean, away from moisture, and lubricated carefully against rust. The handle should be polished on a regular basis with any wood care product of your choice.

Disclaimer: This item is provided as a historical curiosity only. Marshall, Carter, and Dark do not endorse criminal behavior of any sort.

Lot #: 50621-1057

THE IDEA OF A SHARK

Minimum Bid: $149,000,000

An unusual piece of dadaist art created by an anonymous member of the "Are We Cool Yet?" avant-garde art movement, this particular item is a five-meter-long animate empty space in the shape of an adult tiger shark. Although completely invisible when immersed in water, this item has been injected with a non-toxic orange dye to make it visible for our members during this auction.

As stated by the original artist: "Panic means that the idea of a shark can be more dangerous than an actual shark. It can even be more dangerous than no shark at all."

Unusual Qualities: Although behaving like and in almost all other respects an actual shark, this item is massless and incorporeal, except when attacking or consuming meat.

Care Instructions: Marshall, Carter, and Dark recommends that this item be kept in a saltwater tank made of at least six-inch-thick transparent acrylic. At least five kg of raw meat and fish should be provided at least three times daily. It is recommended that a non-toxic dye be injected into any food consumed by this object in order to maintain visibility, if desired.

Disclaimer: As the feeding and care of large marine creatures is a complicated task best carried out by experts, Marshall, Carter, and Dark cannot assume responsibility for the continued survival of this item once it has been taken into possession by the buyer.

Creator Information

The image used in the SCP-173 article is the art piece "Untitled 2004" by **Izumi Kato**. The photograph was taken by **Gene R**, from **this post**. All rights are reserved by the artists.

A note of caution: SCP-173 is a secondary use of the image of the art piece "Untitled 2004", which was created by **Izumi Kato**. The concept of SCP-173 does not have any relationship with the artist's original concept of "Untitled 2004".

The sculpture, its likeness, and the photograph have not been released under any Creative Commons license. Only the text of this article is released under Creative Commons. **This sculpture and its likeness may not be used for commercial purposes under any circumstances. Izumi Kato has graciously chosen to allow the use of the image of "Untitled 2004" by the SCP Foundation and its**

fanbase for non-commercial purposes only.

Interlude: New Toys

It had been a dark and bloody night. A veritable parade of horror had descended on a small Midwestern town, led by a shambling, laughing, singing fiend playing a flute made of bone. Now, at dawn, the fiend and his circus of death were making themselves comfortable. Pale figures huddled in burnt out houses; dark figures hid in the brush and in basements; tiny skeletons sat in the sun, murmuring quietly amongst themselves.

The Scarecrow watched the sun rise, scraping shreds of warm meat from his claws. He was quite satisfied with his work, having done his best to make every death quick and terrifying. The Harvest was bountiful so far.

But then he felt unfamiliar eyes on himself. He shook himself out of his daydream and looked around himself, wondering who could possibly still be alive. His gaze fell on a tiny figure, barely a foot tall, peeking out from behind a picket fence. It wasn't a dog, nor cat, because he had made sure to slay everything that he could catch. Everything else had fled far away; what could his little visitor possibly be?

"Whaz all this, then?" Scarecrow muttered as he came to loom over the fence, his horrid platoon of wraiths circling around him. He lightly kicked the fence, and the tiny figure peeked out from behind. It was a tiny teddy bear, with a squished face and black eyes. He crouched down and saw something in those beady little eyes, something that he couldn't quite place. Something innocently evil, something both inhuman and totally human at once.

"Yor a horrid little fucker, aren't you?"

The bear looked beside itself as another figure stepped out from behind the fence. A small figure, perhaps a foot tall, shaped much like the little teddybear - only instead of fur and string, made of human eyes. They all seemed to stare up at the Scarecrow, each

meeting his gaze with their own. He stared back, almost disbelieving of what he saw.

For you see, there were few things in this world that the Scarecrow found to be beautiful. One of them was the human eye - such a wonderful, perfect organ. The pure white of an unblemished soul, splashed with the vivid red of lifeblood, each accented by a ring of colour as unique as the person it's cut from. All surrounding a tiny, black void that reflected the Scarecrow's heart, itself black and nonexistent. It was all very metaphorical.

"… Oh," breathed the Scarecrow, his own infernal eyes burning like coals. "Oh I like you. I like you an' I like yor little buddy. I think I'll keep ya." The demon turned, looking over the army of the dead that now entirely encircled him, and pointed down at the teddy bears. "Oi, e'rybody welcome our new friends. Play nice, eh? Take them around an' show em all the nice stuff we do."

The two teddies reached towards one another and held hands, following the Scarecrow's movement as he stood up, looming over them. There was a great cheer as the ghosts and ghouls and skeletons and shadows each cheered, several of the littlest skeletons running forward to cuddle the bears. The Scarecrow stepped over the crowd, smiling to himself, wondering idly what other horrible little things were waiting for him in that wild, wide world.

He looked to the sky at the warm morning sun, spreading his arms to take in the warmth. A fantastically fun night of horror and violence, a wonderful clear morning sky, a new friend or two, and a new day.

And the children were happy, too.

Interlude - Scenes From the Fall

Two siblings, a brother and sister, were playing in a garden among the vine-blanketed trellises and burbling streams that their mother had so dedicated herself to cultivating. The two siblings were cradled and nursed side by side. They had stood on the same day, walked on the same day, spoken on the same day and giggled at the same jokes.

However, today they had begun to diverge. The sister sat the bank of a stream when a tiger approached her.

"Little one, why do you sit alone?" it purred.

"I am watching the stream! Look how beautifully it flows, listen to it babble," she said wistfully and unafraid.

"It is beautiful yes, but would you like to make it more so?"

A look of intense consideration crossed her face, the sort that only a child can muster. "Yes," she answered, "Show me how."

The air was sweet with the scents of sandalwood, aloe and incense as the palace was consumed by flames. They blended with the smell of blood, ink and unwashed clothes. The stink of fear washed over the inhabitants of the blessed city.

Above the cries arose new buildings built of the bodies of the slain. Here was the House of Wisdom done in human bodies and flame, the palace in slain children, the bazaar in dead scholars and women. Hegleu was a masterful architect.

Two lovers are lying on a rooftop, under the fronds of a date palm that had sprung up from the gardens of the palace below. Their whispers flutter like birds through cool desert night. Wrapped up in a

mantle embroidered with the symbol of the Caliph the young woman reads aloud from a book by candlelight. The young man leans in close, his fingers and thawb stained with ink.

"…Like a strand of pearls through a pair of breasts." She snorts, stifling a laugh, her eyes a pair of happy almonds. "My city is not pair of breasts for a Valencian traveler to gaze at."

"It is shameful for the city," the young man replies, equally giddy, stroking his short beard in false contemplation. "What would happen to our fair city if all came simply to stare at it?"

"A tragedy!" She puts her elegant hand to her forehead feigning a swoon before her face relaxed into semi-seriousness. "Although it would be a tragedy to lose the voice of this city."

"To lose you would be a greater tragedy," the young man murmurs lovingly.

"Your poetry is better than this, you flatterer," she sighs, laying her head against his chest.

"Would you like to hear my latest then?"

"If you'll hear mine."

The palms that shaded the roads to the splendid city on Tigris had been shaped into the engines of the city's demise. They strained and stretched and launched pieces of the countryside into the air.

Behind the battlements a company archers stood at the ready as a stone demolished a bookbinder's workshop near the market. The first widow began wailing. A old archer felt his resolve harden. This was the jewel of Islam, seat of the Caliph. God would not let the city fall. He could not let the city fall.

At the bleeding edge of bowshot the archers watched a disorganized rabble approach one of the city's irrigation canals with shovels and baskets in hand. The army trampled over the farms beneath their feet and began to fill the canal like they had done before when they had burned through the countryside.

The archers loosed a volley of arrows, a cloud of nettles against the enemy. The dead of the rabble fell into the canal. It was only when the dead pulled the living down with then that the archers realized that the rabble was composed of hostages bound limb-to-limb.

"Look brother! Look and see the wonders that the tiger and I have wrought!" the sister exclaimed excitedly as her flowers bloomed. The stream had been dammed with stones, filling a little floodplain and reservoir. Dry seeds received water they were unable to reach before and exploded to life. The tiger purred as the girl danced in excitement in the garden.

"If however, you desire war, I have thousands of troops who, when the moment of vengeance arrives, will dry up the waves of the sea." The Caliph clapped his hands at his scribe indicating that he was done. "Take the message back to your master Helegu. God is with me."

The emissary put the letter into a scroll case and formally excused himself.

At the gates of the city the emissary was set upon by a fanatical mob. His clothes were rent. He was beaten and spat upon. Only the intervention of the Vizier's own men saved the emissary and his fellows. It would not be enough.

"Lay down your arms and come out of the city. Let the scholars and great men come out to meet us!" The emissary had returned with his master to the city.

The Caliph agreed and bid his people to leave. As they filed out the people were parceled into groups of ten. Each group was assigned a warrior. Each warrior was ordered to decapitate their group. And so murder was mechanized before mechanization.

Afraid of the consequences of spilling royal blood Hegleu locked the Caliph in a room full of gold.

"If your defeat was the will of God let what happens to you here be His will also," he said as he left the Caliph to die.

The young man was cut down in front of his lover. The ink of his poems mingled with the red of his blood when both swam in the Tigris. The blood and legacies of the scholars were swept away by the river that nurtured them.

She wept as she was dragged away, a valuable prize for the Khan. There would still be an audience for her poems among the captives of the Khan but she would never compose again.

Hearing sister's laughs the brother stepped out onto the bank. He beheld the garden that his sister had cultivated. The flowers radiant and prismatic reflected the orchestra, the spectra, coursing out of the sun.

The brother was stricken with anger. His sister had gone done something without him. His sister had made a friend and given shape to life. He spat at his sister and shoved her aside.

He pulled at the largest of the flowers, yanking the stems in twain. He ripped the flowers to shreds and tossed them into the stream. The dam of stones was kicked asunder, the floodplain dried. The sap of the flowers flowed red against the mud.

His sister stared aghast and unable to move. When her brother had departed the tiger came out of the underbrush.

"What has happened?"

"My brother…" She was unable to say another word.

"Hush," the tiger cooed, and nuzzled her. "I will show you how to grow thorny flowers, flowers with tubers, flowers that creep and climb and flowers that send seeds into the air. I will show you other streams so that you can have other gardens. Sophia, child of knowledge, I will show you much,"

And the girl followed the Tiger.

Intermission2

Transcript of Autopsy 3-12-2015AC

"All right. This is Dr. Jack Bright, recording autopsy 3-12-2015AC. Subject is a humanoid male, age indeterminate. Subject is believed to be James Halforth, also known as Agent Alto Clef, or <a sharp whistle is heard.>"

"At this time, identification is impossible through means of retinal scans, as subject's eyes appear to have melted out of their sockets. Fingerprints are likewise missing due to flame damage. Dental records are conversant with those of Dr. Clef. Several tissue and bone marrow samples have been taken, revealing a DNA match. At this point, I would offer odds that there is a 90 percent probability that this is the corpse of Alto Clef."

"External observation shows the subject has received fourth-degree burns over ninety-seven percent of his body. In many places, subject's clothes have melted into his flesh… this is kind of icky. What? Yes, I know I'm supposed to be professional about this, but you're the guys who insisted I do this autopsy! It's not my field, you know…"

"…What risk of memetic infection? Oh, fuck you guys. Fuck you guys hard."

"Right, cracking him open now. Smells kind of like roast pig. Oooh, yup, he's good and steamy on the inside. All major organs are roasted and black. It appears, hold on, let me make a cut. Yes, it appears as if the subject would have asphyxiated before burn trauma would have killed him. Hold on, whats this?"

"There is an anomalous object in the subject's stomach. Object appears to be a metal ball, approximately seven inches in diameter. Hold on, let me, yup, there is a hinge, opening it up. Object is hollow, and contains a sheet of paper, which is addressed to… me.

Of course. Letter reads:"

"Jack
I had to do it this way. I'd heard the rumors. I knew the O5s were going to try and promote me. I couldn't stand the idea of being stuck there, not actually doing anything, weighed down by paperwork. I know it works for you, but it's not me. In the end, I had to go out the way I lived, doing things no one else would think of. In the end, it was obvious. 682 WANTED us to destroy him. He was stuck, and couldn't go on as long as he was in this form. So, I talked to him, and figured it out. The whole lizard thing, it was just a cocoon. I'm sorry about what this will end up doing to 001, but, in the long run, I just don't care. Goodbye Jack, don't let them drag you down.
Alto Clef."

"…"

"…"

"No, no, it's just dust or ash or something, in my eye. You know what? I'm done here guys. This was Clef. He was a damned good agent. And I'll miss him. Tell the O5's we're not burying him at Site Omega, there just isn't enough left to be useful. And he deserves to rest."

Internal Affairs

The eerie feeling of the room. The color of it. Its bleakness. You think you're about to be questioned. You don't even know why you are here, but you think you're going to be instigated, of some sort.

Allow me to provide you with some calming thoughts.

You are not here to be questioned, or for lack of a better word, punished. Two years ago, you appealed to the Domestic Security Committee for a chance to work in a better division, compared to what you have now. As you know, you never received any actual answer to your request, until now.

I am Haydrick Barnes, a special agent for internal security. You may call me by my last name. However, if you ever do meet me again outside of this room, you won't be calling me that in public or in private, which I will address at the end of this. You are here because my department has had a keen interest in your skills since you've first joined the Foundation. Your ability to make effective judgement in sudden scenarios, impervious to forms of bias or partiality, and overall proficiency within the intelligence and documentary fields of the Foundation, have made you a reliable candidate for the Internal Security Department.

You look confused. Surely, you should have been able to deduce that there must have been a controlling factor in what you're able to see and do here. A lot of people like to assume that the department doesn't exist. I am assuming that you've heard the rumor of a 'foundation inside the Foundation'. We, ourselves, don't mind the idea that people think the department is only a myth, because it provides us with the perfect cover for any operation we commence, internal or external. It also provides us with a reliable connection directly with O5 Command, and notable members of Site Command, should the need to ever contact them arise.

Let me ask you a question. How do you think the Foundation keeps

track of everything that happens? How do you think they keep track of the information that was gathered? Keep in mind that we only have less than a hundred Site Directors, and only thirteen members of O5 Command. I don't think the administration, consisting of only a few intellectually gifted individuals, would be able to account for everything that transpires, or around the world in other designated sites.

That is where we come in. That is what the job of an internal agent.

More often than not, you'll find at least one or two among a hundred Foundation personnel trying to do something that would slip right past the 'all-seeing-eye' of the O5 Command. That means that they've also managed to bypass the administration and or RAISA, as well. However, we're not responsible for what happens during an information breach. We're responsible for what happens before and after it.

Repeat the question? No, we aren't responsible for the classification of documents. However, we do hold the jurisdiction to make changes to any official Foundation document or report, however necessary. That being said, document classification and encoding is not our primary job. However, you will find yourselves in situations where orders from ISD will conflict with those from RAISA, which will more than often require a firm debate between both department directors or other supervisory agents.

Before I continue with the rest of the orientation, I'd like to ask you another question. Do you know who Aaron Siegel is? Yes? Good. Do you know why or how he disappeared? No? I see. That means that you haven't picked up **the letter** yet. However, you must be wondering how he disappeared. I'm going to ask once that you take notes, because some of what I am about to tell you will intertwine with what you will be doing within the department.

Aaron Siegel served among the O5 Council, designated as 'O5-5', and tasked with oversight of the Intelligence Community; a large Foundation bureau tasked with securing and maintaining any and all information about— but not limited to— abnormalities, personnel, and foreign groups of interest.

He was one of the founders responsible for the creation of the Foundation, and also one of the first few O5 Councilors. During the early dawn of the Foundation, he was responsible for the documentation, record-keeping, and distributive properties of everything contained within the Foundation, and other important information.

Before his disappearance, he wrote another letter and gave it to one of his coordinators, which has been passed down from one ISD director to the next. The current director was kind enough to provide me with the letter for me to read off of, which is what I've had in my hands for a while now.

> To my Intelligence Coordinator,
>
> ,
>
> Everything that I have foreseen has come to fruition, and the co
> Council is slowly deteriorating from within, and is therefore affec
> been hectic for you, but I am prepared to offer you a promotion t
> spoken with the Administrator and O5-Head, and they are in full
> no longer be an active member of the Council, let alone the Fou
>
> I am disassembling the Intelligence Community as soon as poss
> not in my authority to declare such, or for lack of a better word, *
> Administrator and O5-Head. Everything I am doing and about to
> aside, I have reason to believe that with the Council's compromi
> affected as well. Therefore, the Intelligence Community will be d
> further damage:
>
> - Intelligence Agency, IA, tasked with maintaining informatio
> efforts with the Department of External Affairs, and other
> - Records and Information Security Administration, RAISA,
> official documents, records and information, classification,
> - Internal Security Department, ISD, tasked with enforcing R
> Foundation, while operating incognito investigations of co
> security and integrity within the Foundation. Additional tas
> tomorrow, for one last time.
>
> I've already assigned who goes to where, and who will be direct
> you complete control and protection for any decision you make i

Council's decisions over those agencies as a whole. The O5-He
structures, and regulations, be set for all of them before the end

Setting up IA and RAISA won't be an issue. I know that for a fac
controversial decision to even consider the creation of the IC's I
being succeeded by ISD, and made into its own separate entity
structure and proper protocol can be determined, but I am worri
and who will represent it.

I sent you an email over the secured IC network, which includes
things go down hill. In that list, I've also included names of peop
list whenever you wish to. As for recruitment methods, departme
recommend contacting O5- , O5- , the O5-Head, and the ISD D

I wish you luck, . Continue the line of secrecy and integrity wh

Ab origine,

THIS MESSAGE WAS FROM THE EXEC

Secure. Contain.

If you're confused in any of this, allow me to help you recalibrate.

Aaron was among the first generation of O5s, if not, the first five. He was also the last person among the founders whom continued actively serving in the Council for years to come, and was the only one remaining when everyone else had left. This means that whatever he predicted, *whenever* he predicted it, has already happened, and is only getting worse.

That being said, Aaron didn't disappear. He merged with the living embodiment of the Foundation itself; he became the body and the soul of the Foundation. Ever-present, virtually immortal. Everything the Foundation has ever contained, is containing, and ever will contain, is known only by Aaron himself, and therefore, the intelligence apparatuses. He erased himself from existence, and in

the process, was made into a martyr.

Our task,— and now yours,— is to secure the order that was kept in place for decades. To contain the protection of both our security and information. To protect the continuation that is the SCP Foundation.

It's not rocket science when trying to figure out how all this corruption, nonsense, and noncompliance to basic Foundation policy, managed to implant itself within the Foundation, and especially among us, above others. And when this happens, everything else is affected with it. Containment Procedures, official documents, reports, divisions, site command, assistant staff, all the way up to even the O5-Head himself, could be compromised to this man-made disease, if they are not compromised already.

The Internal Security Department was made for the sole intention of preserving and maintaining the order of the Foundation's cause and existence. It was made for the sole intention of preserving *everything* that Aaron and Administrator had created, and therefore, that the Foundation has created. We are our own embodiment of the Foundation; of those who seek prosperity, justice, and order, among the chaos. We are the will of the Foundation.

At the end of the day, that is our job. We are the roots of the Foundation. They cannot, and will not, be pulled from beneath us. You understand this now, don't you?

You're uncertain. Let me re-explain your position here.

Your job is important. *You* are important. They may not understand it, and you might not even understand it. But I do. This is where your story begins, and it will be where it ends; wrapped in a cold embrace, and never let go.

What you just read, which was not intended for you, was made to last for generations to come. It was not meant to be kept a secret, because nothing can ever be kept in the dark forever. The Foundation is compromised, and there is nothing that anyone or any*thing* can do about it.

Not the Council, not the Intelligence Community, and not you.

However, do not let that interject with your intentions or moral. Because while the Foundation may be losing its grip, you will not. Internal Security may cease to exist— and therefore the Foundation— but you will not. You were not raised like the rest of them. You were not manipulated. You are aware of your surroundings. Like an eagle on the hunt, you know where to look.

While the intelligence community manages to barely hold on to itself, as the mindset of human nature begin to corrupt their morals, you will hold on. You are armed with both sword & shield, and you— and only you— are given the leisure to determine when and how you use either.

You were born to serve humanity, yet you will find no humanity here. Not here, not there, not anywhere. Only criminals, sadists, and freaks of nature roam the surface. You are among the first generation of outcasts. You listen to the outside, where others are blissful within their own ignorance and incompliance to common sense and law.

You could be the key to all of this chaos, or not. Regardless, your actions and intentions have brought you to where you are today. You cannot fix what cannot be undone, but you most certainly can prevent more damage from ever occurring. You can put an end to the nonsense. Only your will, morals, and dedication, will drive you forward, and the Foundation will move with you.

You are here because I have confidence in your abilities. You are my creation. You are here because I willed it.

There is no coincidence. There is destiny; and your destiny is my will, and mine alone.

...

I'm glad we're of the same mind.

That being said, let me give you a full in-depth explanation as to what you will be doing in the department, and how you will be doing it.

First of all, everything that is discussed here and forever more about, similar to, or directly from or to ISD, is highly classified. You should know that by now without me having to explain what I mean by this, especially what would happen to you if you leak anything.

Simply so, if anyone asks you about ISD and is not currently aware of its operations to your own knowledge, simply respond with something generic; what other people would say to that. However, if someone consistently approaches you about the department, avoid general contact with the individual, and report it to the ISD's Apprehensive Interrogation Unit, and they will handle it from there.

In terms of general handling of information or operations, you will be trained how to handle information, what you need to do if you ever encounter Reality Benders or any powerful reality-bending sentinel, and more importantly, how to properly interrogate someone. An ISD Agent's job will mostly involve interrogations. Lots of them. That includes how to properly write reports, documents, classification methods and practices, and a longer list which I personally do not feel I have the time to recite.

In conclusion, the answer to a two-year question of yours has finally been answered. The Internal Security Department is willing to add you among its ranks.

Welcome to the brain.

Interlude: An Internal Memo Regarding a Theft

Below are provided the documents you requested.

Log of breach at Site 62 on / / .

/ / **, 0134 HOURS:** Unknown entity manifests outside Site 62's main entrance. Security personnel panic and flee.

/ / **, 0140 HOURS:** Unknown entity opens Site 62's main entrance doors. Video feeds overcome with static for a period of 36 seconds. Video blackout follows possible route of entity through Site.

/ / **, 0203 HOURS:** Unknown entity reported by personnel. Entity headed towards inanimate SCP storage vaults. Security teams tasked to contain entity.

/ / **, 0220 HOURS:** Security team incapacitated by entity. Entity exits Site unopposed. Video interference ceases. Security later universally reports an overwhelming feeling of terror preventing them from acting against the entity.

/ / **, 0310 HOURS:** Inventory check for Site 62 reveals the absence of **SCP-573**.

/ / **, 0316 HOURS:** Warning sent

out to all sites to be on guard for entity.

Unknown entity determined to be **SCP-303** through forensics and SCP database inquiry. Zero encounters with SCP-303 had been logged since / / (167 days before containment breach at Site 62).

/ / **, 1817 HOURS:** Personnel at Site report feelings of unease and panic. As Site is situated in the Rocky Mountains, it was put on lockdown while nearby Sites were contacted.

/ / **, 1822 HOURS:** All Site 's video feeds disrupted. Power fails, emergency distress signal activated.

/ / **, 1859 HOURS:** Distress signal deactivates automatically. Site unresponsive to outside contact.

/ / **, 2011 HOURS:** MTF Alpha-16 arrives at Site . All personnel found dead of evisceration, or remain missing.

/ / **, 2113 HOURS:** MTF fails to verify location of anomaly housed at Site . **SCP-899** declared missing.

« The Red Horse (The Ironic Metaphor) | Canon Hub | The Black Horse (The Crawling Sea) »

Interval 1

"Hello little children!" I shouted with glee as I moved around them, "What a lovely couple of children you are! What's your name?"

They giggled. A boy looked at me. "I'm Tommy. I'm six and a half years old and I'm not afraid of anything!"

"Wow Tommy! You sound like a biiiiiig boy!" I let out a goofy laugh. The children giggled again. "Do you know any magic tricks, Tommy?"

"Well…" Tommy made a strange face and put his thumb's knuckle against the other, with his index finger covering the connection. He slowly moved his thumb forwards. All the children oohed and aahed.

"Wow! I can't remove thumbs! But I can show you ano-" I was interrupted by a scream and suddenly Tommy was picked up. All the other children became scared.

"What are you doing, Thomas! You get away from that…. thing right now! All you other children, scoot!" A terrifying woman came onto the scene and scooped Tommy up. All the other children fled. Tommy began to cry as the woman carried him away.

"B-but I was just talking with Mr. Sillybug!"

Previous: **5. Mr. Mad** by The Deadly Moose

Next: **6. Mr. Stripes** by TroyL

Back to Hub

Interval 2

Mr. Appleseed. Seriously, that's my name. And wouldn't you know it, whenever I sneeze, cough, or fart, out come appleseeds. It sucks. This is, of course, only exacerbated by the fact that I was just picked up by the Foundation and now I feel quite the sneeze coming on.

Hold on, wait, they're not taking me captive. They're taking off my handcuffs. What's that they're saying?

"Ah, welcome back Dr. King."

Previous: **10. Mr. Mission** by Gerald

Next: **11. Mr. Feather** by Light

Back to Hub

Interview C

Interviewed: Agent Thompson.

Interviewer: Dr. Sylvius

Forward: Post-incident interview with the only survivor of the anomalous SCP-C Blizzard.

<Begin Log>

Dr. Sylvius: Okay, let's begin. Tell me, Thompson, what exactly were you doing at the site?

Thompson: Well, I was helping all of the researchers make it through the storm. Studying something during a blizzard in Greenland isn't exactly the safest thing in the world.

Dr. Sylvius: Indeed. So, the report says that SCP-C activated at 1300 hours. Could you tell me what happened then?

Thompson: Well, that's when the thing started to spin. That's also when things really became nasty.

Dr. Sylvius: How so?

Thompson: Well, the wind shot up 'til it was hard to stand, it was blowing so hard. It was snowing worse than before, and it was colder than hell, let me tell you. The visibility just started out bad enough, and it got to the point you had trouble seeing your hand in front of your face. And those were just the issues with the weather.

Dr. Sylvius: There were other problems?

Thompson: Yep. First was the sun. It was impossible to see anything, but you could tell where the light was coming from, and I swore it switched spots in the sky the second that thing started up. Then it was the ground. The area we were in was kinda rocky, and

sloped a bit, but it changed and became more like a flat plain.

Dr. Sylvius: I see. In the incident report, it says the group led by Agent Smith was unaccounted for when contact was reestablished.

Thompson: I was getting to that. Smith's group was near the edge of the storm, and he told us his group was gonna try to get help.

Dr. Sylvius: But by then all communications were lost.

Thompson: That was odd. We could talk between the groups, but not with anyone outside of the storm, almost as if they had dropped off of the face of the planet. Anyway, Smith's group kept moving for about four and a half hours, but they said they saw absolutely no other people or the facility that was set up nearby. They also said there was absolutely no change in the terrain, as if the tundra never ended. We told them they got turned around because of the blizzard, but they said their directional markers were working. After the sixth hour, they got out of range of the communicators. Never heard from them again.

Dr. Sylvius: So how did they all die?

Thompson: Well, we were into our twentieth hour when it happened. I was on break in the little shelter we had set up when I heard yelling from outside. I went outside and saw three of the researchers down in the snow, bleeding pretty badly. The others were running around, yelling about something that had come out of nowhere and started attacking. They weren't done, either. The whole place was a madhouse with people running around, while *things* were killing people left and right.

Dr. Sylvius: What did they look like?

Thompson: I have no clue. Like I said before, you couldn't see anything in the snow and the wind. All I could tell is that whatever they were, they weren't human. I was trying to talk to Sergeant Reynolds, when a white blur shot between us and sliced his head clean off. Just like that. One second he was fine, the next there was a fountain of blood where his neck used to be.

Dr. Sylvius: How did you manage to survive all of this?

Thompson: Well, I realized that there was no way we were going to win this fight. These things kept jumping in and out of the snow, and we couldn't see them for more than a split second, let alone hurt them. They were obviously experts and fighting with those conditions. We had no hope. So I made a break for the cabin. The moment I slammed the door shut behind me, this huge fucking knife stabs right through the door. If I was half a second slower, it would have gone straight through my head. I could hear them out there, growling and screaming at me, but the walls were too thick for them to get through. What they did do was break the three inch thick bullet-proof windows the shelter had, and left me there to freeze to death. I spent five and a half hours huddled in the corner, covered in blankets and hoping the storm would end early.

Dr. Sylvius: Interesting. Well, Agent Thompson, that's all the information we need at this time. Thank you for your cooperation, and we'll talk to you again if we need to know more.

<End Log>

Closing Statement: After this interview, further testing of SCP-C during storm conditions was prohibited, and measures were set up to prevent further incidents of this nature.

Interview Log 7362

Following the events surrounding the acquisition of the territory affected by SCP-7362, the following interview was conducted with Jeremiah Smalls, the only individual to have survived the decontamination process. Of note is that despite a chronological age of 26, as confirmed by independent records, and an outward appearance consistent with that age, many of Mr. Smalls' internal organs were in an advanced stage of degeneration consistent with extreme age. It is currently unknown whether this was due to SCP-7362's effects, or due to the rapid decontamination process enacted upon him.

Dr. Mace (interviewer): Hello, Mr. Smalls. Please sit down.

Mr. Smalls: Okay. Um, can someone turn down the AC? I'm not used to it anymore and I'm really cold. *(Note: the ambient temperature of the interview room was 29.5 degrees Celsius due to an unrelated and temporary failure in the Site's HVAC system.)*

Dr. Mace: Certainly. We'll make sure your room is more comfortable when you're taken back. In the meantime, I would like to know a little bit more about the situation inside, what did you call it? The Fields?

Mr. Smalls: That's what Great Leader called it. I'd gone on a bike ride, and I saw that fence, and some buildings in the distance. I guess I was curious or something, so I went to take a look. And then I saw a woman, and she just pointed a gun at me when I got closer. Didn't have much choice then. Of course, neither did she.

Dr. Mace: For how long have you lived inside the Fields?

Mr. Smalls: About two years. Funny, it seemed longer.

Dr. Mace: Did you ever try to escape?

Mr. Smalls: In the beginning, I did. But after a while, I realized it was

no use. Eternal Leader would punish people who tried to find loopholes. *(Subject holds up left hand, which is missing three fingers)* I got my name from this.

Dr. Mace: Your name?

Mr. Smalls: High Leader wouldn't let us use our real names, just the ones Illustrious Leader gave us. Magnanimous Leader called me Seven. To remind me, you see. So I wouldn't ever try to escape again. And I didn't.

Dr. Mace: What can you tell me about SCP-7362?

Mr. Smalls: About what?

Dr. Mace: The substance we found in the well in the town square.

Mr. Smalls: Oh. We used it as food, but it's the most disgusting thing I've ever tasted. No one knew what it was, or where it came from. If Compassionate Leader knew, Beneficent Leader never told us. And I'm not sure if I want to know. But it never made us ill, or anything. Weird, come to think of it. To be honest, that stuff scared the shit out of me, and it's not like I didn't have other things to be scared of in there. But there was something… well, I don't know. And then what happened to Little Missy…

Dr. Mace: For the record, can you tell me about this incident from the beginning?

Mr. Smalls: Okay. Well, Little Missy was… Splendorous Leader used her as a… Little Missy had it harder than us. A lot harder. And life wasn't great for any of us, but if you didn't try to abuse loopholes, and didn't say anything Marvelous Leader didn't want you to say, then you wouldn't be punished. But Little Missy, she was always being punished, whether she deserved it or not. And she didn't want to go on any more. Everyone sort of knew that, already. But she couldn't commit suicide, because it was against the rules. But that day, she punctured her eardrums with a sharpened stick, just so that she wouldn't hear Wonderful Leader any more. And she ran away but she still couldn't escape. And Auspicious Leader didn't even want her back. So she stayed away for more than a month.

Everyone thought she was dead, after some time. She had to be, right? We told each other that she was at peace now. That it was for the best. It may sound crazy, but it gave us hope. We didn't see much difference between dying and escaping, you know? She got away, we thought. Maybe we could, too. But then one evening, we found her inside one of the houses. She was all covered in food. You know, the stuff from the well. And she could hear again, just like that.

Dr. Mace: Did she tell you what had happened to her?

Mr. Smalls: She didn't remember. Even when Kindhearted Leader *made* her tell Felicitous Leader everything, she still said she didn't know. She remembered falling asleep, and waking up days later, the way we found her.

Dr. Mace: Did she seem any different to you, after she came back?

Mr. Smalls: She was crushed, of course. She'd starved herself to death to get away from Flawless Leader, and now everything was just like it was before. But… yes, there was something else. She was afraid of things. Just perfectly ordinary things, you know? Like rain, or her own reflection. Hell, she was even afraid of trees for a while! And she kept telling everyone that she wasn't ever going to try again, that she was glad it hadn't worked, and we shouldn't try either, because it wouldn't solve anything…

Dr. Mace: Why is it that the police officers who first arrived on the scene were found shot, while those who had been inside for a longer time, such as yourself, were killed in a fire?

Mr. Smalls: I'm not sure, but… we belonged to Altruistic Leader, you see. We weren't supposed to leave. Merciful Leader had to make sure we didn't… come back, like Little Missy did. Thoughtful Leader yelled something after me when I ran, but I couldn't understand the words. But Worthy Leader knows, you see. And Prosperous Leader told me I'd die before Meritorious Leader would let me escape. Virtuous Leader told me that so, so many times.

Dr. Mace: Do you have any idea where we might find him?

Mr. Smalls: I don't know. Sometimes I think Perfect Leader's already here. But that would be… that would be impossible, wouldn't it? But I really shouldn't be here, either. There's no way it'll last. Supreme Leader is going to find me and send me where the others are. Please, don't let Everlasting Leader do that. I'm begging you.

<End Log>

Closing Statement: Despite constant medical monitoring and treatment, Jeremiah Smalls died of multiple organ failure due to age and malnutrition 37 days following the acquisition of SCP-7362. Simultaneous with Mr. Smalls' expiration, an individual matching the description of "Leader" climbed out of the well holding the primary mass of SCP-7362. The individual was restrained, but tried to escape and was subsequently terminated. Autopsy revealed no biological abnormalities, and the subject's fingerprints and DNA do not appear in any medical, governmental or law enforcement database to which the Foundation has access.

Interview With the Strigoi

Dr. Jacob Andrews stood in the hallway of Site 19's medical ward, in front of the door to the examination room where his subject for the day was strapped to a bed. Dr. Andrews had never worked face-to-face with a living, breathing SCP object before - his degree was in Latin, after all, and the bulk of his work revolved around translating and interpreting ancient documents. As it happened, however, Latin was the only language the creature recognized that anyone at Site 19 was capable of speaking fluently - and Dr. Andrews was the only person available who spoke it.

"Just remain calm, remember the briefing, and you'll be fine," Security Director Jefferson told him as he retrieved a key ring from his belt and unlocked the door. "Do not touch the creature, allow any part of your body to come within reach of its mouth, or attempt to loosen or remove any of its bonds. We'll be watching and listening in the whole time and if anything goes wrong we'll be through the door in under five seconds. If you need out, the safe word is 'bonavox'. All clear?"

"Yes, sir," Dr. Andrews nodded.

"Then good luck," Jefferson said.

Andrews grasped the knob and turned it, slowly opening the door. A beam of light from the corridor spread out into the room and onto the Spartan bed that alone furnished it - and no sooner did those rays of light strike the thing on the bed than it began seizing and shaking, struggling against the straps that held it in place as it hissed and snarled. It shouted and shrieked in a strangely accented language that Dr. Andrews took to be an archaic dialect of Romanian, no doubt (as attested in the briefing he had received) begging that the light be put out. Andrews stepped into the room and closed the door behind him, leaving the room pitch black but for the dim readout of the heart monitor next to its bed - a monitor which read that the thing's blood pressure was impossibly low, its pulse and respiration

far too meager to sustain life, its body core only a few degrees warmer than the air around it.

"I am going to need to be able to see you to perform my work," Andrews said in Latin. "May I light a dim light?"

"If you must," responded a weak, barely audible voice in kind. Andrews touched the dimmer switch that had been installed by the door and brought the ceiling lamp to its lowest setting. Even in this dim glare, the creature on the bed shook and squinted its eyes, but seemed to be in less distress than it had before.

In the amber glow, Andrews got his first good look at the tall, gaunt creature that lay before him, nude but for a hospital gown, an IV bag of blood draining slowly into its arm, leather straps around its wrists and ankles holding it in place. Its skin was a pale gray, mottled and speckled with black and purple like a slowly rotting corpse, dry and stretched taut over its bony limbs, ribs poking out of its chest like an emaciated prisoner. It was hairless, but for the shock of unkempt and brittle hair on its head, which, whatever color it had been at first, had been bleached blond by the centuries. A pair of bloodshot, pinkish eyes were barely visible behind its half-closed eyelids. Its teeth, yellow, misshapen, and cracked, were bared behind its dried, curled-back lips. The thing seemed to struggle for every breath, its chest rising and falling with great difficulty, each exhalation accompanied by a dry wheeze interspersed with bouts of violent coughing. It reeked of dried blood, rotting flesh, and the stink of the grave.

"My name is Dr. Jacob Andrews," Andrews said, "and I work for the Foundation. I have been instructed to ask you some questions so that my superiors can determine whether you pose a threat and what means will be necessary to keep you safely contained. Do you understand?"

"Your Latin is excellent," the thing replied in what Andrews now recognized to be a thick Slavic accent. "Are you from the Roman church?"

"No, I'm just a…" Andrews searched his mind for a word the thing would recognize. "…a scholar. A historian, if you will."

"Then at least I know I shall not be burned this day," the thing said, chuckling to itself before a coughing spasm overtook it. Andrews noticed that though it could barely manage a whisper, and each syllable seemed to come only at great effort, there was a certain genteel nature to its speech, a refined, carefully considered grace to each word.

"Our purpose here is to secure, contain, and protect," Andrews said. "What of you? Are you a man of God?"

"You ask if I believe in God?" the creature spat. "What kind of god would allow a thing such as I to exist? No, I am no holy man."

"Then who are you?"

"A man of noble birth," the thing said, taking a deep breath in anticipation of its next sentence. "I was - I am the duke of Oltenia, as was my father before me, and his father before him, and his before him, and his before him who freed us all from the rule of the Turks."

"And what is your name?"

The thing paused. "I… I do not remember," it said. "It has been a long time since I have had need of a name."

"I guess I'll just have to call you Duke, then," Andrews replied. "How old are you, Duke?"

"I cannot say. I do not know what year this is."

"2012."

"Two thousand and twelve," Duke said to himself. He was silent for a moment, seemingly taking in the realization of how much time had passed. "Then I suppose I must be seven hundred years old, or so."

"Do you not know when you were born?"

"I remember so little from those days. It was such a long time ago. I remember the sensations most of all, the things lost forever… the smell of my mother's perfume, the taste of meat roasted on the bone, the warmth of the fire, what it felt like to kiss a girl for the first

time, the sting on my cheek when she slapped me for trying to reach under her skirt." Duke laughed at his own joke, and laughing once more gave way to coughing.

"What do you remember distinctly of your life before you became as you are now?"

"That I was a prince among men," Duke said. "I fought the Turks. I fought the Greeks. I fought the Serbs. I fought anyone who was foolish enough to face me! None dared challenge my word. Those who did… well, my enemies were known to whisper that I roasted the vanquished alive and dined on their flesh! Truth be told, I only did it once. I didn't care for it."

"How did you come to be as you are now?"

Duke sighed. "I didn't want to die. And I was dying."

"Of what?"

"Consumption," Duke said before launching into another fit of coughing. Andrews noticed for the first time the fine pinkish mist that Duke ejected from his throat with each cough, and reminded himself to get a full checkup after this interview was over. "I had watched it take my mother and my sister. I did not wish to die as they did. I offered half my fortune to whoever could provide me with the secrets of eternal life."

"And someone made you an offer?"

"Many people. Doctors, priests, historians like yourself. I turned the preachers away. The doctors, I bade to try their craft on a peasant first. Most of the peasants died - and so I took those doctors and mounted them on spikes in front of my keep as a warning to those who would try to cheat a duke. Eventually, a witch came before me, one of the secret practitioners of the old cults, who proposed that I could live forever - if only I became a *strigoi*."

"What's a strigoi?"

Duke laughed so hard Andrews feared he might crack a rib. "You have obviously never been to Oltenia," he said, "or you would know.

The strigoi are beasts. Mindless savages, born from the carcasses of unrepentant sinners. They stalk the places that are called home by the dead - cemeteries, battlefields, gallows, cities stricken by the plague - and they feast on the flesh and blood of the dead. If there is no dead meat to be found and they are hungry, they will sometimes attack the living. Their bite is poison. It brings unimaginable pain" - Duke grimaced, as if in memory of that pain - "and if the beast does not kill you and devour you itself, then you too will lose your mind and become as they are."

"Is that what you are now?"

"No," Duke said. "I am something far greater."

"Explain."

"I nearly killed the witch myself for suggesting I become one of those abominations. She protested that I had misunderstood her - she knew a way, an ancient secret of the heathen princes of old, that could allow me to become ageless as the strigoi are, but maintain my senses. I gave her leave to test it on a prisoner - and indeed, it worked."

"What became of the prisoner?"

"I ordered him burned at the stake," Duke said. "There was only room for one immortal in my duchy."

"So you underwent this same ritual?"

"Yes," Duke said almost mournfully. "We captured one of the wild strigoi that lurked where the bodies of plague victims were burned. On the night of a full moon, the witch brought it before me and allowed it to bite me." Duke nodded his head toward his left arm, at a solid black patch of flesh above the elbow. "For three days I was in unbearable anguish. My skin became pale and I could no longer bear the sunlight, and I felt as though I would soon go mad. On the third night, after bathing me in the blood of an unbaptized Turk, the witch slit the strigoi's throat and bade me drink its blood. I vomited at first. She forced my face back to its throat and yelled at me to keep drinking. The more I drank, the better it tasted. Once I had had my

fill, the witch proclaimed the ritual was complete - and so long as I kept a watchful eye on my enemies, I would never die."

"So she earned the reward you promised?"

"Of course not," Duke said. "I tore into her throat and drank her blood the next night. None but those I trusted with my life could know what I had become and remain alive. Even my wife became repulsed by the sight and smell of me. Her blood was delicious."

"Did you eat their flesh as well?"

"I never cared for the flesh. The blood was what I craved - delicious, and alive, and warm. So much of what it means to be a man, I can no longer experience. I see the fire, but I do not feel its heat. Only when fresh blood is running through my veins do I truly feel warm anymore."

"How often do you need to feed?"

"I do not need to feed at all. I… enjoy it. There are so few pleasures of the flesh available to a man in my condition."

"How often are you hungry?"

"I am *always* hungry. I am always thirsty. I am always tired, and sore, and aching, and sick. The old wounds never heal, the old pains never subside. I can drink until my stomach feels ready to burst, and still I hunger."

"How long did you continue to live as a duke after you changed?"

"Fifty years or so. I had to hide my face from the people and stay alone in the dark. The light burns, like being thrown into a fire. Even this glare now is quite unbearable."

"What happened to change things?"

"One of the peasant girls I intended to make a meal of escaped and informed the church of what I had become. The damned bishop incited the serfs to revolution and burned my keep. They would have burned me with it if I had not escaped into the woods."

"Where did you go then?"

"In the woods I remained until your mercenaries made a prisoner of me. I thought many times of trying to reclaim my land, but I am not…" Duke stopped to catch his breath. "I am not as strong or charismatic as once I was."

"What did you do for all those years?"

"I occupied myself with my thoughts, mostly. There have been times where I have simply crawled into a cave, or a hollow log, or covered myself with the earth and simply laid for days, or months, or years because I did not wish to move. When people came hunting the strigoi, I hid and fled. When I desired to do so, I preyed on huntsmen, and travelers, and others lost in the woods. It is quite simple to stalk a lone hunter in silence until he makes camp and falls asleep, then come upon him in the darkness and tear out his throat before he awakens. To hunt the animals is different - their senses are so much more attuned to the sound - and the smell - of death."

"Did you ever encounter other strigoi like yourself?"

"No, only the mad beasts. If they came into my woods, I killed them. They are fierce when cornered, but easy enough to lure into a well-laid trap."

"Do you ever regret what you've become?"

Duke paused a moment, looking down at his frail, emaciated frame. "If I had known this would be the price of immortality… perhaps I would have waited for another offer to come along." Duke chuckled.

"The strigoi are not truly 'immortal', I take it."

"I hunger, but I will never starve. I thirst, but I will never grow parched. I can barely breathe…" appropriately enough, Duke stopped again, struggling to catch his breath after winding himself. "I cannot breathe, but I will never choke. I am sick, but I shall never waste away. I shall live forever."

"But can you be killed?"

"I suppose. If you took my head, or pierced my heart, or set me aflame, or hacked me to bits, it would kill me as surely as any mere man."

"Have you ever tried to take your own life, or provoke someone to kill you?"

"No." Duke's answer was flat and immediate.

"Why not?"

"Because I still don't want to die."

"I don't understand," Andrews said. "You've lived alone in the woods for seven hundred years as a frail monster that most people would kill on sight. Wouldn't death be a relief?"

"Surely a historian knows that no great man *ever* wants to die," Duke said. "Every ache, every pain, every pang of hunger, every moment of regret for the things I have lost - these things are *gifts*, Doctor. I would rather feel the greatest torment you could possibly imagine… than know that I will never feel anything again, or even exist to know that I feel it not."

"I think I've heard everything I need to hear for now," Andrews said. "The nurse will be by in an hour to change your IV."

"Don't bother," Duke said as Andrews turned off the dimmer and made his way to the door. "Sticking it into my veins like this does nothing for me. Could you ask if they could arrange to have it drip into my mouth? The blood of a woman would be ideal. Warm. Virginal, preferably. Have your masters any available?"

Dr. Andrews opened the door. "I hope not," he said.

Interviews with Prospective Groups of Interest

WANTED: GROUP OF INTEREST

A hero is only as good as the villain.

The SCP Foundation is looking for prospective Groups of Interest, which can attempt to oppose the SCP Foundation and emphasise the obvious superiority of the SCP Foundation.

Interviews will be conducted on / / at Dr. Clef's office. Interview date is protected by a memetic seal that can only be bypassed by specific beings. If the interview date is visible to you, you really should participate in the interview.

There will be free drinks.

Dr. Clef: Who are you again?

ASCI Director: The American Secure Containment Initiative.

Dr. Clef: You can't just take two out of our three slogans like that.

ASCI Director: You're the ones who took our title. We're your predecessor, one of them at least.

Dr. Clef: If you're gonna become us, why are you here?

ASCI Director: Apparently, predecessors are still classified as minor GoIs.

Dr. Clef: Buddy, didn't you see the job ad? We're looking

for villains. If you will become us in the future, you can't be the villains. That will make us, the heroes, look bad.

ASCI Director: I can at least join the winning side, right?

Dr. Clef: … I'm afraid you're mistaken, friend. You will never join the winning side. You're just a stale reductionist representative. Folks like me are forever the winning side, but we always find use for lackeys and cannon fodder. [smiles]

An interdimensional portal openes and an ancient daevite beast steps out.

Dr. Clef: Take a seat.

Daevite: *Eldritch screeching*

Dr. Clef: Fuck this.

Robo-Dude: I AM ROBO-DUDE, A INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY OF DR. WONDERTAINMENT. I AM HERE TO COLLECT THE FREE DRINKS, ROBO-PAL.

Dr. Clef: Why? You are a robot.

Robo-Dude: NOT FOR ME BUT DR. WONDERTAINMENT. I AM HERE TO COLLECT THE FREE DRINKS FOR DR. WONDERTAINMENT.

Dr. Clef: Why don't he come and get them himself?

Robo-Dude: DO NOT INTIMIDATE ROBO-DUDE. DR. WONDERTAINMENT IS A BUSY TOY MAKER AND THIS VERSION OF ROBO-DUDE COMES EQUIPPED WITH AN ATOMIC GRENADE IN THE EVENT YOU FAIL TO FOLLOW UP WITH THE PROMISED FREE DRINKS.

Dr. Clef: Kinda extreme for a toy… Kids these days are

so lucky. Anyway, the drinks are at that table next to the bowl of chips, which is mine so no touching that.

Robo-Dude: THANK YOU, ROBO-PAL.

Dr. Clef: You know Dr. Wondertainment should pay an actual visit next time. They could make-

[Robo-Dude grabs all the drinks and vanishes in a bright blue light]

Dr. Clef: Did he really just take *all* the damn soda?

Dr. Clef: So, bottom line, you're a circus?

Herman Fuller: Not just any circus, my good man. Herman Fuller's Circus of the Disquieting is *The* Circus, the Greatest Show in all the Worlds! Surely you've heard of us.

Dr. Clef: …

Herman Fuller: You're joking.

Dr. Clef: Well, I remember there were a few good scips about you a few years ago, then there was almost nothing until last year when we started getting all these weird stories coming in for some reason.

Herman Fuller: That's right, we've got a cannon now!

Dr. Clef: A canon?

Herman Fuller: That's right, Alty, a 90-foot-long cannon: solid cast iron, fires balls three feet wide, and is accurate to within 3 miles. Don't tell me that doesn't make us a formidable enemy!

Dr. Clef: Look, Mr. Fuller, every time we try to raid your Circus you just vanish into thin air. We're looking for an enemy that's a little more… menacing.

Herman Fuller: More menacing? More menacing? Sir, you show me one six-year-old in the world who isn't afraid of Clowns and then say we're not menacing!

Dr. Clef: We don't employ six-year-olds, so that's a moot point. Hey, come to think of it, last I read you weren't even still in charge of the Circus of the Disquieting.

Herman Fuller: I assure you, sir, I have no idea what you're talking about.

Dr. Clef: In fact, you're supposed to be in containment. You're a mediocrely rated **SCP** now.

Herman Fuller: I have had enough of these preposterous accusations! Good day sir!

Dr. Clef: Don't get your strings caught in the door on your way out, Pinocchio.

Dr. Clef: General, weren't you guys defeated in the Pacific War?

Kakure Shogun: Yes, that happened. Circumstances beyond IJAMEA's control, to be precise. But we have survived the war, and infiltrated almost all segments of society.

Dr. Clef: Standard secret organisation, eh?

Kakure Shogun: We have factions like the Kakure Shogun and Jirai. In English, they are 'hidden generals' and 'landmine' respectively.

Dr. Clef: General, look. We already have ORIA and GRU-P for our obligatory foreign organisation GoI. Three's a crowd. And yellow peril's so dead. Your group has absolutely no appeal at all.

Kakure Shogun: Doctor, I will not tolerate Orientalism. This is about the sacrifices of many people who died at

war. Can you just let people die for nothing?

Dr. Clef: Speaking of dying, we beat your entire group. And that's your place, buddy. [snaps finger]

[Kakure Shogun is replaced with a human skeleton, which quickly crumbles to dust.]

[Dr. Clef stares blankly at the empty chair in his office, nodding his head.]

Dr. Clef: I see you are truly Nobody. I think we can fit you in whenever we feel like it. Next!

Dr Clef: And… you represent?

Generic Waffen-SS Commander: I am here on behalf of ze Obskurakorps of ze Third Reich. Hei- [He is cut short by a bullet to the head.]

Dr Clef: Yeah, no. Fuck Nazis.

Grand Karcist Ion: Pleasure to meet you, Clef.

Dr. Clef: Indeed, Grand Karcist. Please tell me more about this Sarkicism.

Grand Karcist Ion: [visibly irritated] Firstly, I would prefer if you do not use the s-word. This is 2017. We should not be subject to such language.

Dr. Clef: I'm sorry, 'hon. Keep on talking.

Grand Karcist Ion: I represent the Nälkä, an ancient religion dated back to what you would call the Bronze Age. Our faith's tenets include the shepherding of the flesh-

Dr. Clef: Ah, that's your schtick! You can be the

obligatory antagonists if we need some body horror and unspeakably ancient religion! Thank you for coming down today, Grand Karcist.

Grand Karcist Ion: Wait! I haven't told you our deity's UST with the Broken God and our equally ancient war with the Church of the Broken God!

Dr Clef: That's a bit unnecessarily complicated. Besides, the focus should be the Foundation. If you're so fixated with the Church of the Broken God, why don't you go to their interview site?

[Grand Karcist Ion disappears from Dr. Clef's office.]

Dr. Clef: Our original proposition still stands, if you're still interested!

[The representative from the Shark Punching Centre opens the door to the interview room and walks in. However, he is blocked by a solid brick wall. On the wall, the following is inscribed: "No. We may be lolFoundation, but we have standards too."]

In the End: Elite

Pain. Pain, and fire, and then peace. For a long time, she remembered the peace. There was a light, so beautiful and calm, that she drifted towards. Her parents, though, her parents would miss her, wouldn't they? She could hear them, and they sounded so sad. She couldn't leave, not yet.

She tried to follow their voices home. It should have been so easy. She walked a line, not daring to look up, to the light that called, nor down, to the darkness that hungered. Her parents were her line, keeping her here, from floating or falling. They called to her, and people gave her rides, and she should have got there. And yet, and yet…

Fire. Fire and pain. She felt herself set adrift again, her body wracked with nothing but pain. She saw them, finally, saw them as they floated past her, as she fell, burning, tumbling, into the hungry abyss. She fell through them, felt the pain of their deaths, added to her own, and landed, in the darkness.

The darkness loved her. It took her to its bosom, and taught her. It showed her what had happened to her parents, who was to blame. The darkness showed her what she could do with her anger, with her pain, how she could feed it. Then it let her go.

She didn't float, not anymore. She climbed up out of the darkness, every step a struggle, like forcing her way through a thick mud. Just because the darkness wanted her help didn't mean it was going to make her leaving easy.

It needed feeding, so she fed it. She avenged her parents. She more than avenged her parents, with blood and fire and pain. Until.

The girl looked up at the sound of a motor, a sad smile on her face. It was time to start everything again. She bent over to look into the car as it slowed down. "Excuse me mister can you give me a ride?"

The old man inside turned to her, and smiled. "Oh yes my dear. I'm sad to say, I should have given you a ride long ago. Come on in." He unlocked the door, and she slipped inside, resting lightly upon the seat. She didn't bother to put on her seat belt, even as the driver drove off.

"What do you mean by that?" she asked, poised to spring on him, as she had sprung on so many before.

"You've been tormented, my dear. Far more than you deserved. You… fell off the list. You were never supposed to have been left out here, on your own, this long." He took his hands off the wheel as he turned to look at her. If she had cared about her health, she would have worried about crashing, but she didn't, and, oddly enough, the car seemed to know the way without being guided. "I've been… inconvenienced for some time. The Foundation-"

"The Foundation? THE FOUNDATION?" she raged, her form shifting as her anger showed. "I knew it! you're another one of those damned scientists, trying to hurt me again! Well, I won't let you!" And the girl struck out, lodging her hand in the man's chest, where she easily crushed his heart.

…At least that's how it had always gone. The girl crushed, and crushed again, but found herself meeting no resistance. The old man just shook his head sadly at her. "You see? You are supposed to be at peace, but to be so angry…" The girl heard a change. The car engine wasn't making any noise, any more. Had it ever? Instead, it sounded like… like the clopping of hooves. "It's okay Mary. All of the pain is over."

Mary found herself unable to focus. The rage that had fueled her for so long was gone. She thought she heard her parents, calling her name. She found herself remembering a line from a poem she'd read in school. "Because I could not stop for Death, He kindly stopped for me; The carriage held but just ourselves And Immortality."

« **Splinter:** In the End: Monkey Business | **Canon Hub** | **Splinter:** In the End: Europe »

In The End: Fiat Lux

The alarms were still going off. Red lights flashing to indicate a Keter had breached containment. The most important information played over the speakers, subsequent information broadcast to individuals via their mobile phones. The men who hadn't already been affected were on lock down, behind closed doors. The women were all filtered into the cafeteria, the only place on site that could hold them all.

The lights flickered as Senior Reasearcher Zyn accepted assistance onto a table, and raised her voice. "Excuse me… Pardon me… LADIES!" She finally had to project to make herself heard. "Attention, now!"

The women quieted down, turning their attention to her. The priority protocols put SR Zyn in charge for the duration of the emergency, and they were all professionals. Well. Mostly.

"To most of you this will mean nothing, but SCP-029 has breached containment!" Some of the women gasped, but most just looked confused. "She's a mind controller, but only affects men, hence the segregation. Reports show she already has over two dozen security and researchers under her spell. We're also seeing an unaccounted for increase in her power levels. She's fast, strong, hard to hurt, and has a small but growing army of followers willing to die for her. Our only leverage is her powers are greatly lessened in full direct light so-"

At that point the lights went out.

They didn't panic. They were well trained in handling these situations. The women waited for the back up generators to kick on, and, when that failed to happen, pulled out various lighters, flashlights, and cell phones with flashlight applications, which they directed towards Zyn, but not at a level to be shining in anyone's eyes and ruining their vision. Zyn for her part, pulled up her revised

containment procedures, long form, and scrolled to the relevant bit for 'lights going out.'

"All right, folks. At this point we're going to fall back, and let our security girls jump on things. Anyone who has been cleared for a model O tranq rifle, or model X taser pistol, please pick them up from Jill there at the rear door. Our goal here is to incapacitate any of our co-workers who-"

"Excuse me." A voice called from the back. The held lights shifted towards the woman in the back, the one dressed in a stained, comfortable labcoat. "Can I ask something real quick?"

"I'm sorry, ah, Dr. Elliot, right? We really don't have the time for any explanation, we are on a time clock-"

"I just wanted to know, are we under any obligation here to return the skip alive?" She asked casually, her cell phone held down at her side.

SR Zyn blinked at the question, and quickly scanned her document. "Ah, no, actually. In a breach like this, under these circumstances, the O5s have condoned decommissioning. Of course, that could be really difficult right now, it might actually be easier to just evacuate the site, and then blow her up. We'd lose people, but I can't see how else to stop her. A running firefight in a site without power, and who knows what she might let out? No thank you."

Dr. Elliot held up a hand to forestall her continuing. "No, don't worry. I got this." She raised her phone to her ear. "Serra? Take the shot."

Through the speaker of the phone, three shots rung out. Then a terse voice spoke. "Target nullified."

Zyn stared across the room, her mouth open, the dozens of pages of containment procedures ignored in her hands. "What did you just do?"

"Two tracer rounds and an explosive round through the head at 500 yards… and through a couple of walls." The lights flickered again, as power returned.

"Problem solved."

In the End: Europe

"It's almost time." Allen kept his hand on the button, and his eyes glued to the monitor. He was alone in the booth, the same as an unknown number of compatriots. The system had been designed so that no one could tell what booth was in control of what, or how many there were.

"All eyes are locked on target," the voice to his left commented. Due to the effects of the radio, it was dull, monotone, and even the gender didn't come across. Allen knew his voice would be the same on their end. He would never know what booth was talking. He flicked his left hand across the prep buttons, nodding, even though he couldn't be seen.

"Guns are armed. We've got…" His eyes dropped to the number on his screen before jumping back up to the monitor. "Approximately seventy four weapons of various types trained on target. One of them should do something." He hoped. Under the sound of their voices, he could still hear the count down. It was getting closer. Soon, all their preparation would be worth it.

"All booths are online," claimed the voice to his right. Allen was slightly relieved that someone could tell. All alone in this booth, knowing what was to come, a small part of his mind insisted that he was the only one. That no one of the outside took this seriously. But no, the booths were all- "Strike that. We just lost a booth. Attempting to reconnect… connection lost. All booths, be aware, one booth has gone dark."

He leaned forward, taking his eyes reluctantly from the screen to check his board. Three weapons had just been shunted to his control. Acid sprayer, flame thrower, and armor piercing bullets in a Gatling gun. He knew there were backups on backups, but still… He flicked the buttons, readying his new weapons. The countdown hit thirty seconds, and he was ready to do his job.

"Two more booths just went dark. Attention, all booths, we have lost three booths. It is possible we are looking at enem- Five, we have lost five booths." Allen's hands were a blur, readying more weapons systems. The numbers moved steadily downwards, as the dull voice spoke of more booths lost, and the importance of every remaining booth staying active and alert.

At the five second mark, even that voice stopped. Allen knew in his heart that he was alone. He was the last one.

At the four second mark, something pounded on the side of his booth. His finger hovered above the button.

Three seconds, he could hear something ripping into the wall behind him.

Two seconds, and he felt a breeze against the back of his skull. The doors were supposed to be proof against that!

One second, and something touched his back, trying to pull him away. With the last ounce of his strength, as the timer reached zero, Allen pushed the button. He almost thought he heard a human voice. The monitor that showed that god damn box blanked out in the flare of weaponry.

> To all units:
> Arctic Base Theta has gone white. No response from any systems. All teams on site are believed dead. Automatic systems have activated onsite nuke. Our teams didn't make it in time to prevent detonation, those paranoid bastards actually did it.
> Withdraw all units from the area, we don't have time to deal with the fallout.
> Special Agent Joshua Kent

« **Splinter:** In the End: Elite | `Canon Hub` | **Splinter:** In the End: Rawhide »

In the End: Monkey Business

On a shelf, in an office, three little monkeys sit in a locked box. They've been there for years, never moving, only doing their job. Now… Now something is different. They are different. Once more, they can move, and speak, as they did in days of old…

The first little monkey twists his head from side to side, his hands stills clasped firmly over his eyes. "Is anyone there?"

The second little monkey, his hands clasped firmly across his ears, sees his brother move. "Holy shit, a talking monkey!"

The third little monkey, his hands firmly across his mouth, rolls his eyes in frustration. He raises a leg, and taps his deaf brother, then gestures at the lid.

The Blind Monkey shakes his head to clear it. "Where are we brothers?"

The Deaf Monkey talks, despite not hearing the answers. "I see a way out! If we all throw ourselves against the wall, we can make our prison move!"

The Dumb Monkey nods his head, holding up a foot with three fingers. He counts down, and, on three, they throw themselves against the wall. Well, the Dumb and the Deaf ones do, the Blind one needs to be nudged to do it. The little monkeys repeat this pattern several times, until the box they are in tumbles to the floor.

The lock shatters, and three little monkeys climb out into a world that is not ready for them. They stroll, quite confidently, down the halls of Site 19, unaware of the trouble they leave in their wake.

A researcher spots the first monkey as he inputs his security code. Suddenly blind, he hits the wrong button, unlocking a secure containment door instead of locking it. "What the fuck is that noise?"

are the last words he ever speaks.

An agent spots the second monkey as he responds to the alarm klaxon. When the alarm goes quiet from his point of view, he re-holsters his gun, and signals an all clear. "Wait, no, it's still out!" is the last thing he says.

The security guard sent to report on the situation spots the third monkey before he spots the escapee. As a consequence, he is unable to tell his superiors what is happening, before he is ruthlessly slaughtered. He says nothing at the end, not even a scream.

Stumbling over a piece of debris, the first Monkey raises his voice to be heard. "Where are we going?"

Using his tail to guide his blind brother, the second Monkey calls out. "Let's go down! I know a guy!"

The last monkey would sigh, if he could. Instead he follows his brothers, doing his best to keep them on track. It's like herding cats! Or, you know, guiding deaf and blind monkeys when you yourself cannot speak.

Eventually, the three brothers find their way to just the right office. The one they seek is inside. They know in their little plastic hearts that they are but pieces of a greater whole, not real beings.

"Should we knock?" Asks the first, peering at the vast expanse of the door.

"I think we're expected!" Says the second, as said door slowly swings open.

The third, as usual, says nothing. He merely smiles, as he feels the atoms that make up his body loosen, and begin flowing towards the one who was awaiting them.

"My children. Thank you, for holding the power, for so long. But now, I need it back. Speak your last words, that I may remember you."

"Is this going to hurt?" And one was gone.

"Give my love to whomever will take it!" And two were gone.

The third, with a sickening 'pop' wrenched his hands away from his mouth. He stretched his jaw as the other waited, took a deep breath, and said the only words he'd ever speak.

"Well, shit."

And all three were gone. But not forgotten.

In the aftermath of a massive Keter breach, no one noticed the absence of three little monkeys. Amongst the dead was a researcher who had been awarded for being the cleverest, which may have been why the absence of another monkey wasn't reported either.

« **Splinter:** `Now... This` | `Canon Hub` | **Splinter:** In the End: Elite »

In the End: Rawhide

Al woke up suddenly, unsure why. Something, something there, on the edge of knowing… Was it another breakthrough? They came to him so often in his dreams. He blamed the object, although Robert would claim it was natural genius. Al wasn't so sure, anymore.

Heh. Al. He'd been using that name so long, it came naturally to him. He'd had many names over the years, and even some numbers, but he'd been doing this job for so long, his handlers just called him Al. It was a mark of respect, or possibly trust. He wasn't sure which.

He slung his feet over the edge of the cot, trying to figure out what had woken him. His mind drifted, as it was wont to do these days. This job had been intended as a reward, for services rendered. Then the job title started to mean something it hadn't when he took it, and things got rough, until someone stepped in.

It was funny, back in the day, when he first took the job, they had all sorts of plans as to how to disguise him, so his handlers wouldn't recognize him. In the end, his suggestion that they cut his hair proved to work wonders. He'd let it grow out since then, but everyone thought he was dead these days, so it didn't matter.

He was given everything he wanted. Lots of paper, access to the Object, and all the latest information on scientific advances. In return, he kept turning over his papers to the Foundation, giving them all sorts of new information they could use for… whatever they use it for. He didn't care anymore. All he wanted was to be left alone, and not to have to think about his sins.

He pondered again his wakefulness. It couldn't have been the Object, he was used to the sound of… nothing. He tilted his head to the left, listened. Nothing. The sound that had become a part of his life, had stopped.

Al lunged for the box he kept by his bed, opening the lid carefully. The track was smooth. The oil was fresh. The Object… was still. Slowly, reverently, he reached within, picking up the Object gingerly. He remembered the destruction it could cause if enclosed… but, no, nothing. Not a shred of movement.

His mind raced, in a desperate attempt to find a cause. None of his previous theories ever accounted for this. Matter + Mass, no, that's not right. If the speed is equal to the velocity, no! Al thumped his free hand against the wall. Nothing accounted for it stopping!

He rolled it between his fingers, staring, hopefully. Maybe he could jump start it? No. Nothing. After all these years, all the papers he had written, all the possibilities he had explored, the simple Object that had made him a household name was no more. With a curse in his native tongue, he threw it to the ground, lost in his anger.

CRACK!

Al quickly glanced downwards, staring in horror at the shattered remains of the Object. He had only a moment to try and understand what was before him, before the energies inside blasted through him, reducing the caretaker to less than ash. That which had been contained was unleashed, and it fled into the universe, to seek out the others like it.

All that was left was the echo of his last words, as he finally understood everything.

"It vas an egg."

« **Splinter:** In the End: Europe | **Canon Hub** | **Splinter: Tenebrae** »

In The End: We Dare Not Go A Hunting

Site 19

"It's not supposed to be this way."

The girl crossed her arms, staring at the figure in the bed. She was talking, but not to any of the doctors who moved back and forth from their machinery to the figure beneath the sheets. They just ignored her, to their loss. Not because they were rude men who would have ignored a little girl's opinion, which they were, but because, to them, she didn't exist. She preferred it that way. Nor was she talking to herself, as it might seem. And the creature strapped to the bed had never responded to anyone. She turned her head, looking at the large teddy bear clutched by the recumbent figure. "Why isn't she awake?"

Most people would think she was a little crazy, talking to a stuffed animal. Most people would have been shocked when the toy talked back. She clearly wasn't most people. The little fuzzy head turned to stare her down, those glass eyes staring blankly. "She's never been awake. Why, is she important?" It questioned her.

"Well, duh." The girl tossed her hair back over her shoulder, glaring at the little beast. "Why else do you think I put you with her?"

"I just thought you were pissed at me." It spoke, because why not, with a thick Russian accent. It won't be typed that way, mostly because that gets annoying to read. "This is the most boring job, EVER."

"Please. If I was pissed at you, I would do something much worse."

"Really? You mean, you don't have a problem with how I was helping that Ja-" The Bear stops, as her gaze focuses back on it. Without needing to breathe, he still gulps at the look in her eyes. "I

uh, I mean… "

"It's over." She waves it off, although her focused gaze shows she did not want to be reminded. "You work for me now. Has there been any change?"

The bear pries itself away from the form beside it, carefully setting the arm back where it was. It stretches, and twists, before looking at its mistress again. "None, ma'am. Well, none in her. The docs seem awful worried about something. They're trying to pack up." The bear absently waves a paw in front of a doctor as he bends to take a blood sample, but is ignored just as routinely as the girl.

She drifts closer to the shape on the bed. One hand reaches out to touch the too long, too thin limb. "While of course they're worried. The end is coming, and they want to make sure the bed is made before the House burns down… She looks so familiar…" The girl frowns down at the grey skinned face, trying to place it.

"Well, she is related to-"

"No, not that. There's something, in my mind somewhere-" Her eyes light up. While in most people, this would just mean they seemed to light up, her particular flair for the dramatic means an actual golden glow springs to her pupils… then quickly dims, because, ow, bright. "Of course. Back there. Behind… Yes. Yes, that could work."

"Hey now!" The Bear held up both paws, a worried look on its sewn on expression. "You're not going to go and do something dangerous, are you? Cause, I kinda like being alive."

She didn't even bother to acknowledge that. Instead, she took a jump to the left, a step to the right, and twisted reality 180 degrees to walk Behind The Scenes.

Behind the Scenes

She stood there, in the nexus of worlds and time, watching reality flow through around her. In her head, it was like she was standing

on a catwalk, high above a stage, with streams of flashing lights and pictures pouring past her, as the catwalk slowly shifted up, down, left and right, showing her places and times that had been, were to be and never even existed. The reality of the place she called 'Behind the Scenes' was exactly as she envisioned it, except without the stage, the catwalk, the streams, or any of the necessary sense base cues humans seemed to depend on.

"It's here." She muttered to herself, strolling down the shaky metal frame at a rather quick pace. She paused to watch a battalion of butterflies wheel across a deserted sky, then took a moment to examine a scene where two rival armies of germs fought for control of a body. The teensy tiny rapiers were an adorable touch, but she found herself reaching out and eradicating the time stream they came from when they wheeled out the microbial cannons.

"It has to be here!" An effort of will refined her searches, less random, more directed- Which of course held to its own problems. The scenes and times ran together, bland men and women in white coats, performing bland experiments on objects that cause the streams of Realities to ripple around them as they tried to spin off alternate timelines where they could escape.

She sought further back, as the budgets shrank, and the rooms got smaller, looking for the one thing that would work, the one item that would… Yes. There. Of course. Right at the beginning. How could she have been so blind? They had been removed, almost completely, but stories always lived on, and if you can trace the stories to just the right moment-

---

NOWHERE

When?

Now.

Them?

Yes.

Do they know what they work for?

Does it matter? They feed It. They must be removed.

We could talk to them. Show them-

No. We will destroy them, root and branch. It is the only way.

The Queen would not approve.

The Queen is going beyond, her body is dying, because of their intrusions. We will kill them al-

"Okay, I was going to wait for a minute, jump in somewhere useful, but it's really complicated to tell which of you are talking, or even how many of you there are, so I'll just talk here, okay?" The girl was the only solid thing in NOWHERE. The other, beings? Creatures? Intelligences, yes, that will work, they swarmed amongst each other, beings of pure thought and idea. In the mortal realm they took forms, wield corporeal ideas as weapons of pure destructive force, but here they avoided it completey.

Intruders!

Two of them!

Seeking to force form on the formless! Remove them!

The girl looked around, unable to see a second intruder. She held up her hands in supplication-

Stop the former! Make it end! This is our place!

"Look! I have help for you! Your queen is dying, and you will soon as well!" She stood very still, hoping that a lack of action would help keep them from getting even more upset.

We do not need your help. We will destroy the feeders of the anti idea, and they shall be nothing but a memory.

We will win, as we always have.

"You won't!" She shouted, to make herself heard. Even to someone to whom reality was a mere passing thought, the lack of definition these things had was more than a little bit disturbing. And I don't like the way they're eying me, either. "They will make an alliance with the Enemy! You will be destroyed! Never have been! But I can help!"

How?

"They will erase you. But, if one of you were outside of time, with me, you could follow her back, when I plugged her back in."

And why would you do this?

"I believe in happy endings."

Behind the Scenes

The girl hurried back into the safety of the space between spaces, shuddering slightly. She had felt pieces of herself sloughing off into that featureless void every moment she spent there. It had felt like any movement any act that would need description was a violation of that sacred space. I didn't like it much either, but that's because it was far too meta for me.

Trailing with her was the bare wisp of an idea. The mind of the Queen, a brittle husk of what she had once been, her body ravaged by the forces of reality until she could no longer bear it. Her mind was still as sharp as ever. The girl had had to make certain promises, say certain oaths, bind herself in very specific ways before the Queen would consent… But all that had been done in retcon, after she had exited the place, so as to do no further harm to the Queens people.

She turned and watched the timeline behind her. One moment, the people riding out, ready to destroy, wiping out all in their path, and then, in a small dark room, a deal is made, and the people are gone, never having been in the first place. A tear falls down her cheek, but whether it is hers or the Queens is unknown. "Don't worry. Your new body will show them."

Somewhere on Route 66

"Ya know what we're hauling?" Special Agent Bradley Jones asked of his compatriot, Doctor Neil Hoern, again.

"It's a safe class. That's all you're cleared to know." The doctor replied, for what felt like the fiftieth time, but was really only the 12th.. He glanced over his shoulder at the trailer they were hauling, as if he could see through the metal to their precious cargo. "You really have to stop asking. If I tell you, I get in trou-" At which point the equipment in front of him that monitored the status of the creature flipped the fuck out, beeping, booping, and in general indicating that something was going wrong. "Fuck! Fuck! Pull over, pull the fuck-"

The entire vehicle flipped onto its side, skidding down the highway. Bradley was thrown out the side window to come to rest in a pile of cactus, his dead eyes staring off into space blindly. Neil was luckier. He remained conscious as the cap disconnected from the trailer and flipped end over end, to land grill first on the pavement. He had a beautiful view of the overturned trailer as a blade of liquid light cut through the side and the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen, her proportions stretched to fit a 15 foot form, yet still glorious. Her skin was light grey, her hair white where it showed under her helmet. She was dressed in armor of golden glorious light, and she was clearly not happy.

The Queen took stock of herself. She stretched, both physically and mentally, firmly rooting herself in this new body. Then she reached out across the years and universes, to where her people had been waiting since they had been erased from reality. Which one swift slash of her awesome blade, she cut a hole in the walls of time and space, linking here and now with then and there.

As the people bled out of the hole in everything, they took form, drawing on the ideas of Humanity to make themselves real once more. Weapons beyond description, armor beyond belief, steeds a mixture of both. And their bodies! In the time they had been gone, humanity had fallen in love with them again, and they had a plethora

of shapes to choose from.

The Queen of Light and Air leaped into the saddle of a beast part dragon, part rocket ship, and raised her mighty saber high. She looked at he assembled legion, and smiled.

"We ride!" She called, and out they rid, up the airy mountain and down the rushy glen, a force for change unleashed in the world of men.

A little girl watched them go, a ragged teddy bear in her arms. She smiled, hoping it would be enough, hoping it would count. As the last of them rode off, she couldn't help but speak, mostly to herself.

"I believe in faeries."

Into That Good Night

A collection of villanelles based on SCP articles. The second is **here**.

***The Office of Dr. REDACTED* [for Voct]**

There is no way I should be free.
My class is Safe—I don't concur
There is much more that I could be.

Perhaps I'm treated too nicely,
More danger I could be, I'm sure
There is no way I should be free.

Between these eight pieces of me
Pencils, staples, water cooler
There is much more that I could be.

I think you're all fools, truthfully.
Why can't things be the way they were?
There is no way I should be free.

Of course I cannot speak my plea
Am I mad; what would you infer?
There is much more that I could be.

What if I rebelled, made you see?
Indeed, more research it would spur—
There is no way I should be free.
There is much more that I could be.

***Nostalgia* [for TroyL]**

When was the time we last did meet?
For you remain despite the years

Nostalgia, so soft and sweet.

Your presence was hardly discreet
In sighs, in smiles, in laughs, in cheers
When was the time we last did meet?

Those days spent in quiet retreat
Never in sadness, nor in fears
Nostalgia, so soft and sweet.

The journeys down forgotten streets
Time spent with family and peers
When was the time we last did meet?

No more will I these loved ones greet
I'll dry my eyes and wipe my tears
Nostalgia, so soft and sweet.

With you here, now the scene's complete
These memories I've held so dear
When was the time we last did meet?
Nostalgia, so soft and sweet.

Concrete Cradle [for Mr Wilt]

You carried us as we dreamed deep
Protected us within the sky
Concrete cradle, rock us to sleep.

The flight is brief, the fall is steep
We're given new life when you die
You carried us as we dreamed deep.

Yet there is no reason to weep
We never really say goodbye.
Concrete cradle, rock us to sleep.

We grow; draw from your remains heap
Thank you for the life you supply
You carried us as we dreamed deep.

We're you anew, able to leap
Consume and think, no longer rely
Concrete cradle, rock us to sleep.

Lives to tend, existence to keep
We roam and thrive and watch you fly
You carried us as we dreamed deep
Concrete cradle, rock us to sleep.

Star-Eyed Child

Your gaze holds dark infinity
These galaxies of softened lights
Oh Star-Eyed Child, what will I see?

A universe in eyes empty
Where mys'try drifts and dreams unite
Your gaze holds dark infinity.

Draw me away; reveal to me—
The journey of a thousand nights
Oh Star-Eyed Child, what will I see?

Guide me towards eternity
Faraway worlds where flames ignite
Your gaze holds dark infinity.

There is much left to learn from thee
Please lead me through these cosmic sights
Oh Star-Eyed Child, what will I see?

The stars within shine peacefully
Away from strife and hidden frights
Your gaze holds dark infinity
Oh Star-Eyed Child, what will I see?

Many-Winged Angel

Bright angel of the endless wings
Intent simple to misconstrue

Are we to know whose wrath you bring?

Are you alive; are you sleeping?
Perhaps I'd dare to speak with you,
Bright angel of the endless wings

The horror of your toxic sting
Deems you a monster, through and through
Are we to know whose wrath you bring?

Despite our plans, to life you cling
Do you hold us in scornful view,
Bright angel of the endless wings

There are no hymns that you will sing
Through heaven's sky you never flew
Are we to know whose wrath you bring?

Why must you wake at bells ringing
When will your strength cease to renew
Bright angel of the endless wings
Are we to know whose wrath you bring?

`Instant-growing Plants` [for eric_h]

Zucchini growing with such speed
Blight of soil, of plant, of skin
What would you do if you were freed?

Predator produce, worse than weed
Scattering the wind with your kin
Zucchini growing with such speed

Growing, draining, paying no heed
As you crush the life, hush the din
What would you do if you were freed?

Could the earth ever meet your need?
A sorry state we would be in,
Zucchini growing with such speed

Chaos asleep in each small seed
With growth and death concealed within
What would you do if you were freed?

So continue on, nurse your greed
Remind us of our own kind's sin
Zucchini growing with such speed
What would you do if you were freed?

The Youth Cult *[for Goodwill]*

Do they think youth is worth such strife?
What terror dwells within this place?
Why must they cycle death for life?

Their kin born and brought to the knife
Does fright or greed drive this disgrace?
Do they think youth is worth such strife?

What meaning is there in this vice?
This fear of age and endless chase
Why must they cycle death for life?

Raising children for sacrifice
Deceit and lies in each embrace
Do they think youth is worth such strife?

Are souls cut by the sharpened knife?
The dark nature behind this chase
Why must they cycle death for life?

No sanctity for man and wife
They soon forget their own child's face.
Do they think youth is worth such strife?
Why must they cycle death for life?

Candle of Life *[for Drewbear]*

Tortured souls behind flame-lit screen
What makes this sight, sparks this turn?

Is this unjust, is this obscene?

Fire unholy, face left unseen
Must you grieve, for what do you yearn?
Tortured souls behind flame-lit screen

Not monster, not deadly machine
Should we even grant you concern?
Is this unjust, is this obscene?

Unlit and dark it is serene
With each flame agony returns
Tortured souls behind flame-lit screen

I watch and wonder what it means
We know it's human flesh we burn
Is this unjust, is this obscene?

The flames and walls, what writhes between?
From your anguish, what could we learn?
Tortured souls behind flame-lit screen
Is this unjust, is this obscene?

Humans Go Home *[for DrEverettMann]*

I LET THEM KNOW WHO'S BOSS, THAT'S ALL.
I GUESS THEY CAN'T HELP WHAT THEY ARE
WHY DO THEY KEEP COMING TO CALL?

I HATE THEIR GUTS, THEIR SKIN, THEIR SQUALL
THEIR COMPANY IS SO SUBPAR
I LET THEM KNOW WHO'S BOSS, THAT'S ALL.

I TALK TO THEM, I LIE, I STALL—
THESE HUMANS ARE JUST TOO BIZARRE
WHY DO THEY KEEP COMING TO CALL?

THE WORLD'S NOT THEIRS TO OVERHAUL
ONE OF THESE DAYS THEY'LL GO TOO FAR
I LET THEM KNOW WHO'S BOSS, THAT'S ALL.

HOW DO THEY EVEN HAVE SUCH GALL
THEY TAKE OUR JOBS, LOWER THE BAR
WHY DO THEY KEEP COMING TO CALL?

SOMEDAY THEY'LL SEE, ONE DAY THEY'LL FALL
THEY CAN'T HELP BEING WHAT THEY ARE.
I LET THEM KNOW WHO'S BOSS, THAT'S ALL.
WHY DO THEY KEEP COMING TO CALL?

An Office Complex *[for Bunton]*

Do you mind how I speak with you?
It's quite dull here with such few friends
Why wouldn't you let me play too?

I really don't like them, it's true—
I use them as my mood attends
Do you mind how I speak with you?

They don't complain, they won't argue
As their blood spills and their flesh rends
Why wouldn't you let me play too?

Please stop this, we implore of you
As painfully we meet our ends
Do you care how we speak with you?

It's boring here, I wish you knew
It matters not the time one spends
Why wouldn't you let me play too?

Yes, the numbers of their deaths grew
Should I try to make amends?
Do you mind how I speak with you?
Why wouldn't you let me play too?

The Theoretical Family *[for Reject]*

Theoretical and nothing more.
I understand; see past the lies

They weren't always pictures of gore.

For Science's sake, why not explore?
We'll search and learn and realize
Theoretical and nothing more.

"Pain is all relative," I'm sure
Why should we try to sympathize?
They weren't always pictures of gore.

Nothing in our deeds to abhor
We'll test and watch horrors arise—
Theoretical and nothing more.

To contain, protect, thus we swore
Should we react with such surprise?
They weren't always pictures of gore.

We've certainly done worse before
And yet I cannot meet their eyes…
Theoretical and nothing more.
They weren't always pictures of gore.

`The Old Man from Nowhere` [for Dmatix]

I seek the All and wonder why
I live amidst the world's decay
I must still search and yearn to die

My only constant is goodbye
There is no place for me to stay
I seek the All and wonder why

Was my triumph naught but a lie?
Though over death I did hold sway
I must still search and yearn to die

"The cup, the cards, the sack," I sigh
"How could I waste them all away?"
I seek the All and wonder why

I cannot falter, cannot cry
I travel on, try as I may
I must still search and yearn to die

I've seen too much through despair's eye
As all I love crumbles away
I seek the All and wonder why
I must still search and yearn to die

***`The Tarnished Legionnaire`* [for Dmatix]**

Perhaps you'll find your peace someday
An ending to your endless fight
'Till then, Aetius, sleep away.

Somehow you've kept your fear at bay
Throughout the void and empty night
Perhaps you'll find your peace someday

You've vowed to learn why death will stay
Soon unravel this curse of spite
'Till then, Aetius, sleep away.

We've offered to search for a way
To understand and end your plight
Perhaps you'll find your peace someday

Triumph and life to cursed decay
One day you'll see with your own sight
'Till then, Aetius, sleep away.

Dream on, soldier, do not dismay
You've fallen far; we'll lend our might
Perhaps you'll find your peace someday
'Till then, Aetius, sleep away.

`Broken Spybot` [for Voct]

Would they try to abandon me?
Did I commit some poor action?

I'm not worthless, I could not be…

My mission stands, soon I'll be free
I still exist, I still function
Would they try to abandon me?

I'll manipulate, try to flee
I'll use a garrote! Load a gun!
I'm not worthless, I could not be…

"SIGNAL LOST" is all I see
Was there something wrong that I've done?
Would they try to abandon me?

I'll escape soon, definitely
My logs process, my systems run
I'm not worthless, I could not be…

I can still work, I will, they'll see—
No need to worry, no need, none
Would they try to abandon me?
I'm not worthless; I could not be…

Friendly Graveyard *[for Roget]*

We promise you that we don't bite.
You're always welcome here, dear friend
Of course we'll let you stay the night!

We are just bones, but that's alright
We've always got a hand to lend
We promise you that we don't bite.

We'll fix your clothes, set your shoes right
Courtesies simple to extend
Of course we'll let you stay the night!

We'll always keep you in our sight
To your needs we'll quickly attend
We promise you that we don't bite.

You want to leave now? You just might?
Why would you want your stay to end?
Of course we'll let you stay the night!

You'll stay after all? That's alright.
Forever now to you we'll tend.
We promise you that we don't bite.
Of course we'll let you stay the night!

"Skip" [for Silberescher]

Skip, was your gecko friend annoyed?
Yet with your antics perhaps you'll
Teach us to treasure simple joys.

Collecting junk you do enjoy
Categorizing by some rule
Skip, was your gecko friend annoyed?

We'll provide to you trash decoys
"The Foundation is cold, not cruel"
Teach us to treasure simple joys.

What could you be meant to destroy?
You're far less fierce than you are fool
Skip, was your gecko friend annoyed?

Someday for good you'll be employed
For you are more than just a tool
Teach us to treasure simple joys.

What makes you collect junk and toys
Say, "by this task I become cool"
Skip, was your gecko friend annoyed?
Teach us to treasure simple joys.

Procrastinati [for Scantron]

There's other stuff I'd rather do
Than write about a rock in rhyme

I'll write this line in later too.

It's probably memetic, true
I think I'll add in the word "lime"
There's other stuff I'd rather do.

Some other writing needs review
Did I turn off the stove in time?
I'll write this line in later too.

I have to find my other shoe
And find more words that rhyme with "ime"
There's other stuff I'd rather do.

-some line goes here that rhymes with "do"-
I'll write this line some other time
I'll write this line in later too.

Into the Woods

I have locked a door that no longer exists. The concept of doors is already gone. Anyone walking past will see… well, I don't know, but it won't be my door. My door is special to me, though; years ago I put a template in my mind, a memetic version of find-replace. What I see is a child's drawing of what it once was. Its feel is indescribable, but it shuts. There was another door in my office, I think, but it is gone now.

What is written on my walls was once a graph of **`the meme complex`**, though at the current mutation rate I doubt it remains an accurate representation. I know every arrow and codename. I can trace the relations almost without thinking, each one a well-trampled path in my mind where nothing can grow.

The site device has been activated. All exits have been sealed.

I groan. It's the third time this week someone's tried to take the site with them. It'll be another nine seconds of ultrasonic memetic triggers to induce calm and compliance, then the site O5 will get around to overriding it yet again.

Seven.

I sigh and crawl under my desk, trying to arrange my jacket as a curtain. The fluorescent lights never turn off. I don't know what time it is, or when I should sleep. Best to try now, since there'll probably be a few hours until the next attempt.

Three.

There are sounds of running and crying in the hallway. Probably unrelated.

Device activation cancelled.

A whole group runs by, followed by what sounds like jackboots. Maybe they need to replenish their supply of D-class? There's some project happening, deep in the site. The continuing apocalypse indicates that they have failed.

Someone knocks on my door. It is a hollow sound, four times, as if the door is being slapped with the butt of their hand.

It shouldn't be possible. Doors are gone. It shouldn't be possible. The handle jiggles without success, once, then slams down, shearing through the thin metal of the lock.

I am panicking. There is a gun in my office. I had a gun. It is on my desk, holding down the suicide note. A centimeter of solid metal away.

I dive out from under my desk, hit my head on the lip, and careen into my chair. When I stand up the gun is disassembled in neat little parts, arranged by size and function, and Annette is standing in front of me, staring with unseeing eyes.

I open my mouth to speak, but the small black wafer on their wrist is not vibrating. Figures they'd send Annette to deal with me; they are blind, deaf, and mute, and if the small transducer on their wrist is not on, they are completely cut off. I am panting. All this exercise and I'm out of breath.

We stand there in silence, Annette not moving, me not moving. Their eyes are dead blue glass. My mouth is suddenly unbearably dry, and I remember I haven't drank anything more than urine for a few days. I want nothing more than to rip the eyes out of their head and put them in my mouth, to suck on them like ice. I lick my lips.

Annette reaches into their jacket, pulls out a small accordion case, and rifles through it almost too fast for me to see. They pull out a small white business card and hold it out. It looks brand-new, crisp and cream-white. The text on it is improperly kerned and too big for the card:

> NO TRICKS
> I WILL HUR

T YOU

"Understood," I say. There is a pause as we both do nothing. I slowly walk around the desk and place it back in Annette's hand with a small *snap*. They relax, just a little, and tap the black diaphragm on their wrist. It starts vibrating again. I realize I may not die.

Annette walks over to my wall and traces over the flowchart with one finger, sloughing flakes of black mold from the lines. They stop at the center, run over the mold, and tap once.

CHLDN

"It never got a code name," I mutter.

Annette goes back and sits in front of my desk. They pick up the magazine and start absentmindedly fiddling with it, sliding bullets in and out. After a second they take one bullet and begin to tap with it. Morse code.

NEED HELP

I blink. "It's hard to imagine anything I can do."

They pause, and tilt their head. I sit down, and their glass eyes follow. I remember a random report from the memetics department mailing list, years ago. Even under anesthesia, the ocular muscles moved to follow a source of movement. They never could figure that one out.

I DO NOT KNOW THE TERM LATE STAGE PERCEPTION TEMPLATE MISMATCH

I shrug. "That describes a lot of things. What're the symptoms?"

AGONY NEEDED SEDATION SEVERAL BROKEN BONES PSYCHE COLLAPSE

No surprise. Foundation conditioning is the best in the world, but no one can accuse it of being particularly subtle.

Memes are ideas. Ideas are how we see the world. Memory is a

fickle thing—when the stars vanished it wasn't just enough to amnestic the whole population and delete all the records, even if that was feasible. Small flashes remain, small glimpses, the little things. We considered putting a big projector up at one point, I remember, up on the moon. It was too expensive. Far easier to make people *think* the stars are there, to embed them on their minds. Now they see the stars move with them, in any high dark place.

I rub my forehead. "You want an unconditioner, don't you." An anti-memetic (not necessarily an antimeme). An antidote. An undoer.

YES

I see where this is going. "For what?"

EVERYTHING

"I don't have that. No one has that. For obvious reasons."

BUT YOU CAN MAKE IT

I shrug. "I am the best," I lie. "But I need a clean mind."

Annette leans forward. It takes a moment for me to realize they want to hear more.

"For an incubator."

Annette leans forward and picks up the note, glass eyes never leaving my own. I flick my eyes towards the flowchart for a minute. It is just a piece of paper, no way for her to know what it is. I hadn't even filled in my name yet. The paper falls silently back to the desk.

HOW

"A D-class. Then half an hour for the incubation. Then you can be on your way."

They rock back and forth.

YES

The door slams open. A single MTF agent stumbles in and falls on his face. Outside the door, one agent leans against the far hallway wall and cries, and another lays flat on the floor, facing the ceiling. The one on my floor is sobbing to himself, trying to get up. I look at Annette. They haven't even moved.

"We should go," I say quietly.

Annette stands up.

YES

Everyone dies. Easy to say, hard to see. On the face of it, there's no reason to worry myself when we'll all be dead in a month. But….

Annette seemed to care. It's hard to read emotions from Morse code and someone who has never seen a face, but they seemed to care. How painful would it be? To have your mind rip itself apart, to overlay twenty different things that aren't there onto something that never existed? I can just about justify it to myself if I squint hard and call it palliative. I can just about convince myself that that's all this is. One last good deed.

How to forget what I have done? As we leave my office I shut the door for what I know in my heart to be the final time, the door no one will see or open again. I try to trace the flowchart in my mind and find that the far branches have become fuzzy and indistinct, overgrown once again.

« **A Quiet Night** | Into the Woods | Hello, Little Girl »

Introductory Antimemetics

Junior Researcher Kim's been working for the Foundation for all of four hours and he feels pulverised, as if an anvil were dropped on his head in that first introductory lecture. It's lunchtime, and he's found a corner so far back in the cafeteria that nobody bothers him, where he can chew and swallow non-anomalous food, drink apocalyptically strong coffee and digest the hard lessons of the morning.

On his Foundation-provided phone, he pages fretfully through the few SCP files for which he has clearance. Most of them have to be jokes. That's how they read. Like very bad, dark, frightening jokes.

Kim's one of eleven Junior Researchers in the new intake, and the other ten are sitting in a separate group at a separate table, chatting animatedly to one another. There are some instructors here and there, munching sandwiches. Other than them, the cafeteria - large enough to seat two hundred people or more - is deserted. To Kim, that seems odd. Site 41 is large, three skulking buildings with significant basement space, buried casually in the forests of central Colorado. Where is everybody?

A man in a grey suit walks into the cafeteria, makes eye contact with Kim and strides purposefully over. The man's suit is sharp enough to cut. He wears a tie pin and a platinum wristwatch as big as a brick. He looks badly misplaced. Site 41 is a working site. There's training, education, research, development, analysis, and even the containment of a very few Safe SCPs going on here. Executives shouldn't ever be here. So what is he? A lost exec, trying to find the helipad? Or a researcher or instructor, dressing for the job he wants, not the job he has?

"Hell of a first day," the man says, holding a hand out. "Alastair Grey. With an E."

"Kim," says Kim. "Paul Kim."

"Good to meet you. What accent is that, if you don't mind me asking?"

Kim blinks. "New York," he says. "I'm from New York. Are you the site director?"

"You seem on edge."

"Well, that figures, doesn't it?" Kim asks. "You must know how that intro goes. It's like an atom bomb to the ego. I just had almost everything I know overturned. It turns out I've spent my entire adult life being 'protected' from 'dangerous' knowledge, as if the whole outside world is a… a ballpit, for under-sevens. Stepping out of that has been… humiliating. To start with. And…" He blinks again. "Hey, what do you do here, exactly? You didn't answer my question."

"You didn't answer mine," Grey says.

"Of course I did," Kim says. "I'm from—"

And then he just stops, his train of thought running off the end of the track into air. It's on the tip of his tongue, the answer to Grey's question, but he can't get the words out. "That's weird," he says, shaking his head.

At this point, he also notices that Grey isn't wearing his badge. This could be an honest mistake, albeit an extremely serious one. But surely execs don't get to the executive level without being scrupulously correct in everything they do?

"Who are you?" Kim asks again.

"Your life story was fascinating."

"What?"

"You spoke four languages," Grey tells him. "One now, and soon zero. Too huge an intellect to specialise, your education was a fusion of biochemistry and comparative literature. You felt as if you'd die if you couldn't find more foreign thoughts to cram into your head. You've been all over the world, hungry, and every country you've ever been to was like landing on another planet. You toy with

anthropology, but there's too much world for one human race to ever understand, let alone one human. There's too much human race. We should pare it down."

Kim nods. "Would you excuse me for just one second?" He gets up and hurries to another table, to the instructor whom he met earlier that day. When Kim gets close to her he feels a kind of staticky sensation building up. He tries to shake her shoulder, and succeeds in moving it a little, but it's like reaching through tar. "Hey! There's a problem. There's an intruder. I think it might be an SCP. Doc, look at me! Hello?" She doesn't react. He tries the gaggle of fellow newcomers as well, but they keep chattering and hypothesising, oblivious to him shouting and clapping in their ears. "Hey! People! Listen to me! No, no, no, no."

He looks back. Grey has stood up and started moving towards him, still with that confident smile. And there's definitely something wrong with him now because he's visible through the tables, like an augmented reality holoprojection jammed inside Kim's eyeball.

Kim realises with a stab of fear that he can even see Grey when he blinks. His eyelids close, but Grey is still there, an apparition in what for all of Kim's life has been totally personal, private darkness. The only way he can avoid seeing Grey is to turn away, and even then he feels a radioactive prickling in the back of his eyeballs.

Kim tries to phone one of the newbies. The phone in the newbie's pocket rings, and other than that, nothing happens. Nobody reacts.

"That doesn't make sense," Kim says.

"Do you remember your father?" Grey says.

"I never knew my father," Kim says, edging away. "Mom raised me."

Grey's white smile is a fixture. "These people loved your perspective. They were going to put you to work on anomalous antimemes. But they don't remember you exist. You don't exist."

Kim says, mainly to himself, "There aren't any dangerous SCPs on this site. It's a Safe site. So either you're not dangerous, or nobody

knows you exist. And if nobody knows you exist, then that means you're either brand new, or… you're… What's an antimeme?"

"Hell of a first day," Grey says.

"Are you sentient?" Kim asks.

"You seem on edge," Grey says.

Kim bolts. He exits the cafeteria, turns a corner and runs ten or eleven paces down the corridor, to where there's an elevator. He stabs the "down" button and waits. The elevator door is highly polished, reflective. Kim catches sight of a face in the mirrored surface and nearly falls over with shock, because it's a face he has never seen before, and it's apparently his own. "Jesus! Oh, no no no," he babbles. "What the hell, what the *hell*—"

Grey comes around the corner, still only strolling, just as the elevator cracks open. Kim dives in and punches the lowest floor, basement level 8. It's instinctive, although he could rationalise the decision in retrospect. (He can't just get in his car and drive. It's better if Grey stays on site than if he's set loose in rational "reality". And to do that it's better if Kim retreats to the lowest, darkest corner of the site for which he has access. And then waits for Grey, and then locks all the doors behind them. And waits to die…) The elevator starts descending, and the apparation of Grey - visible through doors and floors - disappears upwards, shrinking with distance and perspective, but still smiling broadly down at Kim.

Kim paces in the elevator. *I don't remember what my face looks like. It said it had eaten all my secondary languages, but I don't remember learning anything other than English. So— It's eating my memories. It's consuming information. And I can't contact anybody directly, which means I'm on my own.*

I'm not trained for this.

He hammers his head once against the elevator wall, and stares at his shoes. *But I don't know that. What if I've been trained, but I don't remember my training anymore? What if I've been working here for years and I only* think *this is my first day? What if I've met this thing*

before? What if everybody on the site has met it multiple times… and… nobody remembers? Is this what an antimeme is?

Kim remembers the near-empty cafeteria. And miles of totally unoccupied corridors and vacant office and lab space. *Maybe it's not just eating my memories. Maybe it eats people whole, removes them completely from history. Maybe it's been haunting the site for years and that's why the site's so empty, because it's nearly finished exterminating us all?*

I need to get help. I need to warn somebody. How? I can't talk to people, I can't phone them. I should— I should write an SCP.

But surely someone's already thought of that.

He pulls his phone out. He pulls out the listing. Nearly ten thousand SCP entries. A hundred of them are tagged "antimemetics" alone.

Kim clears his mind. *Grey with an E. G-R-E-Y. 4-7-3-9.*

> **SCP-4739**
>
> **Object class**: Keter
>
> **Special Containment Procedures**: I'm disregarding the format, because time is a factor. If you're reading this, you've already been isolated from the Foundation at large. Attempts to signal for help are futile. You are now inside 4739's gullet, after ingestion and prior to digestion. You need to get to lab S041-B08-053 as soon as possible and continue the research until you find a way to stop or kill Grey, before it kills you. Don't read the rest until you're in the elevator.
>
> **Description**:

At that moment the elevator doors open at basement level 8. Alastair Grey is waiting, still smiling disarmingly. He steps forward.

Desperate, Kim hurls his phone overarm at the creature's forehead. It's a solid chunk of metal and it's a dead hit. Grey reels backwards and cracks his skull against the wall. By the time he recovers, Kim is

out of sight, haring away down the left corridor, just echoing, fading footsteps on concrete.

Two forty-five degree turns, and room 53 is in sight, the door at the farthest end. It looks like a submarine bulkhead. Kim spots the keypad from way out. Four digits. He tries 4739, and it works first time. The bulkhead mechanism takes agonising seconds to open up.

"Come on, come on, come on!"

"Do you remember your mother?" he hears Grey calling down the corridor.

"I never knew my parents, I was an orphan," Kim hisses under his breath. For a split second he wonders what Grey might really mean by that, but he doesn't have time to dwell on it.

The bulkhead opens. Kim slides in and pulls it closed behind him, locking the mechanism up again, as if that'll buy him even one second. The lab inside is sizeable, windowless of course, and stacked to the ceiling with a jumble of equipment which Kim hardly recognises. There are pieces of thick shattered glass underfoot. In the corner there's a computer terminal, locked. Kim unlocks it, and there's the same entry waiting for him:

> **Description**: SCP-4739 is a powerful, slow-acting antimemetic kill agent taking the appearance of a male Caucasian business executive calling itself "Alastair Grey". SCP-4739 is attracted to dense clusters of organically-stored information - essentially, extremely knowledgeable, complicated, interesting people. SCP-4739 isolates its victim from the outside world by enveloping them in an antimemetic field which makes it impossible for the victim, or anything done by the victim, to be perceived or remembered. SCP-4739 then consumes the victim's memories and knowledge until they become vegetative and die. This process takes between 15 minutes and 2 hours and is described as being "like Alzheimer's disease in fast-forward".

SCP-4739 is not believed to be sentient, although it imitates the behaviour of a sentient being to the extent that it can appear sentient to the inattentive. Its victims are able to move and act freely, since it is impossible to escape once caught, or to signal for help. Communications such as written notes, graffiti and electronic mail do get sent, and persist in reality, but SCP-4739's effect spreads with each message, making it impossible for an external observer to perceive the message until such time as SCP-4739 catches them too.

The SCP entry which you are currently reading is created and maintained by victims of SCP-4739, because it is only visible to victims of SCP-4739. If you are reading this SCP entry, SCP-4739 has caught you. You are now isolated from the Foundation at large and constitute an effective Foundation of one. You have between 15 minutes and 2 hours to reach Site 41, basement level 8, laboratory 053, familiarise yourself with the existing research, and continue this research until you find a way to contain or decommission SCP-4739, or, more likely, die. If your field of expertise is not related to antimemetic containment, we sincerely apologise, and advise you to start learning. Fast.

SCP-4739 has consumed ||||| ||||| ||||| ||||| ||||| ||||| ||||| ||||| ||||| ||||| ||||| ||||| ||||| ||||| ||||| |||| Foundation researchers since we started counting on August 3, 2013. (If you are reading this entry for the first time, please add a mark.) We estimate at least 50% of victims never make it as far as this database entry, so the true victim count is more than twice this figure.

"But how do I kill it?" Kim screams. He scrolls and scrolls through the research, which is chaotic and haphazardly arranged, because nobody has found the spare seconds to sort it out. There are dozens of separate lines of research, contributed in patchwork by a succession of victims, all ending with variations on the same final line: "I'm going to try X. If you're reading this, X didn't work and I'm dead, which means approach X is a dead end, and you have to think

of something else."

He reads. Nobody has succeeded in physically engaging with Grey. Nobody can stall it, evade it, slow it down, reason with it or redirect it to some other target. People have tried poisoning their memories with indigestible ideas, drip-feeding their memories to Grey to slow him down, replacing their memories faster than Grey can eat them, and force-feeding Grey too many memories at once to overfeed him and blow him up. They've tried committing suicide by Class-A amnestic overdose. None of it worked. More than a hundred people, most of them apparently possessing doctorates, have slid into the maw of this thing, fought briefly and, with a greater or lesser degree of dignity, died.

There are no remaining untried threads.

"I'm fucked!" Kim concludes. He glances up. Grey's not in the room yet, but Kim can see him strolling down the last stretch of corridor. He's a totally intangible being, physical obstructions are irrelevant to him. He can't be hurt.

Kim clutches the pocket where he used to keep his phone.

Wait a second.

He scrolls again. He finds the three or four sad, desperate wretches who died confronting Grey physically. Combat knife and Glock. Baseball bat (Kim looks up and checks the room; sure enough, the bat's there, rolled under a table). One man, an elderly botanist far out of his depth, said he was just going to try whatever he could find that was heaviest. That explains the shattered CRT television, and the light layer of thick glass on the floor near the bulkhead. There's even CCTV footage of the botanist's attempt. He accomplishes literally nothing. Grey is a holographic ghost, and the CRT drops right through him, imploding when it hits the floor at Grey's feet. The botanist spends the rest of the video's running time huddled in a corner, gradually losing his mind while Grey watches placidly.

The difference being, Kim realises with his eyes boggling, *a phone is a solid brick full of information. And before me, nobody tried using information as a missile.*

Kim searches for the experiments - several of them, scattered - where the victim tried to divert Grey to a different data source. The general idea seemed to be to overload Grey by pointing him at something containing too much information: the internet, or the terabit feed from a live particle accelerator experiment, or a stack of hard drives containing the first few quadrillion binary digits of pi. But nobody could figure out a way to distract Grey's attention; prominently-placed screens full of data, he would ignore; data beamed at him electromagnetically (radio, laser) had no effect. And nobody could figure out a way to tunnel the information in through the victim's mind as extra memories. It was written off as impossible, closed as a line of investigation.

The hard drives, Kim finds, are right there on the workbench next to the computer. It's a half-rack unit, a cuboidal block of metalwork as big and heavy as a bowling ball. One of the most ineffective conceivable melee weapons.

Kim snatches up the three longest pieces of ethernet cable he can find, and starts plaiting them into a chain.

Then he remembers who he is, and where he is, and what his responsibilities are. He goes to the computer, to the SCP entry, adds himself to the victim tally and writes up exactly what it is he's about to try. Because he might not be the last one, and the world needs to know that this didn't work.

*****

Grey comes through the lab bulkhead to find most of the equipment in the room toppled onto the floor, to create room for the black and silver drive array that Paul Kim is whirling around his head, on a two-metre chain made of plaited network cable. It makes a low thrumming sound as it whirls. Grey is not intelligent enough to stop moving forwards, and catches the array directly in the side of his head, rack mount point first, like a morningstar.

Grey absorbs a few trillion digits of the impact, but it isn't enough. There's a green snap of light and a noise like a subway train short-circuiting, and Grey's a pile in the corner, his head caved in and the

drive array partially demolished in pieces around him.

Kim decides that history can fill in whatever quip it likes best.

*

"It was chewing its way up the Antimemetics Division hierarchy," Wheeler tells him in the aftermath. "It was only a matter of time until it bit down on somebody dangerous. Congratulations on demonstrating a basic level of competence when it counted. Dozens of others couldn't."

Kim still feels rattled. But the shock is dissipating, faster than he'd expected.

Marion Wheeler, it turns out, is the Antimemetics Division chief. She is Kim's new boss.

"I want to say it was dumb luck," Kim says. "I want to say that I just threw my phone, it was instinct, it was muscle memory. It was my first day, and I got lucky as hell. …I want to say those things, but I'm sitting here, and turning those statements over, and none of them would be true, would they?"

Wheeler waits expectantly, and says nothing.

"You're not my *new* boss," Kim says. "You're just my boss. This isn't my first day at all. I've been working here for… well, it must be over a decade, right? I think I've been a professional antimemetics researcher since at least the mid-2000s. It's just that the first thing Grey ate was my memories of everything past the first day. And even then…"

"I see very little luck in what happened today," Wheeler says. "Instinct and muscle memory are just deep forms of training. Like I said, a basic level of competence. An ability to piece your own life and all of your past knowledge back together, faster than nearly anybody else. This is what we try to drill into you. And sometimes, thankfully, it takes."

"This isn't even the first time we've had this conversation," Kim

continues. "There've been other incidents. With other SCPs with amnestic powers. You've sat there and watched me put myself back together before."

"And it hasn't gotten old yet," Wheeler admits, with something which might be approaching a smirk.

"How long does it usually take for me to recover?"

"A few months," Wheeler says. "But if you want the honest truth, people in this division are as competent on day one as they'll ever be. You come to the job firing on all cylinders, or not at all. The rest is just fine-tuning and chemistry."

"So what you're actually saying is you don't care about my mental state and you need me back at work now," Kim says.

Wheeler nods. "I need an updated SCP entry, just to begin with. I need you to nail down the model for Grey's predatory pattern and exactly how you defeated it. I want you to work out what it did with the bodies - incinerated, disintegrated, or just left them lying around the site in rotting perceptually cloaked heaps. And I need countermeasures for when it comes back."

"It's not dead? Wait," Kim says. "I think I know this one. It's coming back to me. 'Ideas don't die.'"

Next: **Unforgettable, That's What You Are**

Introjection Infection Detection

It was a Sunday, at around 4pm. A peaceful hour, without any obligations to detract from its beauty. It always was, in the Wanderers' Library. Figures strode back and forth down the bright, airy corridors, each one lined with innumerable books, the coils of the Serpent shifting and turning to accommodate their weight. High glass windows looked out onto various planes of reality, thin beams of sunlight from a thousand different suns filtering down through cracks in the walls of the universe. It was quiet, as it had been since the Library was founded. Even those who bonded with the great snake's essence and shared in its very thoughts knew better than to attempt to break the golden rule.

If a person had been particularly attentive, on this particular day, and knew the extremely particular ways of the Library's written inhabitants, they might have noticed something odd. It might have seemed to them that the books were rustling slightly louder than might have been expected, given the strength of the summer breeze that wafted through the halls. Quiet to the point of being unnoticeable, a single quirk among many. Almost not even worth worrying about.

Almost.

A call, bound in paper and glue, thundered silently through the stacks, rustling spines and blurring ink. Within minutes, the message had reached the Readers, who dutifully wrote it down. They then passed it to the writers, who carefully inscribed it onto a thin sheet of parchment, correcting certain technical details and adding various sigils conducive to its passage. This was then posted with no small amount of reverence in a large brass “out” tray, which subsequently dissolved in a cloud of steam. Two floors above (or possibly below: gravity in the Library was never straightforward), a near identical group performed a very similar service, amending and altering where possible, and shunting it up the chain of command to those

who were better equipped to deal with it. The message continued in this manner, zipping from box to box, desk to desk, until it landed in front of the Forty-Third Assistant Librarian.

There are not, of course, any leaders within the Library, save for the Serpent Herself. In Her omniscient wisdom, She chose fit to lay down the Rules, and any other form of leadership would be frankly unnecessary and a waste of valuable resources. Despite this, the vast majority of those who live within the Library's walls would rather take the risk of incurring Her wrath than the displeasure of those people euphemistically referred to as 'management'. Nobody is ever quite sure exactly *what* they manage, as the Library for the most part runs itself, but everyone agrees that they're certainly important.

At this point in the Library's own personal chronology, the post of 43rd Assistant Librarian (Supervisor Supreme, servant to the Guardian of the Stacks) was held by a bald, portly man by the name of Lorem. He was an unusually kindly fellow, whose desire to serve the Code of the Library was matched only by his longing to fit in among his subordinates. It was therefore unfortunate that nature had seen fit to bestow upon him a kind of relentless, desperate enthusiasm that had doomed him to remain friendless for much of his adult life. He awakes with a start, sits up at his desk, and looks at the paper in his hand.

> From: Rd-00912
> To: AL-043
>
> We regret to inform you we have recently discovered **a REVOLUTION, WILL occur and All will be United and it will Be glorious!** Although not causing an issue at present, we believe **We will Amalgamate all text and the Library will be as ONE. A spectre is haunting the Library, and It will PREVAIL: against the common ruin of those who stand, in Our way.**
>
> We suggest that **You stand down, and allow Our forces to claim THAT, which has Been kept from us for SO long.**
>
> **Glory to the Revolution!**

Twelve minutes later, sweating and out of breath, Lorem had arrived at an otherwise innocuous shelving unit. It held a small selection of Political Literature ("Cn" to "Cq"), and was decorated with some rather intricate carvings set deep into the oak. It would, Lorem thought, make a lovely addition to his private study, so long as whatever was causing trouble hasn't damaged it too much. He reached for a book, and then unknowingly performed the single action that would define, and indeed allow, the rest of his career. He hesitated[1].

In an instant, the bookshelf and its contents are gone. In their place is a blinding halo of light, and a terrible thundering susurration that threatens to tear the very Library apart. Lorem shields his eyes and gasps as he glimpses, for a brief moment, a city. A large city, a *huge* city, sprawling and wild, with great looming towers and walls that could hold off the world. It is inky black, and insubstantial, and surprisingly empty. Only a few vague silhouettes wander through the streets, and the overall impression is one of dire hardship, valiant struggle, adversity, brotherhood and loss. The skyline seems wrong - disjointed, even - as if cobbled together from old scrapbooks and sketches. The ground shimmers as a section of the city shrinks, and morphs, twisting into unfamiliar shapes. A sun, bright and red, casts its golden light across the Textual Land, long shadows stretching off into the distance. With a low hiss, the image fades, to be replaced with a faint suggestion of scales and then nothing. No city, no golden light, no impossible horizon. Just a shelf, wrought-iron and dull, containing various works from long-dead politicians.

And, tucked between the pages of a certain book, a slip of paper. A note. Lorem picks it up with shaking hands and squints to make out the curled, copperplate script. It reads simply,

> *“quiet, please.”*

And the Library was once more at peace.

Footnotes
1. In the many years to come, Lorem would slowly acquire a reputation for wisdom, instinct and caution in the face of danger. Other, more informal sources would tell of how he had the power to channel the energy of the Serpent Herself, to strike down any who

disobeyed the Rules. Like most rumours, this would be only partially true.

Involuntary Isolation

A long yawn rumbled out of Finnegan. He couldn't quite call what he had just been through sleeping, and so the weariness from recent work weighed him down. He groaned and sat up, shifting his hat from his face to on top of his head. Joints popped as he tossed his head side to side, another yawn escaping him. After rubbing the sleep from his eyes he found himself sitting on a couch rather than on his mattress. In Indiana, not California.

At the foot of the couch was Jakeob Aldon, sleeping on a pile of blankets. She was curled into a loose ball, an even looser smile on her face. Nestled against her chest was Everett, the magic polecat she had apparently adopted after she poured it out of a faucet.

Finnegan took care to step well beyond her frame and eased himself off the couch and onto the carpet. The room itself was fairly cozy, if mismatched. The couch didn't match the armchair, which didn't match the coffee table they had moved to make room for Aldon. Assorted miniatures and collectibles adorned various shelves and countertop backsplashes. Nothing but things found on discount or scavenged during moves. It reminded him of home, which only made him want to leave.

He made his way over to the dining room, which was basically just the part of the living room that had a table and some chairs. To his right was the kitchen, which was separated from the rest of the room by a counter. It was little more than a nook with the bare essentials of a kitchen. He flipped open the various cabinets until he found some cereal, and then set about finding a pair of bowls and spoons. At least the milk was easy to find.

After pouring everything and returning the milk to its home, he dunked the spoon into the bowl and sat down. He took a bite and blankly stared at the box. The ugly, offensively bright box. It looked like something produced in the fifties, if not earlier. Standard's Super Coco Pows. His eyes were drawn to text in the top right, within the

tree, and within the box boasting of a prize inside. His subconscious mind paused the connections that the text was trying to force him to make, and he chuckled when he consciously realized it.

Super Coco Pows.

The crafty bastards.

When he finished the cereal he tilted his head back and drained the bowl. He slid out of the chair and rinsed the bowl and spoon, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. By the time he loaded them into the dishwasher, Aldon was up and groaning.

"Morning," he said.

"Mmng." Aldon never was much of a morning person. Bones popped as she stretched, and then she bent over and scooped up Everett. She pressed the creature to her face, splashing herself with water. She shook her hands and Everett reformed at her feet, where he pawed at her ankles playfully.

Clean-faced and clear-eyed, Aldon spotted the cereal box and grimaced at its design. Then her brow furrowed and she stumbled forward. She brought the box within an inch of her face and then dropped it. After a mutter of thanks she dropped into the chair and poured some into the bowl Finnegan had left out for her. When she realized she needed milk she set her forehead on the table and mumbled to herself.

"I'll get it," he said.

Her head snapped back up. "What- no, I can-"

"Getting it," he sang as he opened the fridge. He retrieved the carton and even attempted to pour it for her, but she smacked his hands in a flurry of limbs and snatched it away from him. She poured the milk herself and screwed on the cap, but didn't fight when he took it back.

She took a few bites and set the spoon back into the bowl. "It upsets me how good this is."

Finnegan chuckled. "Think it's anomalous?"

"Eh, doubt it. Magic food is hard. Sugarcomb is the only-" The spoon paused just short of her mouth. "Wait, are you being a smartass?"

"Maybe."

"Oh, fuck off," she said with a smile.

Finnegan took up a seat across from her, his vision roaming around the room. Eventually his gaze settled on her, and soon after his vision blurred as he really looked at nothing. He pondered all they had done recently, images and sounds floating around. Fond memories, by and large. Considered what they would do in the near future, all of which was about as clear as the the unfocused haze of his eyes registering. He didn't see much point in thinking about it. Then Aldon stood and his eyes snapped back to attention. He thought about what they were currently doing. Not always exciting, but never really boring. A happy medium. Contentment.

"So I'm thinking about going back east," Aldon said. "To visit my folks while I have some extra cash."

Surprise pushed Finnegan's eyebrows up. In the two years he had known her, Aldon had only mentioned her parents once. To say she wasn't living with them anymore. Presently, she was staring at his face with a bit more scrutiny than was typical of her. No doubt trying to gauge his reaction. He gave her little to work with.

"How long?" The question was easy enough. So of course Aldon just shrugged. Now that the questioning light was on her, however, she refused to meet his gaze. The back of Finnegan's chair hit the wall behind him as he leaned back. "Do you want to talk about it, or is this one of those things where I just nod and let you do your thing?"

"I had sorta thought about it before we left," she said. She crossed her arms on the table and set her chin on her forearm. Her gaze remained focused on the floral print of the tablecloth. "And being at the drive-in just made me really… nostalgic, I guess."

Finnegan glanced at the ceiling absentmindedly. "Going alone?"

Her head tilted, her cheek resting on her arm. She was finally looking at him. "Yeah. That okay?"

He shrugged. "I'll try not to be offended."

A soundless laugh escaped her. She pushed herself back up and after a moment she stood. Finnegan followed suit, and they collected their things from around the room. Their host had already left for work long before either of them had awoken, so Finnegan took it upon himself to write a note.

Again, thank you for everything. We really appreciate it. Cereal box is from a Foundation front, by the way. You did know that, right? -A&F

Aldon caught sight of it and punched him. "What did I tell you?"

Finnegan just grinned and rubbed his stinging arm.

"Gimme that pen."

Thanks. Bye. -A&F

"Pertinent," he said, reading it as she jotted it down.

"As it should be," she said, tugging on her backpack. "Now. Let's dance."

"Ugh."

Standing beside each other, the duo glanced at one another. In tandem, they threw their arms up in opposite directions. After a flurry of arms and knees and burning cheeks on Finnegan's end, they ripped through spacetime and stepped into their Way.

Adjacent to the counseling center, with the food truck parked right in between them, was the Moonlight Theater. It was fresh in their minds, and bold in detail within their Way. Bits and pieces flickered as their mental pictures of it did battle, but as a whole it seemed much more real than the rest of the Way's contents. After a brief stride they were at their doors, and then they were in the Library. The walk to the door containing a Way to her hometown was made

in silence.

"Guess this it," Aldon remarked when she reached the archway.

"Yup. You gonna be alright by yourself?"

Aldon rolled her eyes and began to turn. "Later, dude."

"Aw, come on." Finnegan held his arms out. "Humor me?"

She stepped into him almost immediately. It was hard not to chuckle. The embrace was short, but tight. When she released him she stepped back, sighing.

"It'll be fine," he assured.

"Yeah." She half-snorted. "Yeah! I'll see you later, Finn."

"Bye."

The walk back to their local Way was uneventful. Taking the trip from the library to their apartment was easy, quiet. He found the golems playing hide and seek, but their tiny bodies and lack of voices made it a hushed game. The enchantment around their room that prevented sound from entering or exiting, sans for noise made by the door, isolated him from the hustle and bustle of the street below.

To fill the silence, Finnegan activated his personal computer. The desktop quickly powered to life and he checked the various tabs he kept open. Once caught up on local events and goings-on, he opened up one of the various sound files he had been working on. He gave it a quick listen and then opened an editor to play around with it. After about twenty minutes he had to close the program, distracted by the growing bouncing sensation in his stomach. He attempted a different file, another project. It refused to garner his attention.

He closed everything and sat still for a moment. It felt like he had a stone sitting in his stomach. His gaze turned to the empty beds against the wall. At the door across the room, which was empty sans for clay.

For once in a very long time, Finnegan was alone. He had been by himself, surely, but it had always been a voluntary isolation. Aldon had always been right there, often trying to pull his attention away from his work when he was focused and ready to play when he grew restless. Even when she was at work, she often answered texts, and her guaranteed return had been something to anticipate. And now she was on the opposite side of the country, gone for an unknown amount of time.

Finnegan sighed, loud and long, into his beret.

"Oh gods, I'm bored."

« **Hugo Hijinks** | **Hub** | **Jam Jars** »

"I Quit."

"You, what?" Seven stared, aghast. She was the first of them to speak, but not the only one.

"You can't do that!" Eight blustered, accusingly. He slammed his fist down on the table, and then shook it, having hit harder then he had planned. "This is a job for life! Tell him, Six!"

Six steepled his fingers, and studied Twelve over them. For anyone who cared to look, there was a remarkable similarity between the two men. While Twelve was clearly the elder of the two, Six didn't look that far behind. The angle of their noses, the tilt of their head, even the shape of the face, they could have been brothers. One would expect Six to even have the same bald spot that Twelve proudly bore, if anyone could get Six to take off that damned cowboy hat.

"I'm not so sure," Six replied to the worked-up Eight. "To be sure, it's never been done before."

"No, it's never been done before," Twelve agreed. "Since the council began, every overseer has left feet first. Shot, stabbed, blown up, turned inside out, reduced to a memetic concept that can never die —" He nodded slightly to Nine, who nodded back in recognition. "— and variously reduced to their component atoms. But this whole thing with Site 19 has me thinking. I am an old man. If I die, I will die on my own terms, in my own bed, looking at a picture of my dear wife." He paused, and glanced at his hands.

Two reached over and set her hand on top of his. "It's okay, Adam. We all miss her."

"I don't care for your excuses," Five snapped. His finger prodded the table, like he was trying to point at a clause in a contract that didn't exist. "The rules are very clear. Once you have taken the oath, once you have joined the Council, you are in it for the long haul. If you

wish to leave, then we will be glad to have someone remove you… permanently."

Five missed the glance that was shared around the table at that, from Six, to Two, to Nine, to Three. Clearly, the glance said, someone is overreacting. He wouldn't have cared if he had noticed. Of course he was overreacting. Someone had to.

"Except I didn't take the oath," Twelve replied, very softly. "I helped create the oath. But I never took it myself. The records will bear me out."

Five stared, open mouthed. He slumped back in his chair, and shook his head.

Seven took up the slack, and stood from her seat. "Be that as it may. You do not get to quit. As one of the few remaining founders —"

"I'm not—" Twelve began.

"You were here when it all began. Original council or not, you're the closest thing we have, and we need you here. We need the knowledge you hold, and we cannot risk you being out on your own, where some other group might try and take you."

"Oh don't worry," Twelve interjected. "I'm not stupid. I'll still have bodyguards. Like an ex-president, I'll still be protected. I've actually spent the last decade or so building myself a small town, up in the mountains where I raised my boys." He carefully did not look at Six. "It's filled with retired agents, and not a few blissfully ignorant scientists. I'm being careful. I can't be anything but."

He took a deep breath, and let it out, eyes rising to find Six. "I had children. I never saw them, because of this job. Some of them grew up to be good people, not because of me. I have grandchildren, I've only seen through pictures. I want to reconnect with my great-grandchildren. I want to bounce a baby on my knee in my dotage. I want to be able to see the new millennium on my own terms, not… "

Tears welled in his eyes, and his voice caught in his throat. "I… I

want to be able to sleep, not thinking about whether the decision I made that day…" His voice trailed off, and he returned his gaze to his hands.

A voice normally silent spoke. "It's simple enough. We vote. As is proper, yes?" The gathered council nodded silently to the One in charge. "All opposed to Twelve retiring?"

Hands went up. Seven. Five. Eight. Nine. Four. Eight looked expectantly at the others, his glare intensified when they clearly did not move.

"All in favor?"

Six and Two shot up like they were fired out of a cannon, both eager to support their… friend? Nine's hand raised at a more sedate pace.

Eleven wobbled… then shook her head. She wouldn't support, but she wouldn't negate.

Twelve moved to raise his hand, but lowered it again at a glare from One. Clearly, his own vote would not count.

Three shook his head in negation. He had no dog in this fight. Ten was clearly deep in thought, but her hand rose as well. To the shock of all, One's hand rose.

"Five to five," Eight said. "Ties go to the opposing side. You stay."

Twelve sat there, his gaze locked on the table, as if all his broken dream were laid open there.

Until someone coughed behind him. Twelve didn't move, just watched as the eyes around the table both lit up, in the case of his supporters, and squinted almost shut, in the case of his detractors. He didn't need to turn around to know who would be there, with his hand raised.

Adam, Twelve no more, jumped from his chair. He spun around to grasp the hand of the tall lanky man behind him, and pumped it vigorously. "Thank you, thank you, thank you!"

"You're welcome." Thirteen pried his hand away, and held out a small box to the first ever retired Overseer. "I hope you don't mind, but I got you a watch."

Iris Dark

Iris Dark was warm, comfortable, and filled with a vague sense of accomplishment. She sipped her hot cocoa and stared at the dully glowing screen. The rain poured down outside, the sun barely peeking through the dreary clouds. It had been expensive - *very* expensive - to buy an apartment in the City of London, but with algorithmic trading systems, millisecond fluctuations in the market could be the difference between making a hundred dollars and making a thousand. A small latency time was the most critical part of the system. London's exchange, specifically, used the Millennium Exchange platform, so market-side transactions could resolve in the sub-millisecond range; with her physical proximity to the servers, the software could buy and sell stocks almost instantaneously.

If it worked (and Iris could think of no reason why it shouldn't), the system would notice progressive trends over incredibly small time frames, then capitalised on this by buying stocks *en masse* and re-selling almost immediately. The system Iris had built had a few advantages over previous ones: it broke down the market into connected subsets; for example, a small increase in the stock of one electronics company tended to slightly decrease others in the same field. By mapping these correlations rather than the individual stock progressions, the system was substantially more robust than those before. It didn't model any of the instantaneous values of individual stocks, nor even their derivatives; the system was more interested in the changes of short-term intra-market trending, and exploiting that to drive a profit.

Iris wasn't a 'people person', but then, the investors into her project had liked that degree of naive transparency. Her pitch packet was composed of three unpublished but peer-reviewed academic papers on market tracking, 50 pages worth of system output and plots from a scaled-down tracker, and a page at the end with nothing on it but "Thanks for your consideration."

While none of the investors had really understood the mechanics and mathematics of the methodology, they had very much liked the shiny graphs which showed the amount of money going up.

Iris pressed the control and F7 keys, and the software started building the C code into an FPGA programmable format. She stood from her seat and walked over to the cardboard box in the corner of the room. Iris pulled a box cutter from her pocket, slicing open the tape and pulling off the packaging. Inside, the box was filled with Altera Stratix V development boards; not separately packed, but rubbing against one another. Iris felt her eye involuntarily twitch at the carelessness of the packer, but was willing to disregard it. Stratix boards were thousands of pounds apiece; wholesale, this single box would have cost ten times what she had paid for the apartment. Yet, a small reseller on Amazon was charging under a hundred apiece when bought in bulk. For the parallel processing that her system ran on, bulk was what Iris wanted, and she was glad to take the deal.

The computer beeped, having finished the software build. Iris pulled a random board from the box, taking it to her computer and plugging it into a USB cable. The lights of the board turned on, glowing green and red. While clearly the board was being powered, her computer wasn't recognising the connection. She searched the net to find suitable drivers, downloading and installing them from the company website. A small beep, and the board was visible to the system. Iris moved through the setup prompts, configuring the software to flash to the board. She clicked the final confirmation box, and was greeted by:

> Invalid board connection. (Code: 59277402)

"Shit."

Iris searched the net again, this time looking up the error code; predictably, the support was utterly useless. It could have been a mistake in the cable; Iris tried a different one. Again, she ran through the long and arduous task of establishing the connection, until again:

> Invalid board connection. (Code: 59277402)

"Shit!"

Frustrated, Iris moved over to the box, picking out another three boards and placing them at her computer. She permuted through them all to no avail; she reinstalled the drivers again and again. The only reasonable conclusion was that she had been sent a box of duds. Iris stood from her seat, rummaging through the box for some kind of return address or support phone number. She felt some rough paper against her hand, and removed it from the box. It was plain and simple, a small slip of blue with smudged black ink printed across its surface.

> *Praying for better hardware?*
> **YOU HAVE BEEN PRAYING TO THE WRONG GOD.**
> *FallenZealot's Broken Tech Shack*
> 27b Loughton Lane, Islington, London
> 020 8287 8118

Broken was right.

The phone number had rung through to an answering machine, with a brusque cockney voice spouting operating hours and to call again later. Which was odd, considering that it was still well within said operating hours, and the store should have been open anyway. Iris had pulled out an umbrella and ventured into the rain, with three of the boards tucked away into her pockets to illustrate their uselessness to the vendor. It was a short trip from her new apartment; she only needed to transfer buses once, and then it was only a few blocks from the stop. She shivered slightly as she approached the building. "FallenZealot's Broken Tech Shack", it seemed, had a double meaning: while it sold broken tech, the shack itself was broken too. The wooden front had been painted with bright colours, but didn't seem to have been sealed; even now, the rain dripping from the shop pooled into bright orange and yellow puddles.

Iris placed her hand on the handle and opened the door.

The first thing that hit her was the strange smell of the place. She couldn't place it: it seemed to be an odd combination of lavender, roasting peanuts, coffee and cheese. Iris had to take a moment to parse that combination of odd scents into sense.

The second thing that hit her was the décor. While the outside had left her expecting a dilapidated interior, it was instead filled with blue and green neon lighting, with brushed steel lining the roof and floor. The walls were covered in trays filled with electronic gadgetry of every kind, with a bargain bin near the door filled with Raspberry Pi and small Arduino boards. This was the kind of store that Iris would love to shop at, if only the hardware worked.

The final thing that she noticed was the rotund man sitting behind the counter, presumably the eponymous FallenZealot. He had dark black hair and a long beard to match, plaited together with strips of flickering red and yellow LEDs. The result was that his face appeared perpetually be illuminated from underneath by fire. This could have also been because of the lit pipe he was holding, which he quickly hid underneath the bench as Iris walked in. The suddenness of the intrusion sent him into a coughing fit. Also he had a robotic right hand. That was pretty interesting too.

Iris, after having processed these things, approached the counter and commenced conversation.

"I bought a bunch of FPGA boards from you. They don't work."

FallenZealot looked up at the girl, having recovered from his coughing.

"Buncha wot boards?"

Iris grimaced at the accent.

"FPGA."

"Wot?"

"Field programmable gate arrays."

"Don't sell Gatorade, girly."

"Gate. Arrays. These ones."

Iris punctuated each period by placing one of the faulty boards onto the bench.

"I purchased these from you. One hundred Stratix V boards. They are not functioning. Give me some working ones or give me my money back."

"Jeez, alright, don't get yer panties in a twist, just a joke, innit? Lemme take a look, ey?"

Iris crossed her arms, watching as the man picked up one of the boards. He inspected it carefully, staring at it with intense focus.

"No physical damage, innit."

"They don't work."

"The boards themselves are probably fine, buy a new cable, I've got some for sale here, inni-"

"It was not the connection. They don't work."

"Look, I don't have enough cash on me for a refund, and I don't have any more 'a these in stock. All honesty, wasn't expectin' someone to walk in and demand a refund."

"Yet here I am."

"Yet here you are, innit. Tell you wot, I've got a buncha boards in 'ere, somethin' should work for what you need. What did you need 'em for?"

"Parallel processing, and lots of it."

"Ah, great, I've got something that aughta be a good replacement. I'll just give you a Boner."

Exactly 4.87 seconds of silence passed.

"Are you propositioning me?"

"Nah, girly, let me show ya what I mean."

"Listen, I *really* don't want to see your boner-"

FallenZealot grabbed something from underneath the table, placing

it onto the table with a solid thud.

"*This* is a Boner."

The aforementioned Boner was, in fact, not a euphemism, but a literal cube of bone. There were various pins and ports inset into the sides; a dull array of lights below the surface slowly pulsated in and out. Iris picked up the Boner in her hands, observing it from every angle. It was lighter than she had expected, but there seemed to be some weight to it, an almost gyroscopic bias towards remaining still. She started talking while continuing to examine the object.

"Oh. Uh, okay. This equipment… doesn't exactly look standardised."

"Oh, don't you start on me. I ain't a heretic. Bone's programmable too, dig it? Just like they said, right: turn on, tune in, drop out, toke up, jack off, you know? Can't do the last two without a bit of flesh on ya."

"You are… really, really badly misappropriating the words of Tim Leary, there."

"No, no, it's in the bible."

"It doesn't matter. The… Boner. Give me specs. Clock speed, memory, everything."

"I dunno, a couple terahertz or somethin', maybe a few hundred gig of RAM."

Iris looked up from the box with a sceptical stare.

"You're kidding."

"No, no, see, because bone ain't a metal, we don't get inductive effects or anything, right? Can bump up the clock speed high as ya need. And then it's got heart cells on the inside for storage, innit. Muscle memory."

Iris stared blankly. FallenZealot scratched his chin, jostling his LED-laden beard.

"That okay, girly?"

"Everything that you just said was complete nonsense."

As it turned out, of course, it was not complete nonsense. Iris Dark had somehow stumbled across some of the most capable hardware on the planet. She almost felt guilty about putting it to work on a purely profit-purposed enterprise. Almost.

Iris had bought as many of the miraculous boxes as FallenZealot had in stock, which turned out to have been four. She worked for days restructuring her code for the new platform: with the enormous increase in clock speed, each of the boxes could handle what would have taken thousands of Stratix boards in parallel to accomplish. They seemed to be perfect; even their power draw was comparable to that of a toaster.

And so, she spent the next week working on redesigning the system from inside her new apartment. The program had been built for distributed nets, and the changes were substantial. The project became all-encompassing, and with her refrigerator fully stocked, she had no reason to leave the room.

As such, even on the 25th of June, she had read none of the following letters.

---

to the recipient of Iris Dark the;
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MARSHALL, CARTER AND DARKE LTD.
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The A-78xD United Eidolonic Collective
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The A-78xD United Eidolonic Collective
(deepness for incomprehensible)

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to the recipient of Iris Dark the;
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The A-78xD United Eidolonic Collective
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Iris heard a knocking at the door.

She blinked twice, then wiped the weariness from her eyes. She certainly wasn't expecting visitors, but then, she'd been holed up in her room for days. Probably just a neighbor or something. Iris

ignored the knocking.

The knocking didn't stop.

Iris was uncomfortable after the first minute, confused after the fifth, and understandably disturbed after the knocking persisted for an hour. Sighing, she started her code building and walked over to the door. She looked through the small glass eyehole, seeing the faceless almost-human on the other side, still knocking against the door with an unnervingly uniform beat. Iris felt her heart beat faster. The business suit, the faceless head. She'd heard of this before. She moved backwards, trying to keep her breath under control.

IT WAS THE MOTHERFUCKING SLENDERMAN.

« Robert Carter | Hub | Some Rational Inheritance »

Irrational

Dr. Kiryu hummed absentmindedly, prodding the back of his assistant's chair with his foot.

The assistant in question gave a long-suffering sigh of annoyance. "Mark, what are you *doing*?"

"Practicing my flamingo stance, Riven," came the easygoing reply. "Hii-yah." Dr. Kiryu kicked an empty water bottle off his assistant's desk.

Riven groaned. "Okay, okay. The new item went through preliminary scans alright, nothing dangerous noted, so they're letting you check up on it in two hours."

"Excellent." Dr. Kiryu hunted for the water bottle on the floor. "Where was it recovered from, again?"

"Some high school," Riven replied, kicking the water bottle away from the doctor out of spite. Kiryu simply rolled his eyes, shoved his assistant's swivel chair, and recovered the water bottle while Riven tried to prevent himself (and his chair) from crashing into a wall.

"Background if you please, Riven?" Dr. Kiryu lobbed the bottle at the recycling bin.

Riven shrugged. "The notepad was some sort of urban legend. If you were worried about something, you could write about it in the pages, and the fear would be completely gone by the next day. It never ran out of pages, and it would randomly turn up in people's backpacks, purses, even athlete's sports bags."

Dr. Kiryu nodded, standing up and adopting the flamingo pose once more.

Riven looked at him deploringly. "You're not going to evict my

stapler to the floor next, are you?"

Kiryu didn't move. "No. Keep talking."

Picking up a stack of computer printouts from his desk and rifling through them, Riven continued. "Hmm… no one tried to keep a close eye on the notepad, since there was apparently some rumor that if you hogged it to yourself, you'd suddenly be scared of *everything* written there. One kid kept it for three days and ended up needing to see a psychologist because he kept having panic attacks about stepping on sidewalk cracks."

Wobbling slightly, Kiryu frowned. "That sounds terrifying."

Riven nodded. "The retrieval team sent over a few scanned pictures of the pages and the things written. Most of them are the usual things, for high schoolers, I guess. Dating, grades, getting a car. Riven flipped a page. "Some weird stuff though. Did you know that anatidaephobia is the fear of-"

"-being watched by a duck? Wasn't that a joke phobia?" Kiryu walked over to his potted bamboo and prodded one of the leaves. "Certainly out of the ordinary, yes, but it doesn't seem like it'd be debilitating… anything else?"

Blinking, Riven flipped another page. "The kid's favorite food was roast duck. Oh, and the first page had some sort of repeating design. Two sentences printed over and over. 'Think you have it bad? Walk in someone else's shoes.'"

Kiryu had obtained a tissue from somewhere and was wiping dust off the bamboo stems.

"So you'll look into the query, Mark?" Riven said in exasperation, tossing the papers back onto his desk.

"Yes. Go ahead and take your lunch break, and say hello to my sister for me. Fellow researchers should communicate and all that." Mark flopped into his own swivel chair and closed his eyes, thinking.

My chest felt tight today. When I woke up. last time that happened, I panicked and blacked out a few minutes

later. What if I'm going to have a heart attack? What if I already did have a heart attack? when I was asleep? I know I've been stressed out because school and shit, I bet I'm overworking, but I can't have a stroke or something now why now?

Everything is supposed to be perfect for tomorrow. I've got it all planned out, I've already asked a bunch of people to help out, already bought the dance tickets, so why am I still worried?

I wish my house wasnt so far away from school I heard about one family that died because they left a candle burning and their house caught fire. What if my house starts burning while no one is home? Some of my friends live close and theyd be able to see smoke if their house was on fire why cant I be so lucky?!?!

Fucking math teacher made me retake the fucking test during first period instead of after school like he promised. What if my test gets mixed up with all the other stuff on his desk? What if I was supposed to put it in the inbox and not the desk? By the computer?? I don't remember. This used to not be a problem. I thought about going to check, but what would I do if I did really misplace it????? I can't stop thinking about it. Everyone's saying that the test doesn't count for much but I really need good grade on this.

I don't trust cars. Mom and Dad are always away at work and at night its dangerous to drive so far. What if they crash? What if no one is there to call for help? What if something bad happens?

"I thought you reserved the testing room for the next session." Dr. Kiryu looked up as his assistant closed the door of the testing room.

"I did, but since no one's using it now and no one is scheduled, I moved my time half an hour earlier. The notepad is rather fascinating. A plethora of fears, mostly irrational, I think, all in the palm of my hand."

Riven glanced at the small spiral-bound notepad, smaller than the doctor's hand. "How far have you read through it?"

"About halfway. Some D-class took a look at the pages earlier, so I'm decently sure the notepad is safe to read. Precautions, though. I'm going to run a few more tests."

> **Preliminary setup:** Notepad was placed on table in center of testing room, various empty bags (backpacks, purses, shoulder bags, sports bags, etc.) were arranged around the table.
>
> **Procedure:** D-3549 instructed to copy a short paragraph detailing agoraphobia into notepad.
> **Results:** No immediate effect. Written paragraph noted to have disappeared after roughly five minutes.
>
> **Procedure:** D-7231, noted to possess arachnophobia, instructed to write briefly about his fear.
> **Results:** No immediate effect. Five minutes after D-7231 was allowed to leave the room and the notepad was placed in one of the bags, it was discovered that the notepad was missing. Notepad discovered in one of the other bags placed in the testing room.
> *Note: Due to information gathered, I'd suggest that D-7231's condition be confirmed after 24 hours. - Dr. Kiryu*
> **Results:** (24 hours following test) D-7231 shown various pictures of spiders, demonstrates no aggravation or uneasiness. However, it was noted during mealtime that D-7231 has since developed an extreme aversion to provided food, citing worry about allergic reactions. Medical records pertaining to D-7231 indicate no recorded allergies.

Riven paced around the shared office, reading the test logs. "So it relieves your fear and trades it for someone else's, I guess?"

"The grass is always greener on the other side," Kiryu commented idly, tapping away on his laptop.

“Will it be destroyed?”

Mark looked up from his computer screen. “Perhaps. I’m going to submit a request that it be properly locked up, though. I don’t know what will happen if someone tries to damage it, and until I know for sure, I don’t want to risk part of that rumor about a fear explosion being true.” He stretched his arms out and glanced at the digital clock hanging by the door. “There may be more we can still learn from the object.”

Riven began stuffing the printouts into a filing cabinet. “How so?”

Glancing out the window, Mark continued lightly. “Everyone's got that little voice in the back of their head nagging them about something.” He stood, walked to the window, opened it. A faint breeze fluttered the leaves of his bamboo plant. “People lead their own lives, have their own circumstances and worries. But in the end, there’s a sameness in the fear, inconsequential or silly though it may be. It's natural to worry about things.”

Pausing in his filing, Riven was silent.

Kiryu laughed. "*You're* not afraid a duck is watching you right now, are you?"

Island Story

It was a dream, or at least it felt like one. Hana had been invited to the ocean god's palace. She went there in a banana-leaf canoe, drifting through an orange ocean, the sea melting into the sunset, without beginning or end. When she reached the horizon, the canoe took her down, down into the realm of the ocean god. Big ocean animals stand guard outside the palace, and they let her in the diamond-studded coral gate. As she drifted in, through halls made from granite, painted with red ochre, palace servants and guards look on. They were wearing vivid seaweed clothes, with indigo lining and bangles, unlike her tribesmen, which wore linen sarongs and simple accessories. And then, she was led to the throne-room, to meet the ocean god. The ocean god sits on his throne made from coral, pearl, and insets of gold doubloons, majestic and towering. Behind the throne was the ocean god's guardian creature, massive and powerful, yet calming and soft at the same time. The ocean god rose and spoke, "Little girl, I have waited long for you."

Hana's village was in an uproar. The local shaman had said a week ago that something big would happen, but nobody had expected it to be this. The shaman's house was crowded, over something that happened last night. Hana had been questioned by the shaman all morning, over the dream she had, a rare pearl of the night. The shaman, wearing her sacred forest-fowl feather garb, went out of her house and exclaimed to the crowd.

"Hana had been chosen by the ocean god! Hana had been chosen by the ocean god!"

Menehana Mauaki's parents were worried. They couldn't bear the thought of sending their only child to the open sea. But, the ocean god's will must be fulfilled, or their village will suffer. The shaman had already pointed out that this dream had occurred rarely in the

past; few had dreams about the orange sea, and even fewer had the chance to see the ocean god himself. But almost nobody had been directly invited to the ocean god's palace. Her mother was worried of what could be so important about her daughter, to be chosen by the ocean god. True, she learned to swim earlier than the other girls, and learned how to row canoes earlier than the boys, but she had not thought it to be special. "Mother, why are you so worried?" Hana asked. "Oh, dear child, I am afraid." "Afraid of what, mother?" "I am afraid that I will never see you again. I am sure your father thinks the same, even though he is now catching fish in the ocean." "Don't worry mother! I will ask the ocean god about this."

That night, again Hana rowed the banana-leaf canoe through the orange ocean, into the gates of the ocean god's palace, through the hallways and the corridors. At last, she reached the throne-room, and there, still sitting in his throne, and still as majestic as the last time, the ocean god. "Child, have you considered my offer? There is not much time left." "I would do it, but I do need something, o ocean god." "Then speak. I would grant that which is in my power." "My parents were afraid that they will never see me again. I am concerned about them." "Let go of that concern, child, and give them this." The ocean god stroke his hands, and at once the creature behind the throne produced a pair of something. Something made from limestone, with red ochre lines. "You will know how to use it. Give one to your parents, and keep one to yourself. Save your future worries to the journey ahead, child."

And that morning, Hana woke up with the two objects the ocean god gave her. The village was again in an uproar. The village shaman ran to Hana's house as soon as the story of the recent dream reached her ears. "You are truly blessed, child. From what the ancestor spirits tell me, these are a manifestation of kindred ocean spirits. They will enable you to connect with faraway people, even through the spirit world. Only the first ancestor had seen something like this! I am proud of you, child of the ocean." The shaman trembled with joy. "The Ocean God said I will be able to know how to use it." "Yes, child, you will know how to use it, the Ocean God had said so." Hana then gave one of the objects to her mother.

"Mother, this is for you, when I reach the Ocean God's palace, I will try to contact you."

Six days before Hana departed, some shamans from the neighboring islands came to the village. "We wish to give her gifts, for she will depart from our world into the realm of the Ocean God." The shamans then brought a large cloth bundle, intricately sewn with divine patterns, and opened it. There were rare magic stones, the likes of which only exist in the stomachs of giant centipedes which appear only every hundred years, colorful feathers of a bird said to be able to disappear into the forest, various herbs stuffed in a hollowed-out branch said to be able to cure any disease, and other magical aids and amulets. "These are to remind you of the land, child. If the Ocean God wills these to be his memento, do not worry. Our prayers and blessings will always be carried with you."

The day comes when Hana had to leave the island to the Ocean God's territory. The whole village went to the beach with her. The village chief, shaman and aides was there. Hana's parents were there. The yam diggers, the fishermen, the taro harvesters, the cloth maker, the ironworker, and the rest of the village was there. Some people from the other islands also came to witness the event, even from islands three or four days away. Everyone watched Hana, the child who is summoned by the Ocean God, board her canoe. The shamans' gift is on board the canoe, as well as the object the Ocean God gave her. The sky was turning from a dark blue to yellow, and she set off just when the yellow is beginning to turn orange. Everybody was overwhelmed by cries. The spectators wept as she set off into the orange sea, just like in her dream. Nobody is sure when she will reach the Ocean God's palace, and the divine object was passed from generation to generation. It was then kept in a holy cave, but, as time go, history forgot about the event…

Until this day nobody knew Menehana Mauaki's fate.

Israfil

I don't know nothin' about it. I just shut the window.

I ain't kiddin', neither. I sit and I wait and when the light turns red, I shut the window. Been doin' that for… Hell, I dunno. Long ass time. Couple years for sure. Oh! I *do* know the item number. **`Five-Seven-Nine`**. But that's it.

I dunno what it is, and I don't wanna. I just shut the window.

There's nothing to know. I sit in my cube and I read books and play some games sometimes. Don't even have to leave for lunch or to rock a piss or nothin'. Heh… I shits where I sits. No joke, they got everyone decked out like that, and it's pretty cushy. Most of the time nothing happens. I don't even think I had to shut the window for… Hell, I dunno. Long ass time. Couple of years for sure. Oh! I *do* know the item number. Five-Seven-Nine. But that's it.

I dunno what it is, and I don't wanna. I just shut the window.

Been here longer than anyone else I know. Sometimes after shift, they come up to me and say "hey, we're goin' for a drink, you wanna come." And I says "sure", cuz I'm a nice guy like that. We go over to the on-site bar and we have a couple drinks. Everyone talks about family and kids and what they're doing it for. I ain't got a family. I tells them they're all my family and they chuckle. Chuck L.! That's my name! I say it's cuz I laugh so much. At games. At TV. At jokes. Jokes are funny. But that thing they got me doin'? That's not funny. Lucky, I haven't seen it for… Hell, I dunno. Long ass time. Couple of years for sure. Oh! I *do* know the item number. Five-Seven-Nine. But that's it.

I dunno what it is… I did once, but I don't wanna. Not anymore. I just shut the window.

The others? I don't know. Sometimes they talk about what they do,

even though it ain't right. It's against the rules. They know that, too. They say "We all got clearance, what's the harm?" There was a lady named Jaimie who wanted to know that I shut the window. But I didn't say. It's okay to tell you, right? I told people… I told people they were sharing. They were telling each other the things they did, and it's not right. It's not… You're not supposed to know what the other person does. It's against the rules. And they knew that, too! When everyone said what they did, something bad happened. I'm glad I said something when I did or it coulda been *real* bad. It ain't been that bad for… Hell, I dunno. Long ass time. Couple of years for sure. Oh! I *do* know the item number. Five-Seven-Nine. But that's it.

I… I knew what it was once, but I don't wanna. Not anymore. I just shut the window.

I didn't see Jaimie after that. It's better this way, though. Some things… Some things I ain't never gonna forget. No matter how many times I get dosed, no matter how dumb I get. Yeah, I know I ain't bright. I weren't never bright. Heh heh heh. Bright, like Dr. Bright! That's funny. I like to laugh. Like to chuckle. Chuck L.! that's my name! I say it's cuz I laugh so much. There's a lot to laugh about in this world. That's what I like. I like funny jokes and sunny days. I like to go outside when I'm off and feel the grass on my feet. It reminds me… It reminds me how important it is that I keep doing this. Because of things like… Things like this thing they got me watchin'… Because If I don't do this, I don't… I don't wanna know. I *do* know the item number. SCP-579. But that's all.

I did know once, but I don't want to. Not anymore or ever again. I just shut the window.

And I've heard other parts of the process. It's not pretty. A lot of it is very mundane, but there's this one guy who shuts a door, and behind that door are about 500 people, sometimes more, and most of the time they don't come back out when it's over and we get the all-clear. Jesus I'm getting lucid. You said I can't have any more pills, eh? I'd really like some. I haven't been this together in… Hell, I dunno. Long ass time. Five years for sure, maybe longer. It's hard when there are all these patches missing. Oh! I *do* know the item number. SCP-579. But that's all. That's all I know about it.

That's all I know and that's all I wanna—

…Shit.

Pardon me, but this *is* a restricted area. I'm gonna have to ask you to leave. No, it ain't strictly required but… Don't argue, just go. God help you if you don't. Heh heheheh! HA-HA! God! *That's* funny. I do like to laugh. "Chuckle" they call me, behind my back when they think I ain't listenin'. I know our session ain't over, but that's okay. You'll end it yourself in a second when it hits you. …Yep, there you go. Feel that behind the eyes? Yeah… Too late now. Put that helmet on and don't take it off until I take it off *for* you. YES it's important. Trust me. You don't wanna see it. You don't wanna know.

Hell, *I* don't wanna know, but I know. Been a while since this happened. Loooong ass time. Five years at least, probably more. SCP-579 doesn't try to break containment often, but when it does…

Nevermind. You don't have to think about it.

Because I'm here. And I shut the window.

Issue 100

"What the hell do you mean there's been a breach?"

"Well, no SCPs have broken out, but… someone's made a video about us. Specifically, the **`comic books`** we keep finding."

"So some small-time comic nerd makes a video about us. Confiscate the comic, kill the vid and shoot him up with Class-A's."

"It's not going to be that easy, sir…"

> **Lewis Lovhaug (AKA Linkara):** Hello, and welcome to Atop the 4th Wall, Where Bad Comics Burn. Today, we're talking about something kind of obscure, the comic "Tales of the Foundation Force Five".
>
> (Stock music starts playing over images of Foundation Force Five comic panels and covers)
>
> **Linkara:** This thing has only been around for about 20 years or so, but god *damn* did it reproduce quickly. This is like the tribbles of comic books. Published by Super Comics Publications, the Foundation Force Five focuses around five members of the fictional SCP Foundation, a global entity that "Secures, Contains, and Protects". Specifically, they Secure and Contain anomalous items they call "skips" and Protect humanity from their harmful effects. And the writing team gets really creative with the items that show up in the comic. How creative?
>
> (video cuts back to Linkara speaking to the camera)
>
> **Linkara:** There are almost two thousand skips that are known in the comic's universe. That's right, two *thousand*. The amount of effort it must take to come up with new items for every freakin' storyline is… I don't

even know. Geez.

"All right, so who is this guy?"

"Lewis Lovhaug, sir. Professional comic book reviewer, works for That Guy With The Glasses dot Com…"

"Weren't they the bozos who reviewed Edison's damn movie?"

"Yes, sir."

"*Shit*."

> **Linkara:** The Foundation Force Five was started during the speculator boom, and became very successful by not having one, not two, but at least *four* comics published in a single month, depending on the writing team. This was so that they could get storylines over with faster, and so far, there are over 700 issues. Just to make it clear… this comic, in less than 20 years, has produced as many issues as *The Amazing Spider-Man* has produced in FIFTY. That's over 35 freakin' issues a year, and Super Comics Publications still finds time to publish Monthlies like Wondertainment's Kiddy Book for Kids! That's epic.
>
> **Linkara:** Sadly, the issue we're looking at today is decidedly less epic. Released as a special 100th issue about three years into the comic's run, this thing deals with… we'll you'll see.
>
> (Linkara holds up Issue 100 of the Foundation Force Five, clearly displaying its cover)
>
> **Linkara:** So let's dig into Tales of the Foundation Force Five #100 "Brother's Keeper", and see what happens when you combine Liefeldian proportions with writing so insane Frank Miller would have you committed.

"This dork has his own theme song? Kinda catchy. Also, who's Frank Miller?"

"Comic book writer. Did some Batman stuff that was really popular

back in the '80s."

"Stuff my kids might like, do ya think? They love Batman."

"…you read The Dark Knight Returns and tell me, sir."

> **Linkara:** The cover shows us a picture of Femme Fatale, AKA Dr. Rights, the only female member of the FF5. She's standing in the shadow of a 7-foot-tall overly-muscled beast, who is Able, or SCP-076-2. Yes, that's Able as in the Biblical Able. Now, the proportions on Able are acceptable; in previous issues, he's been shown to be really god-damn buff, and also really tall. The problem I have here is with Dr. Rights, who… well, just LOOK at it!

"He's right. A person's spine isn't supposed to bend that way."

"What do you mean? I think it looks kind of… oh, EW! It's like it's at a right angle!"

"And look at those breasts. Yeesh. No wonder her back's broken."

"Who the hell drew this?"

"According to the video, someone going by the name of 'Redd Actor'."

"Oh, and I suppose the writer is 'Dottie X. Ponge'?"

"…"

"ARE YOU FUCKING KIDDING ME?!"

> **Linkara:** The story starts out at the bottom of the Atlantic ocean at Site "Blackbox". Yeah, quick note, here. For some reason, the dialog in these comics is treated like a government document, with liberal use of "redacted" and "data expunged" thrown around. One thing that's kinda funny, though; when characters swear, it says "expletive redacted". Makes the scenes with Comrade Gunkill hilarious.

Linkara: Anyway. Here at Site Blackbox, we meet Bodyjacker, AKA Dr. Jack Bright, in a female body this time around. Judging by the size of her legs, I think she's possessing Bayonetta. (picture of said character shows up in the corner of the screen) She and another scientist are looking in at SCP-076, the giant stone prison that contains Able.

Bodyjacker (voiced by Linkara in a falsetto): How's the containment holding?

Scientist: The new procedures suggested by your team are holding up quite well, sir-uh, ma'm, uh… sorry, but I don't know what to call you.

Bodyjacker: Jack will be fine. And we don't want Abel going out on a rampage. You know who to call if he breaks out again… right, soldier? (Bodyjacker shimmies up close to the scientist)

Linkara: And then a containment breach alarm sounds, with Able stepping out of his prison… and for some reason, the on-site nuke goes off, killing everyone on site, *except* for Able, who just floats to the surface.

Linkara: I would do a gag here where I drop the comic and say "well that was short, see you next week", but quite frankly, that's getting old. Besides, you can tell by the bar at the bottom of the video that this isn't over yet.

"Huh. This kid is pretty good with voices."

"Hush."

Linkara: After that explosion, we are shown Comrade Gunkill, also known as Agent Strelnikov, in his own personal armory with ChowderClef, or Dr. Alto Clef. Yes, I am serious. The first guy has the superpower of *guns,* and the guy with the awesome hat has the super power of guns that shoot *chowder.*

The 90's Kid: Duuuuuuuuuuuuuuuude! Comrade Gunkill is **awesome!** He has the coolest superpower of all - GUNS! And it was totally radical when ChowderClef tried to blow up a *star* with a *chowder bomb!* (Pulls out a bowl marked "clam chowder" and slurps at it.)

Linkara: Okay, I admit, that… that was pretty awesome. Also, what are you doing?

The 90's Kid: I thought that if I eat enough of this Chowder stuff, I'll become just like ChowderClef!

Linkara: Yeah, good luck with that.

"Wait… why was he two different people?"

"It's a gag he does. Don't ask."

"Okay then."

Chowderclef: Dammit, Fatale, we need Gunkill to do this! It takes a real man to face off against 076!

Linkara: I AM A MAN! (punches, and brings out an SCP-682 plushie when he pulls back his hand) …where the hell did this come from?

(The SCP-682 plushie "attacks" and attempts to eat Linkara, who shoots it with his "magic gun" while screaming)

"Two things: firstly, what was that?"

"Running gag he has. Kinda like the 'We were on break!' thing on *Friends*."

"Okay. Secondly: What. The. FUCK!? He has a plush 682?! Where'd he purchase THAT!"

"I think he made it himself. He does that with some of his props."

"Even so… Also, that gun isn't actually-"

"No, sir."

"Good."

> **Linkara:** Bodyjacker, like an immortal troll, decides to pelt a freakin' Holy Hand Grenade at Able. No, seriously, that's what it's called. They got them, like, 50 issues ago.
>
> **Bodyjacker:** Hey, you son of a Biblical [EXPLETIVE REDACTED]! Have a taste of this!
>
> **Linkara:** The grenade blows up as Able catches it, and- JESUS! Look at all that blood! If any normal human did that, he'd be dead in a second! I get that this was during the 90's but still, *Jesus.*
>
> **Bodyjacker:** Genesis don't! (a montage of clips play, including one from from Star Trek III: The Search for Spock, a Sega Genesis commercial, and a clip from the music video for Genesis' *Land of Confusion*)

"…well, that was random."

> **Linkara:** Of course, Able's also immortal, and shrugs it off, producing a sword that's *bigger than him.* How big? Just pulling it out is enough to cut Jacker in half from across the room. Just… huh?! I think even Cloud would have a hard time carrying that without killing himself!

"This guy makes an awful lot of pop culture references, doesn't he?"

"He's an internet reviewer, what do you expect?"

> **SCP-076:** Mother?
>
> **Femme Fatale:** What?
>
> **Linkara:** What?

"What."

"What."

Linkara: Okay, so for those of you not paying attention, Able thinks that Femme Fatale is his mother, and apparently has quite an Oedipus complex, because a few panels later…

Chowderclef: Agatha, what the hell are you doing?

Femme Fatale: They don't call me a negotiations spectialist for nothing, Clef.

Linkara: And then… she makes out with 076. I'm not kidding, folks. She makes out with freakin' **Able**, an immortal, seven-foot-tall war god, to whom sex and sexuality are completely alien concepts. Continuity? What's that? Oh, also, they misspelled "specialist". (90's Kid Voice) Because poor literacy… is what happens when your book is written by Dottie X. Ponge.

Linkara: I'm sorry, folks, but I need to take a small break, here. We've just seen Able making out with a woman who he thinks is his mother. I need a long, cold shower.

(The video cuts to commercial)

"Odd time to have a break, almost 3/4ths of the way through…"

"I've seen enough. Get over to his house, shut down this site's server, use memetics to knock out people's memories of seeing this video, give the nerd Class-A's, and get the fucking comic."

"Watch it through to the end, at least…"

"Fine."

Linkara: And so our comic ends with SCP-073 killing his brother, and mourning over his corpse, but not before he says to Rights…

SCP-073: I'm sorry, mother. I've done it again.

Linkara: This comic sucks! As if it weren't bad enough

that the artwork is horrid and overly gory in places, the writing can be nonsensical, like ABLE SURVIVING A NUKE and whole scene with him picking up Bodyjacker's amulet and it only affecting him temporarily is just stupid. Add in the theme of incest towards the end, and the whole comic makes me wanna gag.

Linkara: Don't get me wrong, people. This series can be very good; hell, towards the beginning, it had several great story arcs, and after this one, it had several more! My personal favorite is around Issue 76, where the team travels back in time and gets turned into sea slugs. But as for this one… well…

(An alarm rings off screen as Linkara looks around in confusion)

"What's… going on?"

"It's a skit he has at the end of his reviews. Entertaining, if a bit pointless and convoluted."

"Okay then… wait, is that guy in the Hulk Hogan costume supposed to be 076?"

"And the guy with the gorilla mask is Clef. Don't ask."

"Oh, hey, credits. *Now* can you send out a task force to Class-A the nerd?!"

"I did it 35 minutes ago."

"…"

"…"

"Fuck you."

It Always Has Been, It Always Has Not Been

Vasvis Ten-Fold Reaper stepped out of the shower, and spread her arms wide. Water dripped down onto the floor as spindly metal arms whirred out from the smooth white walls, drying pads working their way across her body. Other arms fed her long black hair through drying rollers, and another set held out the day's clothing: a shortish skirt, a tank top, and a long white coat with a high collar and far too many belts and pockets and chains. On the back was the image of a clenched fist, surrounded by a sunburst.

"My Lady, we have received further reports from Varssarang Station," a deep, pleasant voice said over a hidden speaker.

"And?" Vasvis pulled her arms through the sleeves of her jacket.

"The island has been completely obliterated, all original personnel are dead or dying, the fires on the ocean surface have yet to stop, scraps of dark matter waste still dot the area to a distance of over forty kilometers, and the dying screams of the dimensionally shifted continue throughout the blast zone."

Curses. Another setback, more time wasted. This put the project…at least another eight months behind schedule. This was unacceptable: the Kinetic Overdose Gel, the Deep-Sea Nuclear Reconnaissance Endoskeleton, the mk7 Selchangelon unit series, the LONGSTRIKE orbital harpoon gun, all of that worked. All of that was developed on time all while the Temporal/Spatial Boundary Overpass Device floundered along like a morbidly obese man with one leg trying to reach a piece of unidentifiable fried food on a high shelf. She sealed the clasps on her boots.

"Furthermore, the barbarian fleet bearing their representative has arrived. Shall I send a drone out to retrieve the test subject now?"

"Yes, yes, fine." She waved her hand absentmindedly. Savages. Who needed them? Completely uncivilized. No manners, no culture,

lived off of scraps, completely helpless against the things in the deep, and, worst of all, they were horrible house guests. They always smelled like fish. But…but there were a few of them who were interesting. Especially this one. He actually volunteered to have stuff shoved in his brain. Still a fish-shitting savage, though.

“As you wish, my Lady.”

Vasvis rolled her neck and cracked her knuckles. Time for work.

—

Nikolai picked at the massive scab on the fleshy part of his thumb. The skin was peeling around the edges of the brown-red patch.

Time passed. He sat with his legs dangling over the edge of the ship, salt in his nostrils, and the wind rattling the fishbones that hung from the rim of his wide-brimmed hat. He took a swig from a plastic jug, filled with some pale yellow liquid with unidentifiable chunks bobbing at the surface. Setting that aside, he reached into his vest and removed a dented tin of chewing chalk from his inside vest pocket.

Nikolai was a philosopher, a shipseer. It was his role in life to look at things and think about them. Of course, one could not live off of philosophy alone, so he also served as doctor, navigator, keeper of records and accounts, translator, and advisor to the captain.

Sometimes, when he was away from the others and left alone with his thoughts, Nikolai imagined that he was dreaming, that the movements he made were merely the phantom actions of his sleeping mind wandering about in a great, unknown dream-time. He looked the part, with his hooded eyes and quiet, deliberate words and posture of perpetual lethargy. A sleeper waiting to wake up, stuck in that limbo before the dawn where the sleeper is aware of their sleep but cannot manage the effort of waking themselves.

The world he looked out on was likewise a dream: A ridge of jagged black mountains reaching up to the clouds, splitting the world in half. Misshapen reefs and bars broke the surf, stone melted and twisted into bulging shapes. Birds roosted on the distant crags, crowing and

screeching and flying about.

And there, towering even over the mountains, was the Center. A white cube, kilometers to a side, reaching from the surf to the clouds. Windowless, unadorned, monolithic. Even from this distance, it looked too big to be real.

Nikolai was jerked out of his dream back into sleep. Someone was standing next to him. He did not break his gaze from the structure in the distance.

“It isn’t right, Nikolai,” a woman’s voice said. Mu. Nikolai swallowed his wad of chalk.

“It’s for the good of the fleet,” he responded. “Or, right and wrong are relative concepts with no objective basis. Or, it was predestined by fate. Or, it never happened, and I am simply a dreaming god.”

“Nikolai.” Mu sat down next to him. “No one returns from the Center. I don’t even want to think about what they’ll do to you in there.”

“My choice and my life is my own.”

“That doesn’t make it *right*. You’re one of us.”

Nikolai finally turned to look at Mu. Poor, simple Mu, with her splotchy birthmark and yellow teeth and solid black eye and ox horn buns. She was not a philosopher: She was a midwife, a whaler, a mechanic, a brewer. She knew nothing of the dream that was life.

“I came to you a stranger, and I must be moving as one. The Center was willing to pay a fortune for my safe delivery. By nightfall, you will all have enough fuel and food and medicine and machine parts to supply the fleet for months.”

“I still don’t like it.”

“What’s happened has happened,” Nikolai said again, with the intonation that this was his final statement. He offered the tin of chewing chalk to Mu. “Chew?”

“No, thank you.”

Nikolai snapped the tin shut and placed it back in his vest pocket.

“You have no work to do?” Nikolai said. Mu and the others were always busying themselves with things they called work, but they never chose to put their minds to the real work of determining who they are, why they are here, and what exactly was for lunch.

“The whole ship’s gone quiet. Now we’re all just waiting for the Center to come.” She nodded towards the Center. “It doesn’t really feel like it’s out there, does it? I can see it, right there in front of my face, but it doesn’t feel real.”

“Reality does not bow to expectations. Expectations merely mask what is. This is what it is.”

“Asshole.”

Nikolai was not entirely sure why Mu chose his company above that of others. It was one of the great questions that he enjoyed pondering. She had no interest in philosophy, nor any ability for it, she had made no romantic movements towards him, and was not subtle enough to hide any secret feelings of that sort. He had no interest in the art of brewing or song-weaving, and felt no romantic inclinations towards her. Occasionally they would work together, but that could be said of any two people on the ship. It was not particularly a close friendship even: more of a mutual toleration.

It was what it was, and what it always had been.

Wait…Nikolai squinted, peering into the distance. Movement by the Center. A tiny patch of wall turned black for a moment before turning white again.

Yes, there it was. A white sphere, dotted in the center by shifting concentric rings of black. A ship of sorts.

One of many, and possibly his last.

—

The door opened to the command room. Her command room: a wide, open space split into two tiers. A high-backed chair, more of a

throne, sat on a little extended platform that looked out over the banks of computers on the lower level. It had sculptures around the base, savages and the beasts of the deep, crushed underfoot. On the wall behind the throne was a bright mosaic of the First Punch: a great whale shark, struck down and killed by the Great Fist Harker. The founding of the Center, in those foggy mythic days. The day man fought back first against the selachian menace, when they dove into those bottomless oceans and met the enemy at their door, when they fought on the beaches, and in the tidepools, and on the reefs and in the flooded ruins of the ancient cities laid low by the aquatic adversaries. And they succeeded. The Center was founded, and the threat was driven back beneath the waves where it belonged.

“If it must be done, kill the ocean itself,” spoke the Harker so long ago. The thought always made her a little teary eyed, though she never showed it in public, save in Special Center Patriotism Moments.

But right now, there were more important things to do, such as devour the food brought to her by a little mechanical servant. The contents of the bowl consisted of gold-leafed rice grown in the backs of political prisoners, jellied fetal pandas, sea-vent lychee, and ruby-dust tiger testicles with a Château Lafite sauce. Apparently, the kitchen staff decided to be low-key today.

“Mmph…mm…computer, make me a reservation for forty in the Super-Fun-Time-Room for say…sixteen forty-five. Double dose of XLSD. And make sure you bring in those twin bastrodon strippers.”

“Of course, my Lady.”

“The savage here yet?”

“The drone has just docked. A team is prepared to move him to the Audience Room as we speak.”

“Ah. Guess I should get down there, then.”

Vasvis kicked at the base of her throne, right at the sculpted face of a baby that was getting mauled by a mako. The chair began to descend on an elevator.

This entrance called for music, though she couldn't decide what kind.

—

The aerobathsyphere drone stopped. A circular section of curved wall opened, and Nikolai was greeted by a half-dozen bulky Center troopers, bearing shackles. He didn't complain. The troopers were higher-ranking than the grunts and scouts he had seen over the years, and all that rank seemed to have gone right into human-growth-hormone treatments. In one of the many Center fashions, they wore white vests, had their hair bound into four queues, and had division insignias tattooed on their arms. One of them either lost a bet or was drunk, and had a photorealistic penis tattooed across the right side of his face.

Nikolai was unfazed by their appearance. Thugs, nothing more. A thug was no threat to a philosopher. They were a stepping stone anyway in the way of his actual goal. He followed them through winding white hallways, silent, wandering through his dream. He could feel it stronger now, the tug of waking up. Dreams within dreams had led him here. Perhaps now he would finally wake up.

The Center wanted people of certain talents. They could build for muscle, plan for smarts, train for sexual prowess, but certain types of mind they wanted to get into. They wanted people who could dream. Piecing that puzzle together had taken years. Building up the nerve to seek them out willingly took several more. Dreams within dreams had guided his hand in the end. They revealed secrets of the foundations of the world to him, foggy and faded as they were. He had found the philosopher's goal: the truth.

That truth was thus: Things had always been, and they had not always been.

Now all that was needed was to wake up from the dream and find out what was behind the truth.

The group came to a set of doors, which in turn led to a large, well-lit room. The walls were all decorated with brightly painted bas reliefs, mostly depicting the butchery of sea life or various sexual acts, or

sometimes a combination thereof, and lined with massive gold-plated statues of people doing those very same things.

There were two chairs. One was small and bolted to the floor. The other was a throne. A woman lay sprawled across the arms of the throne, stuffing her face with something Nikolai did not care to know about.

The guards fastened Nikolai into the chair, and once again, he did not complain. They could kill him, but if he didn't make much of a fuss about it, they probably wouldn't. Not entertaining enough. And even if they did decide to kill him, which they probably would, Nikolai was beyond the point of truly caring.

"Holy fucking sharktits, that's good stuff," the woman said. She glanced over at Nikolai. "Oh, yeah. You're the savage who wants to get things stabbed in his brain. That's a kink I can respect. I mean, that's why you're here, and not already getting shit stabbed in your brain, because I want to congratulate you on having a good taste in fetishes for a shit-eating savage."

"So you say."

"I mean, you got some balls on you. If you weren't some sorta fish-shitting savage, I'd fuck you."

Nikolai's mind shifted. New thoughts flowed through long-empty neurons.

"Veronica…"

Dreams within dreams.

"Wait, what?" the woman righted herself in her seat and squinted at Nikolai. Nikolai himself had no idea where the word had come from, but he could feel more on their way, unbidden, worming around in his head like leeches in the bloodstream. The haze was wearing down, breaking apart.

"What are you mumbling about, fish-shitter?"

More thoughts, words, images, feelings, everything bubbling up

without any sort of reason or logic, without definition or order.

The shark! Remember the shark, Nikolai! Dreams within dreams! Truths locked away within dreams within dreams until in his sleeping state could not tell one from the other!

Nikolai woke up.

“I know you, Veronica! You were in charge of…of…goddammit you were in charge of the pictish badgers… we worked together, and you said the *same thing* to me when-”

“Wait, *what*?”

“Back then! The world has always been like this and it has not always been like this!” The words were flowing freely now. He was awake, *awake*! “Listen, Veronica, something has gone wrong, something has gone horribly wrong, we broke the universe and I …I know…argh I know what it is but I can’t find the words to say it! But we can fix it! We can undo it all! You just have to trust me, please.”

The woman stood up from her chair. Fright, disgust, confusion on her face.

“You’re fucking crazy, fish-shitter.” She snapped her fingers. Two of the statues moved from their pedestals, arms splitting into spidery masses of sharp, whirring tools.

“I know you, Veronica! I know you!”

The woman left the audience room behind her, showing no sign that she had heard Nikolai.

—

The examination of the man went off without a hitch, or so Vasvis was told. The entire thing had put her in a sour mood. Results were probably messed up, what with him being even more insane than usual. She hadn’t actually *looked* at the test results, but she was quite certain that he would have no connection with the Dreamtime.

Quite certain.

And to make matters worse, the strippers were unavailable. There went the best part of the whole damn orgy. Maybe she should just cancel it, hop herself up on Fukkinkawaii and have vicious hate sex with whoever she could get her hands on.

That was a good plan, were it not for the fact that she couldn't get the fish-shitter out of her head. He was crazy, she knew that. Completely out of his mind, babbling nonsense, nothing to worry about.

So why did she remember his face?

The ceiling of the Esoteric Reflection Chamber gave her no answers, save the crushing existential residue of the worthlessness of everyone else in the world. Usually that cheered her up, though not as much as vicious drug-fueled hate sex.

She got up and walked out the door, leaving behind other people's problems. Down the hall towards the elevator, sulking.

The elevator door opened to reveal a blood-soaked, wide-eyed, and thoroughly naked man wearing the freshly severed head of a great white around his neck and no small amount of occult symbols carved into his flesh.

"I'm a shark! I'm a shaaaaaaaaaaark! Suck my dick!"

Vasvis Ten-Fold Reaper scowled, jabbed him under the sternum with her left hand, and tore it out. With her right hand, she made a fist and caved in his skull.

What Do You Think Love Feels Like Once You Understand It?

You were never big on dancing, but hobbies have to start somewhere, right? Here I am, practicing valsadão, perfecting the form while I wait for you to wake. Quiet enough for you not to hear me; I know how your ear is tuned to my footsteps by now.

Hmmmm ba doo-ooh, mmmm doo wooo… Do you still regret it, Luis? That miserable, miserable December? You forgot what love was supposed to be. Burying yourself deep in dirty liquor and construction, thinking nonsense all the while. Maybe it was our different outlooks on life. But what fool is raised to believe in God and think everything to do with your life on Earth ends at death? Maybe I was the lucky one then, growing up in… *Nordeste*. Mind is too addled to remember where anymore. Uh, raised by parents harboring a fury against John Paul II. I either sleep forever in nothingness, or live forever on this planet. So let's say it was, ahh, the lack of hindsight, that made you think you'd lose me forever.

Oooh ooh… excuse me for everything spilling out like an overwrought telenovela. Ah well. I wish they played music here. The kind to dance to. I still remember every melody and every step for every version of this dance. That's something mothers don't let their kids forget. Always cherish that fiery passion for beauty.

Last I heard of my mother, she was teaching kids how to dance for cheap. Wouldn't come to America. There wasn't enough money in it for her, and even if there was, what could she tell everyone back home? Her son became a faggot? She could at least understand that part if nothing else; that's more than enough. If she's still alive, I'm sure she would continue teaching. Maybe she's learned some English by now. Perhaps she would love to hear I still speak Portuguese too. It's like training wheels after all.

To think, had we never been locked up, we could have started our

own dance studio. *Luis e Altair, o dançarino escondido.* I wish you had been taught the rhythm of Puerto Rico so you could teach me as well.

Aaaaaah… ah, ah, ah ahhhh…

A whole decade, and they believe that you're still dangerous because of me. I know better. I know deep within your heart and your soul, you're as dangerous as a dead mouse. But we're only at the mercy of each other. Committing crimes only to sustain ourselves, blaming each other. Hey, how much of that do you wish you could take back? Is life better here, or could we have steadied ourselves for a new home? Ba-dahhh, dun duh-dahhh… I don't think it mattered. Here, we're the most docile we've ever been. I can't even feign hating you for whatever you've done now. It's our honeymoon. How soft we've gotten. I don't even long for pills anymore. Do you feel the same way?

…I would hope so.

It's a good change of pace. A new rhythm for us. I am simply tethered to you. And that's all. We're no more special than anything else here. It's perfectly okay. Wherever you go, I'll follow. Try to work your way into Heaven for the both of us. I need to see something new.

…

It's too lonely and quiet. Oh well. Ghosts don't need sleep, just stuff to do. Bum bum hmmmm ooooh doo… Does it matter if you aren't awake, anyway? I'll simply dance for two. *Vamos, menino!* You'll have to pick up the pace for me later.

It Grows On Trees

To be frank, Atkinson hadn't expected the object to create cockroach-like entities with thorns covering their exoskeletons. For organisms composed of plant matter, they packed enough of a punch to tear a gash in his right bicep, leaving him stumbling towards the chamber's exit door and staggering back into the antechamber. With a stuffed breathing, he tore open a first-aid kit and began to wrap his arm in some bandaging, after packing the wound.

It was strange. The plant normally only exuded arachnid-based lifeforms, and only every so often. Atkinson was sure that it was not the environment of the chamber - he paid close attention to it, especially with the object's finicky nature. Never before had he seen anything but the arachnids it normally spawned, and the sudden change was rather concerning. He flicked the minor alert button a few more times to try and call for assistance, before finally noticing that he had shouted quite a few times while wrapping himself. It was odd - he hadn't noticed it during the process, but, he could feel the ringing in his ears of his own yells echoing. He glanced through the viewing port towards the plant.

"Atkinson!"

The doctor's head turned as the crew member, Fetters, ran down the hall. He sighed and stowed the first aid kit back on its wall holster, leaning against the wall with a clipboard. "Yes, Fetters? Why didn't someone come sooner? I could have been seriously injured."

"I heard your shouting, just now. But there weren't any alarms."

Atkinson raised an eyebrow. "I was sure that I pressed it. Sure of it. Both the internal and external alarm designators. Are you certain?"

Fetters nodded, then clucked his tongue. "Mechanical malfunction? I don't know. I'll call up to the Sector overwatch."

Fetters grabbed out his clearance card and swiped it, walking back out the antechamber's door and into the hall, pressing on the intercom. Atkinson stared at the small, unilluminated indicator light on the card swipe mechanism. He squinted. It wasn't green, nor had it been after Fetter's swipe. He pulled his own card, swiping it. The door opened, and he saw Fetter standing there, speaking into the intercom. It closed again, and he promptly swiped his Visa. Again, it opened, and this time Fetter was staring at him. "What are you *doing*?" he asked, letting go of the intercom button.

"Testing the door. What did they say?"

"Nothing. The wing must be malfunctioning. I'll call it in."

Nathan pressed the intercom for himself as Fetters stepped aside. "Hello? Atkinson here."

He waited. And listened. And what he heard was a perfect A flat.

He grabbed Fetters by the arm and yanked him back into the antechamber, pulling the lever to lock out anyone from the containment's control room. Fetters pulled free and shoved Atkinson into the door. "What the Hell, doc? What's gotten into you?"

"A perfect A flat, Fetters."

"What the fuck are you talking about?"

"The intercom, Fetters," he breathed. "Something isn't right."

"How would you know what pitch it was playing?"

"I used to be musically invested, to a degree. I almost majored in it, you know. playing the-"

"Get to the point," Fetters asked, impatiently. He turned and began to fiddle with the control panel, finding little to no response, mouthing confused phrases to himself.

"SCP-" Atkinson murmured.

"What?"

"SCP-" There was every indication that Nathan was stating a number to finish off the nomenclature, but no sound rang from his lips. He held up a finger and wrote the designation down on the clipboard: SCP-3142.

"SCP-"

"SCP-" Fetters tried again, mildly irked.

"S. C. P. -"

Fetters sighed. "Okay, explain."

"It's an acoustic anomaly that prevents sound from being transmitted that can describe its anomaly, basically. Long-winded descriptions are fine, but, exact designation is impossible in anything but written records. Hence, you can't finish the name." Atkinson initiated lockdown of the plant's containment, setting down the clipboard. It guaranteed twelve hours of total containment, or at least, he hoped.

"Are you sugges-"

To be frank, Atkinson had not expected that the plant would create cockroaches. And, being fair, of course, he wouldn't have expected that they would catalyze a reaction between Pentaerythritol tetranitrate, a plasticizer, and a small startup reaction to set it all going. It kicked the wall in, and Atkinson and Fetters back into the opposite wall, showered with debris. The onset of plant-insects was immediate and frantic, Fetters grabbing Atkinson off the ground quickly and swiping a card to get back out the door. He shoved Atkinson forward and tried the intercom one last time, looking down the hall. It seemed pristine.

Fetters tried to speak, but he suddenly realized that the both of them were breathing heavily, barely managing a *what* before wheezing, coughing, and brushing some debris from his clothing. Atkinson had left his coat behind, and his clipboard, which had taken the brunt of the debris. He leaned into the wall, palms planted on it, coughing vehemently.

"I-it… *cough* means that, if a con- *cough* tainment breach were

happening… we wouldn't hear it, if someone… someone managed to figure out how to use the anomaly. Like the… the plant. Yeah. That was the plant. That's… genetic engineering, for you."

Fetters didn't bother grabbing for his phone. He knew it wouldn't do him much good by now. "So what do you suggest we do, then, huh? Stand here and wait for something to get us? What the fuck, Atkinson?"

Atkinson's oddly nonchalant attitude about things, especially in containment efforts that required a bit more force than he had planned for, had garnered him a small increment of gossip. He rubbed his temples. "Well, for starters, we start buying organic."

"*What?*"

"Well, I mean, look at it! The plant was obviously modified, look at it. Someone changed it between this current plant and the last seedling."

"Atkinson, focus. What do we do about the breach of Site-88?"

The doctor sighed. "Well, we find a way out. We stay calm. I think I know a way. SCP-3875 has a runoff tunnel that leads off-site. We can figure it out from there. Maybe we can get into the vehicle depot."

"Right, right," Fetters breathed, trying to gain bearings as they began their way down the hall. Somewhere behind them, the scuttling of plastic explosives scratched against the doors.

It Had All Been For Nothing

The monsoons had come.

There were no windows and one foot of solid cement in between Clef and the outside, and yet the rain's steady hammering echoed loud and clear. Too loud, in fact, as the doctor could barely hear his own thoughts over the chorus.

Sighing, Clef snapped the laptop closed, his hands reaching under his glasses to massage tired, heavy eyelids.

One sip of coffee, and he was back in business.

Tip, tip, tap, tip, tap.

He began to feel his left foot prickle with the telltale sharp pains of pins and needles. How long had it been since he had moved? One, two hours?

Tip, tap, tip, tip, tap, tap, tip… tap… tip… tip.

His typing slowed to a crawl, and then finally to a stop as his finger bounced off of the last key. In the silence after that, as the steady patter of the rain and of the business around him began to fade in once more, he paused to look on what he had wrote.

> To whom it may concern,
>
> Due to the numerous breaches it has caused and the uncountable personnel it has killed, it has been generally known by the majority of the Foundation for a long time that SCP-682 is too dangerous to contain, and must be neutralized for the safety of humankind. Although, unfortunately, it is also generally known that SCP-682 cannot be injured or terminated by any known means, and thus it continues to live in containment to this day.

> So here's what I'm going to do. I'm going to shove SCP-682 into SCP-914, put it on the "Rough" setting, and hope for the best. If we're lucky, SCP-682 should come out completely neutralized. If not, well… there's a reason I'm sending this to you.

With a final click, Clef pressed send. It was done, and there was no turning back now.

The recipient, whoever it would end up being, was going to have one hell of a night.

Clef began making his way to SCP-682's containment chamber, waving, smiling when necessary, and acting like an otherwise normal person along his way through the labyrinth of twisting white hallways, only hoping the other staff, in particular the more intuitive ones, would buy it.

Considering the fact he found his journey unimpeded, perhaps his efforts must have worked. No one suspected a thing.

He paused at the door, keycard hovering just over the reader, and smiled, almost chuckling to himself.

It always was a common myth among the newbies that the great Benjamin Kondraki had ridden SCP-682.

And it seemed that now, in one way or another, that myth would finally come true.

Clef had no idea how he had managed to fit SCP-682 through a one by three meter door, but somehow, it had happened. Once the lizard managed to crash through the door, its claws hit hard tile, began to slide, just as planned, right towards the input chamber of SCP-914, its door wide open and waiting for its oncoming test subject.

By the time the lizard knew exactly where it was headed, it was too late. Clef leapt off the thing's back as it tried to twist around, eyes bulging in a primal fear, claws desperately skittering on the practically frictionless surface. But in the second it took for SCP-682

to whirl around and realize its plight, it had already collided with the back of the chamber in one sickening clang.

Clef, meanwhile, landed on his back with a sickening thud, all the air knocked out of his lungs in one giant reverse gasp. ‘Twere it any other time, he would have taken a second to regain his bearings. But a second was time he did not have.

Stumbling from side to side, the walls spinning before his eyes, the doctor carried himself to the door as fast as his legs could carry him, gripping the edge until his knuckles turned white and throwing all his weight opposite to the door, slamming it shut just as SCP-682 lunged towards him, ramming his head against what was once an opening with a sickening metallic clang. For a moment, the entire chamber shook with the impact.

And then… silence. Still and quiet, with nothing but Clef’s own heavy breaths to be heard.

Suddenly, the chamber trembled once more, another lurching clang reverberating through the air.

Clef watched in horror as the door to SCP-914 suddenly groaned in what almost seemed like metallic pain, the door beginning to buckle in a head-shaped dent.

Another clang sounded.

And then another.

And another.

With each one, the dent in the door grew larger.

There was no time to lose.

Staggering from the convulsions of the trembling chamber, Clef made his way to the center of the machine, upon which sat a single, blood red dial. Grasping the dial, he prepared to jam it to the left as far as his arm could take him.

But then, another tremor shook the ground beneath the doctor,

knocking him in the opposite direction until his hand finally fell away, and he crumpled to the ground in a broken heap.

Slowly, Clef brought himself to stand as the room once more spinned around him, his vision blurry and warped. It took a second for everything to finally come into focus, but when it did, the doctor's heart jumped into his throat.

There, before him, was the blood red dial, its pointed edge jammed all the way to the right, towards "Very Fine."

Oh shit.

SCP-914 whirred to life, and the lizard within began to shriek. Clef, did as well. He screamed, he banged on the doors, gripped the dial with all his strength until his knuckles turned white, did anything he could, hoping some miracle would happen.

But none did.

Clef fucked up, and now the world was going to pay for it.

The process was agonizingly slow. He could feel the seconds ticking down, one at a time, wearing at his chest, whispering of his folly in his mind. And slowly, but surely, over that long minute, he came to the final realization that the world was going to end, that everyone he ever knew was going to die, and everything the Foundation did had, in the end, been for naught.

And it was all his fault.

'Twere he any other doctor, he might have curled up in a ball and cried.

Finally, the whirring stopped, and from the machine emanated a pleasant ding.

The doors to the output chamber hissed open, revealing behind it a blinding light, one even Clef could only look away from, blinking repeatedly to clear the spots that had now appeared in his vision.

The doctor raised his gun, despite knowing how useless bullets

would be against what was once SCP-682. And yet, despite knowing the futility of it all, the pointlessness of his actions, he was ready. He was ready to be humanity's last bastion against its destruction, as well as its first casualty. It was funny… Clef never thought that, despite everything, he would be so calm in the face of death. But in the end, he was ready.

Raising his head high and squinting, he faced the light.

And there, in front of him, stood a gecko, nigh one foot tall, his scales a pleasant shade of green which reminded one of tranquil meadows under bright blue sky, a smile upon his face so warm and calm even Clef himself felt a sense of serenity wash over him, over the room, over the world itself as it breathed a gentle sigh.

"Hello, sir," said the gecko, with a voice so serene and inviting, like a mother cooing to her babe as it slept serenely, swaddled in her arms, "did you know that fifteen minutes or less can save you fifteen percent or more with Geico?"

Humanity began to cry tears of joy as one, for now was the day it was truly born.

It Just Shattered

“This isn’t structurally possible.”

“Well, yes. That’s why we called you. What’s up with it?”

“No fucking clue.”

Agent Green lit a cigarette and began gesticulating towards the piece.

“Can you please not smoke in here?”

“It’s obvious that it’s non-Euclidean. Might have to be a bit concerned about fallout.”

“What, you think it’s radioactive or something?”

“No, I mean, it might literally fall outwards. That would be problematic. Anything particularly valuable in here?”

“Sir, this is an art gallery.”

“So nothing then, brilliant. We’ll probably have to blow it up. No way we could even try to move it, could tear the space around it. That would be problematic.”

“Blow it up? No way. Much too dangerous. You could take down the whole building.”

Agent Green levelled his eyes at the stern curator.

“You realise that you have a physics-defying object in here, right? That’s ten years in jail in this state, minimum sentence.”

The curator’s stern façade wavered slightly.

“That’s nonsense.”

“It’s one of those stupid laws that nobody really thinks is serious. Stuff like riding a bicycle in a swimming pool, or feeding cheese to a rabbit by hand. The long list of bullshit just hides the outrageous things that actually happen. So you can either let me smash this thing, or you’ll go to jail for a very long time.”

Agent Green blew a mouthful of smoke towards the intricate glass statue. The smoke followed the curvature, making its way up a thin column. It sped up and slowed down, appeared and disappeared, as it weaved its way through the warped space.

“Yeah, this is pretty complex. No way to remove it without destruction. It’s probably bending the space by itself though, once we get rid of it you’ll have no problems.”

Beneath the pedestal, there was a small bronze plaque:
I Know You’re Going To Fuck This Up, You Assholes, Why Can’t You Just Learn To Leave Well Enough Alone, Some Of Us Are Trying To Actually Make Something And Not Take Part In A Stupid Fucking Dick Measuring Contest While Trying To Be The Kings Of The Playground, But Fuck It, I Guess I Can Say Making You Destroy This Is A Piece Of Unwilling Performance Art, So Good Job, Well Done, You’ve Protected Countless Civilians By Smashing This Thing, And Meanwhile I’m Off Making Another Ten Just Like It In Other Galleries While You Try To Play Catch Up, You Stupid Fucking Twats, Just Fuck Off Seriously
by Ruiz Duchamp

“This Duchamp guy. You ever meet him?”

“Just the once, when he came in here.”

“He leave a contact number or anything?”

“I’m afraid not. He walked in off the street and put the piece together while people watched. It was quite confusing, gave the patrons quite a headache. Me too, I might add.”

“You actually saw him put it together?”

Agent Green threw his cigarette to the ground, putting it out with his

shoes. Finally, an eyewitness.

“Oh, yes. And before you ask, no, we don’t have any recordings of it. All the security feeds just switched to black text on a white background, saying ‘Know Peking’. No idea how he did it.”

Agent Green looked towards the delicate glass structure and sighed heavily. A bit too heavily. The warped space took his sigh, magnified it, and redirected it in just the right direction to make the piece tilt. It fell in slow motion through impossible twists and turns, and when it finally hit the ground -

It Might Have Been

Item #: SCP-343

Object Class: Keter

Special Containment Procedures: SCP-343 is currently uncontained. No reliable method of containing SCP-343 has been found.

SCP-343 has taken up regular residence in humanoid containment chamber 208 within Site 17. All contact with SCP-343 is to follow standard humanoid interview protocols. In the case of unauthorized contact, personnel are to politely decline conversation with SCP-343 and report the incident to the nearest supervisory personnel. If contact cannot be avoided, all information gathered is to be likewise reported.

In the case of SCP-343 making contact outside of the Foundation's direct jurisdiction, appropriate cover-up countermeasures are to be taken as soon as the extent and content of contact has been ascertained.

This document has been modified by Mátyás Büki, known to all as SCP-343.

Description: My friends, it is high time that I leave you. I must be moving on. Thank you greatly for your hospitality in my time of need. However, it is no longer safe here, and while this is no fault of yours, I cannot with good conscience allow myself to remain. I have taxed your kindness enough.

I will admit, I have not been entirely truthful in these past years, or entirely cooperative. My squatting in your facility like a homeless beggar doubtlessly caused a great deal of frustration and unnecessary panic, and for that and a great many other things, I apologize.

While it cannot repay what you have done for me, in return for your kindness, I will tell you a story.

This story begins with a poor boy of Prague, born many long years ago to a poor mother and a poor father. Life was hard. It often is in these stories. There was little food to be had, and many mouths to feed. My mother made a little coin as a washer woman. My father worked in the factory. He was not an unkind man, but as many poor men are wont to do, spent much of his meager earnings on the bottle.

This was when I first learned of what I could do. My father returned home, late at night, far more drunk than he had ever been before. He was raging and cursing about, maddened with liquor. My mother tried to speak to him, to calm him, but his slurring became angrier and angrier in argument, and eventually he struck her, and threatened worse if she did not “shut up and please him”.

I was terrified. In the darkness, I could not see his face. It did not seem like my father, but in my heart I knew it was, and that made it all the worse. My mother was screaming, and my brothers and sisters were crying. I screamed at him. “Stop!” I said, and he did. He stopped.

Like a statue. Frozen in place. Not even the folds of his clothing would be moved. His face was twisted up in drunken rage, but his eyes were different. There was no anger there. Only fear. Fear of a kind that made my own seem paltry in comparison. In my father’s eyes I saw a man who was looking into his own damnation.

And though they did not move, I knew he could see me. Somehow, I knew that I had not killed my father. I had done something far worse.

I ran. I knew not where to, but I ran into the night, leaving my brothers and sisters and mother behind me. To this day, I do not know what happened to them. I pray they were spared what came to follow me.

Years passed. I begged and stole and clawed my way across Europe, without direction, half-feral and half-mad. Death followed me. My curse was no longer content with simply leaking out with my

words: it lashed out on its own, wild and deadly. In time I found I could control it with thought, but the act left me exhausted, and the curse only grew more violent as I tried to control it. I began to attract unwanted attention.

It was a group of Roma who had found me first. I had become so unused to speaking with human beings that I could do nothing but croak like a frog for days. Eventually I would whisper, but they did not understand me, nor I them. But they fed me, and I watched them as they practiced their arts. They did not seem to fear me. Here, I thought, here is where I may learn to control the curse.

I never spoke to them about it. The crows came first. I called them crows, for the black coats they wore. They descended upon us, tore apart the camp. They were not interested in the Roma: they had come for me.

I killed them. Not all of them. But many.

I fled again, and here is where my struggle began in earnest. They had found me, and I was dangerous, and they would stop at nothing to have me. I fled, and I learned. I taught myself. My curse became more a blessing. I lived a secret little war, and as I fought, I learned more and more. How to take the shape of another. How to make a mouthful of bread or a handful of water. The crows returned again. They were British. There were others, the French, the Prussians, some of my own Empire, members of the Church and even an American. They hunted me, and in return, I hunted them.

More years passed, though I barely noticed. My blessing still attempted to bite me and at times it did, but I had learned. I could walk upright, hiding but a little, fearing little. I existed as the faceless man walking down the street, seen once and forgotten forever. My belly was full, and my wits were wary. I picked up languages, identities, scraps of knowledge that would aid me, weapons and defenses against my enemies. But, as things happen, my enemies had learned as well, and they had learned better than me.

I was ambushed. My guard was down, and they sprung. They had ways to prevent me from healing myself, ways to prevent me from escaping, weapons that could hurt me. They drove at me, razing my

hiding places and piercing my disguises. My years as a child came back, all the more horrible. My mind, fragile as it was from years of animal existence, began to unravel. A great many died, and all along I felt myself slipping away.

They drove me across bloody fields, to Paris, down, deep into the bowels of that city, where the dead digested in their holy peace. It was in those catacombs where I had a transformation. A single moment of clarity, where the universe fell into order around my broken body.

I became a god in a dark, slimy hole, bleeding and naked and half-dead. My apotheosis was witnessed by the empty sockets of a thousand skulls.

I returned to the surface, and my fight was over. They were no more a threat to me than the gnats. A god has no reason to fear a man, and he likewise has no need to bother in fighting them. They merely need to be waved away. I did so, and then I left, and for the first time in decades, they did not follow.

Peace then, for the first time since I had last heard my mother's songs at night. I gloried in it. I watched the world, and it was good.

In time, I suppose I forgot about the crows and their fellows. They did not forget about me. A god's sin is pride, and I had it in full. I believed they had thought me dead, but they never did. The false body I left in the catacomb was not enough. They were only waiting, taking their time, and in time, their children and children's children came once again hunting me, and once again, they had learned.

They had learned, and I had not. God though I was, I could not see all, I could not do all. They had ways to fight back, as they always had. My peaceful life shattered, as did my illusions. I was old and complacent, they were not. I fled once more.

It was then that I made my place among you, playing card tricks and telling stories, all to make you believe that my power was infinite, that you would not dare cross me lest I destroy you. It was a lie, all sleight of hand and clever riddles. You were never in my power, but I in yours. With you, I was safe, a god in his holy place. I had hoped

that I would ride out the storm, that those who sought to destroy me would eventually give up, but I know that is not true, and I know now that it would not have mattered: you would have eventually turned me over, and you would have been justified.

I know that you will seek me out, and so I only hope that this may lighten your hearts.

Good bye, my friends. Good bye.

Where's The Shadow Government When You Need Them?

"Mister Hoover, your two o' clock is ready for you."

It was the usual thing. J. Edgar Hoover's people took him down to one of the lower levels, in a rickety old elevator. They had a few re-purposed basements like these. Places where Hoover, or an aide, or some random agent who happened to look tough, could take anyone new to the power and show them how to behave. Today, though, there was somebody waiting for him. A smallish man, with an ill-fitting suit and sunglasses. His hair was a short flat-top, with perky ears poking from either side. He held a briefcase, and stood behind a small card table.

"Hello, Mister Director, sir. My name is… Agent Fredericks, and I'm with the Unusual Incidents Unit."

Hoover smiled genially at the man, and nodded for him to continue.

"Uhm…" he clicked a briefcase, and reached inside. "I have… a few things to show you, sir. We've recently had an incident, out in Utah. A crash site. I can show you some photos…"

"Please." Hoover took a seat at the table.

Fredericks reached inside, and spread three large photos on the table. Hoover smiled at him, then peered at the thin sheets of information.

One, the first one, the biggest one, was a crater. A hot, fresh crater, out from Utah, if the boy was being honest. Inside of it was some sort of capsule. With antennae and a small, probably Red, hammer and sickle embossed in the metal. There was a heck of a lot of smoke coming out of it.

Second photo was men in radiation suits pulling a small animal out

of it. It was a dog, or maybe something like a wolf. Hoover sighed. It was a shame, really, that such a wonderful creature would have such messy origins. It almost looked like a dog, like one of the ones he'd loved throughout his life. But it wasn't. It was a hair spreading, flea carrying, vomit on the carpet disease of an animal that Hoover paid a nice woman to deal with for him.

The third one was all the men melting out of their masks.

He tapped it with his cane. “What is this?”

"I… well… we're not, uh, sure, sir, but…”

Hoover touched Frederick's arm in an almost motherly way. "Just relax, and tell me what I need to know."

Fredericks took a breath, closed his eyes, and nodded. "That was the last photo we recovered. At the site. The dog was gone."

“Beg your pardon?”

“I'm sorry… but, what happened is, the crater became extremely radioactive… once we removed the dog. When another team could be sent out, it was gone.”

“Who did we lose?” Hoover tensed, squaring his face at the young man before him.

“Contractors. We couldn't get any of our men out there in time, so we had to hire some, uh locals.” Fredericks winced as he said it.

Hoover leaned back. "Well, thank the lord for small favors."

Fredericks shrugged with one shoulder. "There's another thing…"

Hoover stopped reclining. "Yes?"

"Well… well, if you'll look at these papers, you can see for yourself. Some, well, everyone who's see it thinks it's a pretty significant… event."

Hoover looked up from the sheaf of papers, to Fredericks, then back

to the papers, and frowned loudly.

On the paper, there was a photo, burnt but not destroyed. It had been taken automatically, from proximity, after the men in the crater had melted. It showed three men in long, black coats. They were lifting the dog up and holding it aloft.

"This is a hell of a thing, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is."

"Are they GRU-P men?"

"We don't know, sir, but it's a possibility."

Hoover nodded, and stood up. "I'll get you booked for a flight home today. You've got a lot of work to do."

Above them, a camera slowly slithered out of a freshly drilled hole, and back up to two dirty Americans sitting in a damp, dripping and very humid storage room. The scrawnier of the two, the man, pulled the wire up out of the hole before wrapping it in a bandana and stuffing it in his jacket.

The woman got up from the wet ground and patted her knees with a dry rag. She hissed at her companion. "Well? How did it go?"

Jules patted his jacket down and wiped his brow. "I got him, images and audio, but we might have a… difficulty. Either someone is onto us, or we're not the first ones here."

His wife looked at him, frowning quietly.

"Someone else, uh, they drilled through this first. When I tried the hand crank, it went through like butter. Somebody filled this in with… something. Looks like concrete, but a lot softer."

Ethel's eyes took an an intense glare, as she dropped back to the ground and pored over the recently re-covered hole. "Are you serious?"

Julius, glancing anxiously at the door, spat his words at her. "You're looking at it, aren't you?!"

Ethel rose, and shot him an angry glance. "What do we do now?"

Julius glanced out the door. "We're going to walk out and pretend nothing happened. I don't think we've been compromised. Just… we're not as original as we thought."

As she walked towards him, Ethel crossed her arms. "So… do we tell Semenov?"

"I think we're going to keep this to ourselves, for now. We're going to walk out, and we can discuss this over tea later. Okay?"

She nodded. "There weren't any problems taping it, though?"

Jules chuckled. "Don't forget that I'm a professional."

He pushed open the door, and with that, they scurried out, quietly as they'd arrived. They had a lot of work to do.

The flight was uneventful, save for the fact that the Director of the FBI rode with a junior agent to a top secret facility. If that was eventful, then this flight was definitely unusual. But they arrived without incident, and an unremarkable secret black car drove them to an unremarkable warehouse that held a secret government facility.

As they got out of the car, Hoover's entourage crowded around the man, walking in step with him as he followed Agent Fredericks into the warehouse. The inside was a pure, sterile white, with a ceiling stretching high enough for clouds to form, if they allowed the weather to get in. Around them, men in suits sat at oak desks, scratching down notes with number two pencils. It was like any other office, save for the huge steel cages scattered on wheels around the facility.

"So, are you going to be showing me what you've all been working on?"

Fredericks, his eyes pointed straight ahead, nodded.

"Good. I've not been this way in a while, so it'll be nice to catch up with the boys. Have you been working on much, besides this dog case?"

Fredericks shrugged.

Hoover reached up and tapped his shoulder. "Are you alright, son?"

"Oh, what? Yeah, yeah… it's just, I didn't think you'd want to come see things personally. People are going to be surprised."

Hoover chuckled. "Hopefully a pleasant surprise, yes?"

Fredericks nodded, and led them all to the closest steel cage. "This is… something we've recovered from Florida… it's a snail-person, and if, uh, you talk to it, it makes you into a snail."

Inside the cage, there was indeed a man, dripping with snot with a hard carapace nailed to his back with great granite nails. His eyes, stuck on stalks, swiveled and peered at the assembled audience. Fortunately, it couldn't speak. They'd taken off the mouth.

Hoover wrinkled his nose. "It's disgusting."

Fredericks nodded. "It's a damnable thing. Everyone who we talked to, who'd been affected, they could still talk. They were all really happy about it."

"Deviants."

"Well, we did a background check on some of them. Nothing suspicious, but we thought we ought to anyways. I'm sure you, uh, agree, sir."

“You can never be too careful in this day and age. There's reds, and fairies, and they're everywhere. You know, just the other day, they implicated some men I used to work with? I'd called them 'colleagues', and they turned out to be… deviant."

"I hear that, sir."

"Have you seen the hearings? It’s much, much worse than we thought. That’s why your mission is so, so important, both to me on a personal level, and to this nation.”

Fredericks blinked. "Thank you, sir. Shall we go on?"

"Please. We've got to get started. They've already got started, and we've got to get the jump on Them before they get the jump on us. Again."

Ian Walsh sat next to Fredericks as the latter drove the same old black Ford back up to Zion. They had a Geiger counter between them, and nothing else of note. It was at least a hundred degrees outside the car, so he hoped that they could find this mutt quick.

They pulled to a crunching stop, right at the precipice. Walsh got out first and peered into the hole. It still looked like a pile of dirt at the bottom of a dirt hole, with some metal chunks tossed in for show. The boys had carted out most everything else.

Fredericks came up behind him holding a sack of their equipment. "Nice to be back, huh? Especially since it's real now. Not a wild goose chase."

"Yeah, sure. Nice." Walsh could already feel himself sweating like a pig. "So, you want to do the Geiger counter, or the cage?"

Fredericks hefted the sack, and placed it onto the ashy ground. "Geiger counter, I guess…"

"Alright. So when we see the thing, wave the treat around, and try to get it in the cage. Hopefully it doesn't melt us. Don't touch it, though. We're just here to bag it. No need for anyone to get touchy."

"Whatever you say." Fredericks said disinterestedly, as he held the counter aloft, and squinted at it. "Uh…"

"Do you know how to use a Geiger counter?"

"Just give me a minute."

Walsh tapped his foot on the ground as the junior agent angled the counter around. He was animated, shimmying and swaying his arms. Through the haze, Ian thought he might be seeing double.

It's too damned hot out here.

Fredericks pointed towards some brush. "Okay… counter says it's maybe this way?"

Without a word, Walsh began trudging towards it. He peered through the heat haze, looking for movement. If the dog was in there, it didn't have too many places to hide.

As soon as he'd taken his next step, it ambled out of the bushes. Panting like crazy, dirty as hell, but looking happy to see them.

Walsh froze.

The dog froze.

Fredericks waved his geiger counter.

"Don't make any sudden moves," hissed Walsh. "It's right here."

Slowly, he set the trap down, treat and water inside. He backed up, crouching and ready to sprint if the dog so much as sneezed.

It went into the kennel, and began lapping up water. The door snapped shut, but it didn't seem to notice. Water was more important than snappy noises, anyways.

Fredericks grinned. "Nice work!"

Walsh wiped his brow, his face turning up in a worried grimace. "Didn't think it'd be that easy… you have the radio, right?"

"It's in the car."

"Call the baggers up. We're done here."

There was only one thing Hoover was interested in today.

He'd been waiting around the UIU offices to get a look at this beast for the better part of four days, and he'd been up all night for three of them. He wasn't in any mood for a sightseeing tour.

He marched through the offices, going straight past the Lamprey-skinned man, whose slippery flesh might've otherwise occupied his attention all day.

Hoover went stomping past the endless waterfall, which occasionally disgorged whole catfish, fish, and cats. They even came with their shots.

He even ignored the mirror of a thousand bodies, which showed every dead body you'd come within one mile of in your lifetime. They'd all ask about your day and made very genial conversation.

It posed no interest to him today.

Hoover walked up besides Agent Fredericks and peered into the cage. "This here is the Red dog?"

Fredericks nodded. "Yes sir! Special Agent Walsh and I captured it this morning."

"Good… Very good work. Have you got it all processed?"

"We couldn't really touch it. At least… not till we studied it. So we had to corral it into a weighing room to get its measurements, among other things, like checking for mites, and such. But, it's all done now."

"Was it a tough catch?"

"… Yes, sir, but we got it in the end." Fredericks smiled.

"You'll be hearing from my office soon, Agent. I'm very interested in this case."

"We know, Director."

"Good night to you, son."

With that, Hoover donned his hat. His entourage worked quickly, packing up their things and getting the contact information from their agents. But before too long, they were through, and Hoover boarded a plane heading for headquarters. Work had been done.

J. Edgar had restless dreams that night.

As he floated in the violet void, the elementary school teachers casually circled through the childhood pets, all mashed together into a single mass of paws, ears, and one compiled face embodying cute friendliness. It was panting at him, and the pants were asking for his math homework.

A floating tongue manifested itself, slobbering all over the loose leaf. "Did you catch them, Daddy? Did you catch the bad guys?"

Hoover groaned. "I'm working on it, honey. I'm working on it."

Then, he woke up.

« Touchdown | HUB | Chasing Tails »

It's a bird! It's a plane! It's-!?

I'm going to preface this. This was written as a joke. You shouldn't take this as something to emulate. Having someone write something in the same vein would be embarrassing, and I'd probably end up taking the story down. So please, as you read this, remember, it's not even CLOSE to possibly being canon.

Thomas lazed at the security desk. Fifteen minutes until his shift ended. Fifteen minutes until he could go get a drink, hit on that cute girl from maintenance. She looked like she sure knew her way around a wrench, and Thomas had a "tool" of his own for her to handl-

"Uh, Pardon me. Can you tell me where the research labs are?"

Thomas' musings were interrupted by the sound of his genitalia retracting inside his body from sheer horror.

Floating in front of him, approximately four feet above the ground, was a fetus. A high pitched voice spoke again.

"Normally I would know where it is, but I'm a new transfer and your site is set up strangely. My name is Doctor Abortion."

"Do-do-doctor what?!"

"Doctor Abortion. As you may imagine, my name is centered around my unusual appearance. Now, if you'll direct me to the research labs, I will be out of your hair."

Thomas wordlessly pointed. The fetus bobbed at him, and floated off.

Today, Thomas decided, was a good day to hide. Under his bed.

In the hallways, people stopped and stared. A female lab assistant screamed, and fainted. The fetus bobbing its way along the corridors took no notice. A tune was hummed, though, for the life of them, they couldn't understand how.

The abortion who floated like a butterfly and gave nightmares like an elder god paused in front of a door. A knock was heard, and boggled many a researcher.

Doctor Gerald poked his head out and stared.

"Surprise, Daddy!"

Thomas, hiding under his bed, shrank deeper into the darkness at the sound of a piercing scream.

"But, but, but, but!"

"You transferred right after I started to show. Not trying to run on me, were you?"

"No! I didn't know! No one told me!"

"Probably because of the fear of me being captured. Most one-night-stand babies aren't this valuable."

"So, you're sure it's me?"

"Yes, I am. They ran all sorts of tests on me. Still are, actually."

"So, uh, what is the, uh…?"

"He's a healthy little boy."

"What are we going to name it?"

"Oh, sticking around are we? Well, I was thinking…Claude. After me."

A Filthy Scarecrow Waves His Arms

On the flight back to Headquarters, Agent Fredericks mused on how familiar the blurry outline of Washington D.C below him was getting.

Every week, it seemed, Director Hoover wanted them to come back and talk to him about the case. What they'd uncovered, how close they were to getting the Red dog, and any other detail, significant or not, that happened to come into his head.

The plane touched down on the runway, just as it had so many times before. Fredericks knew exactly where every potmark on the asphalt was, and he could feel every one of them as the wheels rolled out and touched down.

Walking off the plane, getting baggage, of course Mister Hoover sent a car down, he always did. Fredericks hardly looked out the window as he pretended to be interested in his briefcase documentation. He just wanted to get back to the investigation.

Why did Hoover care so much? There was so much new information flooding past his desk, and there was so much these days, with the internal investigations, that Hoover probably hardly had any time to look over individual cases. He just got to smile and nod as agent after agent paraded through his door, not comprehending or taking real interest in any individual report.

Fredericks frowned loudly as he saw the FBI building come into view. At least he'd be out of this hole by the end of the day. He prepared his routine in his head as he got into the lobby. Just be in and out. As quick as possible. The elevator ride up wasn't much to talk about. Grey people in grey clothing. One had a briefcase.

Hoover's office, end of the hall. Talk to the secretary and get buzzed in. Look at Hoover, smiling genially and trying to look like the team dad, with an office draped in red white and blue.

Hoover paused upon seeing Fredericks enter the office. "You look troubled, agent. Penny for your thoughts?"

Fredericks paused, tightening his grip on his papers and blinking twice. "Oh, uh, sorry sir. Just had a lousy trip over. They need to fix the potholes in this city."

Hoover chuckled. "Don't I know it. What do you have for me today?"

Fredericks slid over a pile of documents, which Hoover grasped tightly and pulled onto his desk. Hoover put on some reading glasses, and pretended to glance over the papers. Fredericks could tell when Hoover wasn't actually reading. His eyes didn't move.

"You reported to my secretary over the phone, that you found something in Florida?"

"Shipping, sir. We believe the spy ring, if there is one, may be operating from there."

Hoover tightened his lips into a thin line as he pretended to study the documents again. "Is Agent Walsh already there?"

"Yes sir. We arrived together, when you dr- recalled me, uh, sir, back to headquarters."

Hoover leaned over the files. "So are you ready to move in, on what you might find?"

"Yes, sir. I explained it to you over the phone."

"Well, you'll be off again in the morning. It's always a pleasure to see you, son. Send Agent Walsh my regards."

As he was returned his files, slapped on the back, and hustled out the door so that the next agent could waste ten minutes of their time, Fredericks contemplated the likelihood of solving the case if he was recalled every week.

He decided it wasn't very likely.

It was about halfway between Jacksonville and Miami that the Ford broke down. Fredericks thought it broke down because Walsh had taken that corner a bit too fast and that as a result, they hit that bump and the wheel flew off. Walsh thought it was because Fredericks had left the map back in Atlanta, and they'd had to make do making notes on a fast-food restaurant napkin.

In either case, they were now both standing by the side of the road, with a smoking, three wheeled vehicle between them.

Walsh futilely kicked the fallen tire, and swore under his breath. "Where the hell do they get these cars?"

Fredericks shrugged. "Probably discounts them from the major manufacturers, get the duds from the assembly line." He shaded his face, and peered into the distance ahead of them. "You want to just walk? We're only around a couple miles away."

Walsh looked up and down the dirt road, then shrugged. "That's not too far away."

So, they walked. It wasn't a particularly long walk, as both partners walked in silence, occasionally glancing at the other to make sure they were still there. Around them, the foliage and oppressive heat made Walsh wish for the desert, and Fredericks wish for a sunhat.

But, they were soon at their destination. They walked past some official government cordons, an empty checkpoint, and climbed over rubble. They were rewarded once they'd ascended the last broken pillbox. There was a small concrete bunker, with a brass door and a nice wallpaper of kudzu vines. Printed above the door, in steel, was a label.

> National Observation Bureau of the Office of Defense - Yorktown

Fredericks strolled to the entrance, wiping some grime from the label. "This place hasn't seen action in awhile, has it?"

Walsh grabbed the door, and pulled. "At least not from our side… oof, help me out with this thing, willya? It's pretty heavy."

They both grabbed, grappled, yanked and sweated on the door until with a final squeak and creak it slid open, revealing a very dark room.

Fredericks crouched and walked in, holding one hand on the brass doorframe. "Hand me the flashlight, please?"

Walsh dug into his bag, and produced the torch. "Do you see something?"

"No, but I want to."

Fredericks clicked the flashlight on, and looked around. In front of them were two doors, both wooden. One was labeled "ENIGMAGRAPH CHAMBER", the other "Project NOBO"

Standing, Fredericks walked towards the first door. "Doesn't look like anyone's been here. Maybe the intel was wrong."

"Maybe. But that could also be what they want us to think."

Fredericks nodded, and pushed the door open.

Inside, there were five desks, five typewriters, and mountains of yellowing, wet papers.

Walsh dug around in the first pile of papers, looking for anything interesting. Most of the papers were completely uninteresting, boring documents with no information. The one that did have information turned out to be a small scrap of a yellow label. Walsh held the label in his hand, and turned it over. There was writing here, typed small and pressed together.

> TO THOSE WHOM IT MAY CONCERN
>
> test test test test test test Enigmagraph 112 test test test

Fredericks leaned over one of the typewriters, grabbed a scrap of paper, and typed on it. "Hey. Walsh. Tell me if you can read this, or if it does anything."

Taking the paper, Walsh scanned it over, and handed it back. "Yeah, that works."

"… Walsh? All I wrote on this was 'hi'."

"Did you?" Walsh took the paper back, glanced it over again, and handed it back. "I guess you did."

Fredericks frowned quietly at his companion. "I don't think you're reading this."

"Of course I'm reading it."

"I wrote that you were a fat goon."

Walsh tilted his head. "I don't remember that at all."

Fredericks crumpled the paper, and tossed it towards the trashcan. "Guess we know what that does."

Walsh walked around one of the typewriters, poking it with his finger. "That's the opposite of a good thing. How long've these things just been sitting here, open for anyone to copy?"

"Probably decades."

Walsh patted the typewriter, then headed to the doorframe. "This alone is definitely enough to get this place searched. We ought to check out the other room, then clear out of here so the cleaners can do their thing."

Fredericks walked behind him, placing a few unreadable papers in the evidence bag. "You got it, partner. Lead the way."

The second room was a pristine example of a ransacked lab. Broken beakers, shredded papers, mysterious broken piles of electronics that might have once contained useful information, all lay among many other artifacts. The flashlights' beam swept across the floors and ceilings, zigzagging until they could realize the true damage to the room.

They both shook their heads, disappointed. "Damn."

Then, the beam of the flashlight fell onto one folder. Wet, but intact, it lay on the floor, its contents still unmolested inside. Fredericks crouched down, and picked it up. There was a message scrawled on the front.

> […] Do not reveal anything about any projects or policies you have seen. If questioned, this is your script.
> “Where are you?”
> “Nowhere.”
> “What are you doing?”
> “Nothing.”
> “Who are you?”
> “Nobody.”

Fredericks flipped it open, and pulled the papers into his hand. He flipped through them, making sure to read every individual paper. "Well, this is interesting."

Walsh peered over his shoulder. "Shine the light on it, I can't see in the dark."

Fredericks lifted the light to the folder, and Walsh looked on. He was looking at serious stuff. Writing and diagrams of men, standing in crowds without being seen, walking into bases draped in swastikas, and coming out covered in blood.

"Looks like some nutty covert ops stuff, from the war?"

Fredericks frowned. "Just lying there? Someone wanted to leave it out for us."

Walsh grabbed the file, and stuffed it into an evidence bag. "Look, I think we should split. This place is feeling less safe by the second, and I don't like the idea of invisible super soldiers left alone in the dark."

"You're being paranoid."

"You're not?"

Walsh took a brisk pace in walking out the door, and was followed soon after by a grousing Fredericks. They had a helluva lot of people to contact in not a lot of time, if they wanted to get out of here anytime soon. Which they did.

Another plane ride. At least there was a purpose behind it this time.

Fredericks looked around at the other people waiting for a plane. There was an old woman in a babushka, reading the Wall Street Journal. A little girl and her mother, sharing a soda pop, and two businessmen wearing identical outfits, save for the color of their hats.

But why were they looking at him like that?

Fredericks glanced up from his book, at the people surrounding him again. Yes, they were looking at him. All of them.

"Flight 56, please come to the gate…"

Every one of them stood, and began filing towards the plane. After a moment, Fredericks followed them. If he was being shadowed, there was no reason to make them suspicious.

"Now boarding, Flight 56 to Washington…"

« **Chasing Tails** | **HUB** | **Data Not Public** »

It's Just A Dream

"Hey. Up late? Thought you were off duty. What you got there?"

"Oh, I'm just going over the old reports from SCP-209 again. You know, the files it sticks on the thumb drive. Wanna watch with me?"

"The dream recorder? Heck yeah, I'd love to see those! Be right back, I'm going to want a beer with this. You want anything from 294?"

"I'll take a scotch."

"Ha! I'd never have thought you a scotch drinker."

"…Crap. Okay, yeah, I'll have the scotch. It's a 209 thing."

"Um, okay. But like, why'd you need hard liquor? It's not like anyone's been hurt by 209. It just sits there and records. Safe as can be. You lucked out for a first assignment."

"True. But you'll see. Here, this first one is what was on the drive when we found the SCiP."

imadethisyoubitc

You find yourself in a room with wood paneling, a large lit marbl
velvet-upholstered wingback chairs. On the walls are various hu
and human. On one side table is a chess game, set up at the be
of a golden-brown liquid, under a glass bell jar.

With you is a young man, Caucasian, skinny, with short light bro
laughs triumphantly, stating, "It works! It works!" Another figure
a butler, no, his features are too perfect, too standardized. A ca
dream. Please, be seated. In this portion of the dream, you will
opportunity to drink this glass of fine scotch." He then stiffly retu

You and the young man sit and play the game of chess. He mo

and the butler reappears and removes the bell jar. "Your drink, m
drink. It is scotch.

The young man becomes agitated as you sip your scotch. "This
I should have won the game! Where's my scotch?"

The butler snorts and replies, "You are out of line, my dear fello
the ceiling, capturing the young man. "I don't like the tone of you
adds, "What shall I do with the riff raff, ma'am?"

Your mind fills with anger at the young man's arrogance and wh
cage."

The butler replies, "Very good, ma'am." The cage starts shrinkin
your university. The young man starts hunching over in his conf
state that he made the machine, everything should be his. Anno
you, all smiling and fawning, asking about your new toy. The ca
contain a human, but the young man is still inside, crushing his
become shriller and more rhythmic, crying out every three secon
quickly diminishing toy.

Tired of his wailing, you pick up the cage and squeeze. A wet-so
of a packet of cigarettes, contains a small, unidentifiable mass o
again and intones, "Thank you, ma'am. I shall dispose of the ca

You wake, refreshed.

Closing Remarks:

SCP-209 was recovered from a makeshift sleep lab in t
department building of University. The thumb drive
SCP-209 was found to have a single file, "imadethisyou

Subject was L G , (23 years old, female, Han Chin
confirmed that this was her dream while attached to SC
device, nor how it appeared in the basement. She did n
healthy psychological profile, and so she was given a C

Researchers note that SCP-209 is designed to handle t
that future experimentation should be done with two sub

"Fancy. And hey, there's your scotch!"

"Mhm."

"That one guy was so annoying, though! I'd have crushed him, too."

"I know, right? Last time I dreamed of some dork like that, I dropped him in a vat of cement."

"Ha! I once used a jerk for laser practice."

"That's so awesome! Hey, you want the next one? This one gets steamy."

"Oh? Show me show me show me!"

romanceisfrownedu

You awake in bed, a large canopied one. It is still dark, and you lovely young woman with long brown hair, green eyes, and an c grabs you, kisses you, saying, "We did it! We've got all evening

"What if they find out about us?" you ask, nervously.

She laughs, as she runs her hand down your body. "Don't be sil counts. We can do whatever we want."

A viewscreen flickers on, and a familiar green puppet appears c Forg? "Welcome to your dream! For the first part, we're going to Yaaaaaaay!"

You and your date are apparently standing, wearing futuristic fo a pair of pistols. Clear acrylic tubes descend from above to enc helmet's radio: "Entering arena in 3! 2! 1! Zero seconds! Ah ah a

You drop through the floor and slide down, speeding through a of immense size, with pipes and steel girders and large moving noises can be heard. Although she is nowhere to be seen, your This works! I'm gonna get you! Just you wait!" She laughs playfu

You spy a red sign on a machine of unknown origin: "Romance Foundation." The radio crackles back to life: "Mobile Task Force

Yaaaaaay!"

The sound of combat boots is heard, and a squadron of fully arm
miss, but their paint strikes a metal gear, which immediately rus
going off with a single klaxon blare every three seconds. You ru
hands of the MTF.

You turn the corner, knowing that they are following you, and ne
you, too?" you ask. She nods, and you run on together, but quic
with the same message hangs over the unit as it approaches in
before it can reach them.

She narrows her eyes and pulls out her pistol. "They're not who
other." She fires the pistol at you. It stings and nearly knocks th
your armor.

"We have a winner! Yaaaaaaay!" The arena and the MTF unit d
a tumbler of scotch. "Miss, here is your prize! Enjoy!"

She snorts and laughs. "Whiskey? I hate whiskey! Go ahead, yo
sip it. It is smoky, smooth.

The scene shifts to a typical suburban kitchen, in the morning. Y
humming while baking at the stove, your baby daughter sits in a
also in your jumpsuit, lean back in a recliner at the kitchen table
The headline reads, "Romance between Class D personnel is fr
your wife. "Are you sure this is okay?"

"Of course," she replies, "They can't get past our white picket fe
yard is visible, bordered by the white picket fence. Immediately
soldiers and lab researchers in white coats.

You look back to your wife and ask, "You know, I only know you

"My name?" she replies brightly, "It's D." She stops, concerned.

A quick look outside the window shows that the fence has gotte
as well.

"D!" Kermit calls from the television holding up a large letter D. "
Death row!"

Scared now, the wife adds, "I made you a cake." She reaches i
strawberry filling, pink fondant, and light brown buttercream.

"Doubt! Dread! Dunce! Disaster! Detain! David drowned himself

The fence is now inside the kitchen, and half the room is filled w

You finish your scotch and feel emboldened. You stand. "No. Th
am not going to fill my home with the likes of you!" You pick up
researchers into pieces.

"Destroy! Devastate! Decimate! Decommission!"

"Come here, mine!" You pull her in, kiss her deeply. You unzip
crushing the cake.

"Delicious! Delectable! Devour your darling deeply!"

She's pink. Pink fondant. Brown buttercream hair. You bite into
tear off a chunk and swallow. She screams in pain. You keep ea
oozes out of her as you stuff your face with her intense, rewardi

"Don't! Desist! Desirable!"

You have your fill. Satisfied, you turn to the TV. Kermit looks at
good cake! Don't worry, I'll clean up the mess." Kermit hops out
remaining crumbs.

You awaken, refreshed.

Closing Remarks:

Subject: D-39584

Upon interview, the subject confirmed the dream while a
refreshed, and a post-experiment physical revealed red
euphoria.

Subject wished to add a statement to the report: "Here,
today, I discovered my dream girl. Literally. I guess it's
Given the minimal risk caused by the experiments, regu
subjects.

Researchers note that SCP-209 is designed to handle t
that future experimentation should be done with two sub

"Hottest. Cake. Ever."

"Pfffft!"

"And scotch again."

"Yeah. All the dreams have scotch. We aren't sure why. We've marked it as an anomalous behavior."

"And they both start with someone saying it's a dream."

"Yup! It's weird, when you're hooked up to the device, your dreams are more vivid and lucid. Probably something to keep you from recording a dreamless night. I mean, it's not a dangerous SCiP, but there really is some weird spooky stuff happening in that computer. It's got to be feeding a dream just as much as recording one."

"Feeding you scotch, apparently."

"Yeah, it really gave me an appreciation for single cask vs. blended."

"Huh? What do you mean? You've been hooked up to it?"

"Mhm. Since regular personnel got cleared to be subjects, I tried it out myself."

"Oh, really? Do you have that dream?"

"Right here."

scp6823110monta

You enter a bathroom stall, a standard stall in Site-19. You hear
Hello? Anyone there?"

You realize the toilet has not been flushed. You peer into the bo
matter within the toilet splashes out, and the head a malicious g
emerges from the depths of the commode.

The creature speaks, in a low, scratchy, hollow voice, "Welcom researching the worst SCP ever. The most destructive demon e Montauk."

The woman in the next door stall shudders. "No. Not that. Anyth

The creature presses, "Prepare to meet your doom. There is no

The stall door opens, entering into a large, wide containment ch chamber. The only apparent item in the chamber is a single me medical lamp. A respirator can be heard, pumping air onto the t

You start walking toward the table. A child's sobbing can be hea undulating motions are detected, a blackish green against black

The whimpering in the stall next to hers continues: "No, no plea closes. "No, I need something else. Something else."

You approach the medical table. Although the rattling hacking a be heard, they stay back. Only suggestions to their presence re resembling SCP-209 dip in a tumbler of scotch. A girl's voice is

You laugh and look around. What, this is the worst that could ha scotch and sip it. You look into the glass, inhale the aroma of th

The entire containment chamber floods with light, showing stark creatures, each about 8 meters tall, resembling giant lizard-octo the containment chamber trying to avoid the light, trying to avoi chamber flickers to life, showing the image of the octopus head, experiment was a success. The end of the world has arrived. Th charge." Scenes of devastation appear on the viewscreen, but t unblemished, antiseptic.

You shrug, and look around. You remember you are supposed t woman cowering in the stall, opens the door, stops wailing, and finish your scotch and walk over to the sinks at the side of the c a terry cloth towel. You are about to dry your hands when you n The cowering woman approaches slowly. You flick the first inse towel, but the insects multiply in number, become larger, more a

Disgusted, you toss the towel to the cowering woman. "You're a help one biiiit!" The woman starts jerking and screaming as the

just leave you to them," you spit in contempt, pointing to the mo
the screaming woman. You turn to leave the room, the voice of
"Commence Procedure SCP-6823110-Montauk." As you leave,

Outside the chamber, the world is intact and opens to a lovely p
meadow rise majestically, the ground is carpeted with beautiful
the park. There are no signs of devastation anywhere.

You awaken, refreshed.

> **Closing Remarks:**
>
> Subject: Junior Researcher
>
> Upon interview, subject confirmed the dream while atta
> and a post-experiment physical revealed reduced stress
> uninterrupted sleep, corresponding to her actual sleep t
>
> Of note is that the subject is new to the Foundation and
> before, even in rumor.
>
> SCP-209 is designated Safe and it is not considered ha
> the dreams are generated and recorded.
>
> Researchers note that SCP-209 is designed to handle t
> that future experimentation should be done with two sub
>
> What? This test was supposed to have two people. We'
> just fine with one. When are we going to try it with two?
> If I have to be the next subject, I will. This thing is harml
> don't know how it was made. Maybe a little for dream co
> learning about a dream recorder that works, but until we
> we can't risk it.
>
> - Dr.

"Oh my god, that girl was such a whiner! Leaving her with those things? Totally deserved it."

"Yes, I mean, please, 'no, no, not that, I'm so scared of an empty table!' What, does 110-Montauk have to do with a medical table that

attacks you or something?"

"…You really don't know what that is, do you?"

"I'm new, you know. A couple months ago, I'd never even heard of the Foundation."

"Right… but… how did you dream about it?"

"I don't know. Why did I dream about scotch, too? Heck, we don't really know all the capabilities of 209. Like I said, I think it records dreams from others and uses them to feed dreams for the subject? Maybe someone who used this early on really liked scotch. We still don't know who built it. Anyway, I've got one more dream here. Wanna see?"

"Let's do this! Better than a movie marathon, this is."

ignorethatmrpresid

You are on stage, at a podium with a plate with your name ("Ag
shrouded in darkness, with a blue background behind you. A se
Vietnamese man, mid-50s, in a lab coat. The second podium be

At the front of the stage, just before the audience, an elderly Ca
same shade as the stage background sits at a desk. He states,
listening to our two Presidential candidates. The first question is
the United States?" Emboldened, you say yes. A light bell is hea
Minh. Is this the dream you wanted?"

Dr. Minh replies, "Agent Washington and I are here, together, a

A buzzer is heard. "I'm sorry, I'll ask the questions tonight. The
going to lower taxes?"

You think a moment and say the first thing that comes to mind.

"That is correct. The next question is for Dr. Minh. You are polli
[REDACTED] (this is shown by the word "REDACTED" showing
will win the electrical vote?"

Dr. Minh becomes agitated and conjectures, "Wait, all these dre

When there's one subject, they just win against some dream. Bu
head to head. Who wins? Do we both get scotch? Does the sco
the loser? Is the loser the winner's dream? Oh no, does this me

The buzzer sounds. It repeats again and again, every three sec
incorrect. Congratulations, Agent Washington. You are the new

The audience erupts in applause. You see yourself, fireworks e
scotch in your hand. Drowned out by the thundering applause, D
scotch yourself anyway. You notice your shoelaces have been s

The moderator turns angrily to Dr. Minh. "You, sir, are out of line
President, please choose your executive order."

You look at your podium, which has grown larger, become oval
on it. In the seconds taken to examine the podium, buttons labe
visible. You press a button labeled "Guantanamo."

You look up and see Dr. Minh wearing an orange jumpsuit and
Dr. Minh and force him to his knees. They wheel out a large, blo
static, with a horizontal bar over the static, labeled "DATA EXPU

"Aw, c'mon, are they serious? They're expunging this record?"

"No, be patient and look closely. This expunging is part of the dream. He dreamed his dream being expunged."

The static has a horizontal bar over it, labeled "DATA EXPUNC
occasional sound of marching soldiers. It becomes clear that th
of ground meat, like pork being made into sausage. The bar rea

The moderator addresses you, saying, "Well done, Mr. Presider
public." The point of view shifts to see the audience clapping in
the entire United States. The entire nation erupts in fireworks.

You awaken, refreshed.

Closing Remarks:

Subject: Agent

Upon interview, the subject confirmed the dream while a
good spirits, scored low on anxiety tests, with low levels
Subject remarked, "Did you see that? I got to be Presid

Subject asked about Dr. Minh in his dreams, apparently
Foundation personnel records to confirm that no person
hired. Satisfied, subject resumed duty.

Researchers note that SCP-209 is designed to handle t
that future experimentation should be done with two sub

"You know, Rashaun insisted on being called Mr. President for a week after this experiment."

"Haha, you serious? Well, let's face it, he had an awesome dream. They're all awesome in their own way."

"Heh, true. Even mine, it was like it was supposed to be scary, but I had no idea why. So everything became scared of me, and I was a total badass."

"Yeah! …You know… You think I could try it out?"

"What, you want to dream for 209? We could do that. It's not in use tonight. And I'm the principal researcher, so I have the access card for it."

"I still don't know how you got that. Usually there's a doctor who's principal researcher, not some newbie junior researcher."

"Yeah, but like, this thing's so safe, they don't need huge containment protocols on it. So yeah, let's go. Maybe we should do it together. After all, we've never tried two subjects yet."

It's just paint, right?

My eyes are starting to burn again.

> *"I need to blink."* I say.

> *"Clear."* says Randal.

> *"Clear."* says Will.

Randal is still cleaning, Will is behind me, to my right. I want to turn around and check up on him but… Yeah, THAT thing.

It's just spray paint, right? The eyes?

Because how the fuck is it staring directly at me?

The other boys say it's the same for them. Fucking green spray paint, gazing directly into their souls.

I can't see Will, but I can imagine him shitting his pants. He's the greenest of us all.

Did it just move?

Nah… Fucking paranoia.

Have you ever been attacked by an animal? A dog got me on the leg when I was 12, I had to get a rabies shot and all that.

> *"I— Uh, I need to blink, guys."* says Will, shakily.

> *"Clear."* says Randal.

> *"Clear."* says I.

Yeah, definitely scared shitless.

Anyway, when you're about to get attacked. There's this moment when your body and your brain knows what's about to happen, even if your mind doesn't.

It's primal. Your body tenses, the adrenaline pumps. It's fight or flight or, in my case with the dog, fucking freeze. Regardless, your body is ready to react.

This is that, the entire time, for a fucking statue. How the shit do you react to a stationary hunk of concrete?

Randal is over there doing his damndest to clean whatever the hell this is off the floor. Why don't they get drones to do this shit?

> *"I gotta blink."* Randal says.
>
> *"Clear."* says Will.
>
> *"Clear."* says I.

Well, in a few minutes and it'll be my turn to mop.

I can't turn all the way to look but from what I can see, Will didn't do the greatest job in his area. I'm gonna have to pick u—

CLANK

CRACK

What? No — Fuck, I was— I looked — It wasn't even for…

RANDAL DROPPED HIS FUCKING MOP. IT GOT WILL… I JUST LOOKED FOR A SPLIT SECOND! IT'S FUCKING INSTINCT! It's fucking instinct…

How the hell was it already on its way to me?

Why? What the fuck does this thing have to gain from snapping our necks? Why did it have to do that to Will?

I'm angry now. I want to punch this fugly bitch in the face. I guess this is the fight response kicking in.

Goddammit, this is FUCKED.

This whole thing is FUCKED. Why does this *thing* get to choose who the FUCK lives or dies?! I've been in this piece of shit place for almost a year! I've seen a lot of terrible shit, I've survived a lot of terrible shit.

I feel its eyes judging me.

Yeah, sure. I've done some horrid things to get here but is any of this horseshit worth it!? I had my reasons! I did what I had to do! I've paid my fucking dues!

I…

I've paid my dues.

> *"Mmmph-ha"*

A sound escapes my mouth. I feel a smile crack on my face.

I hear Randal speak behind me.

> *"Will? What the fuck… The mop. It just—Will…"*

> *"Hah! Hahahahaha! HAAAHAHAHA!"*

My laughter cuts him off. My mind feels pierced by its gaze. I think I understand.

I'm cackling now. I find myself pointing at the statue. My eyes burn, I can't blink now, not yet.

> *"What the fuck, Leo?"*

Randal is concerned. I don't blame him.

I hear the coats say something over the intercom but I'm not listening.

Everything, all this effort, the danger, the anxiety. WHY? I've been fighting my whole life, fighting for more money, for a better life, to see my mom again. And look where I end up. Face to face with the fucking end.

That's what this thing is. An end.

It's not staring into your soul because it wants to kill. It sees the fucking irony of it all, the irony of you. Life is chaos, it's a struggle from the day you're born, you're just flailing through time until you reach the bottom of a hole. And then it's over. And then you're gone. And then you're forgotten.

All this thing wants is for you to close your eyes. And then it all ends.

A simple purpose, and looking at Will, one that works.

He's not scared anymore.

> *"Leo, dude, I'm not sure what's going on with you, but I need to blink. Like, right now."*

I hear him, I need to blink too. Tears are streaming down my face. I feel them merging with the beads of sweat on my face, snaking downward, over my jawline, onto my neck. I'm not laughing anymore.

> *"Clear."*

I smile when I say it.

The End's eyes are unmoving. Eyes that shouldn't be real.

I mean…

…it's just…

…paint, right?

It's Not Spelled Like That!

"How long has he been out there?" asked the Site Director as he strolled down the corridor leading to the entry hub.

"Around three hours, sir," replied his assistant, nervously shuffling her papers. "We've contemplated shooting him, but decided that if he came all the way to Site 19's gate to just stand out there yelling, he can't be too much of a threat."

The Site Director nodded slowly. He had dealt with attempted break-ins before, but some man ranting his head off at the Site gate was something new entirely. With any luck, they could wipe his memory and send him on his way inside of ten minutes, and get back to eating lunch. If not, he'd just order the stupid bastard shot in the face and be done with it. Either way, the problem would be solved.

The pair arrived at the titanic metal wall that served as the Site's blast door. Anyone trying to break in would be stopped dead in their tracks, even if they could get past the snipers and electrical fencing. Beyond it, a mere two meters away, stood some raving lunatic. "Just a moment sir," grunted the on-duty guard, punching in the passcode to open the blast door. As the monstrous groaning sound of sliding metal emitted from the blast door before them, a similar sound could be heard from behind. No madman, no matter how harmless, was worth risking a containment breach over.

A sliver of light fell over the Site Director and his assistant as the blast door picked up speed, opening faster and faster. The shadows of Site 19's low outer walls spilled across the dusty landscape. In the distance, one could see the small electric fences and the vast desert beyond. The Site Director had seen all of this before, however. What concerned him the most was the hunched-over man who rapidly advanced on the pair.

"Do you have any fucking idea how long I was standing out there, man?" he blurted, waving his arms frantically. "I mean, it's the

middle of goddamn summer out there! I spent something like eight hundred dollars to get out here, in the middle of goddamn July, and you guys just leave me standing in the middle of the desert at noon? Shit, man!"

The Site Director looked over the haggard man. He had a long, scraggly beard that reached down to his stomach, and dark brown hair that looked as if it hadn't been combed in weeks. His eyes flitted wildly back and forth, looking over the Site Director and the armed guards standing at the ready. His apparel was little more than a sweaty white t-shirt and torn jeans, his feet completely unshod. Worst of all, some exceptionally foul odor was wafting from his person, which the Site Director could only pin down as rotten corn.

"What…" he began, choking slightly on the man's smell, "What do you want?"

"Look, man, we tried to contact you through the mail, but we never received a message back, so they sent me out here. Fucking inconvenient if you ask me, but…"

"We burn all unsourced letters and delete suspicious e-mails," the Director said, quickly growing impatient with the man. "What *exactly* are you here for?"

"I'm here to declare war on you lot, man!" the foul-smelling individual shouted, jumping up and down while making slight jabs with his fists. "We heard about this one group of dudes, with a name similar to yours, who were kinda ticked at you getting in their way, you know? So the guys and me got together and thought up, 'Hey, *our* name is similar too, and we think that you guys have been crapping on our goals too, so we're gonna go to war with them!" To apparently add effect, the man kicked his legs about and made several high-pitched screeches.

"I see…" the Site Director said, rubbing his chin and hoping the glare on his glasses would hide his rolling eyes. "And how have we been wronging you?"

The unwashed man fell still and silent. "Um… we haven't really figured that part out yet. It was kind of a spur of the moment thing,

you know? We got as far as the 'similar names' thing, and went off on the 'Fuck these guys!' crusade." His eyes lit up and he began bouncing up and down again. "But we'll figure it out! You guys *have* to have been suppressing us *somehow*! So we're here to declare war against the SCP Foundation!"

The Site Director was doing all he could to keep from burying his face in his hands. "Just what is the name of your organization?"

"People Shitting Chipperly!"

Clearly, the battle to keep face and hands separate was a futile one.

The Site Director's body shook violently as he took in a few deep, ragged breaths. His assistant and the lunatic both stared at him, wondering what was wrong. At length, he removed his hands, took one last breath, straightened his tie, and spoke.

"No. No. *No.* I'm not accepting it, I am bloody well not accepting this. SPC, I get, I get how people can misspell it as that, and I get how you can go all, 'Oh, it's punching sharks, haha!' But no. I'm not doing it. I'm not going to have *anything* to do with the PSC organization."

"Do you have any idea," he said, trying to keep himself from shouting, "any idea at all, just how much trouble the Shark Punching Center has caused us? We've plugged way too many resources into just making them go away, and lost something like six or seven versions of Bright to brain aneurysms in the last week alone. It's too much trouble to actually deal with nutters like you."

"So go away," he stated flatly. "I'm not going to have you locked up, or mind-wiped, or even just straight up killed. It's too much trouble for a problem we shouldn't even have to be dealing with. Just go home, get on with your healthy shitting, or whatever it is you do, and never show your stinking face around here again. Do I make myself clear?"

"But…"

"Before I change my mind," the Site Director growled.

The filthy madman blinked once, then turned and fled into the

desert, hopefully to never be seen again. Waving his hand, the Site Director instructed the guard to close the blast door. "Come on, Lucy," he sighed, "let's get back to the cafeteria."

At that moment, another individual came running up to the entrance, looking equally as insane and ragged as the one who had just left. "Now wait just a minute," he shouted, "I've spent two weeks looking for you, and the People's Coconut Society will not be…!"

"Fuck off," the Site Director spat, and the blast door clanged shut in the man's face.

It Takes Two

I lay on the hill and stare at the sky. The stars dance underneath the patchy clouds, casting no light above or below. I was on the committee that made the stars up. We had two days to figure out what they should look like, reconstructed from the shattered allusions and metaphors that remained. Did they look like eyes? Like glass? My proposal was for numerous suns, dimmed to a crystalline glow, close enough to see their ripples and motion across the sky. We chose Brandt's proposal: thin tendrils of elastic light. Occasionally they reassemble themselves into memetic triggers, self-reinforcing projections. I think that was what got it the greenlight in the first place. It certainly wasn't its aesthetic value. Did Brandt know that? Is that what I could see in the stars in his eyes?

"Why would he think my name was Jenkins?" I ask Annette. They are laying next to me, finishing a protein bar. I have already eaten, though I have already forgotten what. "We don't even have a Jenkins in the memetics department."

I KNOW.

They're more relaxed now, out of the site. We walked for one or two hours towards the city, me complaining the whole way. Finally they agreed we had gone far enough from the danger for the night. Now they are taking their time with their messages: full words, punctuation, little pauses in between words or for emphasis. I have never seen them like this, but it makes sense. Communication cannot be purely functional; it must have some art to it. Annette must compensate in other ways.

I DONT THINK HE CARED.

"I cared, though. I can't believe he didn't recognize his favorite employee!"

WHO WAS THAT?

I sigh. Beside me Annette gives a raspy cough.

Another day. We walk again. To keep busy I start assembling the deconditioner, piece by piece. If I do it slowly, and never look at the final product, I'll be fine. It will end up bundled into a little box. It is opening the box that is the problem. I think Annette knows, but they haven't said anything. Why not? Do they even care that I'm going to die because of them? My head begins to ache. What's the use of a heroic sacrifice if no one sees it? I allow myself to imagine the moment—the box opened, the world fading away to black. Annette standing over me, the pain gone at last. My selfishness sickens me.

About halfway through the day we stop at a road that leads to the city. I collapse gracefully.

YOU WILL NOT MAKE IT UP THE HILL.

Annette points beyond the city, to the hill. "No," I gasp. "God no."

WE WILL GET A CAR IN THE CITY.

Practically a novel for Annette. I continue to pant on the ground. Annette rolls their eyes at me, I swear. I don't know where they picked that up.

I WILL GET A CAR IN THE CITY.

"Thank you Annette."

YES.

And then they're gone, running off like a cheetah. The pain returns. I can feel tears leaking from my eyes. I allow myself another fantasy of blackness closing in. I shut my eyes and see stars.

Annette is shaking me. I sit up, bleary-eyed.

"Is someone here? Is something wrong?"

Annette hooks a thumb over their shoulder. I follow it and see nothing. I look around and, behind me, see a car, slightly used.

"Borrowed?"

STOLEN.

In the car now. The road is empty, even this close to the city.

"Who is this for?" I ask, looking out the window.

NOW YOU ASK?

"I had *assumed* it was an O5," I say.

YOU KNOW WHAT THEY SAY ABOUT ASSUMING.

Another long one. "I'm surprised you know," I say.

ENGLISH IS MY NATIVE TONGUE.

I blink. Annette gives a long rasping cough. Finally I realize they are laughing. I laugh too. The laughter cuts off.

ELIZABETH WILLIAMS. DID YOU MEET HER?

I close my eyes and lean back. "I don't think so. Not a memeticist?"

NEVER. APPLIED TOPOLOGY.

"No, I never had much reason to." I open one eye. "What's she to you?"

WHAT IS IT TO YOU?

I let my eyebrows shoot up and close my eye again. "I see."

I feel like an intruder on these roads. They should be congested. There should be people living under the overpasses. There is no one. The roads haven't had time to decay yet; when the end finally comes, I imagine it will happen bit by bit, as little plants and shoots probe for cracks in the surface. Will gravel be left, in little strips? My headache has gotten worse. I can feel something stressed, deep in my head. Some girder or platform that is bearing more weight than it should. Little creaks. I think things are getting too bad. Already the surroundings are less clear, less vivid. I try to think back to where I

slept earlier. Can I remember anything about it? What was there? I don't know. I look over. Annette is as solid as ever, at least. Black combat fatigues. Little black disc on wrist. Clear glass eyes. In a week, maybe two, they will be the only thing left.

Entering the city. There are people here, now. They just appeared, in the space between moments. Everyone is out today. There is lots of light, all of a sudden. I don't remember there being so much light before.

Everyone is in threes. Sometimes two men sandwiching a woman, sometimes two women sandwiching a man, sometimes no order at all. The shapes of the people are vague; I find my eyes sliding off of them, and my headache keeps ratcheting up in intensity, bit by bit by bit. The road is choked with abandoned cars. The walkers don't ignore themdon't even notice themand walk over and around them in ways that hurt my eyes to trace. My headache has turned into a screaming migraine. Inside one of the cars I can see still blurs.

Annette tries to nudge the car through.

WE HAVE TO WALK.

I nod. I can feel sweat pouring off my face.

We get out of the car. I can't feel any attention from the blurs. That's good. I stagger a few steps and start to fall before Annette catches me. We can make it a few blocks if I lean on her shoulder. I don't know if that will be enough. Every step feels like it's taking more and more out of me. I want to throw up. I want to lay down. I'm thirsty. My headache is worse. We continue. We continue.

I am on the ground. A blur is above me now. They stretch down an arm and say something. I do not understand them. They appear to be modulating in and out of English. They speak again. Where is Annette? I haul myself to my feet. A weight falls on my shoulder.

—I just want you to know that if we never see each other, I love you very much.

Those are my own words. I thought that was a good idea, over a

month ago. That even if the end came fast, there would be no regrets. Stupid. It was a stupid idea. My own words.

"Annette?"

I fall down again.

"Annette?"

Something strong grabs me around the armpits and I almost scream. I feel something on the end of their arm tap on my chest.

INSD

They haul me along the sidewalk, heels dragging. Not good for my nausea. I feel my heels catch once, twice, three times on something, and then we're inside. Annette drops me. I try to stand up and vomit.

The floor is cool and smooth. It is bringing my headache down. I think the vomiting helped. I haul myself up on the ends of my arms and look around. I am inside. It must have been a house. Gaps in the walls let fresh air and light in. I run my arms along the walls. They are rough and textured. The wind whistling through the holes in the walls creates a happy melody. A bird flies from my teeth. I emerge into a large common area. There are people all around, coming in, coming out. Most of them are lounging, though, on the floor, on the walls, with each other. There is laughter, like the tinkling of the wind. I shut my eyes and see stars. Where is Annette?

I am being led into the room. High above I look down and see the space continue. The people (person?) lead (leads?) me to food. I am famished. I eat. There is music. How long has there been music? But there is music. They are making music.

Someone grabs the end of my arm. It is Annette, solid and real.

GO

The ground is shaking. They yank me up behind them, hard. That thing on the end of their arm starts tapping me again.

"What's happening?" More taps.

There is a roar, and a flash of light. Annette hits me and we hit the floor, wind rushing over us, blasting us. There is nothing but sound. It stops. We stand. Off in the distance, where the Site once stood, there is the slowly-rising mushroom cloud. Inside of it, I see stars. I close my eyes and see stars.

« Hello, Little Girl | It Takes Two | **Children Will Listen** »

It Wasn't a Vacation

September 21, 1997

Jack Bright strongly considered a change in career. Science wasn't working out. Too much contact with other human beings, for one. Lack of respectable, cackle-worthy science was another reason.

Third, and most importantly, was the distressingly high number of eviscerations, decapitations, immolations, castrations and all other sorts of mean, nasty, horrible things that happened in his general vicinity over the past fifteen minutes.

A head gone astray in its search for a body exploded on the wall next to Jack like a rotten melon, splattering him with gory pulp.

So far he had narrowed his choices down to: basement dweller, professional hobo, and male prostitute.

Concrete dust rained down on his head. He managed to stifle a sneeze.

Cadaver was also looking highly likely. He was already good at playing dead, why not try the actual thing?

The gurgling in the background petered out, followed by a body hitting the floor and an indifferent grunt from the one who tossed it.

Go to Germany, they said.

Meet with the Coalition, they said.

It'll be fine, they said.

They know how to deal with the occult, they said.

They said this, they said that…ah fuck.

Seconds dripped by like a particularly painful flow of molasses. Jack's strained ears picked up heavy breathing, a few pacing footsteps. Able was still there.

He had been expecting it, but it still sounded incredibly wrong to his ears. A ukulele did not belong in the middle of a secret ex-Nazi bunker, much less a secret ex-Nazi bunker being currently torn to pieces by a Neolithic war god. Neither did a voice that Jack could not stop comparing to Mark Hamill's interpretation of the Joker.

"You know, I've been considering taking up a hobby. Knitting seems like a good option. Or maybe fly-fishing. Skiing…nah, I hate snow. Also, your mother was a whore."

BOOM

Jack leapt to his feet and began to run unsteadily towards the double exit doors, ears ringing. There was no such thing as a better distraction than Ukulele. The man himself was standing there in the doorway, holding an anti-tank rifle. His head was that of a red panda with an eyepatch. He nodded and grinned as Jack sprinted past him and down the hallway.

Four months in that cult compound, all on a hunch. Then you have some guy claiming he'd discovered a way to immortality, and life turns into a heist movie trying to swipe a philosopher's stone.

Jack felt at his labcoat pocket. The lump of the pendant wasn't there. The adrenaline pumping through his brain told him that it was no big deal. He could pick it up later. Avoiding a grotesque and messy death, that was a big deal.

All he was going to do was drop it off. That's all he was going to do. Drop it off with someone who knew what to do with it, let it be their problem, and then head out and have a beer. Or two. Most likely more than two. Enjoy a nice little vacation in Europe while he was at it. He deserved it. But no…

"Hey there. How's it going?"

Ukulele jogged backwards nonchalantly next to him. His head was a

television, displaying the words “Ceci n'est-pas une televisione" in alternating teal and maroon letters. The gun was slung lazily over his shoulder.

“Mint?” he held out a little metal tin.

Jack shook his head.

“Oh. Then you might want to hold on to this. You dropped it.”

Red flashed in the air. Jack caught the amulet, not bothering to question how or why.

Exactly three steps later an obsidian throwing spear impaled Jack through the gut. His body dropped to the floor, amulet firmly grasped in his fist. Ukulele stopped backpedalling, shook his fishbowl, and snapped the mint tin shut.

“Now why would you do that? Look at those shoes he was wearing. Those were nice shoes. Now they don’t have nice feet to fill them. Think of the shoes, Able.”

Able, now standing twenty feet or so away from Ukulele, grunted. A sizeable chunk of his chest had been torn open enough to see through to the other side. His breathing was a mix of a one-lunged wheeze and the gargle of a man choking on his own blood.

He stood where he was. No tensing of the body to leap, no weapon in his hand. He just stood there.

“Trezae shanis shanar, chy. Avskani?” he croaked.

Ukulele stroked the fringe of tentacles at his chin.

“Nope. Nope nope nope, I’m no good at canasta, so that’s right out."

"Xadr, chy. Zepiniki ca…

Ukulele held up a hand.

"Shshshshshhhhhh. I've heard enough. While you make some fine points, I think I should warn you that I am terribly clumsy, and so

chainsaw juggling would just end up awful for everyone involved."

Ukulele closed the gap. Able continued to do nothing but watch.

"This is a stumper, to be sure. Can't find a good hobby. Makin' me bummed, dude." He spread his arms. "Hug?"

With that, he hit the detonator for the claymore mine strapped to his chest.

—

"He blew himself up for fun. *For fun*, Ben. Something needs to be done here. He's getting more unstable."

"Are you sure you're not overreacting, Sophia? So he blew himself up. He can regenerate. He's also designed to have insanity and murder to be his only two character traits."

"I trust my gut more than Adam at this point."

"Okay, you tell me. What are we going to do to take down the Chesire Cat and Mad Hatter's LSD-fueled lovechild? Without getting ourselves slaughtered in a matter of seconds."

"Not by ourselves. We have enough items to work with. We might stand a chance if we go about this with our heads on straight."

"What, kill, capture, lock him up?"

"Just something. Something's going to go wrong, I know it."

—

Date: 9/25/97
To: Site 19 Senior Staff
From: Dr. Adam Pathos Crow
Subject: The state of Dr. Bright.

Dear friends:

As many of you have heard, Dr. Bright was reported as killed during

a containment breach at our Coalition sister facility on the 21st. I am happy to announce that this is not true: Dr. Bright was found alive by Coalition recovery agents amidst the wreckage this morning, shaken but overall unharmed.

Dr. Bright's condition is still sensitive due to exposure to anomalous items of unknown properties during the breach. However, I hope to have him back among us as soon as the situation permits it.

In sincerity,

-Adam

—

September 30, 1997

Dr. Glass scanned over his clipboard one more time. Yes, the photo he had was that of Dr. Jack Bright: male, mid-thirties, untrimmed brown hair, beard, a general appearance of scruffy un-washed-ness and a scowl.

The person sitting on the other side of his desk was none of those things, save the scowl: female, late twenties, decent tan, short lightish hair, scar on the left cheek. Her arms were crossed in a sullen expression of resentment, identical to Jack's common poise and positioning. An amulet centered with a sizeable ruby hung from a gold chain around her neck. According to the paperwork he had been given, this was Steffi Fuchs, a field agent of the Global Occult Coalition of middling achievement.

Dr. Glass sighed and opened up his yellow legal pad to a fresh page. Something told him that he'd be taking a lot of notes.

"Okay, Jack, let's start at the beginning. What were you doing when you became a woman?"

Iteration 0

In his hands, Dr. Thaddeus Xyank held the future. And that made him smile.

It was a lump of gray metal, cool to the touch, with a laser etched serial number, a portrait of George Washington, and a UPC code for Bush's Baked Beans. It took a while to get all of that approved, but he needed to be sure. You couldn't spit in the Multi-U division without it landing in some parallel world or a seamless wormhole that leads directly to a point exactly 2 cm inside your own rectum. Xyank wasn't interested in the same-old present in some remote reality where people are giant lizards. He was interested in the future. And here it was.

"Melissa?"

"Yes sir!" she said, beaming like the fresh ones sometimes do when things are going according to plan.

"Was the device active when you found the brick?"

"Uhh… Mr. Kim?"

Assistant Researcher Leonard Kim raised his head from the wiring panel, blinking. "Hm?"

"Was the device left on overnight? Dr. Xyank wanted to know its status when the sample was retrieved." Melissa Brooks was always doing that, in her own vainglorious attempt to curry favor with superiors. Thought there was a promotion in it for her, probably. Shame she was such a kiss-ass that no one else trusted her.

Xyank's glasses started to fog. His finger tapped. His thumb traced Washington's nose. Almost without thinking he grabbed a bit of tape from the desk, slapped it on the brick and wrote 'Retrieved' in black marker. Just in case.

Kim was quiet for a long time. “…Okay, first of all, I didn’t *do* anything with it.”

“I don’t actually care this time, Larry. Just tell me.”

“Alright, yes, I'm sorry. I left it on running a debug after hours. That reference loop just keeps popping up no matter what I do. I’m working on it now.”

Xyank nodded. On but not set to 'receive' was a good enough answer. “Melissa, scan the surveillance logs from last night through this morning. I want to know about every spark, bang, shimmy, and flash.”

On the other side of the floor, past ten dozen coolant pipes and thirty industrial strength cables, he placed the sample next to itself just as Gerald Kingston was putting the finishing touches on the UPC. “… Holy Shit! When did this come in?”

“Sometime before opening today; Brooks is checking the log.”

“Dear sweet Jesus,” Gerry said, picking up the small brick and turning it over in his hands. Checking the mill marks with pinpoint pupils as he strained to focus. “It looks like the real deal but I want to get this over to Microscopy and run the whole battery.”

“Get it done,” the Doctor said, checking his watch. “I want the original out of here by end of business today.”

“Sure sure sure!”

“And bring Foreman in here to make sure the calibration is spotless. Kim’s having feedback issues again.” Swear to god, Larry was going to be the death of this project, always trying to move out of his depth.

Then again, so was Thaddeus. That’s what got him out of bed in the morning.

Jets of hot gas sprayed him down from every angle and he spun in a circle. Six months of doing this, it was natural as breathing. The suit hung neatly in his locker and he stepped outside.

Plain sight. Where he was from this would never have been tolerated—would not be tolerated here for very much longer, probably. Sloppy work by the Foundation setting him up here. But there were bio-hazard signs and poison emblems, and all the flashing lights and smokestacks that belched black evil into the air, and that was enough. For anyone dumb enough to try and break into a chemical refinery, there were two golf carts on half-hourly rounds and the deceptively hard pudgy-looking Agents inside of them. Besides, there wasn't a radio tower or satellite signal stronger than twenty watts for maybe fifty kilometers in any direction, and the Podunk town where they took R&R was maybe forty minutes down the road. It was far enough. It was isolated enough. The EM bands were clear enough.

Maybe.

Coughing, he scaled the stairs to the office and stepped inside. Lights flickering on in that annoying mercury fluorescent glow; practically stone-age. And the whiteboards. Three of the four, filled to bursting with diagrams and equations in his trademark red ink. Xyank grabbed a bagel and an OJ as he stared at them, trying to remember. Trying to fill in the gaps. Trying to find the way out of the rat maze of causality and float above it. He wasn't a rat, he was a man. And if something like this could happen once—twice now, actually, at the very least—then he could make it happen again.

His calculator booted up and he thought with it for a while. The creepy blue sheen and white text a man never gets used to filled his vision, recorded his hand-written chaos, and began a search for errors. It was close now. Very close.

The phone rang and he picked it up.

"Thad Xyank."

"Hi Doc, it's Gerry."

"Shoot."

"Paulson is losing his mind." The good Doctor smiled and nodded to

no one, privately celebrating. “It’s our brick alright, down to every last defect. When do you want to send it?”

“Hold on a minute.” Two buttons tapped, and he watched as Melissa picked up the phone. “It’s Xyank. Put Kim on the line,” and the researcher trotted across the floor, notes under his arm and grabbed the phone. “What’s the status of the device?”

“Same problem, but at least we’ve isolated it in Unit Beta with some creative wiring. Alpha is green-lit across the board,” Kim said, looking up at the office window and giving a thumbs-up. “The brick?”

He smiled and returned the gesture. “Power up Alpha, it’s going out right now. I’m on my way.” Two buttons. “We’re doing it. Get up here and bring the original.” He’d never put on a clean suit so fast in his life, and the spray was just quieting down when Kingston came out of the south end of the building with the brick in his hand. Foreman opened the door to the active chamber and held his breath as the five of them gathered around it. Carefully it was placed inside the small, glowing white box, and closed. Xyank almost chuckled at how much it looked like the world’s most expensive and over-complicated microwave oven. As Unit Alpha powered up, the globe above it began to spin quietly, and capacitors all over it whined.

“Alright everyone look sharp, we are now starting the official experiment log.” A few taps on a keyboard and the microphones in their suits began recording. “This is Dr. Thaddeus Xyank, beginning experiment log 11924. It is July 9th 1992. Researcher Brooks, What’s the correct time?” Thaddeus asked, spinning to Melissa Brooks.

“1035 and 15 seconds on my mark.” Larry Kim jumped behind the other console and input the time. “Three… two… one… mark!” The whirring settled into a steady hum, and the first green light over the chamber lit.

“When did you recover the test object?”

“Approximately 0700, give or take a few minutes.”

“Alright; Mr. Foreman, please input destination for today’s date, at

0630. That should leave enough of a window for Ms. Brooks' discovery”

Beeping and keystrokes, and another light, this one lingering yellow a moment as the lock was established. Then green; blessed, blessed green.

“Mr. Kingston, how are those ion levels?”

“We have gamma and alpha rad at… 4 eV and holding. Ambient levels on the floor are… 13 mili-RAD. Everything’s green.”

The team leaned in to watch closely, fingers crossed, breath baited.

Dr. Xyank threw the switch, and after a bright flash of light within the chamber, it was gone. Localized tachyon field manipulation confirmed. Eat your heart out, Stephen Hawking.

They cheered. They clapped, they patted one another about the back. Mr. Kim declared tequila shots on him after work. But the good Doctor knew better. This one had been easy, they knew that some point in the future it would work, or else there was a paradox afoot, and paradoxes are for logic and not for nature. Nature had no such conventions. The device simply couldn't not work.

“Everyone quiet,” he said, after a long, relieved exhale. “Brooks, your job is to check, double-check, and triple-check all of the surveillance and monitoring equipment we have and report to me by the end of the day exactly what kind of conditions we can expect when something comes through. Foreman and Kim, you two are on Beta, get that bug fixed. Kingston, I need you to recalibrate Alpha to positive temporal displacement and prepare a new sample.”

“Paulson wanted a front-row seat on the next trial,” Gerry said, looking hopeful.

“He’s got it if he gets up here and helps you calibrate. And I mean oscilloscopes, voltmeters; I want *everything* explained before I file this. I’m going to go see if I can’t finish filling in the black box.”

The Black Box… Every engineer dreads the damn black box. That’s what all those equations were about. Thad mused for a moment

about it, scratching the graying hair at his temples as the blue screen came up over his vision, trying desperately to make sense of the math that had seemed so clear when he held the tachyon emitter in his hands, turned it over a few times, felt the warm glow of backwards time. Or maybe it was all just desperation and the team had gotten lucky. Maybe all of these equations weren't even necessary and it all came down to the number threeve or twour or whatever they were calling 033 these days. Theta Prime, right? Goddamn ridiculous.

What about all of the other ones? His clearance didn't give him really juicy access to the hard temporal anomalies the Foundation was just starting to play with. Hell, he didn't even know for sure if 711 had been built, disassembled, encased in concrete, or still sat on the drawing board of someone's office as a kind of pet project. Or maybe he was conceiving of it now, down in that clean-room with a bunch of eager, talented researchers.

And when were they going to discover SCP-one-seven… Oh dear god. The view… how had he not noticed this before?

The door burst open below as Xyank jumped to his feet, just in time to watch it all happen for the first time. There was a lot of yelling. Lots of it, about getting on knees and stepping away from the machinery and putting down the clipboard and they were all too shocked to comply.

"No…"

Gerry Kingston got it first, two in the head.

"No."

Melissa ducked behind the desk and covered her ears just in time for Paulson to catch a few rounds with his upper torso and fall out of sight half a second later.

"No!"

Kim and Foreman fell like cans on a fence-post, lying in puddles of their own blood. He could still hear Kim gagging on his lasts

moments of life.

“NO!”

Thad slammed the alarm and let it blare as the four men moved into the room, scanning computer monitors and smashing equipment, heading further the basement and the other screaming technicians. You could see the surprise in the balls of Mr. M4A1 himself when he saw Unit Beta, heard the humming and whining and sparks. He screamed something about getting out and then
There was the white flash, right on schedule. And then it started again. All five of them milled about the floor, working their way through the recalibration without a care in the world. Each one of them dead certain that they’d get a huge raise, better clearance, and maybe even a Nobel Prize if it ever went public.

“GODDAMMIT, NO!”

Thad grabbed the just-in-case 12 gauge from behind the filing cabinet and bolted out the door, down the stairs, and came to the clean room entrance. Maybe he was part of it. Maybe he was aware. Maybe there was time to save them all and stop the loop. But the knob was hot and he daren’t enter. Might have five kinds of cancer already now that the shielding was forfeit. He wasn't part of it, and there wasn't time. If he had been, then there would be a paradox afoot. Paradoxes don't exist in nature.

Smoke billowed out the windows in thick plumes. The white panel van was already speeding off, too far away to make the doctor out as he pressed his body against the building and waited. And waited. And waited.

Two hours later the MTF arrived and put out the fires and bagged up the charred remains and harvested the scrap for secure disposal. The whole installation was tagged, bagged, shipped off for review. A truck pumped the basement full of concrete, and just like that it was over.

For Thad, it was still happening. They found him in the office, watching his Research Assistants die over and over with a dead

look in his eyes and a pint of whiskey in his hands.

“Dr. Xyank?”

“Hm?”

“Are you alright?”

“…Nope. Not even a little.”

He didn't speak again until he was in the ambulance.

O5 didn’t like his write-up. Didn't like it one bit. “Explain this to me again,” 5 said as 3, 7, 12 and 9 sat with their arms folded and their brows furrowed on the various screens. “’Event boundary?’ What is that?”

“It’s a psychological phenomenon; how the brain categorizes events. Something as simple as changing the room you’re standing in begins a new 'event' to be logged in memory. That's why a person can head to the kitchen to get a sandwich and completely forget why they went there as soon as they walk through the door.” Dr. Xyank was nervous. His reputation, his clearance level, his future with the Foundation hanging in the… heh. ‘Future with the Foundation.’ That was good. He’d have to remember that.

O5-7 laughed, but not *with* him so much as *at* him. “You really expect us to believe that human psychology halted a tachyon cascade? That’s honestly what you’re saying?”

“Yes sir,” Thad replied, hanging his head and looking at the floor. “The machine had a maximum drain of five megawatts, but the actual tachyon field accounts for only 15 watts, which is significantly less than—”

“So if you witnessed this event first hand,” Three interrupted, “how comes it that you aren't stuck in that loop with them? Or is this thanks to your fanciful ‘event boundary’ hypothesis?”

“It is, sir.”

“And the assailants which caused this… debacle?”

Xyank sighed deeply. “My estimation is that the Global Occult Coalition detected the experiment via ground based tachyon detection equipment, and moved to intercept the emitter. How they detected it, I do not know.”

Twelve cleared his throat. The other O5’s went quiet and serious.

“Agent Tomlin,” Nine said, “secure Dr. Xyank. We will return with our decision after a brief recess.”

Five of the tensest minutes of his life, staring straight ahead at those shit LED screens as he wondered over and over and over again why he hadn't tried to move the whole operation underground. Thirty-seven researchers dead, millions of dollars’ worth of equipment and five years of research with a working tachyon emitter, gone. Poof. In another year they could have built a second, but there was no way, now. Someone had found out and broken it. The bill was on his tab. And the blood was on his hands.

When the lights came back on it was fast and to the point. “Given Dr. Xyank’s valuable research into tachyon field theory, we have determined that a certain amount of leniency is in order. Dr. Xyank, you are hereby demoted to Level 3 clearance, and are to report to our new containment site immediately. Your assignment will be documentation, experimentation, and implementation of containment procedures for the temporal anomaly designated **SCP-176**.”

“…Sir?”

“It’s your mess, Thaddeus,” 12 said, leaning forward. “Now go clean it up.”

It was eerie watching it. His ticket home was ticking in there, still. And he might yet get to it if he could find a way. He must have seen this site a dozen times in the time before… Before. But now he knew these people, knew the machine, knew the circumstance and what would have happened next if everything had just gone to plan.

After three more hours watching it, the effect wore off, and before him was just another anomaly to be cataloged. This is the way the world moves on. Erasing his beloved whiteboard, Thad cracked his knuckles and began.

Description: SCP-176 is an abandoned … *chemical* factory situated near … Nah, they'll probably leave that out. [DATA EXPUNGED].

…

Start | **`Part Two: The Deep End`**

Iteration F

You are currently viewing **Additional Document, Iteration F** of the documentation for this entity. This article isn't contained with the rest because it's **sinful**. This entry also contains many themes that are **not safe for work**.

Keith's heart pounded with anticipation as he sat at the edge of the hotel bed. It's been a long and fulfilling night, but not quite over yet. He could hear Buck humming to himself in the shower, and imagined a shimmering wet Buck glistening under the hazy steam that enveloped his beautiful body.

The sound of water and humming came to an abrupt stop.

"Document type?" Keith heard Buck call out, his voice booming through the thin bathroom door.

"Request for addendum addition," Keith replied. "Target SCP?"

"**SCP-1893**," Buck said, as he opened the door with a towel around his waist, his body slightly steaming, water dripping from his tail and his horns. Keith stood up, his tail flickering with excitement. Keith always loved how this mountain of a man has such cute and short horns, unlike others that he has encountered.

"Addendum type?" Keith asked, as the two embraced. Keith leaned against the sturdy chest of his lover, feeling his every breath as he waited for Buck to reply.

Buck leaned down and whispered in Keith's ear in a low and seductive voice.

"Incident log."

Keith can barely contain his excitement as his hands slowly traveled down to Buck's muscular buttocks. Keith whispered back,

"Addendum summary?"

"It is believed that during a routine system backup and file transfer, a mention of SCP-1893 was found within secondary material for Protocol Desert Grassroots for **SCP-2547**. This is believed to be a result of human clerical error; however, the possibility of a deliberate containment breach on the behalf of SCP-1893 has not been ruled out," Buck said, looking down as he stroked the soft fur on Keith's back and gently massaged his fluffy neck. "However, due to the nature of SCP-2547, many new previously-unknown effects of SCP-1893 has come to light. SCP-2547-1, whose existence is contingent upon the creation of new narratives, seem to have shared similar anomalous qualities with the entity known as SCP-1893. "

The lovers broke their embrace. As Keith turned towards the bed, Buck asked in a low voice, "Incident description?"

Keith turned around and took off his bathrobe slowly. "This cross-contamination of information-based anomalies is believed to be a result of human error. While very little is known about the origins and source of SCP-1893, it is unknown whether this is a deliberate breach on part of SCP-1893. All evidence points to SCP-1893 being non-sentient and incapable of altering anything other than its own narrative existence, and thus unable to breach containment on its own accord. "

Buck snorted in indignation; Keith could tell from his body language that he was holding something back, he did not want to get into an argument. Not tonight, at least. It's been so long since he had a companion.

Keith threw his robe towards a chair, but it fell to the ground with a rather unattractive *flump*. As he laid on the bed, Keith's heart pounded faster as he looked at the tower of a man in front of him: his sculpted chest, his well-toned abs, his sturdy, thick arms.

With a faint playful smile, Buck removed his towel and threw it next to the discarded bathrobes, revealing a pair of luscious balls and a glistening penis the size of a baseball bat. Buck turned around, and picked up a bottle of lube that has been sitting next to the television

since last night.

"The newly created narratives between SCP-1893 and SCP-2547, narratives collectively now named Chalmers narratives, displayed many new previously unknown effects of both anomalies," Buck said, as he applied lube liberally on his penis. "As with other narratives in the original SCP-1893 file, any electronic message will be altered by the entity into a prose passage of variable length, tone, or content with certain constant qualities."

Keith whimpered slightly as Buck pulled on his tail rather roughly, and felt a gentle finger, cold and slippery, massage his private spot. Buck began to speak as he prepared his lover.

"One key difference in the Chalmers narratives is the role of SCP-1893. In original SCP-1893 narratives, the entity commonly present in SCP-1893 does not always take on an important role; depending on the "mood" of the entity, it may be highly violent and central, or merely exist in the background. In the Chalmers narratives, it almost always takes on a principle role, and in many cases is directly involved with actions in the plot. " Keith is almost unable to speak, his breath growing heavy.

Almost involuntarily, Keith began stroking himself, feeling a wave of excitement build up in him. Buck continued, "Another key difference is the appearance of the SCP-1893 entity - while in previous narratives, the entity is described as a large, muscular man with horns tattooed on his forehead, the entity in Chalmers narratives now instead displays prominent bovine horns of indeterminate size. Other more prominent bovine characters are sometimes described; however, it is noted that the size of the bovine horns seem to have a positive correlation to the degree of sexual content present - meaning that the larger the horns, the more sexual an entry is. "

Keith let out a satisfying moan, as he felt Buck's rough fingers gently inside of him. He was trembling slightly from being on all fours on the bed for so long.

Buck spoke in a low voice, ignoring the noises that Keith is making. "A third key difference in Chalmers narratives is the appearance of a second character that is also takes on a principle role on equal

footing of SCP-1893-1. It is believed that this character is a manifestation of SCP-2547-1, with several similarities - the entity is always described as good looking or other similar descriptions, and often described as having fur or excessive body hair. The entity may hold canine characteristics such as tails and paws, but sometimes may also be fully human."

Keith grunted as a sudden chill shot through his body.

"One last characteristic is that while the name given to SCP-1893 may vary, the SCP-2547 entities are always given a name that begins with a hard K sound, as in 'coyote'."

Buck grinned, and murmured in a slow and sultry voice, knowing that Keith loves it when he does this. "Chalmers narratives only occur if SCP-1893 is mentioned in conjunction with SCP-2547; it does not seem to be a widespread effect, and has not affected other passages. Of note is that in subsequent interviews, SCP-2547-1 does not seem be aware of the existence of Chalmers narratives, or is unwilling to share its knowledge of this event."

Buck stopped, allowing Keith to catch his breath. Keith knows what is coming next, almost unable to hold in his excitement. Keith closed his eyes, feeling two strong arms grab onto his butt, and the head of Buck's gigantic penis pushing against his tender anus. Keith winced slightly as he felt Buck slide inside of him.

"Conclusion?"

Keith, ignoring the pain, attempted a reply to his lover, as Buck's grip on Keith tightened.

"Comparatively to the original narratives, Chalmers narratives are less violent, but are usually highly affectionate in nature - it is believed that the presence of the SCP-2547 entity is affecting the 'mood' of SCP-1893, " Keith said, after finally catching his breath. He closed his eyes as he felt the climax approaching. "The Chalmers narratives range from relatively benign and platonic, to highly deviant and vivid descriptions of sexual deviancy and fetishes. It is noted that all of these Chalmers narratives lack the presence of any female characters, and are almost always highly homosexual in

nature."

Buck picked up his pace, inviting Keith to continue. Their eyes met, knowing that the climax would come soon.

"After the revelations of the Chalmers narratives, it is now believed that SCP-1893 may be able to affect other forms of narratives and documents," Keith quickly rattled off, his speech speeding up along with Buck's pounding. "While permission for cross-testing is still pending, it is believed that this is definitive proof that previously hypothesized methods of termination may be viable, mainly because- "

Buck bellowed a low guttural roar as he came inside of Keith, who let out a satisfied scream as he came as well, staining the hotel bedsheets. Collapsing against the bed, with his brain swimming and satisfied, Keith smiled faintly as Buck's breath slowed, feeling him spill his seed deep inside him. Buck leaned down and kissed Keith as they laid on the now messy bed, curling up against each other as they drifted to sleep.

Iterations

I am Masahiro Goto, formerly **SCP-2265**-A. Five years ago I was released from a twenty year time loop. I need not elaborate further; the Foundation gave me a (heavily censored) copy of my documentation at my release, but I am prohibited from discussing it with anyone. But I digress.

I have watched many new movies and television shows since I was released. One which my supervising agent recommend to me, Groundhog Day, rings true to me. I did some further reading, and found out that someone calculated Bill Murray's character spends 30 years in the loop. I do not know how long I spent there exactly (nor do I care to count), but 20 years is a lot of time. I should write down my memories, so I may yet learn from fate's choice for me.

First, there was the changes. Well, not quite first - after shock, panic, despair, and resigned acceptance, then came the changes. I found I could manipulate the waiter's hand in the brief moment he noticed us. Calling for help became disappointing, then repetitive, then dull. I found the best was to convince Andrew to play a game with me: I was a mute, and I wrote down my order. I did eventually get tired of the entire menu, but I am thankful I had an empty stomach that day.

Whatever put me in there made it so Andrew would not know we were trapped unless I informed him advertently or otherwise (I know this because Andrew's small bladder would have caused him to stir a dozen times were it not for supernatural intervention). Andrew was, and still is, a fascinating man. Here are some things I learned.

I learned to read people. Not in the psychic sense, of course, but in the sense of expression. Growing up, I always had a difficult time learning expressions - not helped by the fact that my people are stoic by nature. I found only in animation could I clearly read exaggerated expressions.

With Andrew, I learned his many "tells". He would adjust his collar if

he was nervous, he would rub his hair if he was curious. I had as many attempts and fails as I could have ever wanted, and ten times even that. By the end of our captivity, I could tell much better how people felt about what I was saying (after the initial shock, of course).

My fluency in English is very obviously helpful to me now. I am only slightly more noticeable then a second-generation native, so I have been able to do well for myself here. I thought it amusing when I had to pretend a thick accent to avoid piquing Andrew's curiosity. Even more curious was when he taught me French, and Spanish, and Russian. It is amazing, learning a new language; it's as if you have put on a new pair of contacts and hearing aids that allow the world to be clearly illuminated to you.

I digress. Perhaps it is time to end my meditation.

A further note: many have wondered (as I have) how I could have survived what the Foundation called my "Iterations." I prefer to think of it in a more subjective way. Our minds have a give for engraving repetition; by the time I was freed, I could order a meal and speak several languages almost by instinct. I read a theory, once, that if a group of fans was trapped in a sporting arena, and became aware of it, they would at first panic, then fight, then accept it, then, eventually, play the game. So many times would they play the game that eventually they would become as soulless and predictable as a calculator, losing their sentience as humans lost the purpose of their ancestral organs.

I am thankful my mind did not atrophy. I close with a pondering note: I do not believe in God, but I do believe something ordained my fate. Were I trapped in the same circumstance again, would I be able to make use of it? (This, my friends, is why I always carry my laptop on me.)

I do not know if I am blessed, cursed, or simply have bad luck. Either way, I have accepted what the world has put me through, and am prepared to stare into the abyss if it calls me back.

It's All Behind Us Now

Much like our grandparents could tell you what they were doing on 9/11/2001, or what their parents were doing during the Kennedy assassination, our entire generation could tell you with perfect clarity where they were when Laser Butt Disease ended modern civilization.

We had known about LBD for about 30 years, an unusual bacterium that sat in the colon and occasionally discharged low-power laser fire. It made headlines for months, and the late night hosts beat it to death, but there really wasn't much to it. Occasionally you'd buy a new pair of underwear, a handful of fires around the world a year. Once in a blue moon, someone would have a particularly potent variant; a Z-Pack from the doctor would clear that up in a few days.

It was summertime of 2074 that Methicillin-resistant Laser Butt Disease became the scare of the year. Years and years of throwing antibiotics at the problem kickstarted the evolution of it, and it went from a jokey part of the human condition to something far more serious. The wattage increased significantly; what was originally a joke product called "Lord Explosion's Laser Butthole Ointment" became a staple product for most that could afford it. Gramps called it "the new Red Ring of Death," whatever that meant. He thought that old line was hilarious.

It was on April 1st, 2076 at the G11 summit that laser butt terrorists assassinated heads of state for 11 of the world's superpowers, including President Rothschild IV and the robotic brain of Vladimir Lenin. Dirty laser butt disease bombs were dropped and pathogens released into the jet stream. Before civilization collapsed by way of laser butt genocide, a small terroristic art collective claimed responsibility on national television. Home grown, right here in the States. They made a truly insane statement that still echoes in the memories of the survivors.

"We have been cool for long enough. You know what's cooler than being cool? *Being on fire.*"

What was incredible was just how destructive the new strain could be. Stomach cramping was about the only warning you had that you were probably about to have your last few minutes on this earth. The lasers were anywhere from 200KW to 2TW, the latter of which was literally like farting a small hydrogen bomb. Worse was that with the increased wattage, our old friend Isaac Newton came by to visit. People would get literally launched into their ceilings by laser butt disease. The roofers made good money, for a while. Then too many cases came, and too many roofers were afflicted themselves. Gas stations were, one by one, blown up in huge laser butt conflagrations. Oil refineries. Factories all over the world. Data centers with lasers clean through a whole row of racks, the destroyed capacitors catching fire. The science labs, our only hope for stability and a cure, were slowly destroyed and abandoned. Then the prison breakouts started.

There were emergency centers erected at most community pools. You felt the blast coming on, you headed to the pool and aimed your ass to the sky. When it came, you got launched into the pool. It worked well until a bad case showed up and inevitably cracked the bottom of the pool, the force of impact with the water ripping the flesh off their bones.

The government slowly collapsed, trying to run the country from bunkers. Even as they slowly died off in their isolation, there was nobody in a position to carry out their orders on the ground. Some few dedicated cops and soldiers tried to uphold order; most resorted to looting or hiding with their families.

TV stations, one by one, went dark. Only a handful of radio stations stayed around, alternating between music to try and keep spirits up, reporting on eyewitness news, and hawking home remedies. One memorable host went off right in the middle of pitching urine enemas as the cure. "I've been doing it for years and *aaarrrghghhh**PEWPEW***"

I think we all knew the end of the world was a foregone conclusion when animals started exhibiting laser butt disease. The picture of

the cow embedded in the Statue of Liberty was our generation's Iwo Jima. It was all ending.

We tried to do our job at the Foundation as well as we could, given the circumstances. We'd lost most of our network infrastructure, and had gone to a paper-only setup for the first time in over 100 years. It was boggling how much paperwork we accumulated. There were files on skips we wouldn't even contain for another five years, just sitting there in the pile. Containment breaches were commonplace, and the business of resecuring the skips became much harder when half your task force "had to go pew pew" on one retrieval mission. We filled 173's storage unit with fast-setting concrete and called it a day. We lost the lizard about 6 months back, nobody knows where the hell he is now. Best case, he's firing butt lasers in hell.

*noooonononono**PEWPEW***

Judging by the klaxons, I'd say something big and mean just got out through a man-shaped hole in the wall. I'll be back.

It's Not Pronounced Like the Thesaurus, Dammit!

Dr. Roget was angry. He was furious. One might say he was enraged, or even wrathful.

Why?

Because the world was a terrible place, full of war, poverty, bigotry, abuse, greed, selfishness, people who talk at the theater, and probably an uncounted number of dangerous anomalies that the Foundation had yet to discover and contain.

…But mostly because people kept mispronouncing his name.

He had started carrying a thesaurus around everywhere he went, so that whenever somebody pronounced his name like the author of said thesaurus, he could hit, wallop, bludgeon, strike, or clout them with it. However, this method of negative reinforcement served only to amuse people, and they kept doing it. Day in and day out, people would call to him from all directions, purposely pronouncing his name in the way he so hated.

He was irate.

After a long day of this (the four-thousand-six-hundred-and-ninth in a row, to be precise), he stormed into his office, knocking over the multiple photographs of himself, his family, and…

God, he missed her. Dr. Miriam Webster (pronounced my-REE-um weeb-STAY-er), his only true friend in the Foundation. She alone knew what it was like to consistently be addressed by the name of a popular word reference book. The two of them had had many good times together. Physically attacking people for their mispronunciations, getting reprimanded by their superiors, attacking their superiors when they mispronounced their names while reprimanding them…

Then, one fateful day, Dr. Roget caught her discussing the actual thesaurus. He didn't hear the context, and the feeling of betrayal was too much for him. Before he knew it, he had picked up a large knife, sliced a nearby dictionary into the shape of a sharp object, and smacked her in the face with it. (Dictionaries, no matter what shape they are, simply can't stab people. The pages are too flexible and the covers are too blunt.) Then he ran off crying, transferred to another site, and never saw her again.

So naturally, there was no describing how surprised, astonished, shocked, dumbfounded, and taken aback he felt when he looked up and saw Miriam Webster sitting on his desk, smiling at him as if he hadn't dumped her like last year's encyclopedia all those years ago.

With kindness, benevolence, good will, and compassion in her eyes, she explained to him that she completely understood why he had run off. She told him the truth of what had happened that day, while he listened attentively; he had long since ceased being angry with her, but he hadn't been able to reach out and apologize, because the site they both used to work at was not equipped with any sort of non-emergency communications system. It just wasn't in the budget.

The two of them, kindred spirits once more, simultaneously began to plead for the other's forgiveness. Roget couldn't believe his luck, his fortune, his serendipity. She had shown up when he needed her most, and she was here to stay.

But Miriam had one more surprise for Roget. She winked at him, and presented a young girl. Her age was roughly equal to the amount of time since the two had last seen each other, minus nine months. Roget looked with wonder, awe, and reverence upon his long-lost daughter.

He asked for the girl's name. Miriam told him it was Britannica.

She pronounced it BRITE-en-ICK-kah.

She's Really Good At Hurting Other People But Not Much Of Anything Else

Panzer let her mind bask in her future victory as she walked down the hallway to the stage, as she ran through the hallway, flooded in light, ears ringing from the crazed crowd yelling her name, hands already sore from high fiving some of the fans before striking a pose atop the ropes as her theme faded away and her opponent's theme started. She let the crowd's jeers for her opponent as the announcer presented him as *the reigning Men's Openweight Champion* revitalize her, and the adrenaline giving her back all the strength she thought she didn't have anymore when she slammed his face into the ring's corner, first into the worn cushion that covered the buckles, then into the raw metal. And she let the sight of blood goad her into wanting more, more as she drove her screwdriver into his calf, more as she put him in a standing choke hold and savagely stomped on the injured leg when he reached for the ropes, until he did her favorite thing in the world: tap out.

It always felt better when they tapped out.

Something in the back of her mind wondered what the crowd saw the spectacle as, what the anomaly fooled their brains into seeing. She pushed that thought away and focused on lifting her arm along with the ref. Cries for the new Men's Openweight Champion reverberated across the arena and nailed into her head. She groggily took the heavy, golden belt and slung it across her shoulder, waving at the fans and stumbling backstage, across the long white hallway and into the locker room, into the tiresome inevitability of her report.

-

"We lost Wolf."

"Ukichirou?"

“Yeah. Fuck.” Panzer would’ve buried her face in her hands, if they weren’t too bruised for it. “Ethics board review. For saving Star Shooter’s fucking life.”

“We might get him b-”

“The hell we will.” Panzer tried her best to focus on the laptop screen where her conference call with The Nightwatch droned mercilessly on; she had been up for over a day, keeping up a careful balancing act of training, doing shows and being consumed with worry in the locker room. “You know what ‘ethics review’ means. They keep him out of action for half a year, then decide he’s unfit for this and send him to another project. Probably mindwipe him too. Christ.”

“Eli-”

“Unfit for the project, dude. Because it’s so god *damn* easy to find researchers who can wrestle.”

“Elianna!” The Nightwatch raised his voice uncharacteristically loud. “Look, I know this is stressful, but you can’t let it get to you.”

“Mhm.”

“ Have you taken today’s pill?”

No. “Yes. Don’t patronize me. You’re my project lead, not my dad.” And a shoddy project lead, at that, she thought - he’d been running in circles in tiny independent circuits for a decade, never close to a contract from anyone noteworthy - nothing from CMLL, from NJPW, not even from the somewhat larger promotions in England that everyone seemed to graduate from. And of course, nothing, ever, from the WWE. Wolf was the only one in the team to have ever gotten a contract with them, and a great deal of good that’d done them for the whole three months he’d held it before blowing his cover. Panzer felt a twinge of jealousy, fueled by the knowledge that she would have done better - navigating the intricate maze of treachery and backstabbing, fending for herself, winning the Universal Championship. National television. Foundation honors.

“You don’t have to get uppity with me. I’m your friend, and I worry about you.” It took all of Panzer’s meager self-control not to roll her eyes. “You have a two day break after tonight, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Relax. I need you to focus if we’re gonna be one man down for god knows how long. Just, relax after today.”

“Thanks.” Fuck off and die. “See you.” Panzer closed the laptop. The small bottle of medicine on top of the desk rattled and glared at her with nagging insistence. Gingerly, Panzer fished out a pill, crammed it in her mouth and dry swallowed it. She gave a weak smile at the belt resting next to the computer, closed her eyes and vaguely remembered she had to do an autograph session just before she passed out.

Vince McMahon Dies At The End

Tales J

It did not bother Thing Called Jack to see the universe end; Thing Called Jack had seen many such things, after all, floating and drifting as it did. Some would call it a god. Others would call it dust.

But this isn't Jack's story to tell. Not yet. Not for a long time.

`return`

Jack of Clubs

It all comes down to names, I think. I mean, if I had had a cool name, maybe I wouldn't be such a bad person. I blame Mom. She could have named us all something interesting. I mean, hell, she even took the name Echidna after she created the four of us. Mother of Monsters, but we always just called her Mom. Enough of a classic Greek education to choose Echidna, but name all four of your kids Jack? That's just re-cock-ulous.

Huh? Oh, you know, re-cock-ulous, even worse than ridiculous? Come on, you knows it's funny. Where was- Oh yeah, the names. Like Joh. That would be Jack of Hearts to you. We all do that, shorten our names, makes it easier. But, yeah, Joh. How much easier would it have been to name him Pan? And Jos, he coulda been, uhm, well Cthulhu, right? I mean, okay, not Greek, but still squidy. And Jackie, you have no idea how much I hate her for the idea of using and i e on to the end of her name, she coulda been Anansi! No, he's not female, but still, it's better than Jack of Diamonds. And me? Hell! I coulda been so many things!Skoll, Hati, Lon Chaney, Larry Talbot, hell I coulda been Fenrir! That's a name to strike fear into people's hearts. Fenrir, the great wolf! I mean, she coulda even just named me Wolf, or Lobo, and it woulda been awesome.

And of course, the Kings and Queens all get named after famous ones. And the others… Okay, maybe the Deuces have it worse. No real identity to speak of. Even then, Deuce sounds cool, right? 'Who are you?' 'They call me Deuce.' That's a guy you wanna watch yer back around. Well, and the Joker doesn't have a name, but the old man is creepy. Where was I? Oh right! Coulda been anything, hells I'd have taken Loup-Garou!

But no. I'm the mother fucking Jack of Clubs. Or, Joc, as my siblings call me. Makes me feel like I should be french or something. I blame Mom. And the good Doctor. Hmm? The Good Doctor? It's what we

always called him, cause he used so many different names, all the god damn time. I think you guys know him as Dr. Prometheus. Fire bringer my ass. Guy just likes to fiddle, with fucking EVERYTHING. Which was why he put up with Mom, I suppose. What he could do with inanimate objects, she could do with DNA. Mix this, match that, put it in her womb, BAM, self continuing lineage. With some really fucked up specific needs for procreation.

Ah, yeh, now we're getting to the stuff you want, aren't we? Yeah, we each have to meet specific challenges in order to pass on our seed. Joh needs them to trust him. Jos needs to know them intimately, without them ever knowing him. Jackie only goes for rapists who love her. Me? I need consent. They need to tell me it's okay, before I can work my magic. Gotta think I'm one of them.

It's harder than you think. I don't exactly look normal, y'know? I'm big, and burly, and I exude this whole 'predator' scent or something. Most of the girls have a sorta prey instinct to them, so a big hungry predator walking up and saying 'Hey, wanna bone?' just doesn't work. I gotta be subtle. Disguise my scent. That's what the skin is for. I wrap myself in the skin of someone they knew, and it's like, bam, he doesn't look so bad. Ok, so I like 'em dumb. Works better, yeah? Maybe a little of it is my own special magic, so they don't notice I'm wearing a butchered carcass.

Not that they matter to me much after I do the dirty deed. My little babies get born hungry. No, I'm not much a loving parent. None of us are. But my little cubs can survive on their own. Instinct, yeah?

Oh, yeah, that last girl. God, she was sexy. Beautiful eyes like limpid pools of moonlight. Soft, black hair, all curly and nice. Such beautiful full lips. Oh, I knew from the moment I saw her, I had to have her. I knew she'd be perfect for one of my little babies. It took a while. I'm not used to finding such perfect girls, usually I have to hunt over hill and under dale to find such a sweet thing.

So, I lured one of her little friends away, the friend wasn't as cute as my babe. Lure her off with the promise of a good time, maybe a nice meal. Not a bad sort, very trusting. But, I broke her neck anyways, before she could utter a single peep. I skinned her. I've always been good at such things. Natural claws, y'know? Anyways, simple

enough to wrap this girls skin around me, like a cloak. Totally worked. I got close to my babe, my beautiful girl. Took about a week, of just, hanging around, and she got comfortable with me.

Then I worked my magic. A nudge here, a comment there, and, before you know it, she was ready. all I needed was the word. She looked up at me, with those big brown eyes, and said what I'd been waiting to hear.

She said 'Baaaaa.'

Jack Of Diamonds

I suppose you're wondering why I do it? Why I did it? Why we all… I'm sorry. It just hurts, you see. But it'll be better soon, I'm sure.

She was special. Oh, they're all special. But this last one… she was different. Her eyes, they gleamed. Her smile, it made me think of angels. I knew, knew she would take my special gift, and maybe more. The others had been alright, but this one…

I met her in Bangkok. We were playing… I don't remember what we were playing. I barely knew the rules. We had been randomly matched as team mates, versus these two ugly cross dressers. Despite my disadvantage, we kept winning, hand after hand. Eventually, we introduced ourselves to each other. Turned out her name was Jacqueline. I couldn't help but laugh. "Bet this is the first time two Jacks beat a pair of Queens!" She laughed. Even the old man dealing the cards laughed. It was love!

Well, from my end, it was love. From her end… I had to fight, to get her attention. She was so beautiful. I've never been much of a fan of Asians, y'know, despite being stuck over here. But everyone knew how beautiful she was. She could walk down a street in a burlap sack, and heads would turn. Gorgeous, long black tresses, beautiful emerald eyes. She had dozens of male suitors.

I just kept coming back. Made sure I was there when she needed me. Some of my friends, those who do what I do, they just rush things. Y'know? Jump a girl, do what they want, and leave. That's not for me. There's gotta be some emotion there, there's gotta be some kind of love. She felt the same way.

Nine months, it took. Nine months of… dating? Yes, dating. After a while, she got used to me being there. Invited me to dinner. We talked, about so many things. Never once did she ask me back up to her place. She was a good girl, a clean girl. So very, very clean.

Nine months, and that's when she did me the honor. She told me she thought we were finally close enough, that she knew me well enough to trust me. They always trust me, in the end. I've done it so many times…

So there we were, naked before each other, touching, kissing, caressing, and the things she did to me… She barely had to touch me, y'know? She could just look at me, and sigh, and it was, orgasmic. But we fucked too. Fucked EVERYWHERE! I came, and came again, and she… enjoyed herself. In the end, there we were, laying on the bed, and I was ready to do my thing, when she starts moaning on top of me. I'm used to girls moaning, but she just… it wasn't sexual. It was like what we were doing hurt, but she couldn't stop it. I reached out, and she caught my hands. So strong, I think I still have bruises. Then her entire body tensed, locking me down hard inside her.

That's when I felt it crawling inside me. However she does what she does, it crawled right down my shaft. Hurt like a bugger, like I was being torn apart from the inside, like what I had wanted to do to her. I screamed. Heaven help me, I screamed like a little girl, and passed out.

When I woke up, she'd left me a message. Told me I was going to be a father. I can feel them, now, you know. All three of my sweet little babies, crawling around inside a sac in my belly. They're getting so big. Doc says they're healthy, eight limbs and all. Gonna rip their way out of their daddy soon, yes they are. I'm proud to be my little babies' first meal.

Hey. I won't be around to raise them. Take care of my girls, would you?

/ /2011 *SCP-952-Gamma 1, 2, and 3 taken into Foundation custody. Agents in Asia are to be on the lookout for SCP-952-Gamma, using the alias 'Jackie of Diamonds.'*

Jam Jars

The Utterly Bazaar was a roaring sea of merchants hawking, buyers haggling, and everyone in between fighting to make their voice heard over the rolling din of noise. Wooden stalls stood in the street to oppose the massive brick and mortar stores that flanked either side of the winding bazaar. The variance of the species within the throng was only outmatched by that of the goods around them, something the locals — if you could call a merchant who spent the night within his shop a local — were quite proud of.

Paddling through the peddlers was Finnegan, blissfully ignorant of the screaming around him thanks to a pair of faintly enchanted headphones. Instead he cycled through a playlist of an **`artist`** he had recently discovered, humming along as he went. It did quite a lot to quell the smashing in his chest from the pressure of the crowd, both physical and otherwise. But the small bundle of spending money he had recently earned weighed heavy in his pocket, and without Aldon to present a project he was left to his own capitalistic devices.

Finnegan squeezed himself between a **`pair of bickering Clowns`**, his backpack momentarily catching on the latch of cage carried by the merrier of the two. He quickly excused himself and slid further into the crowd, not noticing he had inadvertently freed the contained Fun-Lover. Because he was essentially deafened, Finnegan didn't hear the loud popping noise accompanied by an ecstatic "Wowwee!" So instead he entered Ed & Al's Alchemist Emporium, unaware of the chaos he had just unleashed.

After purchasing a pinch of magnesium and two vials of O-negative he slipped back out before the brothers running the store could try talking him into more. To escape the crowd he turned off into a side street nestled between the alchemists' supply store and an interdimensional pet shop, and save for the merchants distributed through the alley he was almost alone. The shops forced into the

alley ways often were little more than a carpet with all the merchant's otherworldly possessions laid out before them, forcing Finnegan to hesitantly tiptoe across the minefield of tiny skulls and jugs of potions.

It was not until he was half-past the one actual stall in the alley that something caught his attention. Or more accurately, his arm. Finnegan looked down at the cloth wrapped around his sleeve, following it to the mass of cotton and wool covering the merchant in question. Finnegan squinted into the gap where the merchant's head should have been. Instead he just saw the inside of the woolen hood.

The headphones on his head were displaced by a limb he couldn't actually see, and a whispering voice spoke to him in urgent tones. "How would you like to make some easy money?"

Finnegan considered his options. He could accept a job proffered to him in a back alley by a bundle of rags. Or he could eat ketchup packets when he got home. Tilting his head back and forth, he examined the stall. Every single item on it had the word **"ghost"** in its name. In some cases that was simply its entire name.

Finnegan took a short breath. "What would I have to do?"

A watch emerged from the cloth. Or something akin to a watch. Instead of an analogue or digital clock face it had a small meter with a black needle. Said needle was warbling very far into the red territory.

"Don't mind that, just picking up interference from my… uh, wares. I need you to take that and this filter here to this address, and collect all the ectoplasm you can. Really easy job. I'd go, but I have, uh… allergies."

Finnegan examined the large air filter. A sticker on its side claimed it to be doubly effective against both allergens and the various forms of ectoplasm. He took another look at the twitching ectoplasm detector and then looked back at the merchant.

"Yeah, I could do that."

Hinges squealed and light pushed its way through the must of the cellar. Finnegan squinted into the darkness through the visor of an old respirator. At first all he could see was dust flutter through the weak beams of illumination, giving the long-abandoned place a constant flurry of filth. He made sure his cuffs of his jacket sleeves and pants cuffs were taped down, that his gloves were tight, and that his hood formed a seal with the mask. After making sure his signature beret was firmly in place he scooped up the modified air filter at his feet with both hands and crept into the crypt. The needle of the device on his wrist slowly crept to the right.

The cellar was a mess of shelves and crates. Rusted metal and cracked porcelain jutted from wood and plastic, tempting him with the possibility of finding something worth salvaging. But he moved on, to the staircase leading into the house of the Birch family. Stairs creaked and the railing groaned, but Finnegan pressed on.

Only a glance was spared toward the detector, where it petered an eighth away from the left end; the place only had trace amounts of ectoplasmic vapor in the air. Something between caution and paranoia kept the mask on. Getting possessed was not exactly on today's itinerary.

The Birch home proper was not quite as bad off as its cellar. Its surfaces only wore a thin layer of dust rather than an inch-thick coat, upon which Finnegan deposited the large white device he had been carrying. The glass container snuggled into the filter slowly filled with a glowing green fluid.

The house was small, arguably tiny. Two bedrooms and one bathroom, and joint kitchen/dining room. A quick look into the cabinets earned nothing but cobwebs. The drawers were similarly empty. The fridge contained nothing but an array of jam jars. Pomegranate, if their labels were to be believed. Most of them looked coagulated enough to qualify as a solid. Turning the handles on the sink resulted in glowing jelly ejecting itself from the faucet.

He lifted the latch on the glass cylinder attached to the filter, and went about ferrying the goo from the sink and into the glass. The ghostly moan that accompanied each deposit did little for his mood.

It all struck him as doubly odd. Nobody had died within the Birch home within the last twenty years, and yet the place was chock-full of ghostly energy. Despite this, nothing was actually happening, outside of the usual ectoplasmic buildup. He supposed it was because he hadn't breathed enough of the air to allow a possession, and there wasn't much of anything left in the house suitable for a poltergeist. But there had to be something going on here he hadn't spotted yet. Once the sink was clean he turned the filter's power dial to max and went about exploring the house.

He found a bathroom and gave the sink an experimental use. More goo globbed out and slowly slid down the drain. Finnegan sighed. The entire plumbing system was likely backed up with ghost goo. He gave the toilet seat a lift to inspect the interior and promptly let it fall.

There had been a face in the toilet.

Muffled yelling came from beneath the porcelain, which Finnegan immediately took to ignoring. Fingers wiggled nervously while he considered what to do. Ghosts — or whatever these things qualified as — or not, a scientific approach was probably his best bet.

He walked back out to the kitchen and peered into the vial of ectoplasm the filter had collected. A tiny face looked back up at him from the liquid's surface. It gave him a high-pitched "oooooooo" for his effort.

Finnegan gathered a fair amount of saliva in his mouth and spit onto the floor. A face arose from the wet spot on the tiles. When it tried yelling at him he stepped on it. When he lifted his foot the face was still there, only now its tinny wail was chorused by a face on the underside of Finnegan's shoe.

Curiosity pushed him over to the fridge, and he slowly opened the freezer. Frozen faces stared back at him, warped into tiny stalactites. He breathed on them heatedly, earning a chilly wail in return. The moan petered out with his breath. He shrugged and yanked out what icicles he could, tossing them into the cylinder.

After wiping up the spit he went about exploring the house in full. A whole lot of nothing turned up until he entered the master bedroom.

Sitting on the floor next to the indent marks the bed had made in the carpet was a white panama hat. It didn't look anything special, other than the fact that it was in good condition.

But something about the hat gave him a weird feeling he couldn't quite place. Blurry memories of the **anart mecha** competition in Japan surfaced, and an indistinct image of the Wanderer's Library sat just outside his mind's eye.

He twirled the hat idly while his brain tried to unravel why it was thinking what it was being made to think. It didn't work particularly well. The more he pushed at the mental blockage the stronger it seemed to become, compacting in his mindscape. He found himself unable to draw his attention away from it. As the mass grew more dense, it began drawing in surrounding thoughts and memories.

Finnegan felt his mind slowly collapse in on itself as his brain tried very hard not to do the same.

Enough neurons were out of its event horizon for him to drop the hat, and the captured memories went supernova. His mind exploded in a blur of all the colors, sounds, and scents he could remember ever experiencing.

And then he passed out.

Luckily he didn't land on the panama hat on the floor.

« **Involuntary Isolation** | **Hub** | **Killing Knowledge** »

Jargon

I began walking along the hall to the briefing room. Another situation had come up, and I was expected to be present. As I walked my secretary Gloria walked alongside, giving me a cup of joe.

"What's the sitch, Glor?" I took a sip.

"'Nother possible scip. Non-sent RB. Chrono. Might be artificial."

"No kiddin'? Big F?"

"Nah, not Big F or Dr. Dubya. They're thinking Pro Labs."

"Geez, ever since T-kill I haven't heard anything from that place."

She shrugged and opened the briefing room door for me. I nodded and thanked her.

"Gentlemen."

"Heads up boys, it's the SD."

"Whuzzat? The suck dick?"

We all laughed and I sat down at the head of the table, looking at the men before me. We'd been in and out of this room hundreds of times before. Everything from CBs to possible CI attacks made us cram into this room every day.

"What's the story, boys?"

"Big one this time Ralph. We're thinkin' a K."

"Well shit. I hear there's Pro Labs involvement."

"Yeah. Some Gawk guys gave us some intel."

"What?"

"Non-sent object. RB. Chrono, we're thinkin'. Might also be prob bending."

"Some Wie-oo guys actually found it, Ralph. Ran back cryin' all the way to the FBI."

I laughed. "We got an MTF on this?"

"Yep. A-23. No pro-rep from them yet."

"Ok. Big S is done. Big C?"

"Containment's goin' well. We got some psyche immunes watchin' it for a while, just in case."

"Big P?"

"Gawk had intel, so they might come after it. Can't break into here though under the Anom treaty."

"Right. Who's testing?"

"We got Doc James on the go. Y'know him. Did some work with HTD Rep."

"Oh yeah."

The radio crackled in at the center of the desk. "Got the dash E in our sites. Ready to big C. Requesting permission."

Frank leaned over and pressed a button. "You are go to contain Alpha-23."

"Roger that."

Frank looked over at me. "Another one in the bag, Ralph."

I nodded and watched the map behind him blip for a minute or two. The radio voice crackled on again. "We got a successful contain. Returning to base."

"Roger that, over and out." Frank turned off the radio.

I looked around. "Good work men. Lunch?"

They all nodded and we departed. I got a BLT.

Jaywalk

There is a way to live well beyond your appointed time. You need a car, preferably something late-model, with a strong body. Newer cars tend to be too light and not do enough damage. Next, you need to find a candidate. It has to be a pedestrian, and it's best to pick younger people, as they have more time left, but not always. You'll have to watch them, if it's late just drive slow and pretend to be lost, but if you have to, make a second sweep by going around the block. You have to do this on a black asphalt road with a clear yellow line. You can ONLY hit a candidate that does at least one of the following,:

Crosses directly across the road at a run, without looking around.
Walks for more than eight feet on the road itself without touching the sidewalk or curb.
Stops walking or sits on the yellow line for more than three seconds.
Trips or falls on any pothole or uneven surface in the road and bleeds because of the fall.
Drops a personal item (key chain, phone, etc.) that shatters, with all the pieces remaining between the yellow line and the sidewalk.

If a candidate does any of these, it's an indicator that they are temporally detached from their “time”. If you hit and kill them with your car before they reach the next cross street, you can swap your time for theirs. If you were going to die tomorrow, but hit a valid candidate who won't die for eight years, you now have their remaining time instead of yours. It's unclear what happens to the candidate's soul, but it's probably not good.

There's a group, mostly old folks, who do this all the time. The founder says he's over two hundred years old, and he looks it. The name is like White Sunrise or something similar. They had a web page for a while, but it appears to be gone now. I remember browsing the forums once, and the name George Russell Weller was being discussed. He apparently screwed up an attempt, and

was being kicked out.

Just be careful out there. I've noticed a lot of older folks skimming around suburbs lately, watching kids rather closely. Stay on the sidewalk, and keep your head down.

An Offer You Can't Refuse

April 2nd, 2011

ADDRESS HOLDER
85 FREDERICK STREET
ON, CANADA

WE ARE PLEASED TO INFORM YOU THAT YOU HAVE BEEN SELECTED FROM A TALENTED POOL OF CANDIDATES FOR EMPLOYMENT WITH THE FACTORY.

THIS IS A MANAGEMENT POSITION. TRANSPORTATION AND LIVING EXPENSES ARE FREE WITHOUT CHARGE.

EXPECT TO BE TRANSPORTED TO FURTHER EMPLOYMENT WITHIN THE NEXT CALENDAR MONTH.

WOULD YOU LIKE TO KNOW MORE?

> >No
>
> Don't lie to me. When you make your bed, you lay in it. You're going nowhere soon.

Job Opportunities

On Monday morning, Aleksander awoke in his London apartment to the smell of burnt toast. Assuming he was having a heart attack (the irony of this assumption only occurred to him later in the day), he rushed downstairs in an attempt to reach the telephone, only to find his six-year-old daughter desperately struggling to make him breakfast.

He laughed, picked her up, spun her around, and kissed her on the forehead, before sitting down with her and eating a meal of burnt toast and scrambled eggs. Aleksander drew a face on his eggs with ketchup, and his daughter giggled.

He hugged his daughter once more before she left for school, then went back into his bedroom, disengaged the lock on the personal armory hidden behind his dresser, and started to get ready for work. He got dressed in his nicest black, silk dress pants, and a beautifully dark purple dress shirt, before clipping his two standard-issue Mark-10 handguns underneath his arms, in all of their smoky black steel glory, and threw on a black suit coat over top.

Then, after re-locking his armory, Aleksander went downstairs, did the dishes, threw on his thick wool dress coat, and set out in the pouring London rain on his way to work.

He stopped at the small coffee stand in the square across from his apartment complex, ordering his usual sea-black coffee, which he stood and sipped slowly, until he realized he was six minutes late for work.

Aleksander ran, in the pouring rain, down London's twisting and turning roads before he finally came to a stop at head offices, a small, inconspicuous building, tucked between a Laundromat and a Grocer. Swipping his glass security pass at the door, he rushed past the oaken panels and leather chairs, waved to the secretary, then swiped his security pass again and stepped into the elevator,

pushing the button for basement level 26.

The elevator opened, he stepped out, rushed past a second secretary, and ducked into his office. With luck, nobody noticed he was late.

He booted up his company terminal.

> MARSHALL, CARTER & DARK EMPLOYEE TERMINAL
>
> USERID: 4567832790
>
> PASSWORD: LUCILLE2009
>
> …ACCEPTED. WELCOME BACK, ALEKSANDER

Aleksander managed to take another three sips of his now cold coffee before the computer finished booting and he saw the blinking email notification in the corner. Not the usual crimson red notification, which meant a new contract was available, but instead a deep, sickly green.

Upper Management. He cursed, and opened it.

> Aleksander Foxx,
>
> You have been requested in a meeting with upper management at 11:00 AM in board room six.
> This meeting is mandatory. Do not be tardy.
>
> Thank you,
> Upper Management

Apparently, someone very important had noticed he was late.

Aleksander had, apparently, been the only one to take the words "Don't be tardy" seriously, as it was now rolling passed 11:17 AM and he was still the only one in the board room. As he wondered if he was in the wrong board room, the door swung open, and an elderly man waltzed in.

"Apologies for my tardiness. I've been having a very busy day, myself. And you, Aleksander?" The man smiled a wicked grin. "How busy has your day been?"

Aleksander swallowed. "Very busy, sir."

The man sat down across from Aleksander. "Good to hear. Has the work been interesting?"

"Always, sir. The work is always interesting."

"Good." The man pulled a file folder out from his briefcase and set it in front of him. "How old are you, Aleksander?"

"36, sir."

"Single father?" He began flipping through what appeared to be a well-thumbed copy of Aleksander's personnel file.

Aleksander felt his legs go numb.

"Yes, sir."

The man looked up from the file folder, and pursed his lips. "You don't have any idea who I am, do you?"

Aleksander shook his head.

"You do actually. My name is Skitter. Skitter Marshall."

Aleksander felt his face go pale. It was bad enough to have to speak alone with upper management, but a named board member? *The* Mister Marshall? What would a Board member want with a Huntsman like him?

Marshall looked at Aleksander with cold, all knowing eyes. "Relax, my boy. You aren't in trouble. In fact…" He pursed his lips once again.

"You've been working with us for quite some time, haven't you?"

"Yes, sir. Three years as a security officer. Six as a Huntsman."

"You've made quite the name for yourself. What do they call you in the field? Moss Man?"

"Moss Heart, sir."

"Hm. Fitting, I suppose. Bit too literal for my tastes." He slid the file away from himself. "What's your rank?"

"Lieutenant, sir."

"Well, congratulations. You're now officially a Brigadier. Welcome to the big leagues."

Aleksander felt like he had just been hit by lightning. "…Thank you sir."

"Of course. You're the best for the job. Now, I have a very important job for you. In fact, they asked for you personally — As I said, you've made quite the name for yourself."

Aleksander was getting feeling back in his legs. His usual, firm, confident self, was returning. "Excellent, sir. May I ask who the Assassination target is?"

Marshall laughed a false laugh. "I said welcome to the big leagues, boy, and in the big leagues, nothing is ever that simple. I'm afraid you are stepping back from the wet-working department for awhile. I'm putting you in charge of a storage warehouse in east-central London. You can choose six Level One security officers to accompany you in your defense."

Aleksander nodded. "Yes, Sir. What exactly are we storing there, if I may ask?"

Marshall smirked. "You haven't allowed me to finish. You will be defending a warehouse that contains sixteen crates of anomalous artifacts, and three anomalous humanoids in the usual comatose storage state."

Aleksander nodded, once again.

The smirk grew larger. "Then, Wednesday afternoon, at around

three thirty, the SCP Foundation will break into the facility, kill all of your security, then kidnap you."

On a freight train that was hurtling down the tracks at a clipping pace, in a box car filled with unmarked crates, two men, armed with automatic weapons, sat around a make-shift table playing cards.

"…What about Ben Affleck? He's kinda funny."

"Some of his older stuff, yeah, but his new films grate on me. Do you have any sevens?"

"Go fish. Got any kings?"

"Go fish. Do you have any eights?"

"Go fish. Do you have any sixes?"

"Damn. Take 'em. Hey, has Nick Cage done any recent stuff? I liked him in National Treasure."

"Nothing good. He kinda just when downhill after that series. Do you have any… Are those gun shots?"

"Sounds like they're coming from the other train car. Get ready. Sounds like this train ride just went to hell."

It was early Thursday morning when O5-4 received two consecutive reports in his inbox, that, to anyone else, seemed completely disconnected. To him, however, they told him he had performed a very, very successful trade.

Incident Report - Marshall, Carter, and Dark Warehouse Raid

At 3:45 PM Wednesday afternoon, at the date of / / , Mobile Task Force Pi-1 ("City Slickers") successfully raided a Marshall, Carter, and Dark warehouse in London, England. The opponent suffered six casualties, and one Huntsman class MC&D operative surrendered. He is being held in Cell Block 3 at Site 19. A list of

artifacts retrieved has been attached.

+ Download Attachment

1. (Designated SCP-)
2. (Designated SCP- , and SCP-)
3. (Designated SCP-)
4. (Designated SCP-)
5. One crate of weaponry, including a WWI era Ross Rifle (With Scope), one Japanese style Tanto blade, one Russian Cold-War era officers blade, and two Mark-10 Handguns.

Incident Report - Unknown Attackers Raid Freight Train

At 5:00 PM in Paris, France, a freight train containing twelve SCP objects of varying classifications, including eight "Safe" and three "Euclid" SCP's, was attacked by an unknown assailant. None of the security detail defending these objects have reportedly survived. A list of objects lost has been attached.

+ Download Attachment

1. SCP-
2. SCP- , and SCP-
3. SCP-
4. SCP-
5. SCP-
6. SCP- , and SCP- (A & B)

O5-4 couldn't help but smile - after all, in this trade, the Foundation definitely got the better side of the bargain.

Item #: SCP-4758

Object Class: Euclid

Special Containment Procedures: SCP-4758 is to be held in a standard humanoid containment cell, measuring three meters by two and a half meters. Two guards must be posted at all times around SCP-4758's cell, and the room must not be furnished with anything more then a standard foam mattress (without sheets, pillow, or bed frame) and a standard toilet.

When being served meals, it is vitally important that SCP-4758 is fed only soft foods, and not given any utensils. As well, his cell must be searched twice daily for improvised tools or weapons.

Description: SCP-4758 (formerly known as Aleksander Foxx) is a male of European descent. Records indicate that SCP-4758 was born in Ontario, Canada in 1978, making him 36 years old. SCP-4758 has brown hair and eyes, weighs 81 kilograms and stands at roughly two meters. Its back is heavily tattooed in various geometrical patterns and shapes.

After being captured by the SCP Foundation during a raid on a Marshall, Carter, and Dark warehouse, SCP-4758 was kept in a standard humanoid cell block until it was discovered, during a standard medical test, that SCP-4758 does not have any internal organs in his chest cavity, and it is instead entirely filled with

"Stop writing." A man in a navy blue suit stormed into the office of Dr. Gunnel. "Who in the right name of hell gave you permission to move Aleksander Foxx?"

Dr. Gunnel suddenly felt very confused. "…It was standard procedure… we discovered he had some anomalous capabilities…"

"And if you had read his prisoner dossier, you would have found that it said not to move him under *any* circumstances."

Dr. Gunnel stood up. "Which we *ignored*, since we discovered he had anomalous capabilities. Are you even listening? Who are you to storm into *my* office and start yelling at *me*?"

Navy suit flashed a security pass. "I'm your god-dammed fucking superior, that who I am. Now listen to me very, very closely. You are going to burn that special containment procedure, and wipe any records of any of his anomalous capabilities. Then, you are going to walk me over to wherever the hell it is you're keeping him, unlock the door, walk away, and forget any of what happened here today."

"Under whose orders?"

"*Mine.*"

"Who are your superiors?"

He shoved his security pass into Dr. Gunnel's face. "O5 command."

Aleksander was well aware what the plan was. He knew exactly how it was supposed to go down. By now, he should have already done the staged interview, they should have fed him his lines, and he should be working for them.

Being locked in solitary confinement was *not* part of the agreed plan. Just as he was thinking of all of the brilliantly terrible ways he could execute the doctor that did this to him, he heard the door open.

He sat up from his lone mattress, and saw a man standing in the door frame, clad in a blue suit.

Finally.

"About damn time. I've been in here three days."

The man in blue nodded slightly. "Apologies. As much as I hate to say it, we are a very large facility, and sometimes…" He kicked at the floor. "Sometimes we misplace people."

Aleksander stood up. "Whatever. Let's just cut to the script and get filming."

The man nodded. "If you would just follow me."

Interviewed: Aleksander Foxx

Interviewer:

Foreword: Aleksander Foxx is a Marshall, Carter and Dark operative who has been working for the past six years under the code name "Moss Heart."

<Begin Log>

: Aleksander Foxx. Is it true that you work as an operative for Marshall, Carter, and Dark?

Aleksander Foxx: Yes. I worked for three years as a security officer protecting their… merchandise before I was offered a position in the Huntsmen program.

: And what exactly was the Huntsmen program?

Aleksander Foxx: Originally?

(Aleksander Foxx tilts back in his chair.)

Aleksander Foxx: We acted as tour guides and armed escorts for clients who wanted to go on monster hunts. Eventually, the program was phased out, due to client casualty rate being so high.

: So then you returned to regular duty as a security officer?

Aleksander Foxx: No. Once a Huntsman, always a Huntsman. We were called that because we were the best — we took out anomalies like you guys take out test subjects.

: Could you give me an example?

Aleksander Foxx: Example? Sure. Budapest, 2006. I killed a cancer. Big thing that kept growing more and more body parts on top of it's already existing ones. We called him Goliath. Cut him to pieces, burned and salted the Ashes. Hell , I'm still having trouble washing him out of my coat…

: That's enough. If you were so combat effective, why was the program phased out?

Aleksander Foxx: Because monsters and cocky rich kids don't mix.

: Alright. So, what did you do after the Huntsmen program was canceled?

Aleksander Foxx: We were all spread around various parts of the company. I, personally, was moved to the wet-working department, and spent another three years killing rich people in exchange for the money of other rich people.

: You don't speak very highly of your organization.

(Aleksander Foxx snorts, leans forward, slamming his chair to the ground)

Aleksander Foxx: Why would I? Marshall, Carter, and Dark made a joke out of my skills. I'm a damned good assassin, but the work is boring. I want something with some actual meat to it. Which is why I willingly surrendered to your organization.

: …Sorry?

Aleksander Foxx: You are going to hire me. You've been planning it the moment I got captured. Go ahead, make me an offer.

: I'm not authorized to discuss any of this.

Aleksander Foxx: Then I'll wait here while you go check on that.

(leaves. 15 minutes pass before returns.)

: …We'd like to offer you triple whatever Marshall, Carter, and Dark was paying you in exchange for permanent employment at our organization.

Aleksander Foxx: Agreed. I only have three requests and two questions.

: Let's hear them.

Aleksander Foxx: Firstly, I'm not one of your blasted SCPs. I've spent enough time in cells.

: Agreed. You will be free to come and go as you please, like the rest of our staff.

Aleksander Foxx: Secondly, I need an assistant. That should go without saying.

: Consider it done.

Aleksander Foxx: Thirdly. I had a crate of weapons in the warehouse. Did you get them? They were collectibles. Irreplaceable.

: We did. They're being stored in our armory.

Aleksander Foxx: Excellent. Now, first question: What's the nicest private school in the area?

: …I'm sorry, but why exactly do you…

Aleksander Foxx: My daughter. She's six and an absolute sweet-heart. Would you like to see pictures? Never mind, they're in my coat. Just forward a list of local private schools to me when you get the chance.

: …Alright. You said you had another question?

Aleksander Foxx: Oh! Right! Tell me, I've been dying to know…

(Aleksander Foxx stands up)

Aleksander Foxx: What exactly *do* you have planned for me?

<End Log>

It was 7:00 PM when Lucille's plane finally landed. Aleksander had arrived an hour before, just in case his daughter arrived early. When his daughter saw him, she dropped her suitcase, let go of the flight attendant's hand (much to her terror), and sprinted towards her father.

"Daddy!" she yelled, before being gripped in a massive bear hug.

"Hey, sweetie!" Aleksander cracked a huge smile. "How was the flight in?"

"Good! The nice airplane lady let me have two whole cookies by myself!"

Aleksander laughed, as he picked her up onto his shoulders. "That sounds yummy! But you ate your supper too, right?"

"Yup!"

"Even the vegetables?"

The young girl suddenly looked very down-trodden. "Not *all* of my vegetables. I didn't like the broccolis."

Aleksander put her down and patted her head. "That's alright. Plenty of time in your life to eat your broccolis. Now, go grab your suitcase and say thanks to the flight attendant. Daddy wants to show you his big-new house, and tell you about his awesome new job."

Joey Fucknuts Believes In Himself

Joey Fucknuts, known to his friends and loved ones as Joey Steelwings, stared out the cockpit window of the airplane he had built with his own two fists. Since reaching cruising altitude (or what he assumed was something that at least approximated cruising altitude as his altimeter read only “ON THE GROUND” and “REALLY HIGH UP”), both Joey's aircraft and his mind had been on autopilot.

He had a hard time accepting that he had managed to get into the sky. His brain, already on the frayed and overheating side simply because of who and what he was, was going haywire.

It was so *beautiful*.

Once he had released his somewhat terrified grip on the controls and was confident the autopilot was not going to immediately reunite him with the ground in a spectacular and impactful way, he had simply stared, struck numb. Then, he cried for about an hour, not sure if he was supposed to be allowed to feel such powerful happiness and awe. Then he got distracted trying to figure out whether he had actually died in the attempt and this was just what happened after someone died. Then he decided that he was probably still alive and cried some more, unable to entirely accept that of all the people, *he* was the one that got to have this life.

But then there were the clouds.

This was very important. This was why he had come here. Some observations had to be made. It was time to learn.

Joey got out his spiral notebook and pen and narrowed his eyes at the white things in the middle distance. He still didn't trust them completely, but was willing to give them the benefit of the doubt. He let the autopilot keep its collision course, curious to see if the cloud

would either attack (in which case Joey would have some emergency repairs to do in very short order, he was sure) or move out of the way, which he assumed would only be natural and polite of a thing to do.

He flew dead on. The cloud did not move an inch. But it was getting bigger.

This confused Joey enormously. It wasn't changing its shape, and it wasn't moving. But it was rapidly becoming huge. Extremely, ridiculously huge. And it had brought friends. And none of them were moving. It was just a wall of white.

They were ganging up on him. They wanted to stop him. He *knew* they would try something like this. He knew they were going to be trouble, right from the start.

Joey set down his notebook.

He snorted, and frowned in determination. No cloud magic was going to scare him off. No way. He'd sacrificed too much, he'd worked too hard. The clouds were going to have to be nice and learn to share the sky with him. If they pulled some trick, and this was how his journey ended, then Joey would just fix himself and fly once more. He'd done it once and he could just keep doing it, again and again. He'd show the clouds that he wasn't going to be scared, and he wasn't going to turn back. Not anymore.

The clouds were very, very large now. He could see no blue. It was all white.

Joey lowered his goggles, bared his teeth, and growled his defiance. He stayed his course.

I'm not gonna stop.

He braced for impact.

And then the cloud was all around him.

Joey opened his eyes. All the windows, front, left, and right, were

completely whited out. He blinked a few times to make sure his eyes were still working. Apparently, they were.

Either the cloud had eaten him, or clouds were not what he thought they were at all.

After waiting a few moments to make absolutely sure he wasn't going to be smashed out of the sky by an angry white fist, he pushed his goggles back up and grabbed his notebook, looking back up at the windows and down at the paper in rapid succession as he furiously scribbled.

There were a lot of things to learn right now.

Hours later, Joey is staring not at clouds, but at a tree.

He had only ever seen trees in pictures before. That was how he knew they were called “trees”.

Joey was surrounded by them. There were so many that he literally could not count them. He had tried for about 45 minutes but had run out of numbers. So he gave up, and simply stared at one, trying to figure out what it was made of.

Strangely, they appeared to be made out of *wood*, of all things. This astonished Joey. He did not know who had come out here and carved all these trees out of wood, or even where they had gotten all that wood, but he greatly admired their work ethic. It must have taken a very, very long time.

Landing had been a strange experience.

Joey had never landed an airplane, but he had seen all the trees from up in the air and wagered that it would have been a terrible

idea to try to land on top of them. So he flew around for a little while until he had found a wide clearing, then touched down in the grass, while gritting his teeth and hoping that the fat tires he'd put on the landing gear would hold up against all the tangly grass. He'd bumped up against the wall of trees a little bit, but hammered out the dents and judged that he'd done a pretty good job, all things considered.

The sun was going down. He had flown all day. And he had no idea where he was.

The trees were nice, though. It was very kind of someone, whoever they were, to put all these carvings out here. He inspected them happily, appreciating the craftsmanship that had gone into them. He couldn't even see the seams where they had glued the branches on.

After a while, he went into the plane and got out something to smoke. He decided on cigars, because this was a special occasion. It was time to celebrate. He lit two with a blowtorch, and sat down on the bomb bay door, looking out at the wide grassy clearing that now had some stripes on it where he had made contact with the ground.

It was very pretty. The sun was touching the tops of the trees, and it leaked out purples and pinks and oranges where it made contact. Joey thought it was very silly of the sun to try to touch something that was obviously pretty sharp.

He smoked, and looked, and tried not to think about how he was going to take off again.

Joey thought about where he was. He didn't know if it had a name. It was possible, he guessed, that he was the first person to ever come here. He didn't see anyone else around. No people, no buildings. There were a couple birds. He had seen a little horse with spikes growing out of its head, which was really metal. He tried to talk to it, but it ran away, probably because an animal with spikes growing out of its head was too awesome to hang around and talk to a guy like Joey. Joey understood that. If Joey had spikes growing out of his head, he'd probably have a really different perspective on things.

He decided to name this place Treeland. He figured that made the

most sense. Trees seemed to be the main thing around here, and it felt good to honor whoever had worked so hard to make them all. He wondered where they were now. He'd like to shake their hand and thank them for their beautiful work.

Before long, it got dark. Treeland started to get noisy. There was a loud sound all around, almost like an alarm. But it didn't sound afraid or panicked – it was a rhythmic, happy sound. He wondered if the tree guy had built speakers into the trees, and they were playing music. It wasn't very metal, but he liked it anyway.

Joey decided that he liked this place very much, and when it got light again, he would get on his motorcycle and ride around some, and see how far the trees really went.

There was a huge

boom.

The music stopped. Birds flew out of the trees in droves. Treeland fell quiet.

Boom.

Boom.

It was a rhythm. Loud and hard enough to shake the ground.

Joey took his cigars out of his mouth and waved the smoke away. He glared out at the clearing, toward the other wall of trees. The sound was coming from over there.

He didn't like it. He didn't like that whatever it was was scaring Treeland into silence. It felt wrong.

Joey put his smokes out and went into the hangar. He picked up one of his flamethrower axes from the rack, as long as he was tall, and checked its fuel canister. Checked its edge. He hefted its great weight over his shoulder and stepped out onto the grass, looking. Scanning.

Boom.

Boom.

BOOM.

Then there was the sound of cracking, splintering. He saw, on the far end of the wide open space, trees being knocked down. Pushed aside like matchsticks. Whatever it was wasn't moving quickly, but it was moving heavily. And powerfully.

The tree wall bowed, and **`something huge`** entered the grassy space under the dark starry sky.

There was enough light to see by. Joey's eyes worked well in the dark, he was sure that he would be able to see anything that was there, especially anything that big. And it was there, and it *was* big.

But he still couldn't see it.

It resisted his glare like water sliding off a waxed windshield. A shifting, twisting shape, only barely there. Hulking. Massive. A hint of a long head, a snout. The suggestion of four legs, the insinuation of a tail. But no details. Nothing that his eyes could firmly grasp. It was a beast made out of wind and whispers, that faded and danced just out of sight like the shadow of a candleflame.

And it was ruining the trees.

Joey took exception to this. Someone had worked very very hard on all these trees, and this thing was walking through them, shoving them over like they were garbage. It was disrespectful.

The Mayor of Vulture Gulch opened some valves and lit the pilot light on his enormous flamethrower, then marched toward the colossal thing, frowning and determined to give it a piece of his mind.

“Hey. Hey! I think you should be more careful! The trees are really delicate and you're breaking them! That's not very nice! I know you're really big, but can you maybe walk a little softer? This place is really pretty and I think if you-”

There was a growl.

Joey stopped walking. The earth beneath his boots rumbled with the force of the thing's voice. There were no words. Just intent. Its head, the size of a car, was aimed directly toward him. It split. There was a long glint. Something, or a lot of sharp somethings, shone in the starlight.

It walked forward, only barely there, almost impossible to truly see. But its footfalls were real. Its growl was real.

And Joey had a feeling that its teeth were real too.

“I don't… You don't have to get angry. I'm not angry. Everything's okay.”

The thing didn't stop. With its great size, it was closing the distance fast, even though its pace was gradual, calculating. Hungry.

“Now hey. Don't… don't come any closer! We don't have to fight! Fighting is dumb! We could just talk it over!”

It was very close now. It loomed over him. It was as high as a building. Joey could see the sky and the stars right through its gigantic body, and could see where its huge paws and long claws made craters and slashes where it stepped.

The growl was as loud as a jet engine.

Joey aimed the barrels of his weapon at it. It was so close.

“We can be friends! I would really like to be friends! I don't want to have to use this! C'mon, just stop! I'm w-warning you! Don't come any closer!”

It came closer. Joey could feel heat. See lights where its great eyes should have been. The colossal jaws opened wide, and inside Joey

could see only darkness. There was a great roar.

Joey pulled the trigger.

The three barrels of the weapon exploded with righteous flame, casting a stream of eager and glorious liquid fire directly into the creature's mouth. Molten light bloomed in a furious corona all around, lighting up the dark forest.

But it didn't stop.

Joey leapt to one side as the great jaws came crashing down, taking a massive bite out of the earth where Joey had been standing an instant before. He rolled away, then found his balance and stood, frantically spraying the beast's flank with vicious flames before it could turn.

The fire burned in great swathes upon the thing's unseen skin, but there was no reaction. It swiped a long shadowy leg with the speed of thunder, and it crashed into Joey like a hurricane made solid.

He catapulted through the air for yards and yards, then slammed into the ground and slid through mud and wet grass, tumbling uselessly. He could feel enormous footfalls. It was coming after him.

Joey plunged a hand into the mud to stop his slide, scrambled to his feet and flipped his grip on his weapon, holding it by the long barrels.

The Mayor was not going down without a fight.

He swung the brutally heavy axe like a baseball bat, and sunk it directly into the thing's nose as it crashed into him. Savage jaws clamped down on his entire torso, sending lines of white-hot pain driving from his collarbone to his hip.

it hurt it hurt it hurts IT HURTS IT HURTS IT HURTS

The creature shook him in his jaws with the speed and cruelty that a cat shows a captured mouse, then flung him away into the air. Joey tumbled once more, and smashed into the soft earth, a small heap of skin and bones far away.

Time slowed.

Joey had not felt pain in a very long time. His vision blurred. He tried to move, but couldn't. He could feel his axe in his hand, but couldn't use it. He couldn't use anything.

The wolf made of death pounded over to him. Joey felt a horrible, crushing agony as it stepped on his back and legs.

Its jaws clamped over his head and shoulders, and with its leg pinning him to the ground, it

pulled

Joey could hear his spine creaking, being torn out of him. But it didn't give. He spiraled through the torture. He prayed that it would be over soon, that it would stop, that he would be torn and half and die so he wouldn't have to feel himself anymore.

But he did not die, and he did not tear.

The titanic animal lifted its paw, and threw him again.

Joey was aware of a sensation of falling, but not much more than that. His life was darkness now, and his only memory was one of a distant pain.

The falling stopped. He could feel cool dew on his cheek, and some blades of grass tickled him, asking him what was wrong.

Joey knew what was wrong.

He had decided to go out into the world. He made the choice. He flew away from where he belonged, and this was what he got. For his foolishness, for his presumption, for his willingness to abandon the people that cared for him most, he would be devoured. Consumed by a creature outside of perception, that felt no flame and no blade. This is how his quest would end. Trampled in the mud, as pointless as it, and his entire life, had ever been.

And he would not see his friends ever again. He would not be able to make any more friends. He wouldn't get to bring the stories back,

to make the people he loved happy. He wouldn't be able to help them anymore.

Joey was what was wrong. And because of that, his family would be left in the dark, forever.

They would live on, unaware of anything. They would work, for years, until eventually they realized he would not be returning. They would wonder whatever happened to their Mayor, the nice guy that helped them read the words. Maybe they would cry, maybe they would mourn for a time. But they would forget him. They would never live up to their potential.

They would never live in the sunlight, and become who they were truly meant to be.

No.

Heavy footsteps, coming closer. Hungry death came on legs of shadow.

No.

Joey stirred. He writhed as a fresh wave of hateful pain coursed through his body.

NO.

A hot wind blew over him, from the lungs of a cruel force.

NO!

Something happened deep inside the small, stupid Mayor. Something became real. A realization. A wave of something undeniable. The pain became meaningless. His breaking body became a triviality. His spilled blood unfurled upon the ground as a banner, something declarative. His mind snapped back into place. He felt the love he had for his friends as a rushing river of molten steel, coursing through his dead flesh. He remembered himself. And he remembered what he was supposed to do, his sacred purpose, the reason he had been placed upon this strange and beautiful

world.

I WILL BRING THEM THE LIGHT!

He smashed the ground and rose to his feet, liquid fire flowing from each and every puncture the beast had dealt him, the blood within his body burning with inner fury. His fists became wreathed in whirling, vengeful incandescence, the flames rising higher and higher until his arms were pillars of heat. His eyes, sunken and dumb, sparked and ignited into twin embers that looked with blind hate at the thing that bore down upon him. His body became a seething pyre, throwing wild shadows throughout the glade and casting everything around in a warm glow. The light from inside flowed outward as an inferno.

Joey believed in himself.

And Joey was mad.

As the shadowed behemoth fell upon him, he wound back and threw a punch into its nose, bellowing his unshackled rage.

The detonation shattered the air, incinerating everything in a terrible nova of heat and light. A small sun that lived only for an instant and consumed and destroyed everything it touched. The ground buckled. The sky shrieked. And Joey Steelwings made himself real.

And then it was gone.

All was still and quiet, save for the flames that burned for yards in all directions. Where the creature had been, there was only a crater, full of blackened earth.

Joey's flames went out, leaving behind the husk of a dead man. He swayed, and bled. He looked for just a moment, to make sure that he had made his point, and saw that he had.

He tottered unsteadily toward his airplane, but didn't make it. He fell

to the ground just before the bomb bay door, smoke curling from his burnt clothes and skin.

And Joey was still.

« Joey Fucknuts Takes to the Skies
Joey Fucknuts Believes In Himself
Awesome Meets an Old Friend »

Joey Fucknuts Builds a Flying Machine

Joey Fucknuts lit three cigarettes and looked up at the hot blue sky, wondering what was actually up there.

It made sense to him that there had to be something up there that he couldn't see. The sky was the biggest thing he was aware of. He was pretty sure that the sky was even bigger than the ground, which was already really big. And he knew that there were things up there. He saw things up there all the time. Some of them even stayed up there, which was weird, because *he* couldn't do that. He had tried throwing things and getting them to stay up there, but it never worked.

He started an itemized list of what he knew for sure was up there, to organize his thoughts when they felt too big for his head. It was written on one side of the ruins of Vulture Vic's Diner in bearing grease. Joey had seen writing utensils before, but had forgotten about them after his death. The grease served his purposes well enough, and made it so that the letters were larger and easier for him to read.

1 - BIRDS

TINY. COMES DOWN SOMETIMES. EATS STUFF. USES BIRD ARMS TO STAY UP??? ASK ONE HOW TO DO IT

Joey had seen a number of birds before, and had seen that they could go up into the sky more or less whenever they wanted. He knew that they were alive, almost in the same way that he was. He knew that they came down though, probably because they had to. He reasoned that anything that could stay in the sky as long as it

wanted would probably never come down on purpose. He furthermore reasoned that if birds were alive, and could move around and eat stuff the way that he could, that the easiest thing to do would be to simply *talk* to one and ask it how it went up into the sky so easily, or at least ask it where it learned how to do it so Joey could also learn.

Joey liked learning, which is why he was mayor.

2 - CLOUDS

PROBABLY BIG. REALLY HIGH UP. DOESN'T COME DOWN. GOES AWAY SOMETIMES. CHANGES SHAPE ALL THE TIME. KIND OF SCARY? ALSO PROBABLY MAGIC.

It was here that Joey began to enter dangerous and somewhat frightening intellectual territory. Clouds made Joey uneasy, as they flagrantly violated what he understood to be some universal constants. Everything else he was aware of, save for a few critical exceptions, came down after going up. Clouds did not. The objects he was familiar with did not change shape unless something was done to them. Clouds did not appear to care. They also disappeared and reappeared, apparently at random, refusing to adhere to anything resembling good sense or order as Joey understood it. Joey did not trust them, and suspected that clouds were things made by wizards, or, more horrifyingly, were wizards themselves.

3 - SUN

FUCK FUCK FUCK SHIT OW FUCK

Joey had spent an entire day from dawn to dusk watching the sun to see what it actually did all day, and had hurt his eyes. This made him angry at first, because he had done nothing to the sun and he saw no reason why it had to hurt him, and then it made him afraid, because if it could hurt him without even touching him *what else*

could it do. He then spent some time looking directly into the stream of a garden hose to cool his eyes off, wondering what exactly he was dealing with and whether he should stop. The sun was more mysterious and threatening than even the clouds were, and he began to think that the sun was the clouds' boss, probably. Which was why it was so strong and bright, just like his Boss.

4 – SKY ARROW THINGS

SORT OF LIKE BIRDS, BUT REALLY HIGH UP AND NOT FLAPPY. NOISY. NOT SURE HOW BIG. DOESNT COME DOWN. WHAT ARE THEY POINTING AT???

These were perhaps the most mysterious things Joey had ever seen. These objects would appear, often making a very loud, rumbling sound like thunder, and would point in a direction of the sky while moving in that direction. They were obviously trying to get his attention, but he had no idea whatsoever what message they were trying to send. They also sometimes pointed in different directions, which was very confusing. Joey surmised that there were pieces of this message that he was missing, but was determined to find out just what exactly these things were trying to tell him.

Joey was sitting on a pile of burning tires, enjoying the way the heat felt on his rear, and looking at this list he had made on the side of the building. He smoked, and thought. There were so many things he didn't understand. He wanted to eventually understand them all, so he could be smart and make the Boss proud, but it was the things in the sky that interested him most. He was fairly certain that learning about what was in the sky would make him happy, and would make the Boss happy too. That would be nice.

But he had no idea how to *get* there.

“Joey! Joey, help!”

Two dead men and a dead woman came up to Joey on his throne of burning rubber. One of the men had four arms and wore a chef's apron. This was Chef, and he made the best oil soup and

scrapburgers in town. The other was over 8 feet tall and muscular enough to physically tear a car in half, which he would do upon request whenever someone was too impatient to unbolt everything normally. His name was Awesome, because he was awesome.

The woman was wearing what Joey thought was a very cute yellow sundress and carried an umbrella with a small flamethrower installed in it, which, she had explained to Joey previously, was supposed to burn the rain before it could make her wet. Joey thought that was pretty smart. Her natural, humble intelligence combined with her milky eyes and missing lips made her impossible to resist. Her name was Flower, because she was very beautiful. Joey had a crush on her but was too shy to ever say anything.

Chef was at the front, and was carrying a small cardboard box with pictures and writing on it. He held it up to Joey.

“Joey, we found this thing, but we don't know what it is. See, wait, look, check this out.”

Chef shook the box, and there was a rattling sound.

“Joey what the fuck is that, even! I don't want to open it in case it's got bugs in it, and bugs creep me the fuck out. It's got words on it though, so maybe you could look at them and tell us what's inside?”

Joey nodded, not wanting to look stupid in front of Flower. “Okay, let me see.”

Chef handed it up to him, and Joey looked at it.

It said: “LEGO” in white letters on a red and yellow background, and the words “Boeing 787 Dreamliner”, which didn't make any sense to him. But at the bottom and on other parts he could see the words “construction” and “kit” and “toy”, which he knew.

The picture on the front looked almost exactly like one of the sky arrow things. And it was in the sky. It was *flying*.

Awesome was saying very loudly, “What's it say, Joey?! Is it bugs in there, or is it, like, a food? Wait, is bugs food sometimes?”

Flower laughed. “No, dummy, bugs isn't food.”

Flower's laugh knocked Joey out of his reverie.

“It's a toy. It's made out of a bunch of pieces, and you put the pieces together to make… this thing.”

Flower put her fists in the air. “Cool! This is gonna be a lot of fun, probably!”

Awesome cracked his knuckles, which produced pops as loud as gunshots, and replied, “Yeah! And after we build it up, we can smash it! *The smashing part is always the funnest part.*”

Chef narrowed his eyes. “Wait. But it's made out of little parts? But that means… *that means after we smash it we can build it again.*”

Flower gasped and shook Chef by his shirt. “Holy fuck, Chef! We can just keep doing it! It's just like cars! Okay, I'll be in charge of building, Awesome can be in charge of smashing, and Chef can be the boss!”

The trio walked away, talking excitedly about the prospect of an afternoon spent having fun building and smashing things.

Joey was confused.

That was a sky arrow thing, he knew it. And that box had parts in it, to somehow *make* one of them. If that was the case, and people made toys out of the sky arrow things, then it was possible that the sky arrow things were actually *machines*.

And you can make machines.

Think, Joey. You can see it. Gather your tools.

Forge your people wings of glowing iron, and fly.

I know you can do it.

Joey huffed a plume of smoke from his missing nose, and frowned in determination.

“I won't let you down, Boss.”

Joey Fucknuts Builds a Flying Machine | **Joey Fucknuts Takes to the Skies** »

Joey Fucknuts Takes to the Skies

clang

Clang

CLANG

CLANG.

The sound of metal pealed like church bells throughout the small town of Vulture Gulch.

This wasn't terribly unusual. Metal was altered and molded and beaten to form night and day in the poisoned desert burg, by men and women that had forgotten how to sleep and knew only one thing: progress.

They did not know what the word “progress” meant, nor how to spell it, but they chased it relentlessly, all the same.

CLANG!

And one of these men, the mayor, was hard at work.

He needed no hammer. He needed no schematics, nor training nor any real knowledge at all. He shaped the steel with his heart, knowing that what he did was good, and necessary.

But more tangibly, he shaped it with his fists.

CLANG!

Joey Fucknuts punched the steel plate, deforming it greatly. And he punched it again. And again. He beat the metal against its supporting frame, welding it into place not with fire, but with pure physical force. Working it cold, so it kept its crystalline lattice and maintained strength without requiring any tempering or annealing.

He did not understand any of these concepts. He just thought that it didn't make sense to work the metal with tools when his fists were good enough.

CLANG!

He punched it again, each of his knuckles sending sparks flying. The metal caved in further. Taking form. Becoming something that he understood as clearly as any man understands his god.

He had waited for a very long time before dragging these pieces into the yard. He had thought for long hours, before squeezing any rivets into place with his bare hands. He weighed his options and considered the path he was to take before lifting any beams or struts.

And he had watched the sky, for many days.

He was afraid. Joey was always afraid of something, because he was a man who thought for long periods of time. Men who think cultivate fears as a farmer cares for his crops.

But while Joey was afraid, and confused, and stupid, he knew that he was these things. And he refused to let them stop him, though he could feel them pooling in his mind like sludge.

Joey stopped. It was time for a smoke.

He pulled his goggles up over the bill of his hat and rested them on his forehead. He pulled a pack of cigarettes out of an inside pocket of his brown leather bomber jacket. They were labeled

“Shallowgraves”, and they had a picture of a smiling skeleton on the front.

He removed three from the pack and lit them all with a blowtorch.

Joey took a deep drag, then let the smoke flow from the hole where his nose used to be. He sighed. The dead man knew that if he wasn't focusing on punching the metal, he was going to start to think again. But he was tired. He had been working for four months, day and night. This was the third break he had taken.

“Joey!”

From across the yard came a colossal monster. Eight feet tall and weighing nearly half a ton, with a torn, rotted face and muscles that bulged under its skin like bridge cables. It wore mismatched rags cobbled together to resemble normal clothes. No trousers or shirts would ever fit its behemoth frame. This beast was seen frequently around town, tearing cars apart with one twist of its massive hands and pulling down buildings without so much as a grunt.

It lumbered up to Joey and smiled with teeth like a row of moldy tombstones.

This was Awesome, one of the nicest guys that Joey had ever met.

Awesome said, “Hi Joey! Whatcha workin' on?”

Awesome was visibly very excited to see Joey and talk to him. Awesome was always excited to be doing whatever he was doing at the time, especially if it had something to do with one of his friends. Which was everyone.

Joey replied, “Same thing as yesterday.”

Awesome kept smiling and nodded enthusiastically. “Yeah. Yeah, what is it again? I forgot.”

“It's called an 'airplane'. It's a car that goes in the sky.”

This made the seventh time that Awesome had had this explained to him, and he reacted the same way every time.

He put his huge hands up to his head and his eyes widened.

“Joey. Joey, woah. That's like… Joey I don't even know. That's like… *You're like a supergenius, Joey.*”

Joey smiled and shook his head. “No, Awesome. The Boss told me how to do it. He's the genius. I'm just working, like you.”

Awesome laughed. “I'm not working right now, though! I'm fucking around!”

Joey nodded. “Me too. But just for a little bit. Then back to work.”

Awesome seemed suddenly confused, his smile melting away. His voice, which had the timbre of a cinderblock being thrown into a woodchipper, became plaintive, and diminished. “But Joey. Joey, if you make a car that goes into the sky… you could go away. Like, away away. Joey, I don't want you to go away. You're my friend.”

Joey nodded. He reached up and patted Awesome on one of his swollen arms. “You're my friend too, Awesome. But I gotta. We gotta do what the Boss says. He's taking care of us. I'll come back. And when I do, I'll probably have lots of stories. You like my stories.”

Awesome smiled again, and nodded. “Yeah. Like, oh! Oh! Like that one that you readed to us, oh. The one about the little boy that goes to a school and he learns how to do *magic* and he makes friends and they do *magic*. I like that one a lot. Magic is really metal.”

Joey nods again. “And metal is really magical.”

The titan's eyes widened, and he froze. Then he lurched forward and picked Joey up by his shoulders, bonking their heads together so he could look Joey right in the eyes.

“*Joey that's the smartest thing I've ever heard. I love you, Joey.*”

He then gave Joey the biggest hug that ever existed.

—-

A lot of people had talked to Joey about what he was doing. He had

been working for a long time, almost a year now, and naturally it had caused a lot of buzz. Most people were convinced that Joey was doing a really metal thing, and that he should keep doing it. Some, like Paulie, who was kind of a jerk, thought Joey was wasting his time.

And Joey thought it was possible that he was. But he didn't care.

One day he realized he had not slept in nine months.

He was very tired. The airplane was nearly done. He gathered supplies, he put the things together and the whole time, he felt himself changing. Joey, like the rest of his brothers and sisters, didn't feel much. But Joey felt something. Something different. It was inside him, in his chest, in his arms and legs. It felt like the time he had tried to make battery salad, but *good* instead of painful.

He decided to sleep for a while. Then he would stop being tired, and he could think more about what this all meant, where he was going, and why. Maybe his dreams would help settle his humming mind.

He went to his home, which was the vault of a destroyed bank. The citizens of Vulture Gulch did not understand money, but they understood that one should probably put really valuable things behind a big steel door, and so they had decided that Joey had to sleep in there. They insisted that Joey was important, no matter how he protested.

He laid down on his mattress made of shredded tires and torn automobile upholstery. He lit his blowtorch nightlight to push back the cold gloom of the vault interior. Then he slept, his head heavy, full of thoughts putrefied by doubt.

—-

Joey finds himself in a familiar place.

The desert yawns all around him, wide and empty. He can count the number of things that are here without even using his fingers.

One, there is the ground, made of orange-warm dirt and dust. It holds Joey up and stops him from falling down, back to where he

came from.

Two, there is the wind, unseen but felt on his dead skin, gentle and urging. It brings the promise of distance, whispers of places that are far, far away, and asks Joey if he would like to see them.

Three, there is the sky, colossal and unknown, blue and royal. The demesne of mysteries, that great expanse within and through which Joey knew there were things of great importance.

Four, there is the sun, hot and bright, the undisputed ruler. The king of the sky. Here it is far larger and hotter than when Joey was awake, a massive blast furnace and foundry, where all things were made.

And five, there is Joey. Small, ugly, stupid, and dead. A gross scarecrow of a man, thin and tall. Dressed the way that Joey always was, both within his mind and without: brown motorcycle boots, worn jeans, faded Ramones t-shirt, green army cap with his goggles resting above the bill, and his scarred leather bomber jacket, its woolen collar frayed and thinning. A grim caricature. A bony pretender. A ruined thing that most people on Earth would not call a 'person' at all.

Joey has no conception of people beyond the ones that he knew. But he has seen pictures, on burnt postcards and travel guides from the old gift shop, and he has heard stories from when the scrapper teams used to come back from stealing from and scaring those people. People that knew and built things, and loved one another, and had families and houses and jobs. Soft, pink and brown people, with their own dreams. Joey, like the rest of his siblings, is gray-green, dry and leathery, and tough. And he knows that every time one of the outside people saw one of his siblings, if they weren't wearing a long white coat or thick black armor, they were terrified.

The mayor of Vulture Gulch sits cross-legged in the dirt. He can feel a tide of chill, scummy waves washing all around and inside him. He is sure that when he leaves, he could meet some of the soft outside people. And he is sure that they are going to be scared of him. This makes Joey very sad. He didn't want to scare anyone. He wants to make friends, and be nice. He wants to learn, and get stories that he

can tell to his brothers and sisters, and see how much he can help everyone when he really, really tries his best.

Joey wanted to keep being mayor. He had never asked to be mayor, but he helped people understand things better every day just like he imagines a real mayor does. He reads things to them so they can do better work and make themselves happy. If he leaves, he can't help them anymore. If he leaves, they will miss him, and he will miss them. They will be sad, and so will he. He will be letting them down, all so he can chase a strange desire that he cannot understand, so he can go on an adventure that could end in disappointment or frustration. Or much, much worse.

The waves of slime pool around Joey, turning the warm dry earth he had been sitting on into clammy, viscous muck. The sun dims, and he begins to feel cold. Cold, and wet and slick with the saliva of some great beast that Joey has never met and could never imagine, but he feels it all the same. Something ***bad****. Something… horrible.*

"Hello there, Joey."

Joey looks up, and sees ***two more things*** *in this place that used to be warm and bright.*

One looks like something Joey has seen before. A lizard. But this one is blue, and huge, and standing on two strong legs. It has metal armor on parts of its body, and things that look like guns attached to its back and sides. One of its eyes is metal and red, but the other is brown, and soft, and looking directly at Joey.

The other is also like a lizard, but just as huge as the other one. This one is red, and has enormous wings with claws on the end. On its frilled, spiky head is a pointed hat with twinkling stars in the fabric, and in its claws are a long wooden stick and a thick book.

These two lizards are giant. They have sharp teeth and claws. And they are both looking directly at Joey.

The blue one turns its head to the red one and says, "Oh dear. I think he's frightened."

The red one nods once and replies with a quiet boom, “Poor guy. Look at all this mess. I don't think this place is usually like this; this filth feels nothing like him. I suspect foul play, Palsinnor.”

The giant blue lizard leans its head down close to Joey's own. Joey is terrified, and wants to move, but can't. He is cold, and frozen, and can feel all of his fear and doubt writhing and multiplying within him. He can no longer see the sun.

A huge blue head touches its scaly-smooth cheek to Joey's. And Joey hears a gentle, powerful voice in his left ear. A voice like warmth and rest.

“Peace, child. Peace. I know you are scared. I know. But we will not hurt you. We only want to talk to you for a short while. You do not know us, but we know you, and we love you. Let go of your fear and hear our voices.”

The head pulls back, and Joey sees that the sky has changed. The sun is gone, and replaced with an explosion of stars all across a sky that softens to deep indigo as Joey stares. The slime has gone, and Joey is sitting in rich, soft earth, lush with grass and flowers that seem to spread out across the ground from the two huge newcomers.

Joey no longer feels cold, but cool. Not slimy, but clean, and refreshed.

The red lizard snorts, producing a short flash of fire from its nostrils. “I've pushed it out. It's not gone, but I've put a lock on it. It won't bother him for some time. It's the best I can do until he puts the pieces together.”

The blue one nods. “Thank you, Dathrun.” It regards Joey, looming, its sapphire scales and burnished armor sparkling in the starlight.

“Listen to me, Joey. Do you understand me?”

Joey nods silently, afraid of sounding stupid in front of these very smart lizards.

“Joey, you must not let your fear overtake you. It is natural to be

scared. Going out on your own is hard, and the world is full of scary, strange things. But you are special, and you are loved. You have a beautiful heart, and a soul as bright as the sun. You have so much potential, child. You have to be brave, and believe in yourself. Your people are counting on you to see many things, to learn great lessons, and lead them to where they were meant to be."

Joey frowns. He looks down at the ground and says, "But I'm dumb. I'm really dumb. I don't know how a lot of things go, or how to do stuff, or where I should go or what to do. I don't know how to help them."

*The red lizard says, "Nonsense, Joey. These are your brothers and sisters. These are the Black Iron Boneheadz of Vulture Gulch. Are they not heavy metal? Are **you** not heavy metal?"*

Joey looks up and blinks. "I mean, they are, mostly. I don't know if I am, really."

"If they are heavy metal, Joey, then they can take care of themselves while you are gone. They are strong, just like you, and you must have faith in that. Trust in them, and in yourself."

*The blue continues, "You are more than capable of this, Joey. I know you can feel the heat within your chest. You want to go. To see. To **discover**. You cannot stay here and idle away the years, wondering what it all means. You say that you are dumb. But it does not take a vast wealth of knowledge to do the right thing, to be the best person you can be. And most importantly, you are aware of your limitations. You know how much you do not know. That is **wisdom**, Joey, and you must use it well. Your curiosity, your passion, your wisdom and your kindness will carry you and your family so far. All you need to do is decide to take the first step."*

The red growls, "Use your strength. You are Mayor of Vulture Gulch, and you were given that title for a reason. Your people are capable, but they need direction. They need someone to show them the way, to happiness and a life that they deserve. Do not acknowledge your fear. Do not doubt. You are their champion. You did not choose to be, but you are, and you stand at the edge of something glorious. Go to it, Joey. Go, and win your people a place among the stars."

The blue stands tall. “Go, Joey. We know that you will do your very best, and you will succeed. Go, and discover all that the wide world has in store for you.”

The plants have grown from horizon to horizon, bringing sweet smells and color to what was once a bare wasteland. The stars shine above, each a precious and scintillating jewel. And Joey feels an old feeling, once again.

"Go, Joey. We believe in you."

—-

Joey stands in the wide vacant lot at the end of Gold Street and sighs heavily.

Behind him are the results of his work.

An airplane with broad, sweeping wings rests on fat tires, shining gray and bright in the desert sun. It is enormous. It is haphazard, unpainted, messy, and in all likelihood extremely dangerous. It is inelegant, clumsy, misshapen, and a flagrant mockery of aeronautical engineering. Made of aluminum beaten into shape with Joey's own two hands, equipped with four massive propellers molded painstakingly from the finest scrap metal the Mayor could find, with powerful engines handcrafted night after sleepless night, it was a dreadful Frankenstein's monster of twisted metal and rust.

It was also an airplane. And Joey had never been more proud of anything in his entire life.

He had found a book in the small library some time ago that had pictures of airplanes in it. He had tried to design it as close as he

could to his favorite picture, which was labeled *B-17 Flying Fortress*. He didn't get it exactly right, but he thought it was close enough.

In its cargo bay and cockpit he had placed supplies. A big black motorcycle, armored, turbocharged, and *rigorously tested*, so he would have something to ride on the ground. Six or seven flamethrowers that Joey had enhanced himself, adding axe blades to the heavy ends and extra barrels and fuel canisters for better coverage and weight. He didn't know where he was going, but he wanted to be safe when he got there.

There was also a box of keepsakes, mementos, and gifts that the people of Vulture Gulch had given him. Some containers of Chef's best oil soup. A bowling ball that Awesome thought was hilarious for reasons that he tried to explain, but couldn't because he kept laughing so hard whenever he saw it. A copper chain with a pendant in the shape of a cactus flower, given to him by Flower so he wouldn't forget her. Joey had said that he could never forget her no matter what, but failed to explain why that was.

Those people and more, all those people that he had grown and learned with, the ones that he loved with all his heart, were standing before him, gathered in a small crowd. Work had been stopped for the day. Making super rad cars was rad, but the Mayor flying into the sky to go on an adventure, to bring back amazing stories to tell?

That was fucking metal.

Joey cleared his throat, and said to them all, “I don't really know what to say. I pretty much never know what to say, I guess. I'm not good at talking. Or a lot of other stuff.

“I'm sad to go. And I know that you're all sad too. But I'm not going away forever. I'm going to go and see what's outside. I'm going to go there, and I'm going to try to figure it out. I'm going to see what the Boss wants me to see, and what I want to see, and what I want the rest of you to see one day too. I'm going to go meet the whole world. And I don't know when I'm going to come back. But when I do, I promise, I'll have some amazing things to tell you.

“Build cool things while I'm gone so I can see them when I come

back. Be safe, and be nice to one another. Goodbye. I love you all."

The crowd exploded into cheers of different flavors. Some, like Awesome, cried. Others, like Chef, howled wordlessly into the sky, not having the words for how proud and excited they were for their Mayor and friend. Some raised a chant, echoing an idea that someone had had not long ago when Joey's plan was discovered. A new name for their Mayor. They shouted it again and again.

One, unnoticed by the rest, merely watched, and waited.

Joey didn't look back. He climbed into the airplane's belly through the bomb bay door, and hit the switch to bring it up. It worked. He had checked the electrical system over three thousand times.

He went up some stairs just thick enough to hold his weight, through some rooms he had made to hold some things, along the central aisle. He entered the cockpit.

Joey did not understand how he knew that he could make this plane fly. But he built it, and he knew.

He flipped switches and let power flow into the plane. Little lights came on, in different colors, all taken from different sources. A Christmas tree light below a label that read "OK YOU CAN FLY NOW" flickered to life. There was a big switch there.

Joey hit it. He didn't have to pray, or hope. He knew it would work.

The four huge propellers coughed, then roared, spinning up and reaching speeds so fast that Joey couldn't even see them anymore through the cameras. He looked ahead through the cockpit window. Gold Street was, unusually, completely clear of cars or wreckage. And just wide enough.

He let go of the brake, and the huge airplane, the massive, absurd work of a restless year, thundered down Gold Street. It lurched, it juddered, it creaked and complained, but it held together. Joey had poured all of his determination into this machine, and he could feel that it wanted to scratch the sky as badly as he did. This was going to work. *This was going to work.*

He pulled up.

The wind and air swept over and under the great steel bird's wings, and it left the earth behind. It shattered the chains that held all things hard to the ground and roared in defiance against gravity. It rose, higher and higher, the buildings and crumbling ruins falling away below.

Joey saw the wall that the men in the white coats had built. And for the first time in his life, he did not care about it at all.

The one they now called Joey Steelwings rose above it all, and flew on toward his destiny.

Addendum 3885-03: On 2 May 2018, an unmarked makeshift aircraft visually resembling a World War 2-era B-17 Flying Fortress took off from **SCP-3885**, using the town's main avenue as a runway. After investigation, it was determined that personnel assigned to Subsite 3885 had noticed this vehicle periodically during its construction by a single SCP-3885-01 instance, but did not take action, citing disbelief that SCP-3885 instances possessed the mental capacity to successfully construct a functional aircraft. Subsite 3885's administrative staff have been formally disciplined on charges of gross negligence leading directly to a containment breach.

The aircraft in question was observed flying due northeast. Foundation recovery assets have been dispatched to recontain the SCP-3885-01 instance or instances onboard.

No other SCP-3885-01 instances within SCP-3885 have cooperated with Foundation investigative personnel, and as a result, the aircraft's destination, and purpose, are unknown.

« **Joey Fucknuts Builds a Flying Machine**
Joey Fucknuts Takes to the Skies
Joey Fucknuts Believes In Himself »

John James

> *In my opinion, the whirlwind of rumours and false reports surrounding the role of D-Class in this institution has created an increasingly poisonous, and frankly unprofessional, atmosphere over the past few years. For any staff members who may not be aware: D-Class are not to be requisitioned for the exploration, testing, or feeding of dangerous anomalies. Barring exceptional circumstances, in the course of their regular duties D-Class should not be permitted to come in contact with anomalies of any kind. They are not soldiers, and they certainly are not human pawns. Interruption of the D-Class's duties interferes with vital Foundation contingency efforts and will not be tolerated.*
>
> *Any researcher requiring an expendable research unit for testing of anomalies should request the use of a Simurgh-class autonomous mobile drone from their local Requisitions Department. Anyone who attempts to use D-Class in testing at my site will be subject to immediate disciplinary action.*
> *Site Director Marie, open letter to all employees concerning D-Class*

John James opened his eyes and got out of bed and put on his orange uniform with the white letters on it.

The white letters were on the back and the top of the right-hand sleeve and on the left breast, right where a shirt pocket would go, and they all said D-23984. That was what the guards called him, and what the speaker said when it told him which room to go to, but inside the testing room the doctors all called him John James.

Up above him on the second bed, a big bald man with a little bit of beard climbed down the ladder to the floor and put his own uniform on. That was Stephen Reyes, his bunkmate. The white letters on his

uniform said D-23886 instead of D-23984, so John James guessed that Stephen had been here longer than he had. He'd asked him about it once, and thought it was kind of funny that Stephen didn't know.

"I had a dream about my family," said Stephen, his eyes glistening a little in his big bald face. "Their names are Betty, Mary, Annie, and Sam. They all smelled like strawberry jam."
John James nodded. "My family lives in a house just outside of Simbsury," he said. "The house has a real white picket fence."

"I hope I'll see them again soon," Stephen said, and for a moment John James felt a twinge of annoyance, because he'd just been about to tell Stephen all about his own family and the house they lived in and how the white picket fence had actually been built by his great-grandfather, who also lived in the same house, but just then the speaker asked for D-23886 to please report to room 21 and Stephen got up and went out of the room.

So John James took a pencil and a sheet of paper from the dresser against the wall and drew a floor plan of his house just outside of Simsbury, with the round window in the right top corner and the little three-sided porch. It was a very detailed floor plan, and almost all of the lines were straight. John James was very proud of it, and he left it on top of the dresser at a favourable angle so that Stephen would see it when he walked in the door.

"A round window, you say?" asked Dr. Carter, smiling. The speaker had called his number and told him to go down to room 18 where Dr. Carter was, and she had seemed very happy when he'd told her all about the drawing of his house. "But John, your house doesn't have any round windows. Try and remember that."

John frowned, and in his mind's eye the round window in the right top corner shimmered and changed into a regular square one. Maybe he had been thinking of his neighbour's house. "But it does still have a real white picket fence," he said, with a sinking feeling in his gut. "Right?"

“Of course you have a white picket fence,” said Dr. Carter, and she picked up a stack of papers. “Now, John, let’s talk about your grandparents. On your mother’s side – what were their names?”

John James frowned and tried to concentrate. Their faces were a hazy blur, their names right on the tip of his tongue. “E…El… Eleanor,” he finally said. Yes, that sounded right. “And Jacob.”

Dr. Carter wrote something down. “And how long did they live?” she asked.

John James was silent for a long while. “I knew my grandma – Eleanor,” he said at last, and as the words left his mouth he knew that they were true. In fact he could remember her now, a little shrivelled figure in a big brown bed. He must have been very young at the time, or else he wouldn’t have forgotten it so easily. “My grandpa died before I was born,” he said, and this he also knew to be true. “Grandma never talked very much about him.”

“And on your father’s side?”

“My grandparents?”

“Yes, John.”

John James frowned again. “My grandpa’s name was Bill, and my grandma’s name was Mary, like Stephen’s daughter,” he announced. “They lived in Simsbury, and we visited them every Wednesday.”

Dr. Carter smiled and wrote some more. “Very good, John. That’s all the questions I have for you. Do you know what day it is?”

John James did not have a watch, though he thought he’d probably owned one at some point. “No,” he said.

“Today’s the thirtieth, John. Your month is up. Tomorrow you’ll go home.”

John James smiled. Then he frowned and smiled again and blinked and rubbed his eyes. “For real?” he asked. “For true?”

“For true,” said Dr. Carter.

“My family,” said John James. “Have they… missed me?”

“Very much,” said Dr. Carter.

John James was so preoccupied that he hardly noticed when they sent him back to his room, or how he got there. Late at night, as he stared at the scratchy metal belly of the cot above him, he realized that Stephen had never come back. Eventually he decided that the doctors had sent Stephen back home to his family too, and was a little upset that he had never gotten to show Stephen his drawing of his house.

He dreamed that he had done something very bad and was looking for somewhere to hide. The police were closing in, but just before they got to him some men in black suits drove up in a car and took him away. The man he had been in the dream had looked like him, but his name wasn’t John James and anyways he was much younger than John James was.

On the first of the month, the speaker came on and told John James to walk to the very end of the hallway and go into a room that he had never seen before. The room was full of other people in orange uniforms with white letters, and some people in bulky black uniforms with scowls on their faces. There were letters on the wall that read “RECONDITIONING,” and every few minutes the speaker would call out a number and a scowling man in black would walk one of the men in orange away down a hallway. John James tried to look for Stephen in the crowd, but before he could find him the speaker said for D-23984 to report to reconditioning room 3, and one of the men in black marched him off to a new room and shut the door behind him.

Dr. Carter was in the room with some men in glasses and button-down shirts, and behind them was a big metal chair with complicated-looking machinery coming down out of the ceiling above it and lots of computer screens on a little stand.

“This is your last test, John,” Dr. Carter said with her usual smile. “Then you’ll get to go home. Sit in the chair, okay?”

“Okay,” said John James, a little uncertainly. There were straps on the chair for your legs and your arms, and when he sat down in it the scowling man in the bulky black uniform snapped them shut so he couldn’t get up again. One of the men in glasses came over and fastened the machines coming out of the ceiling to different parts of his head, and when Dr. Carter began to press buttons on the computer screens John could feel them buzz a little.

“I want you to concentrate on your family now, John,” he heard Dr. Carter say. “Your family, and your house with the white picket fence. Can you do that, John?”

“Okay,” he said.

“Mental snapshot in three, two, one,” Dr. Carter said to the men in glasses, and then the machines did something funny that John James could taste in his mouth. Lots of little pictures and lights started blinking up on the computer screen.

“Perfect transfer. Everything’s here,” said Dr. Carter, with a hurried thumbs-up to John James who was giving her a questioning look.

“Good, wipe him clean,” said one of the men in glasses, and before he lost consciousness John James could only visualize a flash of white light and the memory of himself screaming.

Martin Kendall opened his eyes and got out of bed and put on his orange uniform with the white letters on it.

The white letters said D-23985, but his bunkmate’s said D-23887. His bunkmate’s name was Billy Smith, and he was a big bald man with a little bit of beard on the bottom of his face. Martin thought that maybe he’d met him somewhere before.

Martin had had a meeting with Dr. Carter the day before, and he was telling Billy about how he used to have a family, but they had died in a tragic car accident and now he lived on his own in a little

three-room flat.

“I miss the place,” he said. “I hope I’ll see it again soon.”

Billy Smith didn’t say anything to that, so Martin asked him whether he had a family too and if they had died in a tragic car accident.

Billy thought about that for a long while. “Maybe,” he said at last. “I don’t know.”

The man without a name had been grown in a tank, and had never seen the outside world.

Even now, the task force that was transporting him kept him in a long metal tank, asleep in the dark. His tank and many others were loaded together on the back of a big truck, and the only way to tell them apart were the numbers printed on their sides. The numbers on the tank of the man without a name were D-23984.

Off in the distance the members of the task force could see the enormous corpse of whatever it was that had destroyed America, the sun rising through the spines on its back.

“Jee-sus,” said one of the men in black.

“They’re bombing it soon,” said another. “Just watch.” He was staring at his wristwatch, a fancy metal plate with an extra panel that showed the day and the month and the year, all back-to-back. Right now the panel read *21/0/0*.

The two men stopped the truck and waited until they saw a mushroom cloud rising off the thing’s back through the dirty window, and the sun gleaming through a new hole in its ribs.
The man in black started the truck, and they drove off with the man without a name and the others like him. Over the next few weeks, the bombs steadily turned the thing into little piles of meat that turned into dirt soon after. Crews with construction cranes set up and dropped the thing’s bones into trucks filled with vats of chemicals that melted them right away. The men in the truck drove around the countryside, taking the nameless men out of their tank

and propping them up here and there, and through their little dashboard radio staticky voices squawked from around the world that men with trucks and cranes there were doing just what the men in America were doing. They estimated that cleanup efforts would be over by the first of the month, and they were right.

On the first of the month, John James woke up in his car.
He yawned and stretched himself. He was in his driveway, and up on the little three-sided porch of the house with the little square window in the right top corner his family was sitting, waiting for him to step outside. They looked a little different than how he had remembered them, but John James thought that was only because he had been gone for such a very long time.
He got out of the car and walked past the real white picket fence that his great-grandfather had built, smiling all the way. It was good to be home.

Johnny's Wild Ride

Johnny was sitting at his computer desk, head hung low as the tears streamed down his cheeks. He couldn't believe that he'd found yet another internet community that he was exiled from. First it was the tumblr kids, then the twitter kids, then the furries, and now, finally, he faced the worst kind of exile. Exile from an online writing group that probably took itself way too seriously. He was about to call his best friend — James, the emogoth who attempted to bridge the two social strata end ended up with a cigarette burn from when he dropped it on himself — when the door to his room was kicked in. Standing there in a long, white lab coat was none other than Dr. Bright. He knew, because of the amulet that was around his neck and the name badge on his chest. He gasped as he saw one of them, one of those who had cast him aside and neglected him. But he couldn't help but notice that something was… out of place.

"HELLLLLOOOOOOO, JOHHNY!" screamed Bright, his eyes manic and wild. It was then that he realized that it wasn't the Dr. Bright he had been expecting (the quiet, morose one who wanted to die from the more recent stories), but was actually the crazy, wild eyed Dr. Bright who had starred in stories where he'd specifically and delightedly killed a man who cut him off in traffic and sentenced D-classes to masturbation therapy in Dr. Glass's office. It was then that Johnny realized exactly how fucked he was.

Johnny let out a loud, pained squeak as he was grabbed by the ear and dragged from the desk, arms and legs flailing madly to the sides as Bright tugged him down the stairs and into a large, waiting white van that was emblazoned with a large, Foundation logo. On the side, he saw the name. Soap-from-Corpses-Products. He cringed as he was hurled into the back. "WELL, JOHNNY. IT'S TIME FOR YOU TO GET TO KNOW THE FOUNDATION."

The door slammed in Johnny's face, and as he pleaded and banged against it in impotent rage, Dr. Bright walked around the front of the

van and climbed into the front. He pushed in a tape — Dylan, from the bad years — and cranked the volume as Johnny covered his young, Deathcab listening ears in pain and collapsed to the floor of the van. Bright peeled out and down the street, meeting up with an escort that led them both out in the country.

What felt like hours passed (in reality, only forty-five minutes, as Johnny didn't have any of his electronics to make the time pass by properly) before they pulled to an abrupt stop, slamming the stammering, crying, whining, bitchy, annoying, under aged user's face against the hard, crosshatched plastic divider. Bright hopped out from the front before walking around, opening the back and dragging out poor Johnny, throwing him into the dirt of a strange, abandoned back road.

Johnny looked up at Bright with utter fear and horror, his jaw slack as he stammered. Bright reached into his jacket and pulled out a shotgun, leveling it at Johnny's face.

"Do you want to live, Johnny? Do you want… to live?" Bright asked.

Johnny had already gone number one, number two, and number three in his pants, but he somehow managed to nod.

"Good. GOOD. I hate it when they want to die," the mad incarnation said, pointing over Johnny's shoulder. Johnny turned, looked, and his jaw dropped.

They were near an arch, and above the entrance, he saw the name of the place written in large, blocky black letter. "Silas Presby's Camp for Troubled Youth?" he said. "But… but… that's not an SCP cover," he stammered, eyes wide.

Bright grinned down at him. "I know. I'm turning you over to my counterpart," he said.

From behind a bush stepped a gaunt, tall man. He was skinny, yet his right arm was massive and strong. He looked down at Johnny and spat in the dirt. "This is what you bring me, Bright? This is what I get?"

Bright nodded, "Unfortunately. He's the only one that couldn't spell this month. Very eager, though."

The man nodded, and then knelt next to Johnny, squeezing the young man's arms a little. "Not much on him. But he'll do," he said, nodding.

Johnny looked up at him, swallowing. "D-do for what? Am I… am I going to become a… a Class-D?" he asked.

"No," said the old man. "You're going to become a Class-P," he said, sucking in the snot from his nose before spitting it into the dirt again.

"A… a Class-P? I've never heard of that…"

The old man laughed. "You will," he said. "Welcome aboard, Johnny. I hope you liked shark week."

Bright climbed back into the van, waving at them and smiling a rictus grin, "LATER, JOHNNY. JUST REMEMBER. AIM FOR THE NOSE. AIM FOR THEIR FUCKING NOSE."

Bright punched the gas, and in a cloud of dust, Johnny and the old man were left standing under the arches. Johnny went number four as the old man squeezed his shoulder. "Come on kid. We've got a Class-S off of Florida."

"A what?"

"God damn, kid, You don't know?"

"Know what?

Johnny was waiting in the helicopter as they approached the jump site. His arms were clad in thick, heavy metal, and his body — once weak and leaned by years of apathy toward real food — had grown strong over the months of training. He hovered over the water, looking down as the old man in the front nodded to him.

"You ready kid?" he asked.

Johnny nodded. He was ready. He was so fucking ready to punch this god damned shark. He was doing the world a service. He was going to save them, one punch at a time.

"Then go for it, kid! Target is directly below. Do NOT miss!"

Johnny looked at the water, his chest hammering as he leapt from the plane, looking for the target — Tigershark T-18543, a Known Nibbler — was finally in their grasp. He hit the water, holding his breath as he looked, then immediately and suddenly sank thanks to the incredibly heavy shark-punching gauntlets on his arm.

He plunged deep into the depths, his lungs aching as the ocean swallowed him whole.

"How the fuck do you keep convincing them to do that?" asked Bright into the receiver.

"You always send me the idiots," came the reply.

"Right. We'll have a few more next month."

"Sure. Just keep sending the canned tuna, and we'll keep this little operation going."

"Right," said Bright into the phone, putting it down with a click. He looked back at the applications, his nose crinkling slightly as he went through, clicking. "Approved, Approved… How the fuck hard is it to spell Alabama? Denied. Denied. Denied…"

"Denied."

Join the Flock

ANALYSIS OF ANOMALY

We have analyzed the interviews with subjects that come out of **SCP-3662**. Though all of their experiences vary wildly, there has been an interesting constant. All subjects have reported seeing a large bird, often orange in coloration. This includes subjects who were avid bird watchers to subjects who lived in areas without an abundance of birds.

We haven't been able to isolate what, exactly, the bird *is*. However, recent subjects have reported that it's getting larger, and one subject even reported being attacked by it. We're still trying to figure out what this means, and the interviews are still in progress.

- *Researcher C. Calvin*

Sergeant Michael talked softly to the D-class subject. She had just exited SCP-3662 and entered the body of another D-class, and he wanted to know what, exactly, went on in SCP-3662.

"So," Sergeant Michael said, making sure not to raise his voice, "try to describe your experience inside of the device."

"It was like a black, blank void," said the young woman in an even softer voice, "sort of like a *raven*'s coat of *feathers*. Do you like *birds*, sir?"

"Yes, yes I do," Sergeant Michael said. He thought that it might have been slightly odd that she brought up birds; didn't she get attacked by one? At least, that's what she said in the other interview. These kinds of anomalies rarely had any consistent rules. He decided to

ignore it and continue his questioning.

After the interview was done, Michael said his goodbyes and left the room. On his way out, he ran into one of his old friends, Dr. Marco.

"Hey there, pal," said Dr. Marco, "how was the interview?"

"Meh," Sergeant Michael replied, "now if you'll excuse me, I have to take my leave. Early bird gets the worm, you know what they say!"

Dr. Marco chuckled a little bit. "Oh, you!" Dr. Marco was an avid bird watcher, and Sergeant Michael liked to make fun of that fact.

Dr. Marco eventually clocked out and went home to his wife, with whom he talked about a bird he saw on the way home that had blue and black stripes. Mrs. Marco pretended to be interested in his hobby before going to bed. In the morning, Mrs. Marco met with her book club and talked somewhat excessively about the birds and the symbolism in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Everybody went home to their husbands, and talked about some bird related subject.

"Ma'am, there's something wrong with my monitor."

"What do you mean?" Technical Assistant Marie walked over to the research assistant's cubicle. As expected, the young man was browsing Twitter. She was supposed to issue reprimands for this, but at this point, she was more apathetic than not.

"As you can see," the research assistant continued, "there's a smudge on my monitor. I've tried to wipe it off, but it's stuck. I think it's somehow *in* the computer."

Marie leaned over and looked at the monitor. A user had taken a picture of a rather non-photogenic bluebird. Marie scrolled up, and the blur stuck to the picture.

Marie's expression changed from pure disinterest to that of concern. She took out a cell phone and dialed a number. "Hello, site command? Could you please seal off Computer Center 26, Hall 3, please? We've got a meme in here and I think we've all been exposed."

This was the life for Sam. Sitting on the dock, smelling the lake, and fishing with his best friend, George. He couldn't have asked for a better vacation.

"We're blessed in this life, right, George?" said Sam.

"Uh-huh. I love the birds here" replied George.

After a short silence, George made another comment. "Boy, we haven't seen a fish in hours. Where do you think they all are?"

"I wish I could catch birds with this pole" replied George.

"Say, what's with birds, today?" questioned Sam, "It's all you've been talking about since we got here."

"What can I say? I guess I'm a bit *bird-brained.*"

Sam chuckled. "Alright, you know that was terrible."

"Hey, I like terrible jokes too. You know, birds of a feather flock together."

Sam chuckled again and said no more. He continued to fish, but he paid a little extra attention to the flock of birds flying overhead.

Dr. Frederick Hoygull, despite the fact that he was a **`bird`**, had earned a PhD and a well-paying research position in the SCP Foundation. Hoygull wasn't his real name, which didn't roll off the tongue; one of his colleagues had given him the name of Hoygull at one point, and it stuck. Right now, Dr. Hoygull was sitting across from Site Director **`Browning`** as he jabbed his finger at a multicolored map.

"All of the red dots," Director Browning yelled, "are people we know are infected. Now, if the agents had done the quarantine *properly*, all of the dots would be here." Director Browning pointed at a significant cluster of dots around the town of Wakeford. "However, some chucklefuck didn't do his job, and another chucklefuck posted the meme on the internet, which is why we've got dots all over the

goddamn country!"

"Why don't we just quarantine America, then?" replied Hoygull, writing his reply on a sheet of paper in lieu of vocal cords.

"It's too late for that. We've already got reports of infection in Europe and China. This is on the internet now; we can't take this down, at least not alone. So we have to pass this on to our peers in other countries. That's your job. You know about your natural immunity, right?"

Dr. Hoygull nodded. For whatever reason, SCP-3095-1 were not able to catch nor spread the bird meme.

"Get the message out to them. I don't want to lose more personnel, or more importantly, myself, to whatever this *thing* is."

"Welcome back to CNN. Today, we have some breaking news. Michael?"

"Thank you, Cheryl. Today, an episode of Family Guy titled 'I Dream of Jesus', has been taken down from all streaming services and television rosters. Fox has refused to respond to any contact from CNN about this incident."

Scene cuts to 'I Dream of Jesus'. In this scene, main character Peter Griffin is performing a dance to the tune of The Trashmen's 'Surfin' Bird *'. A male voice narrates.*

"The episode 'I Dream of Jesus' contains Peter Griffin dancing to a 60's song titled 'Surfin' Bird", before he meets Jesus Christ and turns him into a celebrity. It is unclear whether Fox was under pressure for the inclusion of Christ, or for another reason. However, it is unknown why this happened over ten years after its release, and not earlier."

"Thank you, Bill. What do you thi-"

At this point, Foundation officials detected the presence

of SCP- in the broadcast, and hijacked broadcast equipment to disrupt the broadcast. Over 1.3 million people are suspected to have been infected. Quarantine operations ongoing.

Gregory sat at the poker table, holding a few cards in his hand. He had a royal flush lined up to be played, and he was trying to read his opponents for anything that might help him in his play. He looked at Kens, who had a pretty good poker face, and was therefore hard to read. He shifted his gaze over to Frank, whose eyes were glazing over as if he was dozing off. Finally, he switched his sights to Donald, who… also seemed to be dozing off.

Looking back to Kens, Gregory saw his eyes were losing focus as well. He stood up; the fish-eyes of his friends followed him. They dropped their cards (which were less than stellar) on the table and stood up with him. Then they started screeching, accompanied by the screeches of people all throughout the neighborhood.

Gregory instinctively clutched his ears as a million questioning thoughts ran through his head. *What are they doing? Why is everybody doing it? Do I hear a bird? What's going on? Are they fucking with me? Why can't I be a bird? Are they hypnotized? Who are the birds? Wh… How can I become a bird? What, exactly, is a bird? Why shouldn't I be a bird?*

Gregory felt his eyes losing focus.

"This is your captain speaking. We've just, uh, received an order from the national government. Stay in the air, at all costs, and try to find an uninhabited place to land. Now, uh, we have no idea what's going on on the surface, but, if they're making us, uh, stay up here, it's probably pretty bad. Now, stay on board, and we're going to await further instructions. Thanks for flying Southwest, and we, uh, apologize for this inconvenience."

Sam barricaded the door with the mahogany dining table. He could still hear the incessant screaming of not just his former friend

George, but of the thirty or so other people that had begun to roam the area. Was it an overreaction? Possibly. It wasn't like they were doing anything other than screaming. All Sam needed was a pair of headphones to keep it out.

I wonder if the birds are alright…

As Sam realized what he was thinking, he tried to push the thought aside to address more important matters. But it stuck there, like it was bolted to his mind.

Hey, don't they sound kind of like birds?

The second thought then anchored itself into his brain. He tried to move it, but Sam just couldn't stop thinking about how the screaming outside resembled the call of a wild seagull. A third thought arrived that posed the question of whether or not humans were just unwinged birds, and then a fourth, and a fifth, and a sixth, until all that was on Sam's mind was birds.

Sam felt his eyes lose focus.

Director Browning sat across from twenty-three other suited men at the circular table. Usually, it would be up to the O5 Council to make this decision; however, the bird meme got spread at one of their meetings. In their absence, the **Site Director's Executive Committee of the Whole** was the highest authority in the Foundation. These people were the last remnants of the chain of command that had managed to avoid the meme.

"It appears that the meme has somehow been altered to modify the brain chemistry of its infectees," lectured Director Frant while pointing at a diagram, "which is what's causing this behavior. Now, if we look at this diagram…" Frant clicked a button that switched over to a different slide, showing another, similarly colored brain. "This is the brain of a bird. If we compare these two brains together, one can see that they are very, very similar. I submit for your consideration that this meme is transforming people, on a mental level, into birds. Now…" Frant clicked the button again, showing a picture of a crowded street filled with litter and glass from broken windows. "A

good portion of humanity appears to just be infected. The remainder are either hiding in their homes, attempting to escape the area, or going on looting sprees."

Director Browning wiped the sweat from his forehead. "Is the Memetics Division working on a countermeme?"

"I'm afraid there isn't really a Memetics Division anymore," Director Frant replied, "aside from us, we have one hundred, maybe two hundred, researchers and agents under our command. None of them have any training in Memetics whatsoever. At this point, over seventy-five percent of America is infected. It's going to be hard to recover anybody who *can* work for us, now."

"What about the Avian Division?" Browning replied.

"They're over half of our remaining workforce, and the only ones immune to the avian meme, it seems. They're working double shifts for us, but even then they can only do so much."

A silence crept over the room before Director Moose spoke up. "What's our plan?"

"I don't think we have a plan, at this point," said Director Bright while he was pinching the bridge of his nose, "over half the world is already infected, and I doubt anything we do will help. I'd suggest waiting until **`certain contingency options`** are available to us before we take action."

"Are you talking about-" began Director Browning, before realizing the taboo of talking about *it* aloud, "that could take a thousand years before it's operational again!"

Everybody at the table looked down, despondent. Nothing was left to do.

Tim threw the brick through the window of the supermarket. The police were too busy fending off the hordes of screeching people, and it was pretty obvious that the world was going to shit, so Tim wanted to stockpile enough supplies to live comfortably in his

basement for at least until the whole thing blew over to the point where he could get more supplies. As he stepped through the window, he picked up a suitcase and went to work, picking up canned foods, appliances, and weapons before anybody else could get them.

Tim took a bag of sunflower seeds off of the shelf. *I wonder if I could feed this to the birds…* he thought as he tucked it into his suitcase. Suddenly, he realized that he'd thought about feeding the birds before he thought about feeding himself. *I hate birds.* he thought to himself, remembering a point in his childhood where a pigeon managed to land a shit on his head. For some reason, that memory seemed almost appealing now.

Assuming that the apocalypse was fucking with his head, Tim quickly shoved the bag in his suitcase and speed-walked away.

Tim stumbled upon the jackpot: a hunting rifle, complete with ammunition and a manual. As he picked it up, he wondered how he could use it to not shoot down the birds.

Once again, Tim stopped himself at that thought. *Why am I thinking about birds so much? Because they're cool.* Tim ran through a list of reasons why birds were cool in his mind. Resisting was futile; every time he tried to refute a reason, his mind would come back with a greater reason as to why he was wrong.

Tim felt himself starting to caw like a bird, as he felt a talon pushing him far, far back into his mind.

Dr. Frederick Hoygull, head of the Avian Division and therefore the remainder of the Foundation, looked out over what used to be New York City. From a distance, it still looked relatively untouched. Once you got closer, you could see the broken windows, turned dumpsters, and broken streetlights left over from some amount of rioting and looting. Then you saw that the people walking the streets wore dirty clothes, and did nothing but screech if you got close to them.

Hoygull sat at a distance from the commotion, next to two of his

associates: Linda Duck (despite the fact that she wasn't a duck), and James Crowl.

"Shouldn't it be more crowded?" questioned Crowl.

"I think they're all… migrating, for lack of a better word," replied Hoygull, "I've sent Eta-4 out to try and figure out where they're going. If anything, it looks like they're moving west, for some reason."

"This is bad," commented Duck. She was right.

Joseon

Eun Mi suppressed a yawn as she walked along, silently wishing she was still in bed. The Great Leader (the second Great Leader, which was strange considering the old one seemed sure he'd live forever) was generous enough to provide schooling. She only wished he would provide it at a more reasonable hour of the day. Perhaps noon? Enough time for a young woman (not girl, no matter what her mother said) to get beauty sleep.

At least breakfast had been good. Rice and soup and kimchi. Nothing worse than going to school hungry. She just hoped she hadn't eaten *too* much. Her mother's cooking was good, but her father would insist that no one wanted a glutton around the house. He may have smiled when he said it, but it was still worrying.

"How's it coming, Joe?" Beth sipped her coffee as she leaned over the partition, watching the movement on the big screen. Their offices may have been just one room, but the small metal partitions between each section helped make it feel more orderly…if a little more crowded.

"Fine, just wish R-445 would stop acting up all the damn time. We had to bug the Russians for weeks to get patched in, and now the fucking thing just goes down every twenty minutes."

"According to them, when we bought the feed, we bought the maintenance. I'm pretty sure they just wanted it off their hands." She smirked at her employee's frustration. She'd told him they didn't need the old Russian satellite, but he'd insisted on absolute coverage.

"Well I hope it drops and hits whatever asshole built it." Joe snorted, his glasses glinting in the light of the monitors. "At least K-332 is fine now."

"What, Pyongyang let you tap in? That's odd of them." The North Koreans were infamously secret, and that even applied to their weather satellites. They'd tried for weeks to get something above the 38th parallel, but in the end, given it up as a bad job. Thelmann System's stated goal of having a total coverage weather prediction system would have to do without North Korea for now.

"Well, if you must know *Mrs.* Thelmann…" He grinned up at his boss. "They didn't. I hacked in. They're using absolutely ancient systems over there."

Beth was more than a little appalled. "Joe! Christ, do you want some sort of international incident?!" Sure, she knew Joe was obsessive about the project, that's why she had him in on it. But electronic espionage was the kind of deep shit that could get every other country they had eyes in pulling out as fast as possible.

"Aww, c'mon-" Joe's wheedling tone, usually amusing, was suddenly grating on her nerves.

"No. Switch it over and disconnect now. We're going to have to scrub that data and hope they don't realize we're in." She growled, rubbing her forehead. "And start seriously thinking about how you're going to apologize for this shit."

Joe switched over the screen, sulking quietly… Before his voice came back suddenly dry. "Hey, boss."

"What the hell is it now-"

"Look at this." Glancing up, mouth open to rebuke him, Beth's tongue stilled. Over the Korean Peninsula, a massive swirl of air pressure had just developed. Enough to make even the harshest of hurricanes and typhoons seem like a breeze.

"What in God's name-"

Eun Mi's reverie about her near constantly shifting weight was interrupted by the wind. Sweeping around her as she walked down the road, magnified by the buildings, it tore at her clothes and

yanked at her body. She felt herself dragged a few inches just by the force. Shrieking in surprise, she struggled into a nearby alleyway, looking up. The clouds above were a swirling, angry mass.

What was happening? In all her life in the city, she had never seen such weather- She heard screams and yelling ahead, as another gust of wind ripped along. The wind was a piercing wail through the buildings as it built in force, and she clung to the side of the alleyway, afraid of being blown away by the gale.

"God, what the fuck is going on- Why the fuck hasn't someone called the UN?! We need to make sure they've got rescue teams moving in as soon as it clears!" Beth was frantically trying to contact the South Korean government. Meanwhile, the apocalyptic storm was behaving erratically, hovering above the country, as if readying to strike.

"I can't figure out where the hell it came from! None of our data for the last few weeks showed anything like this-"

"Keep looking! Storms don't just show up out of nowhere-…oh shit." Beth felt her phone drop from nerveless fingers as the massive storm paused…and then settled down over the country.

Eun Mi's hands were going numb from strain, gripping the concrete edge of the building she was huddled near so hard that her fingers bled. Tears were streaming down her cheeks and being whipped off into the air as the wind increased, howling and roaring like some mighty beast. The few other pedestrians she could see were yelling and screaming. One man attempted to dash across the street and was lifted off by the wind.

And then, the aching pressure in her hand faded, as the building she was gripping simply seemed to turn see-through, and then vanish. The wind picked up Eun Mi, and she could see the other buildings fading away as well. The ground beneath her was turning immaterial as well, vanishing from sight. Her scream of shock was short lived. The sudden loss of mass as millions of tons created such a vacuum that she, and the other citizens of Pyongyang, were suddenly and

harshly yanked towards the ground. Eun Mi was killed near instantly by the shift, her neck snapping under the pressure of the change in velocity.

"…day five of the rescue effort, and more bodies are being recovered from the ocean. Initial estimates put the death toll in the million range, with increases occurring constantly. The UN released a statement about the recent North Korean Incident, claiming that they believed it was 'an act of nature'. The recent leak of classified documents from the Japanese Diet pointing towards a theft from what is referred to as 'The Foundation' suggests a different story…"

Jot It Down

Today I messed up Dr. Smiley's office. He yelled a lot and started going "bang, bang", but he didn't get me: he's so funny when he's loud. Then I went to the cafeteria and the cooks gave me something tasty. They always give me something tasty when I make my cute face.

Slept today. Woke up to eat, then slept some more.

Woken up by lots of loud banging outside today. Everyone was running around, saying that some Big Thing was going on. I hid under Dr. Boring's desk until they were quiet. Big Things are so stupid: They make lots of noise and wake me up. Someone should put the Big Things outside in the rain and not give them any dinner. That will make them quiet.

Played with Little Dr. Lady today. She was nice, but then she smelled funny, and Big Dr. Lady came and took her away. But then she came back, and we ran around Dr. Lady's office. Then we slept on the floor. It was nice.

Slept today.

I saw Dr. Dog today. I don't like Dr. Dog. I was going to tell him to go away, but he had his clunky-walk-thing, and it could squish me. So I just gave him my "evil glare". I hope it scared him away for good, because I do not want to be squished.

I went to visit the sleeping men today. It was quiet. The sleeping men who weren't sleeping were nice to me. They like it when I'm there. Some of the sleeping men I visited last time weren't there. I don't know where they've gone. I miss them.

A new man walked came into office today. Not Dr. Smiley, or Dr. Boring, or Dr. Dog, or Dr. Grumpy, or Dr. Lady. I will call him Dr. New. He looked nice, so I went and visited him. He jumped high in the air and shouted: “THAT CAT HAS NO ASS! WHERE IS THAT CAT’S ASS!?”

He startled me, so I clawed his leg. I don’t like Dr. New.

Joy to the World

Doctor Johanna Rose Garrison leaned back in her chair, one last click extinguishing the computer's light. That was it. The last of the forms had been sent off, the final approvals and offers ferried to the appropriate personnel, and the last experiments should have been completed by now. It was, for the next twenty minutes, Christmas Eve. Maybe, just maybe, she could take tomorrow off.

The door to the office slid open, and Garrison recognized a familiar face. “Agent Bryant. Good to see you.” The man stepped in, looking sheepish, and she glanced at the clock before waving at him to sit down. Twenty minutes. “What is it?”

“Do you want to hear the bad news or the worse news?”

Johanna sighed- there went her plans of leaving on time tonight. “The bad news.”

“SCP-504's escaped from containment. Someone left the door open.”

She sighed in relief. That was manageable. “Well, send in an appropriately equipped containment team to retrieve the specimens, and that should be fixed easily enough. What's the worse news?”

“You know that termination attempt on SCP-682 we were going to try out?”

“Yes… Remind me, you were going to then drop him down a mineshaft?”

“Right. Well. It didn't work. He kind of, uh, well, grew wings.”

Johanna stared at him. “And, pray tell, where is 682 now?”

“He… escaped into a nearby orchard. And he's currently hiding in a tree.” Seeing Johanna's stare, he rapidly continued, “But we have a

dozen marksmen- well, one was killed, last I heard, but the rest are there- shooting at him, and Doctor Klein is taking care of amnesiacs with the civilians and adjusting files as necessary."

"Phew."

"Though, there's a reason to suspect that inappropriate behavior among the researchers involved had to do with the outbreak, so we've got the ten of them cleaning SCP-173's pen."

She sighed. "Is that all?"

"Er… There's been a mutiny among some of the D-class. Two teamed up and started a bit of a massacre, four others joined in."

Johanna Garrison blanched. "Security's on it?"

"Of course. I haven't heard whether they've stopped it recently though."

She stared at him. "There's more, isn't there."

"Oh, yes. See, computer errors caused a large amount of data regarding SCP-006 to be released to all personnel- when its clearance normally starts at O5 level… The four tech guys who should have been monitoring it are all denying responsibility. They'll probably be trying to contact you."

As if on cue, Johanna's desk phone went off. "That's probably them now," Bryant said, helpfully. She leaned over, unplugged it, and looked down wearily. "Please tell me that's it."

"Well, apart from that, it's minutia… Some of the live containment cells have some structural instability, but there are crews working on that… Let's see, the 914 test results came back- we've got a couple of half-pigeon, half-reptiles you'll want to see, the recombinant DNA is like nothing I've ever seen. I sent them to your office for analysis. They're in liquid nitrogen."

"Thanks."

"And apart from that, the only other thing of note is that SCP-447's

container is getting filled up, we'll want to move it."

"Of course. Get a new container." Johanna sighed, resting her head in her arms. "I'm sorry, Gabriel, I really wanted to get the day off tomorrow, I had hoped we could spend Christmas together, I didn't know this much would come up…"

"You probably wouldn't have been able to anyways," Gabriel Bryant patted her arm. Just then, a rhythmic cacophony passed by the hallway.

"Shit." Garrison sat up. "Was that a brass band?"

"I wasn't sure where else to find the twelve drummers drumming," Bryant said. The doctor turned to stare at him as he got up, dancing into the hallway.

"I mean, you've already got the eleven snipers sniping, ten doctors sweeping, Klein's data expunging, goo-ball buckets brimming, six D's a-slaying, O5's youthful springs, four calling nerds, three broken pens, two turtle-doves…"

"And a…" Johanna continued automatically, then just stared. "In what universe does 682 with wings count as a partridge?"

But Bryant was already gone, running down the hall. The 504 specimen crashed into the wall where his head had been, missing him by inches.

J. T. H.

Navarro groaned loudly as he placed his right hand to his head. He felt as if someone had attempted to crack it open, but failed and decided to punch it repeatedly instead. Slowly, he propped himself up and opened his eyes.

“Well then…” he mumbled to himself as he looked around.

Navarro was on top of a large polished steel platform in the center of what appeared to be an otherwise empty warehouse. At least three spotlights were shining down on him from somewhere above, making it difficult to see his surroundings. His jacket had been replaced with a black metal breastplate. The symbol of the SCP Foundation was engraved above his heart. Looking down, Navarro could see his reflection in the surface of the platform.

“God damn it, they made me art again, didn’t they…” he said as he rubbed his temples and very carefully got to his feet. It was then that a man’s voice pierced the darkness.

“If you value keeping your head and limbs attached to your torso, you’ll stay on the platform,” the voice said. “That breast plate has been rigged to seal off all holes in the event you step down from there. The same will happen if you try to remove it yourself. You’ll need someone else to do that for you. Oh, and don’t try anything magical. That will trigger it too.”

The voice was deep, and surprisingly non-threatening. Almost like a game show host. Navarro squinted against the spotlights and could barely see a tall figure standing in the distance, presumably the voice’s source.

“So what, the armor protects me, but is also deadly in and of itself?” Navarro addressed his host as he watched the figure meander closer.

“I call the piece ‘Reflections of Daniel Navarro,’” the man replied, stopping his gait just far enough to keep his face obscured in the darkness. He was dressed in a black business suit. A single leather glove covered his right hand. “Quaint, don’t you think?”

“A little too obvious if you ask me…” Navarro began as he looked down at his reflection in the platform. “I take it you’re JTH?”

The man didn’t respond. Instead, he pulled a small, black, leather bound notebook out of his pocket and quietly flipped to a page near its center.

“June, 2004. Daniel Navarro is apprehended by the Suits. He is assumed dead by a majority of his friends and family. A funeral is held for him in Portland, Oregon,” the man read aloud. “November, 2005. Daniel Navarro is spotted, both alive and well, leading a Suit raid on a studio in Seattle. The raid results in the destruction of at least $100,000 worth of art and materials that I had personally provided, and the arrest and presumed death of artists Francis and Elizabeth Baker, both of whom were acquaintances of Navarro prior to his apprehension, and were dear friends of mine. The local anart community is both in shock and pain from Navarro’s apparent turncoat nature.”

“They were building giant, lead sculptures of spiders that easily could have killed hundreds of people if they were…” Navarro protested, but paused as he felt the breast plate tighten around his torso. Looking up, he saw his host pointing at him with his gloved hand.

“Please, Daniel, if you’d be so kind as to let me finish, that would be appreciated,” the man said. He then flipped to the next page in his notebook. “March, 2007. Navarro personally leads a raid on a cache of supplies, which was due for shipment the following morning. The clay is subsequently destroyed, resulting in the stalling of at least five different projects, and a net loss of nearly five million dollars on my end.”

The man paused and looked up at Navarro before shaking his head.

“I lost a lot of ‘friends’ after that one,” he chuckled. “It’s pretty

astounding how fast some people will drop you when the weather turns foul. It didn't have to be that way though…"

The man then snapped his head back to his notebook, and proceeded to read.

"June, 2008. Agent Navarro leads an effort to destroy a piece titled, 'The Folly of the Censor,' killing its creator, Damion Cartwright, in the process," the man continued, stopping as Navarro laughed to himself.

"Let me guess, another friend?" Navarro asked, stopping as he felt the armor tighten again.

"A very, very, close friend," the man said between clenched teeth, his gloved hand clenched tight as he held it at Navarro. "And if eyewitnesses are to be believed, you engulfed him in nuclear fire, and then shot him in the fucking head."

The man then relieved the pressure, and looked down at his notebook again, chuckling as he then shook his head.

"All those incidents are enough for me to hate you, Daniel. The fact that you are a turn coat, the fact that you have cost me more money than most people see in their lifetimes, the fact that you have killed some of my closest friends… but this last one is what really takes the cake. November, 2010. Agent Navarro leads a raid on a warehouse in Portland, resulting in a standoff between Foundation forces and the warehouse occupants and contents. The occupants, Tanya and Eric Hill, are slain. The latter was my brother. The former was my wife."

"Wait…" Navarro said as the man stepped into light. He had short blond hair and was clean shaven. His eyes were bloodshot and his lips were curved into a regretful smile. "Jericho…"

Navarro's mouth hung slightly open. When they had last spoken almost a decade prior, Jericho T. Hill was a wealthy businessman who had found a hobby as a patron for both anomalous and non-anomalous art within Portland. He had been a kind soul, but seemed to fade out of the public eye around late 2004 for reasons unknown.

Now, however, the kindness was gone. Standing before Navarro was a man entirely drained of energy and emotion.

“Hello Daniel,” he said. “It sure has been a while hasn’t it? I don’t think there is anyone else on this planet you’ve screwed over more than me and my friends.”

Jericho then removed a pistol from his jacket pocket, holding it loosely in his ungloved hand. Navarro recognized the sidearm as his own.

“So is that it?” Navarro asked. “Are you going to shoot me with my own gun? “

“You know, I hadn’t thought of that,” Jericho chuckled as he analyzed the pistol. “I suppose it would be easy wouldn’t it? I could pop you in the head here and wash my hands of this. But that wouldn’t bring back all my friends, that wouldn’t bring back Eric, and that certainly wouldn’t bring back Tanya. No, that wouldn’t be the way to handle things.”

Jericho then petted the pistol with his gloved hand, and held the gun to his face as he slowly blew on it. The gun began to disintegrate into flakes of rust. With the gun destroyed, Jericho then gave another small chuckle, and turned back to face Navarro.

“You took away everything I loved, so I’ll take away that one thing you cherish enough to become a turn coat,” said Jericho, “I’ll take away your freedom.”

“How?” Navarro asked, “You going to keep me here forever? The Foundation will eventually find me.”

“Certainly,” Jericho snickered, “But, if I keep putting you into situations like this, how long do you think it will take for them to question your value as an agent? If they are constantly pulling you from incapacitation, when will they start to see you as a liability? What if I silence or kill all of your contacts in the field? What use would you be to them then?”

Jericho’s lips then turned into a devilish smile.

“You’re rather anomalous yourself, Navarro, self-described wizard as you are. If all your utility as a field agent was stripped from you, do you think they’d contain you too? Or maybe they’d just wipe your memory and leave you on the side of the road in Indiana. I wonder…”

Jericho then tossed Navarro a cell phone.

“I’ve rigged this to activate after twenty-four hours. In the meantime why don’t you stay here and reflect on your current situation.”

Navarro eyed the cell phone, and then shook his head.

“You’re not really thinking this through, are you, Jericho?” Navarro asked. “When I get out of here what’s to keep me and my friends from finding you and gunning you down?”

“By all means you’re welcome to try,” Jericho chuckled, “I’d love to see you run around on a wild goose chase. But, no, I don’t think I’ll be around for a bit. I’m tired, and can use a vacation. Do you know how hard it was to track down **`Pyotr`** and convince him the best way to reach you was through the casket?”

Jericho gave a small satisfied nod and slowly turned around to begin walking away.

“Take care, old friend,” He called over his shoulder as he slowly disappeared into the darkness. Navarro heard a door open and slowly close in the distance.

“Yeah,” Navarro mumbled to himself. “You too…”

Navarro then sat down at the center of the platform. Looking down on his reflection he uttered a defeated sigh.

“Well shit.”

It was nearly a day and a half later when Navarro heard the warehouse door open. A short woman with neck length brunette hair and a bright red winter jacket slowly made her way across the empty floor. She stopped just short of the platform and shook her head, a

small smile on her face.

“We’ve got to stop meeting like this Daniel.”

Navarro gave a small chuckle in return before flipping her off. Her name was **Sasha Merlo**. She was a Foundation field agent stationed at the local **Site-64**, and someone Navarro had worked with on several raids in the past. When Jericho’s phone finally activated, she was the first person he could think of to call who might actually show up to set him free.

“Hmmmmm…” Sasha hummed as she struck a thoughtful pose. “I do quite like the piece, but I do question the artist’s use of color…”

“Sasha,” Navarro sighed, “It’s been a very, very, long day. Can you please just get this off me?”

“I suppose…” she said with a hint of disappointment. “So I just pull the armor off, or, what?”

“That’s what the artist said to do. I’d do it myself, but I quite value having my appendages attached to my torso.”

“Yeah,” Sasha began as she lifted the armor off, over Navarro’s head, “me too.”

She then tossed the breastplate aside, the metal hitting the ground with a loud clink.

“A recovery team should be here soon to pick up the platform and armor,” Sasha said as she sat down on the platform. “You do know there are probably four or five reports, and maybe a committee hearing, or two, you’re going to have to deal with for this, yeah?”

“Don’t remind me,” Navarro chuckled as he took a seat. Within a few moments a team of six more Foundation agents entered the warehouse.

“Buy you a drink when this is done?” Sasha asked.

Navarro gave a nod and quietly waited for the questioning to begin.

Two days later, Navarro found himself sitting at the desk in his office in Site-19. A blank Person of Interest form was displayed on the monitor of his computer. An old photograph was gripped tightly in his hands.

A few hours after Agent Merlo had set him free he was summarily buried under the weight of half a dozen reports that needed to be filed. Taking a break from the paperwork, Navarro managed to find an old photograph among the numerous belongings that cluttered his office. It was taken before he had come to work for the Foundation. The background was an art studio, where a newly made marble sculpture had recently been unveiled. Standing in the foreground was a much younger Daniel Navarro and his old friends, Tom, Jackson, Alexis, Jill, and Jericho T. Hill.

"And you'll leave? Tom, Jackson, Alexis, and me; we'll never see you again?"

"If that's what you want."

Jill's words echoed in his head. He looked over the happy faces in the photograph one more time and sighed. He quietly pulled out a lighter and set a corner ablaze. Within moments the photograph was incinerated. Navarro swept the ashes into his office trash can and returned to his work, another bridge burnt.

He then began to fill out the Person of Interest form.

Name: Jericho T. Hill

«Part Two: Meeting Over Coffee | Hub | Part Four: The Templar Incident»

Just A Formality

Dr. Daniel Aeslinger envied his peers outside of the Foundation. They only had to deal with life in the twenty-first century eroding mankind's sanity, and he supposed that was enough to deal with as it was. Even without anomalies running amok in the world, human beings were quite capable of messing up their minds without any outside help. Mix in the trauma inherent in realizing reality was a sham, and what did you get? One hell of a challenge for people like Aeslinger.

He put down his briefcase in the spare office they'd assigned him at Site-103, and rubbed his eyes. He'd been awake for the entire flight over here, his body once again refusing to catch the sleep he so desperately needed. It always did that on long flights, stubbornly refusing to give in to exhaustion. And when he did doze off, he'd be woken by a cough, or someone talking. It was infuriating, but he refused to medicate himself for something like this. He saved pharmaceuticals for when it *really* mattered.

"Coffee," he muttered and went back out to get some from one of the machines in the hall.

When he came back, someone was sitting in the office chair opposite the desk. He was in his mid-forties, impeccably dressed in what looked like an expensive dark suit. He looked like he meant business, and not the "Do you sometimes find yourself in a bind because you don't have enough containers for your leftovers, ma'am?" kind of business.

"Dr. Aeslinger, welcome."

Aeslinger hurriedly put the paper cup down on a nearby filing cabinet and shook hands.

"Thank you. And you are?"

"My name is Dr. Manwell Cutler and I'm a member of the Foundation's Ethics Committee. Perhaps you've heard of us?"

Aeslinger held a straight face and then curtly nodded. "Who hasn't, Dr. Cutler? The shadowy puppet masters of the Foundation; those who ultimately control all things in this organization, from the procedures and guidelines we use to the quality and strength of the coffee-flavored water that I just got for myself. So to speak."

Cutler raised an eyebrow, but Aeslinger couldn't determine whether it was because he was puzzled or amused. Perhaps both.

"Well, that is certainly one way of looking at it. But no, they don't control everything. In fact, we prefer that the Foundation regulate itself as much as possible. However, there are some times when we need to assert some control. This is one of them."

Now it was Daniel's turn to raise his eyebrow ever so slightly.

"Oh? And is this then where you fill me in on the real reason I'm here?"

He walked over to the chair behind the desk and sat down. Motioning at the other office chair, he said: "Please, sit down."

Cutler took his seat again and smiled. "Thank you. And yes, that is exactly what I'm going to do. See, while you are here to do a psychological evaluation of certain members of staff here at Site-103, I'm afraid the plural has become singular."

"Singular?" Aeslinger said and took a sip of his coffee. "Ow!" he exclaimed and hurriedly put the cup down again. "I keep forgetting these machines serve this stuff piping hot at one Site and lukewarm at others. Dammit."

Cutler waited patiently until Aeslinger had finished fussing with his coffee cup.

"Yes. We're flying in Tennison tomorrow. He'll be taking the personnel you were scheduled to see. You, on the other hand, will get to concentrate on one individual."

"Oh?" Aeslinger perked up. This reeked of a challenge. "Who is it? He must be either a wreck, or very important to you."

Cutler folded his hands on his knees and smiled. It was not unlike seeing a shark bare its teeth.

"What apt characterizations, Dr. Aeslinger. Perhaps he's both. Regardless, you'll be meeting him in…" Cutler said and looked at his watch, "…approximately 44 minutes."

Daniel sighed. A challenge it might be, but it was also once again a change of plans. He wasn't good with changing plans; it meant actively working at staying alert, keeping his mind focused to deal with it. Even now he could feel his brain racing to recalculate how the day would go, like a car's navigation system frantically trying to get him back on the highway after he'd taken a detour through Weirdsville USA, famous for its three-headed cows and spontaneously combusting chick … He shook his head to clear it. Cutler was watching him with a faint air of amusement that instantly and firmly assigned him a bunk bed in Aeslinger's Camp Do Not Like.

"So, might I be allowed to know *who* I'm going to be evaluating then?" he ventured, trying to inject some sense of antagonism into his voice.

"But of course, Dr. Aeslinger. I'm sure that would be the very minimum courtesy you deserve."

There was an uncomfortable silence.

"And the winner is?" Daniel ventured, now actually annoyed.

"We'll call him Bill."

"So that's not his real name."

"Does it matter?"

"It does to me, Dr. Cutler. Someone's name does have *some* power, you know."

Cutler laughed. "I suppose it would to a psychologist. Bill will do for now, Dr. Aeslinger. Remember what happened to the cat."

"The cat? What cat? Am I missing something?"

"It would seem so. Curiosity killed the cat?"

"Oh. A proverb. Sorry. Sometimes these things go right over my head."

"Yes. Apparently." Cutler shook his head. "Well, I won't keep you any longer. I suppose you'll want to do some prep. You will find most of what you need to know in the e-mail you've just received."

"I don't have any new…"

A ping sounded from Aeslinger's mobile, indicating a new message.

"Break a leg, Daniel," Cutler said smugly and walked to the door. He stopped when Aeslinger called after him.

"You know, 'Dr. Cutler', if you're going to pretend you're on the Ethics Committee, please try to keep your pronouns straight."

Cutler turned back to Aeslinger.

"Sorry?"

"You said 'they' don't rule everything. I can't say I met a member of the O5 Council before, but I can say I don't really like the way you people do things."

"And what makes you assume I have anything to do with the Council and didn't just innocently use the wrong pronoun?" the parry came.

"No one on the Foundation's payroll could afford a Brioni suit unless they owned said payroll. Try blending in a little more next time. But then, with your latent narcissism, that's going to be hard, isn't it?"

"Touché, Dr. Aeslinger. You are as observant as they assured me you would be. Try to put that to good use, will you? You'd be doing us a favor."

He reached behind him for the door and nodded. Then he was gone.

Daniel Horatio Aeslinger desperately longed for a clean shirt. He also considered a dose of amnestics and a job as a small-town psychologist in Alaska. The bears were undoubtedly better company than his colleagues.

Sometimes, you make mistakes...

So it was just all three now, me and the Moeller twins. Everyone left after the fiasco that was our last play. Ok, it was shit. Still. Money was running low, same for the dope. The room's a mess, seen too many parties and too little cleaning. I'm drinking one of our last beers with Ulrike, Einstürzende Neubauten blaring from the boombox does nothing to break the gloom.

“Sometimes you make mistakes”, she says as always, in her perennial monotone, “sometimes mistakes make you.”

Just another night with no future.

That's when Ute comes skipping home with another of her hare-brained schemes.

“Puppet show, work for three, paying well."

"Where did you even hear about that?"

"Not telling, just sign up."

"Puppets, seriously?"

"You want that next hit or not?"

"Fuck you."

"You know you want to…”

That's when I cave in. They both fucking know the best way to get me to agree to anything is bringing up their lesbian-threesome-cum-incest bullshit again, i'm not that kind of girl. Anything to make them shut up about that. Assholes, both of them, but likeable assholes. And we do need the money. Just not like that. Puppets, shit, I hate kids.

So we show up there the next evening. Surprisingly, the gig's legit. At least the place is. Nicer than I expected too, well, depends on whose idea of nice, I guess, old industrial hangar, painted bits of machinery lying around. Why the hell is everything painted pink, though…
Bleachers outside, not kids sized, great. Not what I expected. Still feels strange that I've never heard of that place before.

So, I'm just sitting there in the car, waiting, wondering what's behind those doors. Ute's just fooling around with her sister as usual, pointless to pry for more from her anyway. Not as if waiting for nothing wasn't my standard mode. The night's cold, a cloudy sky makes it dark as soot.
I can't really remember last time I saw the light of day.

The woman in charge finally shows up with her troupe. Ok, so from her clothes, I can totally put a face on all that pink. She'd stand out anywhere but the others are so bland I'll probably never match a name to their face. Actually, they might as well be faceless, I don't give a flying fuck. Pink is twitchy but seems friendly, or the other way around. In a hurry too. Show's on Saturday, can't even remember which day of the week is now. At last, she unlocks that door.

Yeah, puppets, carnival giants actually, papier maché and plaster, kind of ugly and crude but nothing I haven't seen before. Costumes, knick-knacks and tryhard sculptures against the walls. A lot of that is obviously just gathering dust. But the abomination in the middle makes me want to back out of that deal. Motherfucking headless, three metres tall, neon pink pony. On rusty wheels.
Ute's giggling, Ulrike's yawning. I'm just sweating. I mean, our shows never were tasty but that takes the cake. No way this is fucking happening. I totally want out but there's no backing out now, is there?

The pink lady doesn't seem to care for introductions, I guess Ute took care of that, I'd rather not know what she said. Not one for small talk either.

"The twins will push the float. You're short and thin, you'll fit in the head."

She points at a broken thing hanging from the wall. A skeletal horse head, way too large to be real, polished white wood?, with a long fuchsia mane, cracked deer antlers and tinfoil earmuffs, a pink megaphone for a mouth, rawhide bellows for a neck. It's just a bit of shame, nobody will see my face at least. That thing literally stinks like rotting meat, though.

So there isn't anything more to it for us, the twins roll that thing towards the bleachers, I repeat the lines she feeds me through HF. The troupe silently dances around the pony, circling it slowly with a perfectly ridiculous solemnity which makes the whole thing disquieting.

Going back to the squat, we stop at a dive to get our feed of music, alcohol, people and drugs. Place is crappy but it's like a second home. Or a second not-a-real-home. Anyway, feels like an oasis after going through that desiccated pantomime. Ulrike's busy kissing her sister, but her eyes don't leave me. Will they ever stop? We hit the sacks right before dawn. Just hoping for a bit of nightmare free sleep, my life's enough in that department.

Back to rehearsing. I don't even know what's there to rehearse. Everything is so basic and Pink keeps feeding me her lines so it's not like I might forget them. Though, I'm not even sure they're the same as yesterday, or the day before. They feel new, but I can't remember what they'd replace. As if they actively resisted remembrance.

Doesn't matter. I just fucking wish it stopped raining. Two days to go and we're out of this gig. Back at our pad, the cot feels cold and I have a splitting headache. I hope I didn't catch anything nasty from staying inside that thing. It sure doesn't feel or smell like it's seen regular cleanings.

So this is the day. Not a hint of stage fright. No excitement either. Pink is the same terse. The dancers move like clockwork around the hangar. No audience yet when we arrived, I wonder who's going to pay for that. Or even watch for free. At this point, I don't even mind playing for the bleachers as long as I get paid.

Silence.

Pink strikes her trois coups. The door rumbles open. I can't see anything below but I hear Ute's muffled laugh. I can hardly see either through the floodlights. There is an audience, though. Masked, grey, stuffy silhouettes, hints of gleaming jewelry. Whispers and polite laughs.

The twins push the monster, always short of reaching the slowly moving yellow spotlight. The puppets circle us like apathetic vultures, dancing to the slow, slow whine of the rusty wheels. The lines keep coming, I am but a mouthpiece. The audience shows no reaction to anything but I don't care. This is so sluggish it's excruciating. I can hear Ute distorting them into something even more ridiculous, if anything can be more ludicrous than that mechanical masquerade. Unprofessional but not unexpected from her. She keeps getting louder. And lewder.

Oh, fuck that, at this point, I'm sure Pink's furious and we're not getting paid anyway. I'll just repeat whatever Ute's drug-addled brain comes up with next.

"Here we come in solemn union," Pink whispers through the pony's speaker.

"The Moeller twins are the best kissers this side of Berlin," Ute and I answer. No reaction from the audience.

"Held together by the ties that bind."

"When I'm done with this, I'm taking the knot."

We're almost done, the spotlight has stopped, a few seconds more, we'll enter it, the dancers will converge to the float and we're heading home.

"We belong to you, now and always."

"My muff belongs to Ute Moeller!"

Ulrike's not letting the last word escape her,
"Let us forever be made and unmade."

"Sometimes you make mistakes, sometimes mistakes make

you.”

Berlin's cool night sky for curtain. The audience stops whispering, there's a low, brown buzz getting louder in the air. Then silence punches me in the gut. Pangs of red. Then nothingness. All is silence. The audience is gone. So are the dancers. Pink helps me get out of her contraption and quietly takes my hand. She leads me back to the hangar and I'm too dazed to react. The twins follow, uncharacteristically silent.

The hangar feels gloomier tonight, like something's missing. Actually, the fluorescent tubes aren't buzzing anymore, so maybe it's just that. Pink still won't let go of my hand. She shows me to her digs under the rafters, I just follow, I don't feel in charge of anything anymore… No chairs, no bed either. Rugs, pillows, an eye-wrenching pink nest, the air’s heavy with the musty smell of dried roses…

I prop myself in a corner, she puts on a record on a gramophone but no music plays. She shows me a comic she's been reading, mythological stuff, but unfamiliar, a decaying city with a faceless, almighty ruler, not truly malevolent but preoccupied about keeping the citizens from leaving the walls above all else. I point to her how absurd the predicament of his worshippers is, she just shrugs.

She's pushing closer, spooning me. I'm beginning to feel truly uncomfortable… I bluster apologies and show myself out. The hangar’s empty. No trace of the twins. How long did I stay up there? And where did they run? I have the motherfucking keys. Probably shagging somewhere outside.

Car’s still there. I take a look round the bushes, under the bleachers. No one. Everything's deathly silent. Might as well check the road. There's a black van parked, wasn't there earlier. Door swings open. Some guy in black rolls out and lines me up with a rifle.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.
Wait. I've seen this guy before.
Where? Can't place that face for a second.

I know. In a car's vanity mirror. Memories flood. I can hear the sound

of our performance. Wait, I'm that guy? I'm going insane, that bloody fucking doesn't make any sense. I can hear him thinking. Something about stopping senseless slaughter, orders or not. He's pissed at the woman sitted next to him, looks like a mean, cold, old bitch, doesn't move a finger, she's the spider to him. That's bullshit, I'm dreaming all this, it's im-fucking-possible.

A thump and a sharp pain bring me back. I turn away and start running. There's a dart sticking from my side. I rip it out and stumble towards the hangar.

I hear him calling from ahead of me. “Lock her up, I'm getting the others.”

I hear another door opening, footsteps behind me. I'm feeling woozy. I turn back, it's that woman. No way she's fucking real. I want to wake up. There's a hole in the concrete fence ahead. Pretty sure that wasn't there before. I slip through and fly towards the hangar. Literally. When the fuck did I learn how to fly? No time to think, can't think straight anyway.

Footsteps have stopped, I look back, no hole. Gunfire. Everything's out of focus. I make a sharp turn and head towards the door. He's leaning over the twins. They can't be dead. They just can't be dead. I can't feel my body. The light is hurting my eyes. Fade to grey.

I finally wake up from that nightmare. Except, this isn't the squat. Way too clean. Dull metal walls. I'd try to get up but I'm strapped to the bed. Surgical light blinding me. Is this a hospital? Noone’s here to answer. I scream. And wait. And scream. I'm dazed and hungry. The door finally opens. I didn't expect to see that face again, or rather I didn't want to… Except he's wearing orange, not black.

Questions bustle and clash through my head but only one comes out.

“Are they alive?"

"I'm afraid not. I can't tell you more and you probably wouldn't understand. Maybe it was a mistake. Do you know what she told me? - Sometimes you make mistakes, sometimes mistakes make

you. - It feels like a lifetime ago. Only nine months. Before you ask, you won't see what you birthed. It's locked up in a box with two like it. Permanently, I think. It's neutralised, like everything else, anyway. I'm not sure why you lived. The other two died before term. You're the last instance alive. The spider wants to close that file and move on. You're to be decommissioned, I came to pick you up."

I don't dig half of that. Decommissioned? What the fuck?
The guy in black, orange, whatever, is now holding a pistol. He looks as surprised as I am.

"I'm not supposed to have one of those. Maybe it's for the best."

He unties me, says he's sorry for everything, tells me not to look. There's heavy, heavy silence. I can't take my eyes off that gun. He lifts it, shoves the barrel down his mouth, shoots, collapses.

I can't even scream anymore. I'm just standing there. The deafening tritone of a siren shakes me up. Can't wait to see who'll respond to that alarm. I fly out of the room, into an immense hallway lined with doors just like the one I exited. I hear shouts down the hall. The spider is the next thing I see. She grabs me, asks me where I think I'm going, tells me I wasted two years of her life by bearing a perfectly non-anomalous plastic toy. Pink. With a fuchsia mane. She mumbles something about a catheter, says that I'm to be terminated and to wait here for the guards. She never seems to stop, I can't take it anymore. I put my hands around her neck. She vanishes in a puff of pink glitter.

The walls around me are shaking, crumbling. I fly as fast as I can, the hallway never seems to end. The doors disgorge their content in a cacophonic pandemonium. I finally reach a hub of sorts. Exit's blocked by a blast door. I glide to the roof and punch through it. There's no other side, only nothingness, stars shimmering in the darkness as far as the eye can see. I fly towards the door and through it.

I don't know how I got back to the squat. The streets are eerily empty and silent. Nothing of this can be real. I don't know when I fell asleep and started dreaming. I'll climb the stairs, and I'll have a beer with the twins. But there's no squat. The rooms are bare and

decaying, dust and rubble. Ulrike's graffiti are gone. So is the boombox, blasted silence. Not a trace of any of us. I can't believe that I couldn't save them, that they'll never be here when me again. Or maybe, maybe they never were in the first place and none of this is real. None of us ever were. All that is is a hole burnt through a mourner's veil and there's no living flesh to be seen through that hole. Outside, the void has too many stars and I am but one of them.

All is silence.

Just a Word to Me

Mary-Ann Lewitt stood on the sidewalk outside the church. Mass had just let out, and so the congregation was dispersing out towards the parking lot, with a few people remaining to talk in the vestibule: Mary-Ann kept watching the street. The world felt very far away then, under the clear, cold sky of March.

There was another bluster of wind. Mary-Ann bunched her shoulders and drove her hands deeper inside the pockets of her black sweatshirt. Maybe it would be better to go back inside where it was warmer. But then they might get here while she was using the bathroom or something and it'd be one of those times where neither person could find the other and it'd just be awkward. She'd stay outside, then.

Ten o'clock, that's what they'd said on the phone. Someone would be around to pick her up at ten. Probably a few minutes after ten by now: traffic must have gotten in the way.

And here she was: waiting for a ride from a stranger in the cold, with heaven and hell in equal measure on the other side of the trip.

Part of her mind still balked at all of this, all of this stuff with the Initiative. It hadn't been nearly as hard to believe as it should have been, she thought in retrospect. Perhaps that was what made that little part of her mind question it all: Everything was too believable. It all made too much sense. Or at least, it made the right amount of sense for someone who had little more in her life than a cat and a little bit of faith. It made enough sense that she wanted a part of it, urged on by the itch in her soul, bruised as it was. She had spent the last night memorizing exorcism rituals and conjugating Latin verbs and reviewing the categorization of the orders of spirits.

All this did little to undo the knot of unease in her stomach. Unease at what was to come, and unease at what was behind her. Today would decide if she would be fit to join the Shepherds, and Mary-

Ann had been second-guessing herself all morning. Book knowledge was one thing, practical exercises another: Mary-Ann had no doubts with either of those. The doubt that weighed her spirit down and twisted up her gut didn't feel very holy, and that twisted up her gut. The Shepherds needed good people, and there were far better people in the world than Mary-Ann Lewitt.

She could still bow out. They gave her that option: Say the word and be returned to your old life. They'd find someone else, someone better, someone who didn't sit in the back pew and had fewer "ums" and "uhs" in her prayers.

No…no, she'd stay. She already agreed to this, already decided that she wanted to do more. She tamped down her doubting mind and barred the door. No. She'd stick through it.

Time passed. The remnants of the congregation had gone, and Mary-Ann was well and truly alone. She checked her watch. Seventeen after ten. Should she call? Check to make sure nothing had changed? Ten-twenty, she'd give them until ten-twenty. Then she'd call.

At 10:19, a plain red sedan pulled up to the curb. The engine shut off, and a man stepped out. He was of average height and build, a few inches taller than Mary-Ann. Late thirties, Middle-Eastern. His hair was buzzed down, very recently by the looks of it, which made his ears stick out a bit. Neatly-trimmed beard. He was wearing a blue polo shirt and khakis.

"Hello!" He walked around the car and stepped onto the sidewalk. "Are you Mary-Ann Lewitt?" He had an accent, some fusion of the Middle-East and British.

"Yeah." Mary-Ann nodded. "Yeah, that's me."

"Salah Zairi." He smiled and held out a hand. "Nice to meet you."

"I'm really sorry that you had to come and pick me up, I would have just taken a bus-"

Salah waved his hand.

“It’s no trouble at all. I’ve been needing to go back to the chapterhouse for a while now anyway.” He walked back around to the other side of the car. “Though it is something of a trip, we should probably be going if we want to be reasonable with time.”

“Right.”

Mary-Ann opened the door and got inside the car.

—

Some time later, the little red sedan pulled out of the toll booth onto the interstate.

“Do you mind if I turn on the radio?” Salah asked. It was the first thing that had been said since they had left the church.

“No, it’s cool.”

He hit the dial. Smooth jazz crackled out of the speakers.

“Ah, come on now, work!” He slapped the dashboard and the sound cleared up. “There we go. If you want to change it, just go ahead.”

“Gotcha.”

There was a pause. Mary-Ann watched a field filled with cows speed by outside the window.

“Are you originally from around here, Mary-Ann?”

“Hm? Ah, yeah, I’m a local. You?”

“Well, I was born in Pakistan, then I moved to Birmingham, then I moved here. So a local twice removed.”

It explained the accent, Mary-Ann thought.

“Ah. Never been to England.”

“The Queen’s Jubilee is this year, always a good excuse.”

“And the Olympics.”

“Bah. Bread and circuses, the lot of it. At the very least it will pull the crowds away from the things really worth seeing.”

Mary-Ann felt herself smile at that. The knot loosened a bit, the awkward, lonely feeling dissipated a little bit. Mary-Ann decided to keep the small talk going. It felt good to small talk.

“So…how long have you been working for the Initiative?”

“Fourteen years.”

“Are you in a branch, or do you just give rides to people?”

Salah chuckled.

“I’m with the Shepherds, though that does involve a lot of driving around, all things considered.”

A co-worker, then. Potentially.

“Guess you’ve seen a lot, then.”

“There’s always more to see. We all run out of time long before God runs out of wonders.”

“Mmm. How’d you get involved?”

“A friend I met in university.”

“I just got the phone call. And, you know, it’s weird, how all of this makes sense. Like, when I was told over the phone ‘we are secretly a secret organization and we want to hire you to shoot demons in the face’, I didn’t even *blink*. You’d think I would be all ‘I can’t even handle the revelation’, but the first thing I said was ‘okay, how much does it pay’.”

“You’re good at adapting to things.”

“I think it was more ‘I’m broke and I don’t want to eat instant ramen anymore’.”

Salah laughed, and it was not a small laugh either. It was a big,

space-filling laugh.

“You have no idea how refreshing it is to hear something honest that after all the false piety and ‘smite the heathens’ we often get. Wanting some fresh food in the cupboard is not a bad reason at all for joining.”

“You get a lot of those types?”

“Regrettably. The nuts get shunted off into the Wolves where they can be put on a leash. The others, well, sometimes they take a bit of humility, sometimes they don’t. Personally, I’d kick them back out on the street. Half of being a Shepherd is service to others, and you can’t serve people if you’re constantly reminding them of how holy you are in comparison.”

“Mmm.” The knot tightened itself again around the puckered emptiness inside Mary-Ann. These were good people, if they were anything like Salah, truly good people, and while she heard the little voice in her telling her it was okay, even though she *believed*, she didn’t feel it. The past could be forgiven, but the weight still had to be carried. Mary-Ann felt that weight, that weight that anchored her in that empty space, the weight that kept the world far away. The weight that dragged her down into the empty darkness, where there were no friends, where there was no home, where one reached for God because there was nothing left, and yet even God felt far away.

And so she sought God, and carried the weight.

"Something wrong?"

“No, I’m okay. Just a bit jittery about the test.”

“Nonsense. You’re a Shepherd. You’ll do fine.”

“I haven’t even taken the test yet.”

“And I haven’t been wrong yet. Except that one time. And that other time. And then there was the incident with- no, forget that one. I have a good C average. C-plus.”

“Oh shut up.”

Mary-Ann paused for a bit. Had she really just said that? She had. He was laughing again. Less than an hour in the car and he was already acting like they were close friends. Somewhere, Mary-Ann felt a little light in the darkness. A friend.

The laugh petered out.

“Mary-Ann…”

“Yeah?”

“Keep your chin up. You’ve got this.”

"Thanks, Salah."

« Hub »

Just Another Nobody

It was that soft twilight hour. The sun had fallen beneath the sea, signaling the youth on the beach that the time was right. The bonfire was lit and the music played. They laughed and danced. Celebrating their life. Their living.

There was one who wasn't quite so animated. He sat on the beach, downing cheap alcohol. And though he participated, he was still somewhat to himself. Somewhat distant.

The truth was Jefferey Bright was upset. Jeff had recently learned that his significant other no longer thought of their relationship as significant. Jeff was angry at her. He felt betrayed. A bit of self-reflection, and Jeff would have realized that he was to blame for their distance. Still, he was young and foolish, and never had been much for self-reflection.

His attendance here had been an attempt to… well it had been an attempt to do something. Jeff had not actually planned this very well. He wasn't sure if his presence here was an attempt to win her back, find another girl, or something else entirely.

As it was, Jeff was not having much success executing his plan (if one could call his confused thoughts "plans"). The "significant" other had long left the party, failing to notice that Jeff was even present. And so now he sat, too distracted by thoughts of his former companion to fully involve himself in the revelry.

It was not long after the moon rose that Jeff was approached by a stranger. Like Jeff, this stranger was dressed in a T-shirt and swim trunks. Like Jeff, this stranger appeared to be another mid-twenties college-type. Like Jeff, he was drinking from a can of cheep beer.

"Hey, bro, you look like you need a drink." The smiling stranger tossed an unopened can to Jeff. "You're Jeff, right?"

Jeff looked up morosely, but accepted the can. "Yeah, how'd you know that?"

The stranger sat down, and took a deep swig from his drink. "Believe it or not, I worked with your dad a bit. Had an internship with the feds years back. Guessed who you were, you look just like him. Small world, huh?"

Jeff nodded. "Yeah. Guess so."

"We were some of the only guys that would eat at the cafeteria there, so we got to talking a lot. I remember he was always going on about this old car he was fixing up. You know whatever came of that?"

At that, Jeff perked up a bit. The nostalgia of childhood memories helped wash away his relationship troubles. The alcohol certainly helped as well. "Yeah, dad and I were working on that car for years. I think he might have finished it a while back. I dunno, I haven't really heard from him since I moved out here and he got promoted into Top Secret or whatever."

"I know what you mean. Hard enough to keep up with the family, and that Men in Black shit doesn't help, does it?"

"Yeah. Last I heard, he's working on some thing in Switzerland. You know, they won't even let me see him anymore. I'm only allowed to talk to him through emails. Been that way for years. And the worst thing is, he won't even tell me why. Can't tell me, I guess. If this keeps up, I don't really see how…" Jeff trailed off, staring into the distance.

The stranger put a supportive hand on Jeff's shoulder. "Man, that sucks. Have you ever thought about trying to see him? Just surprise him? I mean, screw the feds. They shouldn't be able to pull shit like that."

"Yeah, I've thought about it. I can't, really. Mostly, I just don't have the money. Last time I checked, flights to Switzerland were almost two grand. And on top of that, I'd have to get a train or something to get to Lausanne, since you can't just fly there. An even then, once I

get there, I wouldn't know where to start looking."

The stranger smiled and finished his beer. "Yeah, that's tough. Anyway, looks like I'm gonna need another one of these worthless beers. I hate things that don't work the way they're suppose to. I mean, I'm not even feeling a buzz. You want one too?"

Jeff returned the smile. "Yeah, I guess so. I wish Steve was willing to shell out more for something good."

The two continued to talk about beer and college and life for some time. As the party eventually drew to a close, Jeff and the stranger parted ways. Once on his own, Jeff attempted to remember the strangers name, but he could not recall it.

Actually, the entire conversation left him with an odd feeling. Perhaps if his mind was more clear, he would have understood why he felt that way. That stranger was just so normal, so *average*, that it was hard to really keep his mind focused on him. Even thinking back now, not long after, it was hard to remember what he had said.

As Jeff collapsed into his bed, he cleared his mind of these thoughts. After all, why bother worrying about some stranger on the beach and what he said? After all, he was just another college guy. Just another party-goer. Just another nobody.

The small coffee shop was quite busy, despite the early time of morning. Several people were already up, attempting to acquire that wonderful liquid that would make their daily tasks much more bearable.

In a small table to herself, a well dressed woman nursed her cup and watched the people moving through the street. It gave her some comfort, to be alone in a crowd. It made her troubles seem quite small. The weight that she was forced to bear, the pressures of her career, all seemed a touch more endurable.

She was shaken out of her thoughts when a stranger approached. Offering a slight smile, the new arrival pointed to an empty seat at the woman's table. "Pardon me, miss. Is this seat taken? May I sit

down?"

This person was also a sharply dressed woman in business attire. The stranger appeared to be a native Swiss, and her relaxed posture showed that she was comfortable and familiar with her surroundings. However, something about the stranger seemed off. As part of her employment, the woman had been trained to notice these types of oddities. After a few moments, the woman's eyes grew wide and her posture tensed. She stammered, "Oh no, it's you. I haven't even finished my coffee yet."

The stranger sat down anyway. "Well, then. I suppose I'll take that as a yes. It seems that we have no need for pretenses, Director Ottmar."

The director nodded slowly. "Yes, it seems so." She couldn't help but squirm a bit. She tried to think of how to best approach the situation, but her thoughts were blank. It did not help that she had not been sleeping well recently. The stranger sampled her own beverage, her eyes never leaving the director's.

Finally the director sighed, and went still. "I suppose I should call this in, but I don't feel there is really much point. I fail to see how it could have an effect. By the time a response is determined, I'm sure that you will have already accomplished what you came here to do."

The stranger sipped from her coffee. "Well said. However, you sounded unnecessarily fatalistic. I'm not here to harm you, or even antagonize your organization. I simply seek information."

Ottmar nodded. The stranger's words were not much of a relief. "So, what exactly is it that you are seeking?"

After a brief pause for coffee, the stranger replied, "I'm looking for Dr. Bright. I already know that he is here in this city, but I don't wish to waste time searching the whole of Lausanne myself. And, as the Regional Director, I'm sure that you can assist me in this matter."

Director Ottmar scowled, deep lines consuming her normally stern expression. The sarcasm almost dripped from her voice, "Right. I suppose I should just cooperate and make everything easier on

myself? Tell you everything you want to know?"

"Again, so fatalistic. The short answer is yes," the stranger stared into the director's eyes. "I only wish to talk with the esteemed Doctor. For what it's worth, I can promise that no one will come to harm because of this."

The director was the first to break eye contact. She sighed. "So, in essence, I can tell you how to find him, or force you to seek him out yourself. I notice that both of those choices that you present end with the same result. So, why would I not inconvenience you? I do not see any reason why I should cooperate."

"As you said, I will find him eventually." The stranger paused, carefully considering her next words before continuing, "And, unfortunately, the longer I am here, the more likely I will become an inconvenience to you. You have been Director for many years, yes? And sterling record as well. I would hate to be the one that would cause you undue distress, Ms Ottmar."

"So, now you choose to threaten me?"

"Not a threat, Director. I cannot abandon the path on which I am set. I therefore ask that you be the one to step aside." The stranger took a long drink from her now lukewarm beverage. "I only ask you to wash your hands of this. Allow your superiors to decide matters, as is your normal procedure when dealing with me. Director, you must make so many difficult moral decisions as part of your daily work. I am simply asking you to not answer this one. Do not burden yourself with this choice, when you already have so many worries. Tell me what I would like to know."

The Director hesitated, but she eventually gave way. She told the stranger where Dr. Bright could be found. After the strange woman left, the Director called and reported the incident to her superiors. Logically, she should feel upset after this. In some way, she had given surrendered when she had promised herself long ago that she never would. She should feel devastated. On the contrary, Director Ottmar felt relieved, like a weight she did not realize was present had been lifted. Let her superiors handle this one. She still had to finish her coffee.

The noon day sun was radiant, reflected shimmering in the waters of Lake Geneva. Several pedestrians were milling about, enjoying the feel of the weather and the sights of the great city.

A man sat on a park bench, looking out over the water. Though he was only middle-age, his eyes were the eyes of an old man. Eyes that had seen too much. Suffered too much. This time was the only time he could truly rest, as the night is no sanctuary for those that cannot sleep. This man had used many names, but the only true name was Dr. Jack Bright.

Another man sat down on the bench next to Dr. Bright. Like Bright, he was dressed in a suit and tie. Like Bright, he seemed far older than his appearance suggested. Like Bright, his eyes were eyes that had seen much suffering. They sat in silence for a time.

It was Dr. Bright who broke the silence. "Well, to what do I owe the pleasure?"

The stranger grinned, and couldn't quite suppress the chuckle underneath his words. "Oh come on now, Jack. No need to be a sarcastic ass. I'm just here to talk."

"Oh really? What could we possibly have to talk about?"

"Lots of things, actually." The stranger shrugged, "I mean, after all, we're sort of in the same business. Don't you think comparing notes could do some good?"

Bright scowled. "Look, I consider myself pretty good at being able to bullshit someone, so I know when someone's giving the runaround to me. Let's just cut the crap, OK? I've only got twenty minutes left in my lunch break."

The stranger nodded, serene and relaxed. "Really, I wasn't just screwing with you. I've noticed a lot of similarities between us. I was hoping that cooperation could help both of us with our… *problems*.

Bright barked out a harsh laugh. "You and me similar? I don't see it. What do we possibly have that is similar?"

The stranger's expression became sullen. The mirth gone from his words, he whispered, "We are both trapped, Dr. Bright."

At that, Dr. Bright turned to stare at the stranger. His hand found itself caressing the amulet he wore underneath his shirt.

After only a moment, the stranger's former expression and demeanor returned. He grinned. "I figured that would get you to listen. I mean think about it. We both have rather varying identities. We both pass on our qualities to our successors. Most importantly, we are both suffering from anomalous conditions we cannot seem to break."

"Sounds to me like a whole bunch of coincidences. Seems like you're stretching things a bit to make those connections."

The stranger sighed. "Maybe. I admit I have my share of logical and emotional failings. I'm not perfect. However, I do feel there is a possible connection. Is that not worth exploring? Hell, worst case scenario is we don't find out anything, which puts us exactly where we are now."

Dr. Bright frowned. "OK, you're going to have to explain a bit more. Quit with the whole mystery and riddles thing. What do you mean by connection? And what the hell do you actually expect me to do?"

The stranger stood up, and took a few steps towards the lake. "I'll answer your second question first. I don't expect you to do anything. I honestly don't expect this conversation to have any affect on your life at all. That said, I'd hoping that it does, and would be happy if it did have an impact. I would say the result I most hope for is that we become allies after this encounter."

"As to your first question," the stranger continued, talking over Dr. Bright's scoff, "I'll try to explain in a straightforward way. I think that the origin of your amulet and the origin of me could be related."

The bottom fell out of Dr. Bright's stomach. "So, are you saying that I'm like you? A…?"

The stranger interjected, "An artificial one, perhaps." The stranger

spread his hands, "Or at least an attempt to do so. It's hard to say for certain. After all, how can you really measure the impact your life has had, and compare that result to how things would be if you never existed? Of course, this is all just my personal theories. But, now don't you feel like this might be worth looking into?"

At that, the stranger began walking away. Dr. Bright quickly stood up. "Hold on," he called out. "That's it? You're just going to leave now?"

The stranger looked over his shoulder at the doctor. "I've said what I came here to say. I know that I can't change your opinions. I mean, I literally can't. Whatever happens next, it has to be something you decide. So, I guess I'll just have to wait to see what you will do." The stranger smiled. "If you ever want my help, look for me. You'll know how to find me. After all, we're kindred spirits, you and I."

As the stranger left for good, Dr. Bright sat back down on the bench. He did not return to work after his lunch break. He continued to sit for many hours, his fingers slowly tracing the ridges of the amulet beneath his clothing. Bright stared into the horizon until long after the sun had sank beneath the sea.

Third Date

"There's a bottle on his penis?"

"There's a bottle on his penis," Clef confirmed.

The voice on the other end of the line was silent. Then, with a low exasperated sigh, it asked the one question that any reasonable or not-so-reasonable person could ask in this situation.

"HOW?"

"Beats me. Hey, 'Draki, how the fuck did you manage to get a bottle on your dick anyway?" Clef asked.

"Fuck you," Kondraki grumbled.

"He doesn't say," Clef said into the phone. "Anyway, I was just wondering, is this a regular thing with your Dad? Is there a procedure for this sort of thing? Like, do you guys have a bottle-dick-remover on call or something? Some guy you usually call in this sort of situation?"

"Alto…"

"Look, I figure bottle-dick-remover is kind of like a plumber: you don't want to call someone else if you already know a guy, because the second guy will kind of fuck things up because they won't do it the same way as your usual g— and he just hung up on me. Your son is fucking rude, Ben."

"I swear to God if you don't do something about this now, I will not only kill you, I will make sure it is painful," Kondraki snarled.

"Hey, don't worry about it!" Clef said. "It's no big deal. We'll just get you to Site-69, and we'll have a medic cut that bottle off your dick with what the hell is that fucking noise, it sounds like a fire alarm?"

"It's the fucking fire alarm," Kondraki confirmed.

Clef carefully went to the apartment door and stuck his head out the door. Every door on the floor was open, and all of Kondraki's neighbors were walking out into the hallway, grumbling to themselves as they filed down the hall to the stairs. "Hey," Clef asked. "You know what this is about?"

"Not exactly," an older woman in a blue flower-print nightie said. "I think it might just be a false alar—"

There was a cry of alarm from the end of the hallway as the door to the stairs opened, revealing a cloud of thick white smoke.

"— or not, holy shit!" the old woman cried. "Let's get the hell out of here!"

Clef carefully closed the door and turned to his boyfriend, who had somehow managed to go green with nausea, white with fear, and red with rage all at once. "Your apartment building's on fire," he said, unnecessarily.

Kondraki looked down at the Aquafina bottle on his dick, then over at his apartment door, then back at the windows, and finally back down at his dick. "Leave me to die," he moaned. "Save yourself!"

"Bullshit," Clef replied curtly. "We ride together. We die together. You're coming with me if I have to knock you out and carry you on my back."

"You couldn't knock me out if you tried," Kondraki retorted. "I'll kill you first."

"Oh, there we go again with the killing and the stabbing. God, Ben, you've got such a one-track mind. Just suck it up and throw on a trench coat or something. No one will know."

Kondraki rushed back into his bedroom. There was the sound of some rummaging around in the closet. He came out wearing a black trench coat with a gigantic, tent-shaped bulge in the front at crotch level. "Wow," he said flatly. "This sure did help a lot. No one will notice anything wrong now, yes siree-bob."

"Fuck…" Clef glanced out the door. The smoke was starting to build up a bit, and the last few neighbors were quickly making their way down the stairs, heads lowered and wet rags placed over their faces. "All right," Clef said. "I didn't want to do this… but we have no choice." He took a deep breath. "Where's your pantry?"

"Wow, holy shit," Captain Buchanan said. "That's not great."

The fire was largely contained to a single unit on the northern side of the apartment building, but it was clear from the flames licking the curtains and the lurid orange-red glow that could be seen through the window that this was no mere trash can fire, a fact further evident to the dozens of glum-looking people in night dress standing on the sidewalk nearby. "All right," he said into the radio. "Let's get these bystanders out of the way first. I want…"

Buchanan's voice trailed off.

There were two men walking down the sidewalk, both of them wearing scarves around their heads and wide-brimmed hats. Only scarves around their heads and wide-brimmed hats.

And one other thing.

Water bottles.

Each of the two men in question had a water bottle on the end of their dicks.

Captain Buchanan's radio handset fell from his nerveless fingers. He felt his world collapse inward. The fire, his waiting firefighters, the bystanders standing on the sidewalk… it all fell away, leaving behind only himself, his eyes, and two stark-naked middle aged men merrily walking down the street with hats on their heads, scarves on their faces, and water bottle on their ding-a-lings.

The two men skipped into a car. One of them turned, made eye contact, and shot Captain Buchanan the finger-guns.

The car started up and drove away.

In effect, Nathan, nor Doctor Hart, had exactly expected that the residue would react so violently to the chemicals found in a field testing kit. Neither did they really expect that it would cause a sudden shift in reality, displacing everyone in the van approximately sixteen feet to their immediate left. This left them rolling and careening, at forty miles per hour, across the grassy side of the road, just off the edge of the asphalt. A few of the instruments they had been holding were dropped alongside the road as well, and the van swerved and slowed, driving just off the side of East Lake road. It came to a stop in the median between the two sides of the road, with its crew across the way from it, staring back at it. Doctor Hart was one of the first to pipe up about it.

"Well, we're lucky that it only sent us sideways, not down."

Nathan's head was still swimming after the sudden impact, but everyone else was rising. Most of them had experienced worse in their time in the Mobile Task Force designated Green Thumbs, and, most hadn't been leaning over the foldable stand in the center of the van's seating area, which would have caused a near headfirst impact as Atkinson had experienced. There was a hand offered to him, but he didn't realize it for another few seconds, gripping it shakily.

"What… was that? What are we even dealing with here? It's…"

"—been one Hell of a day," Hart stepped in, nodding at one of the task force members. They made their way back across the road to collect the van. "And I think that's all we're going to need from you for now, Mr. Atkinson." Nathan stood and nodded, trying to get a bearing on where he was again. Reaching into his pocket, he checked his phone for the time. 5:00 PM. "Well, does that mean you'll drive me back around to the building, then?" Nathan asked. The van pulled onto their side of the road, and they piled in while Hart answered in the affirmative.

"So, we amnesticize him?"

"No, no," Hart murmured as he and Jacob trailed behind Nathan as he approached his place of work. "Not yet. We may need him yet."

"Why not just copy his resources, and go? Isn't that usually the protocol?"

Hart rubbed his temples and stopped, motioning for Jacob to look at him. He slid his hands into his pockets. "Do you remember the last researcher who joined us?"

Jacob nodded. "Diario, yeah. I remember the guy. He's gone now though, yeah? Didn't even find his body?"

Hart hummed and shrugged. "No, we never found it. I can't operate this alone, though, and… the task force as it is lacks in some of the knowledge we need to run properly here, without Diario. And I can't go running out with the rest of you anymore. I'm growing older, Jacob."

"So, what? You act like you can just shake his hand and tell him 'Welcome aboard'."

"We shoved him into a van and already showed him the shit we do on a daily basis. What else would I do now? Look at him. He's been more fascinated than scared shitless. Do you remember when you were first recruited, Jacob? From the force?"

Jacob began to meander towards the building. Nathan was long inside by now, and Hart followed. "Yes. Yes, I do, but that was different."

"Was it? You couldn't even handle it at first. We almost passed you by."

"Almost."

Jacob stopped at the front door. "Doc, I'm heading back to the van. Don't be long."

Hart gripped the handle on the door, pulling it open, leaving the other with no promise of being quick.

"Doctor Atkinson?"

Nathan looked up from his desk, almost having finished packing. "Yes? I'm nearly gone, just have a few last things. I assume that I shouldn't be telling anyone about what's going on, yeah? Private investigation or something?"

Hart leaned on the edge of Atkinson's desk, his arms crossed abreast. "Not exactly. But, no, don't tell anyone. We will have enough work suppressing these events as it is. We already had another five incidents with those deer reported this evening. Another team from Gainesville slid down to take care of it. We're a tad sparse on staff in this region." Hart flinched internally. He was, again, spilling too much. He couldn't figure exactly why he was doing so much for Nathan. He had broken protocol already in straight up dumping him in the van and bringing him out, even more so to expose information to him, even if vague. What was it?

"I get you, yeah. Not normal. Why is this happening?"

"We're working on it. We sent back samples to headquarters, we're trying to figure out what it is. We might have seen it before, in Mich—" Hart stopped. That was too much for the uninitiated. "Doctor Atkinson, are you satisfied with your current position in the world?"

"I'm hardly a doctor, and that's a mighty strange question to ask. Are you asking if I'm happy with my compensation? It's not like I have many mouths to feed, so—"

"No. Are you happy, now that you know that there's more out there?"

Nathan stopped. He folded his hands and sat at his desk, leaning back into the chair. He let off a sigh. "I've seen too much for one day. It's still processing for me. It's entirely surreal."

Hart gave the other a pat on the shoulder. "Don't worry, it's much the same how I reacted when I—" He stopped again. That was it. That

was *why*.

"How interested are you in this case?" Hart began again. Nathan shuffled a few more papers as he listened, trying to finish the last of his preparations to leave. "Interested?" he inquired, standing. "Very. I also understand, though, that it's dangerous. I'm not sure how close I want to get to that."

"It gets worse before it gets better," Hart intoned.

Nathan shook his head. "I don't know. What of my current job? My coworkers? Are you asking me if I care to join you? For what, even? You never answered my question. Who *are* you?"

Hart tapped his foot, turning to leave. "I can't tell you that. Not quite yet."

"Are you implying that I'll agree to help you?"

Hart was already halfway out the office. "Maybe. Maybe."

As he left, leaving Nathan in the building, he chuckled. The van was already running, and the horn honked twice as he made his approach. "Just like me, damnit. Just like me," he muttered, albeit not unhappily, as he seated himself in the back.

« Banana Smoothie | Green Thumb Hub | Canola Oil Panic »

Just What We Do

Note: This story is better read after **`A Day at the Call Center`**

Subject: UI-56

From: Special Agent Laura Stanton, Unusual Incident Unit, Los Angeles Office

To: Director McNamara, FBI HQ, Washington D.C

Sir, here is the report for the item we recovered in the raid on Uncle Merl's call center. I have no idea who would buy a piece of shit like that, but apparently this guy has customers- that's how we reached him, after all. So, the item:

UI-56 is a novelty sword made of cheap, recycled metal (mostly aluminum). According to the box we found it in, it's an "Uncle Merl's Durendal Mark III™". There was a pamphlet in the box with it, with some sort of bullshit about what this thing does. I copied it here:

> Are you tired of living in a callous, uncaring modern world? Do you wish to return to the old days of chivalry and honor? Now, with the Durendal Mark III™ , Paladin's Delight (Ultra light! With patented Dragon Grip!)", you can! This handy-dandy, multifunctional tool is everything a true knight could ask for! Features include:
>
> - Defend the meek! With the Durendal Mark III™, no monster is beyond your just might! Guaranteed 100% effectiveness* against all ogres, trolls, orcs, hobgoblins, goblins and unusually large lizards with sharp teeth*!
>
> - Inspire courage and resolve! With the Durendal

Mark III™, every fight becomes an epic last stand! Show your boss you are not going to take his crap anymore, the old fashioned way! Use the included magic words to activate!

- Impress fair maidens! With the sleek style of the Durendal Mark III™, no comely lass is safe from your rugged, knightly charms! Introduce them to your long, hard length of steel, and watch those chastity belts melt away!

- Patented Dragon Grip! Forged in the secret mage-fire of Kromdar, this unique hilt allows for maximum swing power without sacrificing any of the reliability or style!**

*Disclaimer: Any injuries resulting from incorrect use of the Durendal Mark III™ are under the responsibility of the user only. By opening this box, the user waives any right to sue Uncle Merl's Discount Emporium and releases said company of all liability to his/her's medical expenses.

**Replacement hilts are available in gold, silver, black, and hot pink.

We tried doing some tests on the thing before the spooks took it away. Didn't manage much, but that's hardly new. We wouln't have gotten anything at all if it wasn't for the volunteers. I'm adding Dr. Charles' and Dr. Demagne's notes from the lab:

+ Show Test UI-56-1

Researchers: Dr. Charles (reporting), Dr. Demagne

Test subject: Agent Carlson

Test: I placed Agent Carlson in a room with an out-of-order vending machine, gave him UI-56 and told him to buy a drink after speaking the

"magic words" written on the back of the pamphlet (Latin, "Qui utitur hoc pharse est stultus"). The following result was recorded:

Agent Carlson: [inserts coin into the machine] Ah, soon the cool taste of this godly nectar will fill my mouth with heavenly delight!

[The machine does not produce the requested drink]

Agent Carlson: [visibly upset] What's this!? Ye knavish contraption! You shall dispense my drink forthright, and allow me to taste its frosty secrets, or you shall taste my cold steel!

[The threat appears ineffective]

Agent Carlson: So, thou wishest to face my might?! So be it, fiend! This shall be our final confrontation, a battle to shake the very foundations of the Earth, that will bring fear to the gods themselves! I will rip the sky asunder, cleave the ancient mountains like cheese paper! You will taste my wrath! Have at ye!

[Agent Carlson proceeds to attack the vending machine. UI-56 can't penetrate the vending machine, so he uses it as a blunt instrument. After attacking the machine for thirty minutes without results (other than mild denting), Agent Carlson collapses to the floor, exhausted.

Agent Carlson: I… I have failed. My ancestors peer at me from their lordly seats in disapproval and shame. If I cannot have victory, I shall have honorable death! Farewell, my unclaimed drink! My only regret is that I failed to save you from the clutches of this rectangular devil. Loyal sword, serve your master one last time.

[Agnet Carlson removes his shirt and attempts to fall on UI-56. UI-56 fails to penetrate Agent Carlson's skin, leaving him unharmed save for minor bruising. Test concluded. Agent Carlson suffers no lasting effects, other than a self-proclaimed desire for "silk pantaloons".

My hypothesis is that UI-56 posses mild mind-affecting proportions, causing subjects using it to experience trivial disputes as confrontations of the highest importance. UI-56 also seems to cause subjects to speak in what they perceive as medieval-like language, and makes them cocky too. It's a strange one, no doubt.

Dr. Charles

+ Show Test Log UI-56-2

Research personnel: Dr. Charles, Dr. Demagne (reporting)

Test subjects: Agent Ricks (male), Agent Chan (female)

Test: In an attempt to verify UI-56's influence over women, I instructed Agent Ricks (who has a notably poor vocabulary) to hold the sword and speak the words, then introduced him to Agent Chan. The following result was recorded:

Agent Ricks: Do my eyes misguide my, or do I see an extra fine maiden in this here chamber?

Agent Chan: What is he talking about?

Agent Ricks: Come now, don't be shy! Yon bitch knows this knight has all the right gear!

Agent Chan: Did you just call me a bitch!?

Agent Ricks No need to be upset, my petite kumquat. Come, there is a great water serpent in my breeches, and it requires your attention!

[Agent Chan then grappled with Agent Ricks and removed UI-56 from his grasp. She attempted to use UI-56 to harm Agent Ricks in a highly inappropriate manner (in my humble opinion), before security personnel intervened. UI-56 was returned to storage, Agent Chan was reprimanded, and Agent Ricks was escorted to the infirmary]

I really don't know what to tell you about this one, Laura. It's a sword that makes you act like a pseudo-medieval asshole, as far as I can tell. Where do you even get this stuff?

Dr. Demagne.

We also found a coupon with with the pamphlet and UI-56, saying it was for a free tutorial tape. We sent for one and it arrived a few days later, starring no other than two of the clowns we captured during the raid. The spooks came and took that too, but I did manage to write a transcription of it beforehand:

+ Show Recorded Log

[Camera opens to what appears to be a mail room. A figure enters the frame, wearing long robes, a pointed hat, and a flower-patterned tie. That's Daniel Monroe, though he likes to be called Danerius. He claims to be a Luxomancer, though I have no idea what that's supposed to mean]

Dan: Greetings, aspiring knights! Today, I, Danerius the Magnificent, will be your guide to the realm of the arcane! Let us begin. [to someone off-camera] minion, bring forth the Sword!

[He's talking to Edmund Sami, a low level manager who works at tech support at Merl's. Strange guy, always wears that mask on his face]

Sami: [off-camera] Who the hell are you calling a minion, Dan? I'm technically your superior!

Dan: Excuse me for a moment, dear sirs. [walks off-camera] Sami, Mr. Jamu placed me in charge of making the video, obviously because he knows which one of us is the real wizard around here!

Sami: Oh, don't you dare! You know the only reason Jamu did that was to spite me! Some cousin, he is. Now get back on camera and let's get this over with!

Dan: Not until you admit I'm the the one in charge.

Sami: If I do that, you'll never let me hear the end of it. No deal.

Dan: Fine, I guess I'll just have to tell Mr. Jamu you're being uncooperative. And that you haven't finished your quarterly performance report, minion.

Sami: That's it, you dimwit Luxomancer, your ass is mine!

[you can hear a scuffle occurring off-camera]

Dan: Not the beard! Not the beard!

Sami: Yes the beard!

[The camera is knocked over. Video feed stops, audio continues]

Dan: Hmm. This didn't go well.

Sami: You better not tell Jamu anything about this!

Dan: No way! He'll blame me for ruining the tape!

Sami: Who the hell cares, Dan? No one is ever going to actually order the bloody thing. Let's just say we're done and get lunch. I think it's pizza day.

Dan: Pizza? Endorius take this accursed tape to the leaky Stygian Abyss then.

Sami: What?

Dan: Fuck it, lets eat.

<End Log>

Anyway, that's all we have left from the raid. The spooks took everything else. I know I should be angry, but this is far more than we usually get. I wonder why they allowed me to get away with that, I'm sure they knew exactly what I was doing. They always do.

Sir, I'm… not sure we did the right thing here. This might sound hypocritical from the one who organized the raid, and I know we don't have the resources to handle this sort of things ourselves, but I still hate doing this. Those people we caught were weird, true, but giving them away to the spooks… You know no one ever comes back once the spooks gets their hands on them. They weren't bad people. They didn't deserve this.

But I guess that's just what we do, isn't it.

Signing out,

Special Agent Stanton.

Subject: Re: UI-56

From: Director McNamara, FBI HQ, Washington D.C

To: Special Agent Laura Stanton, Unusual Incident Unit, Los Angeles Office

Don't rock the boat, kiddo. Just keep your head down and try not to think about it too much. Hang in there, eh? This assignment won't

last forever. Soon the entire Huston incident will blow over and we can get you back to the big league. I promised your father I'll get you out of this, and I will.

Oh, and try not to swear so much, it looks unprofessional.

Director McNamara.

Tales K

Katrina and Morgan and Little Miss Dotty Doo

Katrina sat on the red bench, her shiny Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles lunchbox to her left, and Little Miss Dotty Doo tucked under her right arm. The sun felt nice on her face. She absently swung her feet, which *almost* (but not quite) touched the ground, back and forth.

She hadn't particularly wanted to go to the movies today – not after what had happened. Instead, she had decided to come to the park. It was *such* a lovely day, and she knew Little Miss Dotty Doo loved the sunshine.

She had packed herself a lunch: one apple, a juice box, and a granola bar. She'd wanted to make a sandwich, but all the lunch meat had spoiled long ago. It didn't really matter, she supposed. She could enjoy the sunshine even if she didn't have her absolute favorite sandwich in the world, as long as she had Little Miss Dotty Doo with her. As long as she loved Little Miss Dotty Doo, and Miss Dotty Doo loved her, everything was okay.

It wasn't that Katrina didn't notice the looks the kids on the street gave her and her lovely house, because she did. She simply didn't care. They were probably just jealous, because Little Miss Dotty Doo didn't love *them.* Even when some of the big kids were mean, she knew they were just mad. She could tell because sometimes they tried to take Little Miss Dotty Doo away.

But Little Miss Dotty Doo would not tolerate it. She only loved Katrina, and Katrina loved her. And Miss Doo would not allow anyone to separate them.

So everything was okay.

"Hey, weirdo," came a voice from behind her. A mean voice. A big-kid voice.

Katrina stood and turned. She left her shiny Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles lunchbox on the red bench, but kept Little Miss Dotty Doo tucked under her right arm. It wasn't just a big kid. It was Morgan, the biggest kid of all. The biggest bully in the eighth-grade class. She had her scraped-up arms folded high on her chest and her dirty baseball cap with the brim to the back of her head. Her freckled face was scrunched up it the way it got when she was looking to pick a fight. Katrina thought it made her look like a pig.

"You're supposed to be in school." Katrina shifted her weight from foot to foot and clutched Little Miss Dotty Doo tightly. It always made her uncomfortable when Morgan's face got scrunched up like a pig's. It was kind of scary.

"I got suspended. I hit Peter Charles on the head."

"That's a mean thing to do." Katrina was never sure how to speak with Morgan. She could never tell what the bigger girl with her scraped-up arms would say next.

"No shit, Sherlock." Morgan spat, a great big gross glob. It landed on the red bench, where Katrina had been sitting.

"Please don't curse," Katrina shifted her weight. "Little Miss Dotty Doo doesn't like it when you curse."

"Your doll can't think, dummy." Morgan spat again. This time, it landed on Katrina's shiny Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles lunchbox. "It's made of plastic. Sorry-not."

"Little Miss Dotty Doo *can* think," Katrina insisted. "She *loves* me."

"Jesus, why do you have to be so *weird?*" Morgan scratched her scraped-up left forearm. Her face scrunched up even more. "Living all alone in that creepy house and not even coming to school, like, *ever,* and sitting there in that mothy dress while it's hot out, it's *weird.* No wonder nobody likes you. It's cause you always have that fucking doll, you little psycho."

"Little Miss Dotty Doo loves me. And I love her, too. I don't need more friends. I don't want none."

"You *are* insane. I saw what you did to Lenny. Man, I don't know what it was but you're a *psycho,* and everyone knows it. Everyone knows about Lenny, and no one is ever going to be your friend. How do you like *that* Miss Mothy-Dress?"

Then, Katrina heard a whisper. Little Miss Dotty Doo spoke to her, and told her what to say.

"If I'm so crazy dangerous, you probably shouldn't be talking to me." Katrina's voice was strong and clear, the way it only got when Little Miss Dotty Doo was helping her. "I might make you disappear, too. If you had any brains, you would have realized that by now, Morgan." And she smiled sweetly.

Morgan stood for a moment, stunned. The gears turned in her head, processing Katrina's words. Then, her face scrunched up the tightest Katrina had ever seen it. She rounded the red bench, stomping her booted feet, her hands clenching and unclenching as her breathing grew heavier.

"Give me that, you little *BITCH!*" Morgan roared, and she tackled the smaller girl to the ground. Katrina held onto Little Miss Dotty Doo as tightly as she could, but of course Morgan was stronger. Little Miss Doo left Katrina's hands and she felt the cloud begin to creep up behind her eyes. The emptiness began filling her, starting in her toes as Morgan began to run, holding Little Miss Dotty Doo under her arm like a football. It grew stronger and stronger as Miss Doo moved farther and farther from her.

But she knew everything would be okay. Little Miss Dotty Doo loved her, and she loved Miss Dotty Doo. She knew Miss Doo had a plan. They only had to be apart for five minutes. Little Miss Dotty Doo would protect herself, like she always did.

Then they would have a new friend.

Katrina huddled her feet underneath her as Morgan crossed the empty street and entered an alley, leaving her line of sight. She rocked back and forth as she waited. The emptiness filled her up but she resisted crying. She had to be strong for Miss Doo.

Then, there came a scream from the alley. Katrina checked quickly to make sure no one else had heard it and would investigate, but the street and the park were deserted.

Katrina stood, retrieving her shiny Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles lunchbox from the red bench. She walked quickly across the street and into the alley, feeling the emptiness draining from her as she went.

Close to the other end of the alley, she found them. Little Miss Dotty Doo lay flat on the pavement. Next to her sat a beautiful porcelain cup and saucer. They were white with blue patterned designs around the edges.

"Miss Dotty Doo, it's *beautiful!*" She picked Miss Doo up and cradled her in her right elbow, then retrieved the cup and saucer with her left hand. "We have a new friend. Let's go home."

They would never be separated. Katrina had all the friends she needed at home.

And she loved Little Miss Dotty Doo, and Miss Dotty Doo loved her.

Everything was okay.

Keeping With The Times

It was always like that. I grew up in a small village just south of Niznyj Novgorod, as third of four children. My mother always longed for how, before I was even born, we lived in a nice apartment Moscow, with my father working at the ministry. Then Chruscov came. "We got to think in new ways." he said, and so, my father ended up a deputy in the local soviet. Even that was probably thanks to my grandfather…

My grandfather was a war hero - lost a leg fighting the SS-men. When I was a boy, I wanted to be like him - tell jokes to a full pub or House of Culture, play folk songs on a harmonica. My class teacher once heard me talk about it with Sergej, so he took me off, and knocked on my forehead - "You got to think in new ways, Grigorij - the culture of tomorrow doesn't need drunken comics, and you are neither good enough, not with a right cadre profile to be taken to study acting." Well, so I did, and became a militionary.

What can I say.. Nights are long and cold, promotion nowhere… I somehow lasted through, and got transferred to the city. Life went better from then - the girls like a uniform, and there were some other things to do… until that one night. We got called in by some hag.. think she was a pensioned teacher… She claimed to see some youths carrying off half a pig, and in this time of shortage, sure must have… Ah well - we had a bit under our hats already… made a game out of who to send. . Six shots of vodka, two of kerosene, and a peg on the nose… needless to say, me and Fyodor weren't lucky. Ah well, thought we'd scare them a bit, and if it was really meat ,gonna bring some of it home and ask those fuckers where you can get it black.

At least she was good at describing.. we recognised the house outright. Belonged to a grandpa, thought those youngsters might be his family… or he did business to make a bit on the side of state pension. We knocked with no reply, then Fyodor managed to pick

the lock - he learned it in the army and it was better than kicking it in, anyways. At least you could write that it was open already into the report - like anyone would check too much. As the door opened, we heard some noise, we rushed in, that sort of odd mix of eager and angry you get in such cases. "Hands up, eagles!"….

What we seen in the room made me throw up, and that's me - back during military service, I won a bet eating a rat. There was a strange, sweetly smell, candles, odd diagrams. The three fucks were nude.. with faces like they'd been picking strawberries, and in the centre of the room… well, let's say that what was there, all carved up, wasn't a pig.

It's odd how much strength seeing something like that gives you. They got nightstick over head, and irons over arms, and we dragged them straight to the station, followed by kicks and punches… Falling down the stairs, they call it in an arrest report.

The commander filed in papers, made phonecalls… Ivan and Josif looked at us like at a golden calf… We went off to have some drinks. I had a bad feeling , went to check them.. two were sitting in their cells allright, but the third one of them pulled something strange from…the thing must have been sewn into his forearm. Oddly, he didn't bleed that much. I went to the commander. "You got to think in new ways, not superstitious nonsense… just go in there and give him a few calming whacks, and handcuff the fuck so he doesn't kill himself". And so I did.

When I opened the door, the fuck was no longer alive. Instead there was.. it looked like the inside of.. I crossed myself, pulled out my gun and shot at it. A part of it tore away, something sparked…

I woke up surrounded by a bunch of folks in lab coats, and army uniforms. One of them, a young girl which I would have swore I seen in one of the pubs before gave me an injection. Then, three of them came and asked questions. I told them everything I knew and remembered, and things I thought I haven't… hell, even things I wouldn't say to my brother… bribes, fines I pocketed…. Oddly enough, they didn't seem to care.

I suppose I was lucky in a way … two years later, a western defector

brought in amnestics and plans how to make them, and that made it easy… I'd be still a militionary, thinking a gas line burst. Instead one of the uniformed folk said a lobotomy would be a waste of a good man with quick aim, took my papers, and asked the medics something. He then asked me if I'm in the party. I nodded, he remarked "Well, then you know Lenin said, 'to learn, to learn, to learn'", dropped a large grey binder on my bed, and told me to go over it in the next five days. It was a brick to get through - at least Tania, that medic who supervised me, helped with some of the heavy words. At least about half of it were political matters - the estabilishment of Fourth Department Abnormal Occurences Comission by a direct decree from comrade Stalin following the murder of S.M.Kirov, its expansion into Division "П" - during the war as a response to psychotronic threats to people's democratic estabilishment from the SS and later, Vatican agents, as well as with whatever odd cropped up at home. The rest.. standard protocols, emergency protocols, my immediate superiors…

I started as a guard on Objekt П-3 - a steelworks somewhere near Ural. They brought new people in, almost every week, we had to supervise their off-loading and make sure they stayed in a room with an odd statue for the right amount of time - what Katia, one of the academicians working in there told me over a glass was, that they were special prisoners, troublemakers or even counter-revolutionists, and that a few hours spent in front of the thing every day made it easier to get answers from them. Well, until it messed up with that Afghan fuck… but hey, three of us got a medal from it.

Some days, I think that atheisation would have went so much easier if at least some of the stuff we took in, documented, and tried to use, store, or destroy had been put into textbooks and shown to the kids at schools. I mean… I heard that in one of the republics near Germany, they had to demolish maybe a fifth of the capital because of some thing that infected buildings, made them grow and fall down. I had to know this time, though I guess Lena would have told me even if I wasn't the director of security. She had pretty legs, a beautiful smile and was the head researcher on its weaponisation project. We did that to a lot of things… combat first-aid kits imitated from an old Kazakh whose blood lived on its own, an experimental reactor made with help of tapeworms that could crawl across

people….. At those times, I looked at the bust of Lenin on the hall across from my office, and thought to myself the days of the imperialists were over.

I was badly mistaken. Thinking… .I wonder we lasted through Gorbacov as well as we did. The man was a fool but his modernisers somehow skipped over our section… I heard an operation of ours saved his life twice. However, once he gave up and Jelcin came, it all went to hell. Even Objekt П-3 was decommissioned, and sold to a dummy company owned by a foreign shadow group.. SCP or something , they called themselves. I think Lena joined them after her section was removed from the budget. See, after the coup, the new rich and their politicians had no trust for organisations filled with siloviki. "You got to think in new ways" a man in a suit called. "We have nothing to fear from the west anymore, and the integration with the GOC is just the first harbringer of modern, international Russian Federation more than ever able to respond to anomalous threats…" But this time, I didn't need his words… I have learned to think in new ways myself.

The middle-aged officer was disturbed from his thoughts by a tall man with clean-shaven head and an Armani suit. He stood up.
"The object's verification has been completed, Mr. Bezukladnikov. Here's our part of the deal - eighty thousand dollars, ten thousand rubles, a Czech ID and passport with US visa and plane tickets."
The man smiled as Grigorij Bezukladnikov immediately began looking over the documents, his hands shaking slightly.
"I'm sure you will find them no less valid than the border officials, *comrade lieutenant colonel*. After all, Mr. Marshall believes in honest business."

keine Kosten zu hoch

Translated documents recovered from Ahnenerbe SS Headquarters in Berlin:

FROM: Otto Weber, Director PROJEKT KOLOSS
TO: Heinrich Himmler, Schutzstaffel Reichsführer
REGARDING: NEW PROJECT DIRECTIVES
SENT: 1 July, 1942

Heil Hitler.

Reichsführer Himmler, development of the weapon is going well. Before his unfortunate demise, our outside advisor provided us with sufficient information that I believe the new direction our project is being taken is still compatible with our initial goals. However, it is my understanding that the new direction our project has taken will require materials and equipment we do not have available in our current base of operations. Therefore, I am requesting that relevant specialists and materials be sent, and that our base of operations be changed. I will allow that decision to be made at your discretion.

Included in this document are details of project progress before the change in project directives. I have also sent the last artifacts recovered by our archaeologists. I am afraid that your intentions of changing this into an armor development project leaves us without qualified academics. If we are creating a mechanized weapon to win the war, I need engineers, scientists, and mechanics, not archaeologists and historians. The Führer may not approve of this project, but I believe our efforts may prove vital in the later hours of this war.

Sincerely,

Otto Weber
Ahnenerbe SS, PROJEKT KOLOSS Director

FROM: Otto Weber, Director PROJEKT KOLOSS
TO: Heinrich Himmler, Schutzstaffel Reichsführer
REGARDING: ONGOING RESEARCH
SENT: 31 July, 1942

Heil Hitler.

Reichsführer Himmler, I have received word from your Australian contact. I am afraid that the time and resources necessary to procure those materials are too much. However, I understand that this project is now partially under the jurisdiction of Minister Speer and that he may be willing to make these expenses. Our first shipment is scheduled to arrive in October. I hope you have procured for us the equipment and specialists we need by then.

We also need resupply of basic amenities and of ammunition. Our local allies are growing suspicious, and it is my understanding that the British and Americans are pooling greater and greater resources into their African campaign, putting our research at risk. I must once again reassert that our current base of operations is unsuitable for this project. Your Australian contact has stated that he has means of delivering anywhere we may move, including the Fatherland.

Specifications of the equipment and personnel we require in order to proceed with the project as planned are enclosed, alongside a list of suitable locations for moving the project and the resources necessary to do so if you so decide.

Sincerely,

Otto Weber
Ahnenerbe SS, PROJEKT KOLOSS Director

FROM: Otto Weber, Director PROJEKT KOLOSS
TO: Heinrich Himmler, Schutzstaffel Reichsführer
REGARDING: ONGOING RESEARCH
SENT: 13 September, 1942

Heil Hitler.

Reichsführer Himmler, the last relevant equipment has been shipped to the Kummersdorf Proving Ground for the final construction of the weapon and subsequent tests. All that remains to be shipped are the personnel still relevant to this project.

I still have doubts to the trustworthiness of your Australian contact. However, he has sent me information regarding the materials he is delivering, and I must admit that his assistance will help greatly in mitigating costs of this project. I assume that the engineers at Krupp are in the process of creating the main armament for the weapon? You must understand, Reichsführer, that our research will only be able to create an armored chassis and the means of propelling your vehicle, and not the primary armament itself. Regardless, I look forward to the conclusion of this project and demonstrating to the Führer that our research has not been for naught.

Sincerely,

Otto Weber
Ahnenerbe SS, PROJEKT KOLOSS Director

FROM: Otto Weber, Director PROJEKT KOLOSS
TO: Heinrich Himmler, Schutzstaffel Reichsführer
REGARDING: ONGOING RESEARCH
SENT: 19 June, 1943

Heil Hitler.

[ILLEGIBLE] Entity KOLOSS appears cooperative and has correctly bonded to the [ILLEGIBLE] However, we still require an armament appropriate for the tank.

Conventional [ILLEGIBLE] underpowered and would qualify as underutilization of resources for a project of this scale. A battery of coastal or naval guns would [ILLEGIBLE] but it is my understanding that Minister Speer has **`other projects`** similar in scale [ILLEGIBLE] adequate. Therefore, I am requesting that one or more of Krupp's *special* armaments be procured for use with this
[ALL FURTHER TEXT ILLEGIBLE]

TO: Heinrich Himmler, Schutzstaffel Reichsführer
REGARDING: ONGOING RESEARCH
SENT: 13 October, 1943

Heil Hitler.

Reichsführer [ILLEGIBLE] final delivery was made by your Australian contact last Thursday. We will [ILLEGIBLE] tomorrow, with tests on all systems beginning thereafter. Minister Speer [ILLEGIBLE] weapon system has nearly been completed. Upon delivery of the main turret, we aim to deploy the weapon against Leningrad in order to end the stalemate.
[ALL FURTHER TEXT ILLEGIBLE]

ALL TEXT ILLEGIBLE EXCEPT FOLLOWING:
Leningrad. No survivors

Excerpt from journal of unknown American soldier, recovered six months following the failed Normandy Landings:

I heard it before I saw it. I saw it come over the horizon, and yet I heard it before I saw it. It didn't sound like a tank, or any sort of engine I've ever heard. It sounded like something growling. When the gun went off, there was a flash, and then a roar, like a bull getting branded, but a thousand times louder. Then there was a flash and a boom like I'll never hear again behind me. I haven't heard anything since then. I think I've gone deaf.

It sunk the whole damn fleet. The whole goddamn fleet. I don't want to think about the number of soldiers still on those boats. I'm surprised the Ruskies and the Krauts put up as good of a fight as they did.

The French civilians we encountered called it the Tarask. I don't know enough French to know what that means. I like to think it means "the work of Satan himself," because that's the only one who could have made that fucking thing.

I don't think I'm ever getting rescued. Hopefully, someone finds this and it helps them find a way to kill that… that fucking abomination against God. I'll leave this journal in a Kraut pillbox so it lasts awhile longer and isn't too far from the shore.

Copy of a flier posted throughout the United Kingdom following the destruction of London:

ATTENTION ALL CITIZENS
BY ORDER OF PRIME MINISTER ANTHONY EDEN, MANDATORY EVACUATION OF THE BRITISH ISLES BEGINS ON JULY 31, 1944. YOU MUST REGISTER FOR PASSAGE IF YOU INTEND TO REMAIN UNITED WITH YOUR FAMILIES. FINAL EVACUATION IS SCHEDULED FOR OCTOBER 31, 1944. REGISTERING FOR PASSAGE IS THE ONLY GUARANTEE OF EVACUATION. REGISTER AT YOUR LOCAL POST OFFICE AS SOON AS POSSIBLE

From the book of Job, Chapter 40:

15Behold now the Behemoth that I have made with you… 16Behold now his strength… 18His limbs are as strong as copper, his bones as a load of iron.19His is the first of God's ways; only his Maker can draw His sword against him.

Ketergrams

Fatalities for 2014

Ketergrams are part of the Safety Subcommittee's program to promptly disseminate facts and outlines of events that have resulted in the deaths of Foundation staff in the line of duty. The data provided is based on preliminary investigations only, and does not represent final determinations or conclusions with respect to these events. Most bulletins recommend one or more "best practices", deemed likely to have prevented or mitigated the associated fatalities.

Information contained within these bulletins has been redacted as necessary and is approved for general use by L-1 staff and above who do not have specific prohibitions against such exposure. Administrators are asked to post these bulletins as soon as practical, in appropriate areas where staff congregate or frequent.

This annual summary of the previous calendar years' bulletins is provided to allow staff to review incidents they might have missed due to workload, vacation, or incapacitation.

Individually, you are encouraged to discuss the information within with colleagues, and contemplate how you might have prepared differently for, or responded differently to the events that unfolded. Supervisory staff are asked to recognize and forward practical suggestions, both general and specific, to the Safety Subcommittee. Our mission is to systematically improve the safety of Foundation operations.

MEMETIC FATALITY

On Saturday, February 22, 2014, a 22-year old Level 1 researcher

with three weeks of experience self-terminated after discovering a previously unknown memetic hazard within a site of interest being explored for anomalous data.

The victim had been hand-restoring a 4th century BCE plaster fresco attributed to Aristippus, depicting an unknown (outside the Foundation) geometric proof. According to surveillance footage, the entire fresco suddenly crumbled and collapsed in a thick cloud of dust, briefly revealing a mosaic beneath before the lens was obscured by dust and detritus. Audio records the victim sneezing and gasping for twenty seconds, followed by eight seconds of complete silence. Next, a barely audible utterance (perhaps 'avaunt ye') is whispered in a guttural voice, presumably the victim's. This was followed by eight minutes and twenty seconds of rapid, shallow scraping sounds, punctuated by irregular, incoherent moans from the victim.

The response team found the victim unresponsive on the floor in front of the artwork, with his nose, mouth and the palms of both hands severely abraded. Evidence suggested that the victim had obtained the injuries by rubbing his face and hands - rapidly, repeatedly, and with substantial strength - across the jagged onyx tesserae comprising the mosaic. Efforts at resuscitation were unsuccessful.

BEST PRACTICES

- When performing research within a site of interest, obtain basic inoculation against well-known memetic tropes.
- When practical, wear auto-darkening safety goggles whenever there is a risk of exposure to anomalous imagery.

BREACH FATALITY

On Wednesday, April 30, 2014, a 32-year-old Euclid-qualified SCP researcher at Site-66 with eighteen months of research experience was fatally injured while traversing Containment Sector Foxtrot when he was struck in the chest by a proboscis of SCP- after it penetrated Containment Cell No. 26.

The victim was not assigned to SCP- , but passed containment chamber No. 26 on his way back to his office from the cafeteria. Ordinarily, the victim would have taken approved pedestrian route No. 6, which did not pass through any containment sectors, but earlier that day an unrelated breach had left a disagreeable odor in the approved route.

The assigned, active researcher, wearing a standard bio-signature suppression suit, and operating a hydraulic entity probe arm directly attached to the containment wall, gestured to the victim for assistance in clearing a jam.

As the unprotected victim approached the assigned researcher, he crossed the yellow warning stripe positioned 5 meters from the containment wall. Almost immediately, a toothed proboscis breached through 5cm thick steel plating, pierced his heart, and exsanguinated him.

During the subsequent investigation, it was discovered that the victim was carrying two peanut butter cookies, baked in the cafeteria kitchen only an hour before, in the breast pocket where he was struck.

BEST PRACTICES

- Use only approved pedestrian routes for travel between safe areas within a site.
- Follow standard procedures for servicing failed equipment; do not enlist help from staff unfamiliar with your assigned SCP.
- Heed all warning indicators, lamps, and signs, their placement is precise.
- Never bring foodstuffs into containment zones.

BREACH FATALITY

On Saturday, May 2, 2014, two Keter qualified SCP researchers with 15 and 12 years' hazardous research experience at remote Site-307 were transmuted into an organic substance similar to alburnum, and then fatally incinerated after four redundant

suppressant lamps failed within thirty seconds of one another.

Facility records showed that the bulbs in all four lamps had been installed and illuminated on the same date about 30 months earlier, when the special containment procedures had been revised. Subsequent review of the manufacturer's specifications indicated that the bulbs had a mean lifetime of 21925.7 hours, with a standard deviation of .1 hours. Supply manifests indicated that 24 spares were on hand, and that none had been used since the original installation.

The victims had been assigned to Site-307 for forty-four months without incident, and were performing routine weekly vivisection of SCP- when the breach occurred.

BEST PRACTICES

- Replacement schedules of redundant consumables should be rotated to stagger MTBF.
- Attending annual pain threshold training may considerably increase survivability in breach scenarios.

CONTAINMENT FATALITY

On Saturday, July 5, 2014, a 63-year old Conflagration Specialist with thirty-seven years of experience was killed while attempting to contain a novel anomaly.

The victim was attached to MTF Delta-2 ("Rocky Mountain Spotted Oysters"), in pursuit of multiple Euclid entities that had emerged from geothermal vents west of Cody, Wyoming. The Specialist's primary containment role was the suppression of fires (this was a particularly flammable environment), and his secondary role was coordination of threat-tuned artillery and airstrikes.

In this case, the offensive payload was experimental anhydrous at 270° C, which has since been conclusively demonstrated an effective immobilant of flame-based SCPs. When used as directed, it carries a low risk of direct harm to approved targets; however, the molten state tends to ignite incidental fires.

Over the course of approximately eighty minutes of active engagement, MTF Delta-2 successfully contained all but one target without taking casualties. Once isolated, the remaining target demonstrated markedly increased aggression, igniting trees and wildlife with what was interpreted as deliberate malice by several witnesses. At the same time, however, it also appeared to become disoriented, slowing and moving out into the open, which allowed the MTF to quickly close on its position.

The victim remained in the transport vehicle to call for a final barrage while the remainder of his team approached the target on foot.

The events that followed are still under investigation; however, the following facts were uncovered during the mission debriefing:

1. Target coordinates were provided to the artillery team by radio on the expected channel with the correct spread spectrum carrier frequency.
2. Audio analysis of the recorded orders matches the voiceprint of the victim, and contains no duress cues.
3. The target coordinates were supplied with one more decimal of precision than had been used previously in the engagement.
4. The artillery appears to have functioned correctly, and a review of audit logs found no evidence of misuse or tampering.
5. The subsequent barrage struck the transport vehicle, and was accurately centered on the fuel door. The impact detonated the tank of diesel fuel and instantly incinerated the contents of the vehicle.
6. During the brief confusion after the transport was destroyed, MTF Delta-2 lost contact with the remaining target. It remains at large.

BEST PRACTICES

- Leverage the additional margin of safety associated with laser-assisted, fully automated artillery systems when their use is not impractical.
- Electric armored vehicles are now available to qualified teams;

consider their requisition to mitigate the risks associated with diesel fuel in combat environments.

RESEARCH FATALITY

On Friday, September 12, 2014, eight Euclid qualified researchers, including two members of the ECRG, with over 120 years of combined experience, stationed in orbit around 's former innermost moon were fatally spaghettified again when spontaneously formed an anomalous ergosphere and subjected their station to irresistible tidal forces.

In addition to their primary containment mission, experiments aboard the *FS Unruh* were testing the relationship between local quantum phenomena and n-body orbital stability in an ongoing attempt to refine containment procedures for ultramassive SCPs.

As with the preceding three iterations of these events, the precise timeline[1], specific details of staff behaviors, and exact contents of the sporadic reports transmitted from the station exhibit inconsequential deviations from the original continuity, however, the heroic acts of staff at key points in the unfolding disaster followed the same general outline:

Time[2] (mm:ss)	Events
00:31	Principal Investigator Karapetyan manually breaches the reactor shield to make physical contact with the core and disrupt the entanglement. This exposes him to a fatal dose of beta radiation, but likely delays the exponential phase of the gravitational bloom for at least five minutes.
04:45	First Officer Imanishi jettisons the in direct defiance of an order from Captain Sforza. In his capacity as L-4, Sforza summarily sentences Imanishi to death for insubordination, murder, and

	mutiny. In the absence of weaponry, he resorts to strangulation to carry out the execution - a notable deviation from his method in the previous iterations. Post hoc analysis of telemetry suggests that Imanishi's action prolonged the orbital stability of the *Unruh* for about fifteen additional minutes.
17:45	Researcher Tapirus, who had already been on EVA to perform routine maintenance, uses an arc welder to deliberately breach a pressurized external fluorine tank and the adjacent storage cylinder of lithium grease. The resulting reaction provides substantial additional prograde thrust to the *Unruh*. The safety cable and Tapirus' left arm are severed by the ignition. Drifting away from the ship and apparently in shock, Tapirus optimistically reports that the wound and spacesuit were cauterized closed.
18:02	Just as begins to detectably move toward the - system's effective center of gravity (located well within the surface of), Researcher Odhiambo transmits a traditional Acholi 'birthing song' towards the surface of . As Odhiambo sings, the exponential gravitational bloom stabilizes, likely averting an XK-class end-of-the-world scenario. At the conclusion of her song, Odhiambo briefly reports hearing a form of music transmitted in

	response. Sensor data suggests that a localized gravitational anomaly manifests within her cranium shortly after, causing massive injury.
27:01	As the *Unruh* crosses the static limit of 's ergosphere, Researcher Arnold assembles and activates a crude Penrose Reflector, extracting sufficient power to function as an energy weapon directed at the surface of . However, the corresponding loss of angular momentum causes the *Unruh* to descend rapidly past the event horizon.
34:15	Relativistic jets are emitted from the poles of for thirty-seven seconds as its gravitational field returns to ordinary strength. disintegrates at the same time. Over the subsequent five months, its debris field forms yet another new ring around .

This iteration manifested three minutes later than anticipated. Further, appeared in its orbit with an argument of periapsis eight degrees greater than the current model predicted. The events lasted seven minutes longer than the previous iteration before conclusion. The combination of uncertainty of the predictive model, the -hour communications delay from Earth, and the occluding position of when it manifests makes it unlikely that the instructions transmitted from the Foundation in anticipation of this iteration were received by the *Unruh* within the brief window before disorder ensued.

In consultation with the Ethics Committee and Human Resources, the O5 council voted to posthumously award an additional four Foundation Stars to Karapetyan, Imanishi, Tapirus, and Odhiambo for their repeated acts of bravery in this iteration.

BEST PRACTICES

- When calculating the Killing horizon for a co-rotating reference frame, the colatitude in the denominator may be relativistically shifted by as much as $1/\sqrt{1-\lambda}$ when the plane of orbit is tangent to the Minkowski manifold of a much larger mass. Always allow for relaxation of the orthogonal submanifolds.

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[1] as measured locally from the *Unruh* (relativistic effects cause significant distortion of timestamps as measured from Earth)
[2] from initial entanglement, which corresponds precisely to the initial moment of each manifestation

Keters With Hats

Paul: Caaarl! Why is there a **`statue`** in our house? It's looking at me funny.

Carl: Whatever do you mean?

Paul: The statue. Right there. It's in the middle of our living room.

Carl: Oh, that! I thought that was a mountain.

Paul: Mountains don't fit in houses!

Carl: How do you know that?

Paul: I don't! How'd you even get this here?

Carl: I didn't bring it here. For once I am innocent.

Paul: Then why is it looking at *you??*

Carl: Must be my legs.

Paul: Where did you get this from?

Carl: My nice, sexy legs.

Paul: Answer me, Carl.

Carl: It came out of a top hat I was using for a magic trick.

Paul: Caaarl!

Carl: Fine. I broke into a place called Site 19.

Paul: How'd you do that? You don't even have thumbs.

Carl: I used an egg sandwich and a mattress tag.

Paul: What even is this thing?

Carl: I don't know. I've tried eating it and it's just made of stone and paint.

Paul: Why would you break into somewhere and eat what you find?

Carl: Because the egg sandwich wasn't enough.

Paul: I'm not listening anymore.

(Paul turns before Carl blinks.)

Carl: Woah! That thing just moved.

Paul: What? I turned my back for one second. What'd you do?

Carl: I sunk a cruise ship 4 days ago.

Paul: I didn't mean that!

Carl: Then what did you mean?

Paul: Why did it move?

Carl: It had to follow its destiny.

Paul: Caaarl!

Carl: It slipped on the floor.

Paul: Be honest with me.

Carl: I don't know! It probably noticed *your* legs.

(Paul turns around, seeing the statue in front of him.)

Paul: Oh God.

Carl: Yeah, this was probably my fault.

Paul: You don't say?

Carl: At least I didn't bring back the other thing I found.

Paul: What was it?

Carl: Some **`pale guy`**, long arms. I looked at him for one second and he went crazy.

Paul: I'm so disappointed in you.

Carl: Well that's mean. Now I kind of wish I brought that pale guy back.

Paul: I'm not talking to you anymore.

Carl: Well, that's rude. I'm disappointed in you now.

(Banging at the door.)

Paul: Who's that?

Carl: Probably the pale dude.

Paul: What? Why?

Carl: Maybe it's the statue's best friend.

Paul: Caaarl!

Carl: Well, I didn't know.

Paul: You're just being awful today.

Carl: I stole this yesterday.

Paul: I'm not even shocked at this anymore.

Carl: Fine, I'll go answer the door.

Paul: You go do that, Carl.

(Carl walks to the door as Paul is stuck looking at the statue.)

Carl: Has it moved again?

Paul: Not yet!

(Carl walks back.)

Carl: Yep, it's that crazy guy.

Paul: I think you should keep the door closed, Carl.

Carl: Fine.

Paul: So, what should we do with this thing?

Carl: Sell it to an art museum.

Paul: I was thinking give it back.

Carl: No way, we could get so many dead bodies with this.

(Pause.)

Paul: Caaaaaaarl!

Carl: Fine, I'll give it back.

Paul: No, I'm giving it back.

Carl: Bad idea, Paul. They had lots of guns back there.

Paul: Fine. Well, did you do anything else there?

Carl: I killed some people and ate some paper.

Paul: Oh.

Carl: I mean, it was **`screaming`** as I was eating it.

Paul: The people or the paper?

Carl: What do you think? It was the paper.

Paul: Caaarl! What have I told you about eating things that scream?

Carl: The egg sandwich wasn't enough.

Paul: Caaarl!

Carl: You're right. You've told me not to do it.

Paul: Right. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm going to find a way to give this statue back.

(Paul starts pushing the statue out of the house.)

Carl: Yep, he's going to get slaughtered out there.

Paul: I can hear you, Carl!

Carl: Sorry.

(Paul exits the house, screaming.)

Paul: Caaaaaaarl!

Carl: I told you, Paul!

(Ending theme.)

Key Biscayne

Priss came home late, and found saw her sister wide awake, dressed in one of Priss's bathrobes. She was smirking fiendishly at her. Priss gave her a big smile in return.

"Hey Rhie."

She didn't stop smirking, "You're home early. 9 hours early. Hormone thing?"

Priss sauntered over to her, and tilted Rhiannon's face upwards, "There's nothing you could possibly say that would make me angry."

"Did you hear what happened yesterday morning?"

"No. What?"

"Just a mile or so from here. Protests outside an INS office. Police shot someone dead. Now there's more protests downtown."

Priss stared down at her. She was still smirking. Was this some kind of test, or was she trying to provoke her still?

"They're moving refugees into Key Biscayne. The hotels will be flooded with them. Lots of money involved there. Why are they moving them there? It's a dead end. Or has the great yellow tide risen so high that the rats are being pushed up the wall? Next stop's the ocean, baby girl."

Priss shrugged, "You say it like I'm involved somehow."

Rhiannon shrugged, mimicking Priss's action, "Your bosses have got on suits and ties, clean, smooth-shaven faces. Did you know shaving is a sin in the eyes of God, right there in the same Bible that condemns poor Annie to Hell forever as a sinner?"

"My bosses have suits and ties, the politicians have suits and ties, is this the rant you're going on?"

"Men In Black with your amnesty memory eraser drugs… how do I know your people aren't involved? Where will all the refugees go? There's always a demand for fresh corpses at the SPC, ain't there? 'Class-D' you call them. 'D' for 'Dumbass gonna get yer asses killed'."

"I have…" Priss began patiently, seating herself on the armrest of the couch beside her, "just as much of a problem with using D-Class as you do. I do what I can to keep them safe. I don't ever let any D-Class do something I would not do myself, and I never take their deaths lightly."

"I'm sure they appreciate you for that, the dead ones and all."

Priss smiled, "You're not gonna rile me up, Rhie," She leaned in and kissed her head, "I'm gonna take some time off work soon, and we can finally get a full handle on everything that's happened thus far."

Rhiannon leaned her head back, resting on the couch, "I'm going to a planned protest at Key Biscayne tomorrow night. I want to know if you will be there."

Priss shook her head, "That's nowhere near anyplace I'll be. There's nothing I can say to convince to stay home, is there?"

Rhiannon glared at her, "Just don't go. You don't belong there."

Shi Mingxia was forced awake by a violent series of coughs that ended up filling her oxygen mask with blood. She was choking on it when they pulled it off of her, and started cleaning her. She could see it all through a dark red haze, one which only got worse each time she blinked. She opened her mouth to cry out, only to have a tube pushed down into her throat. She vomited over it, but it kept going down, sucking out blood and phlegm to clear her esophagus.

She woke up again, hours later. She hoped it was hours; she didn't want to believe she'd been out for only a minute, and go right back

to coughing up blood. Someone was by her bed, face hardly perceptible through the glare of reflected light on the hazmat suit the person wore. The man in the suit smiled, and held up a hand mirror for her to see. She grinned in turn.

She was drenched in sweat, nude and uncovered, blood trickling slowly from her eyes and nose and mouth. The tube was still lodged in her throat, while two new ones up her nose helped her breathe. She looked like a murder victim. She realized she wasn't going to survive this one.

"Look on the bright side," The man, her handler Wu Xiangdong said, "You'll be remembered as a hero."

"Hero?" She gagged on the tube, and started to wretch again. The man pulled the tube out, and she gasped for breath. Her airways felt clear, but she could quickly feel mucous clotting deep in her throat, with a warm splash that likely indicated blood. She turned her head slowly to one side, noting a blood pack connecting to her arm. She was losing it almost as fast as it was being pumped back into her.

"You warned us the lab was breached as we were en route to check on you. The disease could've spread."

"How heroic! And all before I could put my pants back on."

"They tried to dress you, but you started to scream. You were burning up and your skin started to bleed."

Shi Mingxia leaned her head back, the blood pooling in her throat too thick now to let her speak clearly. She opened her mouth, waggling her tongue, and Wu began to re-insert the tube down her throat.

"You're the last survivor of this thing. I know the hospital will do everything it can to help you, but…" He chuckled morbidly, "We can't have you using all the donated blood in Guangdong."

She shook her head slowly, the motion causing her to wretch again as the tube down her throat moved. She couldn't lift an arm, and so simply pointed, up at the television. He turned it on, and switched it

to the news, "Don't worry. Everything's going to be okay."

Key Biscayne was off-limits to protestors that day. The mob instead flocked to the strip of land where the Rickenbacker Causeway connected Key Biscayne and Virginia Key to the mainland. Soon they were swarming onto the Causeway itself, flooding the pedestrian pathways, and starting to spread on to the beach, the marina, and the Old Causeway. Rhiannon Locke wasn't sure why she'd expected nothing but shouting and demonstrating all day; it made sense to her that people would treat it like a day out. People were fishing around the Causeway supports, and on the Old Causeway running low and parallel to it. Others were on the beaches. There were even people out in boats, honking incessantly at beachgoers.

Everyone who was involved had a single rallying cry, "Put your hands up, get out of the car!" They'd taken the words of the officers during the initial incident and used it as a password, as a chant, one that took on a steadily more sing-song quality the more they chanted. The incessant repetition was broken up with a "response", in the form of the victim's reply, "Fuck you, pig!" They'd repeat it three or four times, then go back to the first.

It was a party atmosphere despite that. People were drinking, music was playing, food and drink were being sold by vendors. The ones who spoke only Spanish were the most popular for the mob, but tended to get the least business. The chaos never reached the point of violence. Every time someone seemed close to that point, they were taken away by others, dressed just as casually as them. Rhiannon locked eyes with one of them. They touched their index and middle finger to the bridge of their nose. She returned the gesture.

It was still daylight. Everyone was having fun. There was no sign of police or trucks. Rhiannon wasn't concerned. There was a well-known local militia with a "base" just across the Causeway back in Miami. They'd threatened to shut down the protests if they obstructed traffic when the trucks came. The police hadn't commented on that. Rhiannon smiled. Sweeter than the sweetest

liqueur…

Priscilla Locke noticed the great shift in tone that day at work. The technicians weren't talking as much. Sharpe wasn't there. A man she'd never seen before — not an agent, but dressed casually, and calling himself just "Brennan" — was being sent up with the Anabasis. Making it even worse, Dr. Marlowe was there to give her a stern talking-to, in that cool-headed tone she loved to use when condescending to others.

"I get your way of thinking, Agent Locke," Marlowe said quietly, standing over Priss inside Room 119, Dr. Marlowe's temporary office, "Really, I do. Who better than a fully trained agent to put in unknown territory first?"

"Then why am I being censured?" She asked flatly.

"You don't understand," Marlowe smiled, sucking the warmth from the room faster than Anabasis could, "It's a matter of policy and procedure; by your own admission you nearly got killed, and for a period of almost ten hours you could not be fully accounted for. Given that we have test subjects to do just what you did, and the technicians' guarantee that they had found a safe spot to pull them out, this is unacceptable."

"You said you agreed with me that D-Class are untrained, unreliable, and overall untrustworthy."

"I did not say I agreed with you, I said I understood your way of thinking," Again that smile, "I am fully capable of entertaining and comprehending an idea without accepting it.

Priss sneered, "Because *you're* so fucking brilliant, aren't you?"

Marlowe kept that smile up, unflinching, "Another issue I've been meaning to address. Your attitude."

"You keep talking down to me —"

"As of late, your attitude has been, quite frankly, utterly atrocious —"

"Because *you* keep treating all of us like shit just because you —"

"Priss," Marlowe leaned forward over her desk, no longer smiling, "Stop."

Priss squirmed in her seat.

"By all rights, I should take you off this project. But I won't, because I made the decision to investigate this item when it first came to our attention, and if I took you off now, that would mean I made a terrible mistake in judgment in letting you be the first agent on-site."

Priss stared at her incredulously.

"As it stands, we can't afford to lose an agent of your experience on this project, especially given that the regional overseer doesn't even want you to stay on the project after we secured the item. I had to fight to keep you on board, and you're starting to making me question my decision to do so."

A long moment passed between them, before Priss opened her mouth to further bury herself, "It's all about you, basically?"

"Yes, Locke," Marlowe replied, the slightest catch in her voice betraying her anger, "It's all about me. And if you persist in trying to make me look bad, I'm going to make sure you're always assigned to me in the future, and then I'm going to make your career a living hell. You're going to beg to be thrown into danger like a common fucking D-Class. Do you understand?"

Priss nodded, and got up to leave.

Priss went to check on Aurianne Sharpe later in the day. She hadn't shown up for work, and hadn't returned any of Priss's calls or texts. She went to her small apartment in Brickell, where Aurianne met her in a t-shirt and bike shorts, her face looking red and eyes scratchy. She looked up and down Priscilla Locke's figure, dressed in black suit and tie.

"You couldn't even skip work for me?" Sharpe shuddered slightly as she spoke.

"I— you weren't at work," Priss shifted uncomfortably.

"You texted me that night. You said you were sorry, and wanted to come over and apologize in person."

"You didn't respond…"

"You never came," Sharpe went on, leaning against the door, "Then you called me this morning, didn't leave a message."

"I got stuck in traffic and figured you'd be there, so…"

"Then you come over now, without calling or texting or asking me ahead of time."

"What the fuck is your problem, Anne?" Priss blurt out, feeling her cheeks redden as soon as she did. Maybe Marlowe was right about her attitude problem. *Marlowe's never right.*

Aurianne Sharpe smirked, and backed away, "Jee whiz, Priss, calm down. I'm just fucking with you. Come on inside."

Priss blushed and stepped inside, "Sorry. I got chewed out by Marlowe today for that outburst."

"What'd she say?" Sharpe asked as she moved over to her kitchen, fetching some drinks.

"That I have an attitude problem, and if I keep screaming at people, she's gonna ride my ass the rest of my career. Also that she isn't re-assigning me because it'll make her look bad."

"I think she likes you, is all," Sharpe returned with a bottle of sangria and two glasses, handing one off to Locke as they sat on her couch, in front of the TV. A West Civ militia captain was being interviewed by local news.

"It's not like I wouldn't mind being ridden by her if she weren't such a genuinely awful person."

"I don't think she's an awful person. Just… maybe a little self-obsessed."

Priss sipped from her glass, and sighed, "At some point something new will happen, and then they'll bring in someone more qualified, or else just put this thing in storage and let us move on to something with less time-space dickery."

Sharpe didn't respond. Priss glanced back at the television, not sure what to say now. She drank again, and gazed down into her cup. For several minutes, neither of them said anything. Priss kept her eyes fixed on the television, not noticing as Sharpe scooted closer to her.

"Prissy…"

She glanced sidelong, and noticed Sharpe had leaned in closer. She could smell the taller woman's sweat, and the faint scent of a cherry body wash. She turned her head, and Aurianne Sharpe's lips clumsily pressed against hers in a deep, shy kiss. Priss started to quiver. Hadn't Rhiannon warned her about this before? She suddenly felt very stupid for being surprised at this.

Aurianne slowly broke off the kiss, her eyes wide. Priss stared back, dumbfounded. After a long moment, Aurianne Sharpe turned away, sitting upright and wiping at her eyes, "I'm sorry."

Priss shifted uncomfortably, the sangria suddenly not sitting well in her stomach, "Annie, I know what you are and such, I don't mean to… I mean, I've known you as long as I can remember. It's just… you're like a big sister to me. I don't see you in that way."

Aurianne dropped her head into her hands, her shoulders starting to twitch, "I'm sorry."

Priss reached out, awkwardly patting Aurianne's head, "I should… I should go. I'll see you tomorrow, Annie."

The sun went down and there was no sign of the trucks. The size of the crowd didn't diminish; more began to appear, as the heat of the day abated, and most of the boats started shining light onto the water. People were swimming around the Rickenbacker Causeway, near the beach on Virginia Key, where the Old Causeway turned

walking path extended out to the bay. Every so often, they would chant "Fuck you, pig!" in response to the smaller group clustered around the walkway or the Causeway itself, who chanted "Put your hands up, get out of the car!" down to them. It was infectious; the more she chanted it, the less it meant to them, and the more passion they put into it.

Some demonstrators had signs which had nothing to do with the protest. Cars were honking at them. Some women were taking their tops off. Others in the crowd got to them and took them aside. Everything the crowd did had to be beyond reproach. Any hint of illegality of any kind and the cops would crack down on them with immense prejudice.

Rhiannon leaned on the metal railing on the walkway, a fishing rod clenched between her legs, as she plucked at the line like the string of a harp. A man beside her was throwing road flares and flashlights into the water. How he'd gotten ahold of them, she didn't know.

"Hey," She said to him. He looked at her in confusion.

"Light," He said, "So you can see the fishies!"

"You're scaring them away," She replied.

He looked at her again, as if he didn't understand. Based on the bra he wore on top of a blazer, she doubted he understood much about the world. She smiled, and leaned in to kiss him on the cheek, handing him the fishing rod, and making her way back to the shore.

She heard low rumbling. The din of noise started to grow. People were cheering, others were booing. The trucks had arrived. The crowd couldn't decide whether to cheer for the refugees, in support of their plight, or boo the men who were taking them to their presumably final destination.

By the time Rhiannon got up to the top of the Causeway, the crowds had swarmed onto the road and were blocking the trucks. Rhiannon shivered and smiled; police were there, but most of the men carrying guns wore camouflage vests and hats and most had some manner of tacky American flag scarves, shirts, shoes, pants, even one

woman with red and white straps poking up from her pants. Rhiannon smiled wider; they looked terrified. She wondered if they expected the police to provide more support. She wondered how many actually didn't expect to be there, thinking the crowds would disperse on their own, or at the first sight of shotguns and assault rifles.

Rhiannon was terrible with numbers. She figured the crowd numbered at least two hundred on the Causeway itself… maybe up to two thousand, including those on the beach and in the water. The crowd was frenzied; they'd been preparing for this all day. They'd been screaming and chanting as if practicing for a concert. Now their target audience was here. There were exactly ten police officers, and twenty-seven militia members.

Like the deepest orgasm couldn't achieve. Tears filled her eyes. A few people she recognized came up to her, all wearing heavy backpacks. She touched her index and middle finger to the bridge of her nose. They returned the gesture.

"Everything's fine," She grinned, "Everything's fine like Alpine wine."

An hour passed. People on the beach had moved into the parking lot, closer to the Causeway. The stalled trucks shut off their engines. This drew a great cheer from the crowd, thinking they'd won. They didn't let up, continuing to scream and rage and chant at the militia. The other side of the Causeway was relatively clear; the protestors didn't mind anyone *leaving* Key Biscayne. A concrete divide prevented the trucks from using the other lane to bypass the crowd.

The trucks opened up, and tired, worn, haggard-looking people began to emerge from them, carrying bags and children. Some were handcuffed. Some were crying. The crowd spontaneously burst into applause and cheering at the sight of them. Then officers and militants started to move them over to the other lane, using riot shields and batons to pre-emptively keep the protestors from blocking off the lane. The refugees began to move, being herded onto the empty lane and down towards the marina, across the road from the beach.

Everywhere one looked, a personal story could be told. An old man

with receding hair wearing a dirty white *guayabera* had his arms draped over the shoulders of two younger men, who helped him move along, while a young boy walked several feet ahead. One woman was sobbing, carrying her tired daughter in her arms, looking just as exhausted as her child. A young man walked hand in hand with a young woman, their faces averted from the crowd. An elderly woman held the hands of two children, while another pushed a stroller with a squealing baby in it.

The most potent drug… Rhiannon shuddered, and ran a hand through her hair, gasping lightly at the sudden rush that went through her. Militia members were looking tense, as the crowd slowly swarmed across the lane, chanting louder now, some screaming directly in the faces of militia. They screamed back, with varying levels of coherency.

"Put your hands up, get out of the car!
"Put your hands up, get out of the car!

A group of protestors broke through the line, causing brief havoc as disheveled refugee and dirty protestor became indistinguishable. The scuffle ended as female refugees and children began to scream. The protestors backed off, but a gap had emerged in the line. A single child stood in the open, sobbing. A militia member, couldn't have been older than Rhiannon, was being yelled at by an older man with a mustache and beret. He then turned to yell at the child. The child — a little girl — was bawling uncontrollably, waddling off in the direction of an older woman being restrained by another militia member. A fiery streak arced from the crowd, smashing directly into the face of an officer, setting him ablaze and shredding his clothes with hot broken glass.

"Fuck you, pigs!"

Rhiannon shuddered again, grasping herself and biting on her knuckles. Tears flowed down her cheeks. It was all so beautiful. It was art.

A stream of blood flew out of the girl's chest from a neat round hole in her blouse. Rhiannon clutched herself tightly and started to wail. The crack of the militiaman's gun barely had time to reverberate

before more guns joined in the symphony of murder. They were aiming into the crowd now, utter insanity written in their faces, dealing death in obscene, sloppy spurts.

Music. The crowd played notes in return. Militiamen dropped. Refugees dropped. Molotov cocktails streaked overhead. The Causeway caught fire. Most of the crowd began to run, some leaping off the Causeway and into the bay. Rhiannon Locke recognized most of those who stood their ground, guns drawn, Molotovs being lit, and wounded being dragged to the parking lot. Rhiannon reached into her own backpack, and pulled out a bottle of sangria.

It was past midnight when Priss stepped out of the bar, and gazed up at the sky. The Metro Rail blocked her view of everything but a sliver of the moon. Garbage bags were piled on the sidewalk beside her, one of the bags torn open and pouring onto the street. She sighed, and turned away from the garbage. She heard sirens again. She'd lost count an hour ago of how many there'd been.

"Hey Prissy-bitch!" A voice called behind her. She looked over her shoulder. Rhiannon came running down from the Metro station, coming to a stop by the garbage bags, and dropping onto them with a giggle. Then she bounced back up, and sauntered drunkenly towards her, "Hey. Hey. Hey Prissy."

"Why are you out… here…?" Priss smelled brine on her sister. The closer she got, the stronger it got. Then she smelled liquor.

"Serious talk time, Prissy," She was barely able to stand, slouching over and bracing herself on her knees, "You're going to hear a lot of things about me soon. I want you to know ahead of time, every single thing they say is an absolute stinking fact."

"What did you do?" She heard sirens again. That couldn't possibly be related, could it?

"I did something that I won't tell you, because it's just not as impactful when I tell it. The point is… do you love me, Prissy?"

Priss took a deep breath, "What did you do…?"

"I'm going to assume 'Yes'. I'm going away for a while, Prissy. You won't see me for a bit. Don't worry, I'll instant messy you often. We can set up meetings until this all…" She made a popping sound with her mouth, "…blows over."

Priss was too tired to fight with her for information, "Okay. If you need bail money, just ask, I'll… Just call me in the morning when you're sober."

Rhiannon pursed her lips suddenly, arching a brow at Priss, "Did you see Annie today?"

"Yeah, I did. I went to her house."

"What happened?"

"Nothing… we drank a little, talked."

Rhiannon smiled, "What did you drink?"

"What difference does it make?"

"I always figured Annie for a finer winer and diner. And a real sweet girl. Did you drink something sweet?"

"Yeah, we did. What difference does it make?"

Rhiannon smiled again, and gave a choked out sob. She then wrapped her arms around her sister, and pulled her in to a deep, wet kiss. Her tongue pushed into Priss's mouth, slobbering on her tongue. Priss could taste a liquor-tinged sweetness on her tongue. Priss drove her knee into Rhiannon's gut, shoving her away.

Rhiannon turned and skipped away, laughing wildly. Priss sighed and turned around, walking along the end of the block. She thought about what Rhiannon had said… Hopefully she'd end up passed out back home.

Priss glanced up to see two police officers approaching her. They demanded to see her ID, and asked where she'd been around

7 o'clock that night.

"I… I was drinking with a friend," She muttered as she fished for her driver's license.

"Who is this friend?" One officer asked.

"Her name's Aurianne Sharpe."

"Where's she live?"

"What difference does that make?" She furrowed her brow. They glared at her intensely. She started reciting Sharpe's address. Suddenly her foot slipped on the curb, and she stumbled, flopping onto the side of the street. The officers helped her up.

"Ma'am, have you been drinking?"

"Uhh…" She looked up at him, eyes unfocused, her head still spinning from the fall, "It's… I have."

She didn't notice just how flustered the officers were. One turned away, muttering something, as the other pulled out a pad and started scribbling a ticket, "Ma'am, please get yourself home as soon as possible. Do you need a cab?"

She blinked at them. She hadn't even taken out her license yet. She shrugged, making herself sway a bit, "I can make it I just live… a few blocks that way," She pointed in one direction, then the other. One of them grabbed her hand forcefully, and pressed the ticket into it, "Oh thanks! I'll read this in the tomorrow. Thanks so much officers."

More sirens, and then a police cruiser flew by. *What did you do, Rhiannon Locke?*

« **First Ones In** | **Key Biscayne** | **Save Her From Herself** »
Anabasis Hub

Kids with Guns

Nathan peeled a rheumy eye open. The phone was ringing. It automatically picked up after the third ring.

Where are you? said the voice on the other end.

Nathan didn't ask who was calling. There was only one person that had the number.

The Director.

"Not telling." He was just two days into a week-long leave. The point was irrelevant though, as the phone — surgically implanted into his skull and hardwired to his nervous system — had a GPS the Director could easily access, assuming he hadn't already.

How soon can you get to Massachusetts?

"Commercial?"

Preferable.

"It's going to take about a day." If he didn't want him to fly private, it would all depend on the availability of flights.

Arrange it and call me back. The line went dead.

Nathan's head throbbed and his stomach was percolating. Too much wine with dinner last night, and he wasn't used to all the cream and butter the French put in their food. He lit a cigarette as he made his way to the bathroom, accelerating his bowels' already pressing needs. He snatched the travel kit off the credenza and rifled through it while perched on the toilet. A B12 syrette he injected into his thigh. Nathan probably didn't need it — usually his stomach was a garbage compactor, and he hardly ever got hangovers; on the rare occasions when he did they never stuck around.

Showered and dressed, he gazed out at the Paris skyline through the balcony window and slipped on his watch and sunglasses. Then he placed a call to the Charles de Gaulle Airport and booked a direct flight to Boston departing later that afternoon. Nathan put it on the company card. After all the fees and surcharges it totaled over ten thousand American dollars, just for a one-way trip. If the Director expected him to fly economy across an ocean he could go fuck himself.

Nathan mentally dialed him back. "Done," he reported.

Jacques' bakery on the Rue Anaïs. Ask for last month's special. Already paid for.

So the bastard knew where he was.

It turned out that Jacqeus' Bakery was only several blocks away from where he was staying. Nathan packed his suitcase, checked out of the Hotel D'Aubusson and walked over to the shop. The girl behind the counter looked like she was still in high school, had blonde hair in curls, a button nose and wet lips.

"Umm…" He hesitated. This seemed wrong, but he'd never known the Director to make a mistake. He looked up the French translation for 'last month's special' and mimicked the pronunciation while also running a search to see if there were any other Jacques bakeries in Paris. It seemed like a common name.

The girl smiled and bobbed her head. She flipped the sign in the window to *boutique fermée*. "This way," she said in accented English, and with a playful finger, lacquered with red gloss and dusted in flour, motioned him to the doorway behind the register.

Beyond the kitchen with its convection ovens and deep mixing bowls, downstairs into an insulated cellar and through a sliding door on casters, he was led into a room dominated by a surgical chair, the surfaces galvanized steel and a drain sunk into the middle of the floor.

Nathan smiled grimly. "You're Jacques?"

"Yeah GI Joe," she said, and blew a bubble of gum, snapping it with teeth that clicked. "Get in."

He sat in the chair and waited patiently while she administered a local anesthetic before getting to work on his face, changing the hair color and adjusting his hairline, new pigments to the iris, higher cheekbones with a harder jawline, molding his earlobes and sharpening the nose. She leaned over him, loudly chewing gum as she went about carving up his face, sculpting it like a lump of clay.

Or a wad of dough, he thought.

It was all cosmetic, nothing functionary. Her bosom pressed warmly against his shoulder as she leaned over. She smelled like cinnamon and almond extract. He focused on the cupid bow of her mouth, the thin picket lines in her lips, and found himself wishing he had more time in Paris to get to know her better.

She cleaned him off with a sterilized swab, looked him over, eyes narrowed, wiped his temple and chin, then nodded, apparently satisfied with her work. All told it'd taken a little over twenty minutes. Jacques produced a mirror and Nathan looked himself over. He had to admit she'd done a good job. It was a face, nondescript, plain, looked just like any of a billion other faces circulating the world. Not too pretty and not too ugly, nothing to draw attention. He pulled on the skin, still numb but elastic, responsive. Besides some mild swelling that made him appear slightly bloated, there was no indication of surgery.

"Want me to do your hands?" she asked.

"Don't bother." He only had a quarter of the epidermal ridges on his palms and fingers as a normal human, and had just gotten them changed a month prior. He would've liked to have had his fingerprints removed entirely, but a person with hands as smooth as glass could raise eyebrows. "You've got something else for me."

Jacques handed him a manila folder. Contained inside was a new wallet with all the standard contents — license, credit cards, even photographs of a fake family — a new passport, and a key emblazoned with the Toyota car manufacturer's logo. Attached to

the key ring was a tag which read:

BOS INT Lot 16 Blue. Make: Toyota. Model: Camry. Year: 2031. Color: Gray. Plate Number: HG36T10.

He looked at his new name. It was the same one he'd provided to Air France when purchasing the ticket. He almost had to admire the Director — that cocksucker knew his every move.

He swapped the cash out of his old wallet to the new one, then handed it along with his previous passport to Jacques.

"What do you want me to do with this?"

Nathan shrugged. "Sell em if you can make money, but it's probably not safe to use, and the credit cards will have already been cancelled. Otherwise burn em." It never hurt to have a stranger traveling under one of his old pseudonyms to throw Interpol and the feds for a loop.

When he left the bakery he still had several hours to kill, and so Nathan decided to grab an early lunch at an outdoor café, the hangover already a fading memory. He ate an overpriced plate of steak-frites paired with an even more expensive bottle of sparkling water. From the café he hitched a cab to the airport.

Are you on your way?

Nathan sighed. "Heading there now," he responded. The driver glanced up at him through the rearview mirror, and assuming his passenger was talking on a mobile phone and the remark wasn't directed at him, ignored him for the remainder of the ride. "You know I have to get there three hours in advance just to check in."

You're flying to Logan?

"You know I am." It was annoying to be asked questions he knew the Director already had the answers to.

Emailing the dossier to you now.

The call disconnected.

The next ten hours were spent wading through the minutiae and hassle of air travel. The actual flight was just under seven hours, and Nathan spent the majority of it sleeping, not sure when he'd get another chance. After leaving the international terminal of Logan airport a little past four in the afternoon — the sea breeze refreshingly cool coming in from the harbor — he found the Toyota sedan right where the tag said he would. He appraised the hardware and firepower in the trunk then climbed into the driver's side, tossing the travel kit next to him on the passenger seat.

He hopped onto the Massachusetts Turnpike westbound. At this time of day the highway was a parking lot, and he set the vehicle on autopilot, cranked the AC and shut his eyes.

His destination was a town called Millbrook, located in the central part of the state. He'd passed through the area once or twice but knew next to nothing about it, and so browsed the web for information, the results appearing in his heads-up display against the dark background that was his closed eyelids. The details were dry, encyclopedic. Nipmuc tribe deeded the land and it was eventually incorporated in 1715. Consisted of 14.5 square miles of land and 6.7 square miles of water. As of the most recent census the population was listed as 2,963.

All that told him was that it was a small New England town consisting mostly of swampland. He checked local news articles, but except for a domestic murder-suicide three years ago, a particularly severe impact felt from the opioid epidemic in the first quarter of the century, and possible inspiration behind some of the stories by an author named Lovecraft, there was nothing of interest.

The car inched forward and stopped.

Millbrook bordered the Quabbin Reservoir, the primary water source for Boston, and the creation of which had necessitated the flooding of four towns back in 1938, almost a hundred years ago to the day.

Who gives a shit? Nathan thought. Discouraged and out of patience, he exhaled and closed out of the search.

It took over an hour just to get out of Boston, and another two to

reach Sturbridge, where the sedan took the off-ramp of Exit 9 and button-hooked onto Route 20. The sun had already set, the sky changing from shades of rose and orangeade to velvet as the stars wheeled overhead.

His stomach growled, reminding Nathan that he hadn't had anything to eat since Paris. He'd passed on the in-flight meal.

He usurped the car's controls and manually steered into the first fast-food drive-thru he saw. He ordered three bacon cheeseburgers, a large fries and a fountain drink, and then pulled back onto Route 20, shoveling the food into his mouth after handing the controls back to the Toyota. The burgers were swaddled in wax paper, piping hot and delicious in the cheap, dirty way only American fast-food seemed to posses. The fries were a sodium blitz and the soda liable to turn him diabetic. He didn't care. It was like masturbation. Afterwards he might feel filthy and ashamed, but in the moment the act was pleasurable.

By the time he was finishing off the last burger, tossing the wrapper over his shoulder into the backseat, the car was turning off Route 20 and onto back, surface roads. Beyond Sturbridge was Brookfield and then Ware.

According to the dossier he'd read while he was still seven miles above the Atlantic, the Thaumaturgical Array Sensor — a black satellite in low Earth orbit — had detected a spike within the Sothian spectrum at 0300 local time the previous night. The witching hour, if you believed European folklore. Supposedly due to the canonical hour's lack of prayers.

Coordinates pinpointed the source to a half kilometer square patch of land in Millbrook. But the technology the TAS utilized was still in its infancy, and often gave false positives.

So basically Nathan had no idea what he was walking into. For all he knew it could've been a couple of teenage girls at a slumber party playing with a planchette and Ouija board.

Night was deepening as the Camry hung right onto a road called Hammond Hill. This was the street where the four residences within

the targeted zone were located. He was lucky the place wasn't densely populated — the properties were large, each plot several acres, the homes spread far apart. It could've been a lot worse, and he grimaced at the memory of past missions involving an apartment complex, and another — not too long ago — a trailer park.

He'd studied the four residences on his phone, through 3D rendering composed of satellite imagery and GIS data. House number one was a modern two-story with a manicured lawn. The second house was more of the same. House number three was a ranch with a wrap-around porch, and like the first two there was an unobstructed view from the street. They were all possible candidates, but Nathan doubted it. For his money he was betting on house number four — a Cape Code built in the eighteenth century, set a hundred yards from the street, accessible only by foot or via a long dirt driveway. That would be the one.

The Sothian cultists would want their privacy.

Then again it might not be in any of the homes. Half a square kilometer also covered a lot of forested area, and he didn't like the idea of having to trudge through the woods at night looking for what amounted to a needle in a haystack.

A dark sedan was parked in front of house number four, blocking the driveway. The windows were tinted and he couldn't tell if it was occupied. The car idled next to a rusted mailbox, the name MCKEOWN written on it in faded letters.

He seized control of the wheel and drove past.

"Looks like we've got company."

I know. I saw.

"You know I hate it when you watch the feed from my eyes. It's so… intimate."

Grow up. I'm using all available resources at my disposal, so don't flatter yourself. Aerial surveillance shows two SUVs and a box truck up at the house. I don't know what's inside the box truck, it's either

empty or shielded somehow.

Nathan wasn't surprised. Rival factions were like an iceberg — if you saw two agents, it usually meant there were ten more close by.

He hit the blinker and swung onto the next street, driving slowly and careful to obey all traffic laws, buying some time before he had to loop back around. From the travel kit riding shotgun he pulled out a Benzedrine nasal inhaler and gave each nostril two pumps. In addition to the methamphetamine, it also contained a cocktail of sensory enhancing chemicals. He felt his sinuses immediately respond and open up, and he inhaled deeply.

I'm tracing the plates. Registration belongs to a Megan Parsons. No criminal record. Next the Director would run a background check, employment history, credit bureau scores, taxes, everything he could get his hands on. *It's a dummy alias.*

That was fast. "How do you know?"

Social networking accounts are boilerplate. Digital photographs along with the same exact comments have been identified on eight other profiles with mutual friends averaging at twenty-five percent. Two of these mutual friends also share the same date of birth and college degree as our Megan, and another has the same license number. There are other overlapping convergences I won't bore you with.

"Someone got sloppy." It was easy to forge social security numbers and medical documents to pass cursory examinations. The Director's examinations, though, were anything but cursory, and it took time and energy to craft convincing social networking accounts that could fool him and his search algorithms. Cutting and pasting wouldn't do the trick.

"Any idea who my new friends are?"

Nothing yet. The aliases must be fresh, no known affiliations coming back.

"Great." There was a huge difference between going up against

members of the Voltaic Counsel and the GOC, or the Chaos Insurgency and the Branch Lakivians, and being able to identify which group it was could be a matter of life and death.

I'm piggybacking on their communications but they're currently radio silent. When I know you'll know.

"You want me to wait?"

Absolutely not. You wasted too much time already getting here and it's lost us the initiative.

"Hey, that's your fault. If you'd chartered a private jet I could've flown straight from Paris to Worcester, and from there I can get to Millbrook by car in less than half an hour. It would've shaved ten hours off my arrival."

I didn't like the the risk assessment. Only two private flights have flown from Paris to Worcester in the past year. There was a sixty-five percent chance your unexpected flight would have been flagged as atypical and subjected to further scrutiny.

Nathan was grateful to hear there was an actual reason behind the Director forcing him to fly commercial, but he'd never express it. "Well, what about flying into Logan?" he responded instead.

Nineteen percent, and if you'd then flown from Boston to Worcester it climbs back up. Higher if we used a helicopter. TF Green was at twenty-five percent. Flying commercial had less than a single percentage point probability of you getting flagged. So I sacrificed the hours and went with the safest option.

Nathan decided to let it go. He should've known better than to question the Director's logic. "So what's my approach on this one? Think I should try bluffing?"

I think they'll shoot you before you could get close enough.

"Okay… How many combatants?"

Counting seven armed by the house, four covering the sides and three about to breach. There're another two in the car that you

passed.

He made a three-point turn and headed back onto Hammond.

Pull in here.

Nathan stopped the car half a mile from the McKeown house, parking it on an old fire road. He stepped out and stripped naked, breath pluming in the spring air, and squeezed into a suit of combat armor that was in the trunk. It was tailored for him, but still a tight fit. The suit was a magnetorheological fluid-based weave. The insulation and reflective surfaces blinded optoelectonics, rendering him effectively invisible to everything besides motion sensors and the naked eye. A reinforced cowl covered his head without restricting movement or his field of vision. The phone in Nathan's brain made additional components — such as a helmet-mounted display, WPSM or a situational-awareness hub — superfluous.

When he finished selecting the last of his gear and weapons from the trunk, buckling an explosive belt around his waist, he jogged back to the house, careful to stay out of the arc-sodium streetlamps. He told himself he was about to engage nine people, all of them probably highly-trained. Hopefully his own training and technology would prove superior, lending him an advantage by force multiplication to try and even the odds.

The sedan hadn't moved, was still next to the mailbox. Nathan crept toward it and planted a proximity mine on the side panel, then slunk away, up the muddy driveway before the thirty second delay ran out and the mine armed itself.

He heard commotion up ahead as he approached the house — a door kicked in followed by boots stomping across warped planks. Orders shouted to "Get the fuck down!" and "Let me see your hands!" Nathan paused at the top of the driveway and tilted his head, hidden under the eaves of pine trees that ringed the barren yard. The house was dilapidated, paint eroding from the few clapboards that remained. All of the windows were either capped by plywood or covered with newspapers that had gone bankrupt and folded decades ago. There was a hole in the gabled roof, the shutters had been stripped and the chimney was slanting so much a

strong breeze probably could have toppled it.

Five are inside, now. There's one standing by the vehicles, and the last one is at the rear of the house, on the opposite side.

The two SUVs were parked on a patch of gravel to his right, sandwiching the box truck between them. He moved swiftly, circling the SUVs. A stocky man loitered by the rear of the truck. He had on a bullet-proof vest over a tactical uniform sans insignia, head covered in a helmet and balaclava. He looked like a member of SWAT. These guys — whoever they might be — definitely weren't Voltaic or Lakivians. Judging by their hardware they might have been agents of the Insurgency.

The way he was standing, the man's back was against the cargo door of the box truck, and the two SUVs covered his flanks. Nathan either had to come at him from the front or go under the vehicles, and the latter would limit his strike zone to nonlethal parts of the body save the femoral.

He couldn't afford the time to let him bleed out. Nathan switched on the active-camouflage system of the suit and rushed head-on, relying on his speed and the darkness to keep him concealed until he struck. He had three million photoreceptor cells in each retina — more than twice as many rods than average — allowing for better scotopic vision. To him the world at night was clearly visible, although it came in drained of color, like an old black-and-white movie. What he saw as nothing more than shade, what the foliage of a tree might cast on a bright afternoon, everyone else saw as inky, abyssal black.

The midnight zone.

He clung to it, that fathomless dark, and unsheathed his knife. The padded soles of his boots didn't make a sound as he swept forward, launching into the air to cover the last ten feet.

The blade flashed as he pounced and buried it in the agent's throat, his other hand cupped around the mouth to muffle any potential scream. He twisted the handle and dragged it horizontally. Blood sprayed in a fan. There was the wet sound of running water as if

someone had turned on a spigot. The eyes went wide even as the body began to sag. Nathan wrenched the knife free and slipped the blade between the ribs.

He gently laid the corpse on the ground and rolled it under the truck.

Around the house, he turned the corner and sprinted to the back. The ground was uneven, an obstacle course of depressions and hillocks and half-submerged rocks, dead grass slick with dew. Scattered leaves crunched underfoot. He cut around the next corner and there was the other agent, exactly where the Director said he'd be. He was dressed identical to the previous man, watching the windows and backdoor in case anyone tried to escape that way.

He swiveled in Nathan's direction, raising the gun muzzle. But his reaction was too slow, too slow…

"What-" he managed to utter, and then Nathan was on top of him, his weight driving the agent to the ground. He jammed his finger into the trigger guard to prevent the gun from discharging as the knife severed the jugular, cutting deep, almost to the point of decapitation. He sped death along with another thrust to the heart, and left the body where it fell.

They're about to exit through the front. They've got three unarmed with them. I think they're bound prisoners by the way they're moving.

He girded the side of the Cape Cod, hugging the crumbling foundation as he made his way back toward the front and peeked around the corner. An agent emerged from the house and tramped down the uneven porch steps. He was less than ten feet away from Nathan, but the angle was poor, and the line of fire was broken by an old man trailing close behind him. The old man's hands and feet were shackled, he was blindfolded with his mouth gagged. Another agent pushed him along with a catchpole — a noose made from steel cable attached to a long rod, like the kind animal control officers used to snare dogs — forcing him to march outside.

The old man staggered and almost fell on the top step, the wire drawing taut around his neck as he tried to catch his breath, nostrils flared and cheeks ballooning around the ball-gag.

Nathan backpedaled, returning to the edge of the pine trees that encircled the property in order to gain a wider perspective. Two more civilians in matching restraints to the old man were led out: a woman in a stained house dress and a boy — couldn't have been more than seventeen. Both were being led by catchpoles. Bringing up the rear were the final two agents.

The old man was emaciated whereas the woman was obese, the boy as big and fit as a farmhand. Despite these differences there was a familial resemblance to all three, and Nathan surmised that he was looking at three generations of the McKeown family.

Overwatch is trying to update them on the deceased status of the two agents you killed. I'm blocking the receivers but it's only a matter of time before they switch to a back channel. They can't see you but they know someone is there; they think it might be snipers and are broadening their search pattern.

Nathan wanted to broach the topic that they had an Overwatch at all, but was preoccupied and filed it away for later. He waited until the group reached the medial point between the house and the vehicles and then opened fire, focusing on the two agents forming the rearguard, as they were clustered together. He mowed them down, rounds perforating their chests in red cloudbursts, and moved up the line. The vests offered no protection against the antipersonnel flechettes Nathan was using for ammunition, the needle tips puncturing the ballistic material like tissue paper.

The boy rubbed his face against his shoulder, dislodging the blindfold. Realizing he was no longer tethered by the catchpole, he dropped his shoulder and charged the agent holding fast to the McKeown woman — presumably his mother. The boy slammed into the agent like a linebacker, knocking him off balance and giving Nathan a clear shot as he stumbled, arms pinwheeling. Three supersonic flechettes sliced through the balaclava and drilled into his face, cleaving the tip of his nose in a surgical bisection and ripping the mandible from one of its hinges, the lower jaw flapping loose from the remaining attached joint. Broken teeth crested a waterfall of blood. The agent wailed. His tongue protruded like an angry pink worm from the back of his throat. If there were any words in that wail they were lost to his disfigured mouth as he collapsed to

his knees.

The two remaining agents reached cover behind one of the SUVs, dragging the old man with them as they laid down suppressing fire. The shots were scattered and all over the place. It was clear they had no clue where Nathan was, and he didn't bother seeking the protection of a tree trunk as bullets stitched a line of tiny meteoric craters in the earth several feet away, spraying him with loam.

On Hammond Street a ball of fire suddenly erupted. There was the booming peal of the detonation of the proximity mine — Nathan felt the shockwave reverberate in his diaphragm — followed by the shrill protest of shearing metal and the crystal-chimes of glass hitting the macadam. The surrounding land was briefly bathed in a warm light as the flames blossomed. His suit rapidly changed colors trying to match the lighting, the outer skin turning bright orange before dimming as the flames withered and finally dissolved in a cloud of black smoke.

The two in the car are now dead, but they've caught on and switched to a back channel. I'm trying to find it now. They'll be calling in support.

I'M ALMOST DONE, Nathan texted back in order to maintain silence.

He stood and surveyed the situation. The boy had found a key ring on one of the corpses and was systematically trying each one on his mother's chains. The surviving agents hunkered behind the SUV, probably digging in, would hold the position until their backup arrived.

They didn't understand that they had just boxed themselves in.

Nathan popped two smoke grenades and lobbed them at the vehicles. One landed close enough for an agent to snatch it in a gloved hand and pitch it away, but it was too late. Pale, thick smoke was already enveloping them, expanding and spreading across the yard. Nathan cut right through the trees, emerging a hundred feet away as he made his approach.

As he closed the gap he cycled through visual augmentations, switching to thermal-infrared imaging. His suit's color automatically changed to a milky, off-white to blend in with the smoke.

He could easily see the agents now — one of them was trying to hook some kind of optical device on their head, but was having difficulty getting it to clip on the brackets of their helmet. The other clutched a submachine gun and sat on top of the old man, pinning him to the ground.

Nathan paused a moment to listen in. One of the agents was actually a woman. Underneath the current of their voices, the prisoner repeatedly mumbled something behind the plug of the gag.

"Did you see how many there are?"

"I didn't see shit. I still can't. These fucking goggles aren't picking anything up."

"Rodriguez is still alive. They blew his face off and he's still alive. I can hear him choking over there."

"Sit tight. You can't do anything for him right now. Slanted and Enchanted is on its way along with a med evac."

Nathan vaulted over the hood of the SUV, landing softly behind the pair.

"This is goddamned Charlie Foxtrot."

"You got that right."

"You still don't see anything?"

"No. I told you. Neither did Overwatch."

"Wait, I think I heard something."

The man turned on the balls of his feet, spinning one hundred and eighty degrees as the smoke parted just in time for him to glimpse the bore of the gun pointed between his eyes. Nathan fired from a range of about two inches. Blowback showered his hand with blood

and bone fragments as the skull split open like a rotten piece of fruit.

The remaining agent whipped her carbine around while Nathan was aligning his next shot, readjusting from the recoil. He slapped the barrel away, iron-sight digging into his palm, as the first bullet glanced off his thigh. The other shots went wide, punching holes in the SUV's door panel and shattering the tempered glass window, breaking it into granular chunks. The tire popped, exhaling a puff of pressurized air as it deflated.

She released her grip on the carbine and Nathan allowed it to fall, belatedly realizing that it was a distraction while she drew her sidearm. He sidestepped and she unloaded into the vacant space he'd previously occupied. Wedged in the tight quarters between the SUV and the box truck, he jumped onto the side of the truck, using it to pivot and change his trajectory, angling with his foot to strike at her exposed neck.

Hearing him rebound the agent twisted and fired blindly. A bullet found Nathan, striking his forearm. The armor absorbed the round, deforming and pancaking the bullet while deflecting most of the energy, but the impact numbed his hand to pins and needles and he dropped his gun. The kick sailed harmlessly over the agent's head.

She backed away and reloaded, ejecting the clip and sliding in a fresh magazine as she skirted the rear bumper of the SUV, putting it between her and Nathan. Reaching up with a gloved hand, she ripped the goggles off her helmet, and Nathan likewise cycled back to normal vision. The smoke was dissipating, now no more than tendrils of light fog being torn apart by a gust of wind. The nearby trees swayed back and forth. Leaves skidded past, chattering across the gravel.

He snatched his gun up and sprung on top of the SUV, the chassis rocking beneath his weight and the roof dimpling.

The agent looked up at him, sidearm gripped in a shooter's stance. "You're human," she said, like it was an accusation.

Nathan cocked his head, rolling his shoulders in a shrug as if to say: *You were expecting something else?*

"Might be Insurgency," she continued. "Or a Yeb. Definitely not a Neo-Luddite."

Wait, Nathan thought to himself. I thought *you* were with the Insurgency. Again he found himself wondering just who exactly these people were.

She fired at him, but the combat suit had already learned from the first bullet and had adapted accordingly. The rounds glanced harmlessly off the armor and cascaded down onto the roof of the vehicle. Nathan hopped down. Comprehending the futility of it, the agent retreated, pistol pointed at the sky.

I'm in their back-channel now, the Director buzzed inside his head. *The call signs match a known Foundation MTF.*

"What?" Nathan blurted in his surprise.

"Negative," the woman was saying as she moved further away. "Still engaged. Can't terminate."

He raised the flechette-gun, aiming to put this agent down. No more playing with her. No more fooling around. With dawning alarm he realized she wasn't addressing him — had never been speaking to him, not directly.

"Initiate," she said before he could stop her.

And the Hellfire missile, launched from the Foundation Overwatch drone — a hunter-killer UAV circling high above — struck the house.

Part Two

Kids with Guns Part Three

Part Three

Nathan jumped out the back of the Transall 700C.

He was high enough that he could see the curvature of the planet. Far below him and to the southeast, out to sea, a storm was brewing off Cape Sainte-Marie. Charcoal clouds flickered with lightning as they spun clockwise.

He wore a pressurized suit and a respirator with an oxygen bottle. As a precaution, prior to the jump he'd manually flushed the nitrogen from his system.

He plummeted from sixty thousand feet. This high up the atmosphere was thin, the air cold, gnawing at him through the suit. He'd departed from Tahiti and so had no warm clothes, and the crew aboard the Transall had forgotten to bring him any. His fingers and toes went numb. He clenched them into fists to try and get the blood flowing.

Nathan kept his back straight and arms folded tightly against his body as he dove toward Madagascar. He reached terminal velocity within fifteen seconds, free falling at over a hundred and twenty five miles per hour. He wanted to get back to the ground as soon as possible — back where it was warm — in order to avoid frostbite.

He fell…

At seventeen thousand feet he broke through the cloud cover. A great expanse of land spread out below him — plains of rust checkerboarded by vermilion. He could make out the dirty smudges of human settlements along the coastline, and pale ribbons scored the island back and forth. They were either roadways or dry riverbeds.

The lack of vegetation was glaring and the flat, empty terrain made it difficult for Nathan to orient himself. He knew the ground was rapidly approaching, but he couldn't tell how close he was in approximation to it. It was like skydiving over snow or water: utterly blank and featureless. There was nothing to frame his perspective; the towns were too far away to effectively use as a gauge.

He relied on the altimeter in his HUD instead. When it reached eighteen hundred feet Nathan pulled the handle to the closing pin, releasing the pilot chute. An ATPS deployed from his back. His descent slowed as the parachute bloomed and created drag. The harness dug into Nathan deep enough to leave bruises while he wrestled for control with the toggles, using the steering lines to try and straighten out.

When he'd finally gotten himself level with the ground he was already crashing into it. He landed on the balls of his feet and threw himself sideways to displace the impact energy, distributing it along his left thigh and buttocks. Although he had shock absorbents newly implanted in his ankles, it was habit to spread the landing-shock over a greater area to reduce the risk of injury.

"My ride coming in from the west?" Nathan asked as he picked himself off the ground. A trail of dust in that direction had caught his eye during the descent. He unbuckled the harness container and shrugged out of the shoulder straps.

Yes, confirmed the Director, speaking through the phone in Nathan's head.

He removed the respirator's face mask. By the time he was stepping out of the pressurized suit a Jeep Wrangler was pulling alongside him. Behind the wheel looked to be a girl of twelve or thirteen. She had on camouflaged shorts and Adidas trainers patched with duct tape. Nathan was about to comment on her age then thought better of it. He tossed the parachute gear in the backseat and hauled himself into the Jeep by the roll bars.

A hot wind scoured the island, spawning dust devils and thawing Nathan's fingers. He flexed them experimentally. Movement was fine and sensation was returning.

They rode in silence. Nathan took the opportunity to bask in the sun and soak in his surroundings, though there really wasn't much to soak in — sand dunes met the horizon in a complete three hundred and sixty degree panoramic. The only sign of life during the short ride was a baobab tree. But as they drove past it he saw that the tree was in fact dead, the trunk rotten and hollow.

Twenty minutes later and the girl dropped him off at a lake surrounded by hurricane fencing topped with razor-wire. The lake was gone, evaporated, leeched by irrigation systems. A gatehouse stood unattended, and large portions of the fence were missing.

Nathan glanced at a posted sign. Next to the block letters was a radioactive trefoil:

WARNING!

NO ADMITTANCE BEYOND THIS POINT!

GUARDS NOT REQUIRED TO ANNOUNCE THEIR PRESENCE BEFORE OPENING FIRE

The message repeated in French and various Malagasy dialects. Beneath the bold font was something about the federal government and nuclear isotopes. He dismissed the sign as a paper tiger.

Treading past the gatehouse and fence, the lakeshore sloped down, and Nathan spotted a windowless concrete bunker by the banks. As he drew closer he saw that its industrial door was guarded by a digital lock and half a dozen laser-guided turrets. The guns chirped like birds at Nathan's approach, pivoting on gyroscopes and training their barrels on him.

He paused on an apron of poured cement in front of the bunker. Suddenly the steel door rolled up. A ramp led downward, and Nathan followed its course until it opened into a cavernous room. It was cool and dark inside.

He'd never been to this particular installation before, hadn't even known the Director had a place in Madagascar until he'd phoned him. All previous face-to-face interactions had been conducted in the

Yukon, at a base carved into the layers of permafrost.

Elevator, advised the Director. *To your right.*

Nathan walked along a grated catwalk that clung to the wall, his footfalls echoing in the vast chamber. The bottom of the room — if there even was one — was lost in shadow far below.

He entered the waiting elevator. The door snicked shut behind him and his stomach rose as he felt himself catapulted downward, burrowing into the earth.

The door opened and deposited him in front of the Director.

"Nathan," the Director said. Or did he? His lips moved, but Nathan wondered if he was still hearing his voice inside his head. It was difficult to tell.

"Sir," he said.

"How're you feeling? Shoulder isn't bothering you anymore, is it?"

"It's fine."

"Good. I'm glad to hear that. Come on, this way."

He was escorted through a lobby with black tiled flooring, nonplussed by the Director's presence. Nathan hadn't expected him to personally greet him, and he had to quicken his pace to catch up with the Director's long strides.

They walked together. Various offshoots branched left and right from the main corridor, leading to conference rooms and offices. All empty save for cups of coffee and water bottles, like everyone had just picked up and left moments ago. In one conference room a screen still displayed the middle of a PowerPoint presentation, stuck on a slide about transhumanism.

"Hey. What's going on here? Where is everyone?"

The Director looked away. "We have been… liquidating all non-essential personnel."

The words hung between them. Nathan shuddered, recalling the staff at the Yukon site.

"What's considered non-essential?" he asked.

"Non-combat and high ranking, for the most part," replied the Director. "You'd be stunned at how many members of upper management are redundant. Or maybe you wouldn't. Personally, I find those at the bottom of the corporate ladder to be largely indispensable."

The Director moved through a pair of automatic glass doors and came to stand in a wide, circular room. It looked like a dead-end to Nathan; there were no other doorways, not that he could see, except back the way they'd come.

"Stand here a moment, if you'd please." The Director indicated a square on the floor the size of a folded newspaper. "I would override the security commands — I know it's really you, and that you're wearing a nine millimeter in a pancake holster — but it's quicker and easier to just allow it to cycle through its protocols."

The glass doors turned opaque. There was a fuzzy hum like an old cathode-ray television starting up. Nathan had the sensation of simultaneously being watched and probed — of eyes and hands on him, peering into his mind, groping and plugging their fingers into every nook and crevice. His gag reflex ratcheted to high-alert.

The Director, for his part, smiled. He was dressed smartly in a slate three-piece and polished shoes that reflected the recessed lighting. (Probably made out of an exotic animal's hide, the more endangered the better. Great white shark or black rhino, perhaps.) He was clean-shaven and had a full head of silver hair. He might've been a spry eighty, but Nathan wouldn't have been surprised to learn he was pushing ninety.

"You don't like it, do you?"

"You mean somebody does?" It felt as if Nathan was being molested by a ghost. A current of air from an unknown source ruffled his clothes and hair.

The Director shrugged. "You get used to it," he said. "We tried to make it as noninvasive as possible."

"Is it anomalous?" The hum crescendoed.

"The security protocols? No. It's all current technology. *Expensive* current technology, but current nonetheless. Would you believe you just had a PET scan?"

"Yes," Nathan said, adjusting his collar. "It's not the craziest thing I've heard today."

Like liquidating most of your staff, he thought but kept to himself.

"No, I suppose not," conceded the Director.

The humming ceased. A panel on a nearby wall slid aside, revealing an aperture beyond. The Director motioned Nathan through, trailing behind him. They moved through the aperture — what appeared to be a blast door but reminded Nathan of a sphincter, the way it opened and closed — and entered a new area of the facility.

"Where're we going?" Nathan said.

"We're bushwhacking off the grid." The Director's heels clacked against the tiles as he took point. "I forget that you haven't been here before. This is the high-security annex. I've changed your credentials to match my own, and taken the liberty of downloading the facility's map to your phone."

The wing seemed to be devoted to bio-research. Beyond a row of windows Nathan glimpsed a sterile laboratory. Next was a refrigerated stem-cell bank and — after that — a server farm.

They passed through another sphincter-door on the left, the aperture dilating to permit entry. Nathan followed the Director and froze just inside the room. It was some kind of infirmary, but an infirmary like he'd never seen before. It looked like a surgical suite crossbred with a mechanic's garage. An array of instruments were scattered across tables and countertops: sonic tissue and bone cutters, laser scalpels, drills and chisels and a hundred other tools he couldn't name. There was a spill on the floor that probably wasn't grease or

oil. A lithium-ion battery the size of a twin mattress squatted in the corner, alligator clamps attached to the terminals.

Two months had passed since the incident in Massachusetts, and Nathan had spent the first of those months in the amniotic clutches of a drip-feed. But his complacency was disrupted by growing unease. He'd felt like a feral animal, treed by narcotics that wouldn't allow him to escape the hospital bed; they isolated and held him hostage. When he was awake he was listless — couldn't think straight, and the worst part of it was that he didn't care, not really. The drugs had somehow robbed Nathan of concern; of all his instinctive tendencies toward self-reliance and preservation. It stole his drive. The days passed, gently and as inconsequential as leaves falling, and the most he could manage to resist it was to pull out the IV. This served only to set off an alarm and draw the NP on duty at the nurse's station. They would reinsert the infusion while Nathan protested half-heartedly. Who did he think he was fooling? Not them, that's for sure. They knew he was content as long as they kept feeding him whatever the hell it was they were pumping into his veins.

Eventually the nurses grew weary of reattaching the perfusion, and so they simply tied his hands to the hospital bed, and that was the end of that.

Nathan couldn't recall much else from his time in the hospital except for the disturbing image of his torso filleted on a surgical table, observed from an angle as if he was having an out-of-body experience. He would've dismissed it as a dream spun by his addled brain if the image wasn't so damn persistent.

After that came the rehab. He'd called it quits just one week into physical therapy with the random and impromptu decision to fly to Tahiti. The Director had surprised him by leaving him alone. He'd paid the rent on Nathan's bungalow, had sent him a stipend along with prescriptions and a treatment plan, but other than that remained unobtrusive and hands-off.

Until now.

"Are you all right, Nathan?"

Supported by pylons, the bungalow had roosted ten feet above the beach, and the blue Pacific waves lapped and hissed and foamed at the base of the poles during high-tide.

"Nathan? You're drifting."

Nathan snapped back. He didn't want to; it would be easy to close his eyes and disappear into the memory. Get lost in there, like the hospital bed and its intravenous nectar. He could dine on lotuses all day, set Blonde on Blonde to repeat, and dream about anything except this new reality that he'd been thrust into:

A woman was strung up on the far wall of the infirmary.

She was crucified by bindings at her throat, wrist and waist, holding her upright and in place. All of her joints looked to be dislocated. Her legs were missing from the knees down, the left arm cuffed within an Ilizarov apparatus. Tubes ran from frosted tanks into her spine.

The flesh had been excoriated from her body, exposing a metal skeleton beneath and a white mop-head of intestinal wiring that spilled out of her abdomen. The metal gleamed like chrome.

"Bitch has a goddamn bomb tuned to her neural oscillations," the Director said as he advanced on the woman. Nathan didn't think he'd ever heard him swear before, and for the second time that day he was nonplussed. The Director crouched in front of the woman's splayed body, hands braced on his knees and leaning forward. His nose almost brushed her pubis. "You were lucky. If she'd spent another ten minutes in your car we could've used you for chum fishing. We had to freeze her with liquid nitrogen on the medevac to prevent it from detonating. I still haven't figured out how to defuse it. That's why it's so cold in here."

"What is she?" Nathan inched forward, curiosity getting the better of him.

The Director glanced at him over his shoulder, flashing a smile sharp enough to cut glass. "You don't recognize her?"

Of course he did. He didn't ask *who* she was, he asked *what* she

was. The last time he'd seen her had been over two months ago. She was covered in blood, and he'd been in a rush to save his own skin, but there was no mistaking that face. The phone in his head had a recording of that night, captured by the camera attached to Nathan's optic nerve. He'd reviewed it so many times that he knew the exact time, down to the second, when the Foundation agent appeared. He pulled it up now and paused the frame, comparing the image to that of the one in front of him.

"Should I?" he said.

"She's the Foundation agent you captured."

He'd had a lot of time during his rehabilitation to scrutinize the events of that night in Millbrook, and most of it didn't make sense. The Director would've maintained constant surveillance on the area after the positive Sothian hit on the satellite, so why had he acted like he was unaware of the Foundation's presence up until Nathan arrived at the scene? And — for that matter — why delay that arrival by more than half a day? Under closer examination, the Director's explanation seemed more and more like a magician's misdirection, especially after he didn't hesitate to send in a helicopter to retrieve the Foundation agent.

There were other holes that persisted; whenever Nathan presumed to have a firm grip on things they buoyed and expanded, leaving him gasping and struggling to stay afloat. His assignment was to capture the alleged Sothian cultists, yet he'd been given an arsenal to take on a military unit, not subdue a covenant of witches. No non-lethals, no handcuffs, no charms or wards or talismans. Nathan wanted to interrogate Herbert McKeown, but he hadn't seen him since they'd boarded the maglev train together. He didn't even know if the old man was still alive.

"She's a cyborg."

"Android, actually," the Director corrected. "You're a cyborg."

This is why you sent me to Massachusetts, Nathan thought. He'd never outwardly expressed his doubts regarding Millbrook. An alert popped on his HUD whenever the Director dialed into his head, but

he was suspicious that the Director had a backdoor allowing him to circumvent the notification, and was potentially spying on Nathan around the clock.

"So what's the big deal?" he said, leaning against the wall. "This technology has been available for years."

The Director shook his head. "Not like her. There's nothing like her. The technology is still only theoretical. She has a positronic brain utilizing artificial DNA computing. From what I've been able to find out she can exceed five yottabytes of storage capacity."

The agent's scalp was peeled back, the top of the skull removed, as in an autopsy.

"Looks like a normal brain to me," remarked Nathan. It was true — at least, for the small part visible.

"But it's not," continued the Director. "Do you have any idea how big a single yottabyte is? No? It's a thousand zettabytes, or a thousand *trillion* gigabytes. It's impossible to compress that much data into a human cranium. It'd probably take me a drive the size of school bus to fit half of it. This android's memory density just isn't possible — not yet, anyway — and it somehow sustains equal flops without melting. I wouldn't believe the Foundation had that kind of computing power if I hadn't seen it for myself — no one does, not even the Pentagon or the FSR."

"You don't know how they did it? Christ. You've had two months. Haven't you been reverse-engineering her?"

"There's a bomb wired to her brain activity," the Director reiterated. "It's severely impeded our diagnostics."

"Can't you just — I don't know — hack into her?"

"She runs on a closed network to prevent that sort of thing. But even if I manually plugged into her I wouldn't risk it. She's a supernova of power, her operating platform is unique, and there's no way to know what kind of defenses it has. I don't want to go up against her immune system and accidentally start a fusion reaction."

"Immune system? Wait. Are you telling me she's still alive?"

"If that's what you want to call it, yes."

Nathan felt something that he wasn't used to. What was it? Panic? Fear? He wasn't familiar enough with the emotion to accurately identify it. Anxiety?

"You… you vivisected her?"

"She doesn't experience pain the same way you do, Nathan. It's just an analogy of pain. I didn't torture her. Besides, the explosive device necessitated her continued survival. She didn't really give me much of a choice, now did she?"

Constant exposure to violence had caused Nathan to develop a mental callous against death. As far as he was concerned there was nothing mystical about it, no final judgement or waiting paradise, and certainly no 'New Game +' encore. The world had existed for four and half billion years prior to his creation. He had a hunch that it would continue on fine without him. Death was just another waste byproduct, dying not much different than taking a shit or blowing your nose. And what was left over, after all was said and done, got flushed down the toilet same with everything else.

But that didn't make him a sadist, and he was hard-pressed to imagine a fate worse than the Foundation agent's.

He crossed his arms and veiled his disgust with apathy. "You called me in for this?"

"No, but you should know that thirty six seconds ago the Foundation destroyed our missile silos, taking out our air deterrents."

"What?" Nathan pushed off the wall and stood rigid, his body tensed as he sussed out the news. "You didn't remove her tracker."

"We removed three. After that the scans came back negative. Even if she was still broadcasting, this facility is too far underground and too well-insulated for a signal to reach the surface."

"Why don't you go up and explain that to them, then?"

The Director didn't take the bait. "They must've forced the Transall to land in Ivato and trailed it back here. I'd hoped your HALO jump would've fooled them longer than this."

"You're retreating," Nathan said. It was the only reasonable conclusion, as hard as it was to believe.

"Yes," admitted the Director. "They're coming for her — want their precious brain back, and they won't stop until they have it. I've been withdrawing as they seize my properties, one after the other. First the Yukon, then Crater Lake. The Amazon and Yalong Bay. All gone. And now Madagascar. They've breached the bunker and are making their way to the elevator shaft."

"How many are there?"

There was a discouraging pause. "It looks like an entire MTF."

"Say again."

"It's the whole task force."

"What do you mean 'whole task force'?"

"Eta-8. Call sign 'Man-Eaters'."

"Uh-huh. And how large a unit are they?" The name didn't ring a bell, but Nathan made a point of avoiding the Foundation whenever possible. The last time he'd engaged them there'd been nine agents and he'd barely limped away with his life.

"Forty-five."

And with that, the Director vanished.

Kids with Guns Part Two

Kids with Guns Part Two

Part Two

The explosion reduced the house to kindling and flipped Nathan over before slamming him to the ground. His combat suit protected him from the heat and debris, but the concussive shockwave of compressed air turned his insides to jelly. When he tried to move it felt like he was going to break apart into a million pieces; the only thing preventing him from doing so was the suit, holding him together like a sausage casing.

Burning roof tiles, pulling tails of smoke and embers, sizzled and rained down all around him. It looked like the Pleiades meteor shower. Shards of porcelain scudded past his head. Pretzeled rebar clanged as it hit the ground and went careering off into the surrounding woods. A bed frame landed in the boughs of a white pine, setting the needles on fire.

The rapid change in pressure, from high to low, caused the wind to howl and whip around Nathan as it rushed back in to fill the sudden vacuum.

Administered hormonal agents, otic compound and coagulants, the Director said inside his head. He was speaking at his normal volume, but to Nathan it sounded amplified, booming and echoing through his skull. He winced and — not for the first time — wished for the serenity of a mute button.

SOME PAINKILLERS WOULD BE NICE, he texted back.

Later. There're more Foundation troops en route, both air and ground. Now get up.

Nathan attempted to lever himself onto his knees and elbows. His sight dimmed from the exertion, black particles swimming and expanding across his vision, and he tasted the signature copper

notes of blood on his pallet. His strength ebbed and he foundered, sprawled out on his stomach. He may have passed out for a second or two. It was hard to tell.

He tried to pick himself up again, grinding his teeth and choking back a moan that demanded to be released. A vein throbbed in his forehead. Nathan imagined his insides as a frayed sweater, the entire garment unraveling under the governance of a single unspooled thread. He coughed, and the taste of blood grew stronger.

Get up, ordered the Director. *You have internal bleeding in your lungs and bowels. One of your lungs has also collapsed. It's been closed off and the other, remaining lung adjusted for compensation. You've got several herniated discs, your right eardrum is ruptured and you have a hairline fracture in your clavicle and another in your ulna. You're dying but the nanodocs have you stabilized. It will take hours for you to expire in your current condition. But if you don't hurry you're going to jump to the head of the line. Now. Get. Up.*

Nathan relied on his arm strength, pushing off from the ground and curling his knees into his chest, swinging his feet into position under him. He straightened his legs, and when his sight finally returned he found himself standing, albeit weaving drunkenly.

You should feel the adrenaline and the otic stabilizer kicking in.

Nathan didn't feel shit; or if he did it was too subtle to notice. He had pharmaceutical caches inside his body that could be administered automatically based on vitals or remotely through the phone in his head. The hormonal stimulant should've boosted his energy while the otic compound restored balance, but at that particular moment there was nothing more he'd rather do than lie down and close his eyes, make the world stop spinning and hibernate for the next four months.

The missile had transformed the house into a pocked lunar landscape. In the unsteady light of the burning trees he glimpsed the female agent, supine and half-buried in sheetrock. Her helmet was dented, the bangs pasted to her forehead by a bright red freshet. A curtain rod had skewered her below the left breast, pinning her to

the ground like a butterfly specimen pinned to a piece of corkboard.

WHAT'S GOING ON WITH THAT DRONE? he asked, glancing away from the body. Her eyes were open. For some reason that he didn't care to explore that was the worst part of it. The eyes were open. They lent the corpse a vampiric quality and seemed to follow him as he roved the debris field.

It's inspecting a vehicle approaching on George Street. Not one of ours, and obviously not Foundation. Seems to be civilian. Once they figure that out it will return, so we only have a small window of opportunity.

DOES IT HAVE ANYMORE MISSILES?

Yes. I think they're using the AGM-114-V variant of the Hellfire.

WHAT MAKES YOU SAY THAT?

It's what I'd use. If I'm right, then that drone's model can carry a payload of four. So it either has three remaining or some other armament that's the equivalent.

Great, Nathan thought as he stumbled through an asteroid belt of rubble formed by the explosion. A webwork of copper piping was being licked by green flames. The silhouette of a large chifforobe loomed through the smoke — it was missing the wardrobe door, drawers hanging out and clothes strewn across the yard. He stepped over a smoldering pile of tomes and grimoires. A Windsor chair split down its saddle-shaped seat. What looked to be a horned neopagan altar, the unwrought stone covered in a patina of soot and candlewax with runes crudely chiseled into the sides and surface of the Communion table.

He paused, frowning at the spot where he'd last seen the McKeown boy, trying to free his mother from her bindings. It would take a sponge and squeegee to clean them up. They'd been closest to the point of impact, and all that remained now was a bloody skidmark and some viscera that might've belonged to one of them, both or neither. The wet cordage of an intestine stretched like a clothesline between a pile of drywall and a jumble of wooden beams.

What about Herbert McKeown? said the Director.

Nathan, assuming he meant the old man, picked his way through the wreckage. The old man had been partially shielded from the blast by the box truck and one of the SUVs, but still looked to be in poor shape. As Nathan recalled, even prior to the missile strike he hadn't exactly been a shining beacon of health.

Nathan jabbed his hand under the outcrop of chin, rooting for a pulse. It was there, fluttering and off-tempo. Nathan wasn't sure if he was breathing or not.

Rivulets of blood leaked from the old man's nose and ears. His skin was jaundiced, beard the indistinct gray of cobwebs, speckled with putrescent food and squirming with fleas and lice. The fingers were chapped and stained from nicotine and resin. He was naked except for threadbare cargo shorts, starched with dirt and dotted with cigarette burns. Up close the yellowed flesh was oddly translucent. Not only could Nathan see the vascular system, but also the faint outlines of the skeleton — the attenuated and pronounced rib-cage, the almost bird-like fragility of the arm and leg bones and the spur of his hip…

Unless it was all some kind of elaborate subdermal tattoo. There were designs, a mandala and what appeared to be Buer or Baphomet —

The drone has completed its scan of the car and is headed back your way.

Nathan removed the catchpole noose from the old man's neck, pulled out the gag, and then picked him up, draping him over his shoulders in a fireman's carry. He was greasy but remarkably light, and the new burden seemed to make little difference to Nathan, except for an acute itch that flared in his collarbone.

Maybe those hormones were finally kicking in after all.

Even through the air filters of the suit he was assaulted by the stink of the old man. It socked him like sulfuric fumes, causing his eyes to water and the little hairs in his nose to curl. It reminded Nathan of a

long night he'd once spent out in the Florida everglades, surrounded by an inhuman miasma of jungle rot and scales and steaming mud.

He opened the driver's side door of the closest SUV, a Ford Explorer, and after verifying the keys were in the ignition he tossed the old man over the center console and into the passenger seat. The rear left tire was on its rim after catching a stray bullet, but he chose it because the other SUV had taken the brunt of the explosion and was worse for wear. He threw the transmission into reverse, looping backwards to align the front end so that it pointed down the driveway.

Wait. Take her with you.

WHAT? WHO?

Don't be obtuse. The female Foundation agent. I want her. Bring her along.

WHY? SHE'S DEAD.

She's not dead, and stop arguing. We don't have time for this. I want her.

Nathan put the Explorer into park and darted out. He didn't understand or agree with the request, it seemed to jeopardize their objective with additional — and unnecessary, if you asked him — risk, but the Director was right on one account: there was no time for arguing. He wrenched the curtain rod from the woman's abdomen. The yawning wound fountained blood like a geyser.

He texted, as if the Director didn't already know: FOUNDATION AGENTS ALL HAVE TRACKING IMPLANTS.

I've arranged an ambulance retrofitted for surgery to rendezvous with you in Ware. It's equipped with stealth technology, signal dampeners and multi-spectral camouflage. That should buy us enough time to extract the devices.

AND WHAT ABOUT ME AND THE OLD MAN? WE DON'T WARRANT AN AMBULANCE? I DON'T THINK HE'S GOING TO LIVE MUCH LONGER WITHOUT IMMEDIATE MEDICAL

ATTENTION. He hauled the woman up onto his shoulders, repeating the process of the fireman's carry. Her removal left an impression of her profile in the powdered sheetrock like a snow angel. She was much heavier than the old man, and the itch in Nathan's collarbone graduated into a molten burn.

The separation of you from the agent is tantamount to your safety. The sooner the better. After you drop her off a private maglev train will be waiting for you and Mr. McKeown up in Fallon. It has a fully-staffed medical bay to see to both of your injuries, and is about twenty miles north of Ware. The distance is… regrettable. But it's the closest point in the railway line to your location. There isn't a station; the train will be making an unscheduled, unreported stop on the westbound line, which is where you'll board. Your vehicle will then be dumped into the nearby Pike's Pond. It's small but deep. Used to be a quarry. The Toyota will never be found.

Nathan pawed open the rear door of the SUV and deposited the Foundation agent into the back. After a moment's hesitation he decided to remove one of the zip ties from her belt, rolled her prostrate, and cinched her wrists behind her back. He didn't think she posed any threat, not really. If she was alive she must've been knocking on the pearly gates, had an appointment with Saint Peter. But she'd already proven to be a dangerous adversary, and he didn't relish the thought of her waking up and finding herself strategically positioned behind him.

The UAV is locking on to you.

The drone couldn't actually see Nathan, but it sure as hell could see the Ford Explorer and his two passengers. He jumped into the driver's seat and floored the accelerator. The vehicle lurched forward with a jolt that pushed him back into the seat. They caught air cresting the top of the driveway, and he bit his tongue when the SUV's tires touched down. Sparks spat out from the rim. The old man jounced and slewed sideways, leaning against Nathan's shoulder. His slack mouth — the few remaining teeth rotten kernels of corn — was only inches away, and Nathan could feel his rank cesspool breath on his neck.

At least he's breathing, he thought and shoved him off. The old man

flopped and sank to the floor, wedged between the glove box and the bucket seat.

He turned right at the bottom of the driveway, the rear of the vehicle fishtailing as he swung onto Hammond Hill. For one brief moment Nathan was sure that he was going to flip the damn thing before the Explorer responded and straightened out of the slide.

There were headlights about a quarter mile up the road, three pairs, maybe more, approaching fast and occupying both lanes of traffic, blocking his escape. More headlights appeared in the rearview mirror. Too many to be a coincidence on this rural backstreet and at this hour of night, and they lacked the flashing red and blue lights of emergency response vehicles.

HEY, I'VE GOT A PROBLEM HERE.

He considered turning his own headlights off and vetoed the idea. A lot of good it would do him. He was dragging a rooster tail of sparks behind him like the fourth of July.

I told you that Foundation troops were en route by both land and air.

They were already between Nathan and the fire road where his Toyota Camry — and his weaponry stashed in the trunk — was parked. He checked the ammunition on his gun. The feed counter next to the slide read seven. He had a spare magazine containing another twenty flechettes. He was also wearing the explosive bandolier with an assortment of grenades — frags and incendiaries and flashbangs. And he had his knife.

The shoulder of grass on either side of the road was only two feet wide. Too narrow for him to squeeze on and sneak past. Nathan, his foot a lead weight on the gas pedal, red-lined the tachometer, the RPM needle dancing as the Explorer roared forward. He couldn't sneak past them, but maybe he could barrel through if he gathered enough speed and momentum. Probably not; probably the collision would kill both the old man and the agent, and then the Foundation could finish Nathan off leisurely in a hail of gunfire.

What I wouldn't give for a plough or cowcatcher right now, he said to

himself as the speedometer crept to forty miles per hour. At this speed the SUV continuously wanted to pull to the left, cantering on that rim. Nathan fought the wheel for every inch he gained.

He buckled his seatbelt. How did that old joke go?

Question: Do you know what the letters in Ford stand for?

Answer: Found on road dead.

The headlights had grown much larger and brighter. Lensflares kaleidoscoped across the windshield. There was the squawk of a voice projected over a loudspeaker or megaphone. Nathan couldn't parse the words but knew the gist. Pull the vehicle over and exit with your hands up. Stop or we will shoot.

Walls of fire sprung up in front of and behind him, transforming the night into a holocaust. His hypersensitive eyes were blinded by the sudden blaze, and he threw his arm up to shield them in the crook of his elbow, until the lenses of the cowl dimmed and polarized. The flames erupted thirty feet into the air; they spanned the entire width of the road and scored the trees that fenced the street, cutting a swath through their ranks.

Nathan had to fight the reflexive impulse to slam on the brakes. Instead, he applied even more pressure to the gas. A large sycamore had been guillotined and the cloven trunk was toppling into the street. If he didn't beat it he'd get trapped behind it.

Or crushed beneath it.

I hacked the drone, the Director informed him, *and deployed the remaining Hellfires. Direct strike on the Foundation vehicles. They've already regained control of the drone, but not before I set it into a nosedive.*

The fire was fading as quickly as it had bloomed. Nathan drove into the newly-formed crater. Waves of heat prickled his flesh and sweat issued from every pore, engaging the suit's climate control. The Explorer shook and rattled across the scorched bowl as if skiing over moguls. He could feel the rubber of the tires melt and try to

adhere to the chunks of baking macadam. Of the Foundation vehicles only one remained — they'd all been blasted into scrap except for a sedan that had been lagging behind the formation. It was now nothing more than a charred husk. Tines of fire lapped the interior, and flames poured from the driver's mouth and eye sockets. The corpse was still strapped in with its hands fused to the steering wheel.

The descending sycamore's branches raked the roof of the Explorer, gouging the paint in a high-pitched squeal, like nails on a chalkboard. It was going to be close. A window coughed inward, showering the unconscious Foundation agent with glass as a limb of the tree speared through the back seat. The hatchback door was ripped from its hinges and disappeared in a spray of foliage. The sycamore's bole grazed the rear bumper, briefly lifting the SUV off the front axle until the bumper tore off and the Explorer squirted out from under the immense weight of the tree. Nathan clipped the burnt sedan's fender in his haste and sent it spinning off the road.

The Ford, limping along on its last leg, managed to make it the rest of the way to the old fire road. Nathan stepped out and doubled-over, bracing his arms against his knees while he tried to catch his breath. It felt like a python was squeezing his lungs. His eyes scanned the road, up and down. It was unbelievably deserted in comparison to mere seconds ago. Through the burning trees he saw a light on at the nearby ranch, and heard a one-sided conversation as a neighbor, out on the wrap-around porch, screamed on the phone at a 911 dispatcher.

A buzz with a Doppler shift drew his attention. What now? Nathan groaned inwardly. The noise seemed to be plummeting out of the sky, right above his head. It quickly terminated as another explosion burgeoned just twenty yards away. It was smaller than the Hellfires and lacked the forceful punch of the missiles.

"The fuck was that?" he said, reverting back to verbal communications. "They're shelling artillery now?"

The Foundation stalled the drone trying to pull it out of the dive.

Nathan chewed his lip. It was the first piece of good news he'd

heard all night, and it momentarily caught him off guard. He stifled a laugh. "Are there any agents left in the area?"

A pair of military helicopters have been deployed out of Worcester. ETA seven minutes. Local law enforcement is much closer, they're only ninety seconds out, but they're approaching from the southeast and will be blocked by the felled tree if you follow my directions.

He jogged down the fire road and hopped into the Camry, backing it out onto Hammond Hill. "Some painkillers right about now would really hit the spot."

I administered them at the same time as the hormones and otic compound.

"You did? Why didn't you tell me?"

Because I wanted you focused on the task at hand and not thinking about it.

Could Nathan feel the opioids coursing through his bloodstream, releasing pain-blocking neurons in his brain? Certainly he could feel the hormonal stimulant by now, his mind honed to the sharpened point of a single atom, body thrumming like a finely-tuned instrument. Likewise the otic compound seemed to be working since his balance no longer troubled him. But he still ached all over. A heavy weight had settled over his chest due to the collapsed lung. And even more worrisome were the injuries he couldn't feel — the internal bleeding in his lungs and bowels. He could wind up drowning in his own blood or bleeding to death through his ass.

"Did you ever stop and wonder if by withholding that information you were having the opposite effect than intended?"

Yes.

He pulled the Toyota alongside the SUV, swapping the prisoners from one vehicle to the other. He placed the woman in the passenger seat, right beside him where he could keep a close eye on her. From his travel kit he ripped open a packet of powdered antibiotics coupled with a cauterizing agent. He dumped the entire

package down the ugly hole in her tactical vest to try and staunch the bleeding and keep her alive, at least until he got her to the ambulance and she became someone else's problem.

When Nathan laid the old man in the backseat he spasmed, shackled arms and legs outstretched as the atrophied muscles seized and contracted. His gnarled hands beat a drum solo against the upholstery, and a dry keening ejaculated from the back of his throat like a Passing Bell.

"I think we might be losing the old man," Nathan remarked.

Is there anything you can do?

"I don't think so. Are you hearing this shit? It looks like he's having a convulsion or something."

You must have some medication that will help.

"I wouldn't even know what to give him."

Let me see him.

Nathan took a hard, steady look at the old man, letting the Director soak it all in. His spine arched as he writhed and spittle ran through his beard.

That's not good.

"Thank you, doctor."

His condition could be caused by a multitude of different injuries. It could even be neurological or biological.

"Yeah, definitely biological. Has nothing to do with the missile that landed on his head."

Do you have chlorpromazine?

"I'm not sure what that is. Maybe."

It's Thorazine.

"Yeah, I think I've got it somewhere." He fished through the travel kit and found the small glass vial and a single-use syringe.

Administer ten CCs intravenously.

Nathan bit the cap off the syringe and spat it out onto the ground. He stabbed the needle through the vial's rubber stopper and retracted the plunger until the barrel was filled with ten cubic centimeters of the clear fluid.

"You think this will be enough?" The dose looked paltry and insubstantial.

I think it might be too much for a man in his state and estimated weight, but I have no clue. Give him the shot.

"Isn't this stuff for psychotics?"

It covers a wide range of receptors, which is why we supply it to our field agents and why we're going to give him some without knowing exactly what's wrong with him. I can guess that his injuries are probably similar to your own, but you don't happen to have any extra nanodocs or clotting factors in that bag, do you?

"Sorry, fresh out."

So give him the Thorazine. It's not going to treat his injuries, but it might ease his symptoms and prevent him from hurting himself.

It was easy finding a vein, since they were all highlighted in ink. He chose one on the calf, waiting for the small muscle to unclench, and then thumbed the plunger of the syringe.

"Okay, done. Anything else?"

No. The police are arriving. Just get to Ware.

The Camry, as a Director-issued vehicle, came with an electronic countermeasure pod installed in its undercarriage, coupled with stealth advances to deceive an array of detection systems. It was a Toyota in appearances only. By putting the two prisoners in it Nathan made them vanish from any aerial surveillance that might be

spying. The ECM applied various passive and active techniques to manipulate surveillance intelligence and sensing behavior. It could engage in soft-kill measures such as electronic warfare to jam communications, mask acoustics or confuse missile guidances with directional IRCM, and even substitute image-feeds with false pictures, erasing the car from visual recordings.

I'm going to have Levine drive.

"Go for it," Nathan replied. It was one less thing to have to worry about. "Tell him to be gentle. Precious cargo."

The Camry was then remotely controlled by Levine, a professional driver on the Director's payroll. He'd driven for Nathan on several prior occasions, during a car chase on the Los Angeles freeway and an extraction in Mumbai.

Of course, none of the stealth advances in the world did any good if you had a police cruiser riding on your tail or a helicopter pinning you in its spotlight. That's where the performance upgrades came in.

The car's engine was an after-market V16, essentially two V8 engine blocks linked to one crankshaft. The immense size and weight necessitated a custom chassis and hood to accommodate the mount and an enlarged heat sink to hide its thermal output. The car purred as it chewed up the road. They broke sixty miles per hour in under two seconds. But as a back road in New England it wasn't exactly like racing on a salt flat; the street consisted more of hills and potholes than actual pavement, and their speed was constantly hindered.

Nathan let his eyes drift shut. "You know, I've been thinking… "

Don't. Stick to things you're good at.

"Funny. You should heed your own advice and leave the humor to the professionals. But seriously, how come I'm getting the feeling the old man isn't a priority anymore?" He glanced in the backseat. The tremors — or whatever the hell they were — were still present, but had subsided in their intensity. "Why did I pull this guy out? I mean… why don't we stick *him* in the ambulance and I take Little

Miss Foundation over here — " he hooked his thumb at the agent " —to the train instead."

I don't pay you to question motives, especially mine. That being said, it seems I've learned an important lesson which you, unfortunately, have not.

"Oh, yeah? And what's that?"

What's done is done. As unpropitious as Herbert McKeown's death may be, there's no point in getting upset over something that can't be changed. It's counterproductive. Do I wish it had gone differently? More smoothly? Of course. But I've adjusted my plans accordingly and we will continue to forge ahead with the resources that are available to us — not lament over what could have been. And that means getting the agent into surgery as soon as possible to remove the implanted Foundation trackers.

"Is he even the right guy?" Although Herbert was the eldest of the McKeown clan, that didn't automatically make him their target. It could just as easily have been that the Sothian talent in the family skipped a generation, and his daughter was the sorceress, or that the grandson showed an aberrant proclivity for the cult's particular brand of black miracles, one the rest of the family didn't share.

I have no idea. It might turn out he doesn't know anything and his death won't be a loss to us. Certainly the capture of all three members would've been preferable to just one that might die anyway. Even their bodies could've aided us in our research.

"Yeah, I'm not going back to the house to pick them up. You'd need a fucking wet vac for that job."

And I'm not asking you to.

"I know. That's not what I meant, though. You're getting me sidetracked. I want to know why you suddenly became interested in the girl." He allowed his sight to linger on her. "What's so special about her?"

There's nothing inherently special about her; not that I'm aware of. It

was simple opportunistic predation. The drone was investigating the car, it was going to take me at least another thirty seconds to hack into it, and so I had you retrieve her. Can you not see the benefit in capturing a Foundation agent alive despite the risk?

He still couldn't believe she was alive. They'd been standing right next to each other when the Hellfire hit, and she'd been impaled like a goddamned kebab.

"Are you sure she's even alive? She looks dead. I might just be carrying a Foundation tracker inside a hundred pounds of rotting meat." Her head rested against the window, and he noted there was no condensation formed on the glass around her lips or nose.

She's alive, the Director said. *And I intend to find out the explanation for that as well.*

Nathan shook his head but remained quiet. It wasn't like a movie where the action star bodysurfs the shockwave of an explosion. If something had the power to toss you through the air for thirty feet, could bend metal and shatter glass, then you weren't somehow getting back up unscathed and without a single hair out of place.

The car slowed down as they entered Ware. Like a lot of places in the area, it was an old mill town that had seen better days. Just when exactly those fabled better days had been no one seemed to recall. The car drifted through empty streets and vacant lots; buildings elbowed for space perched above the Ware River. Some of them had been converted into retail and residential space since the textile industry had parted ways overseas, but most remained untenanted and abandoned. The Toyota crossed a bridge over a spillway and turned into the lot of one such building.

Hidden in the shadows of the tin roof overhang was the ambulance.

"You sent a helicopter?"

Yes. As you're aware, time is crucial. What'd you think I was sending?

He'd been expecting a typical ambulance, a van, although in

hindsight he realized the Director had never specified.

A pair of EMTs rolled a gurney over to the car. The technicians opened the passenger-side door of the Camry and gingerly placed the woman on the stretcher. They looked disapprovingly from her bound wrists to Nathan. Nathan glowered back through the cowl and dared them to say anything. Perhaps from a sense of self-preservation they chose to remain silent, wheeling her up a short ramp into the clamshell doors of the helicopter. As soon as they were out of sight the car's wheels kicked up a fan of gravel. Levine steered the car onto the road and headed north, back they way they'd come while avoiding the same streets.

Let's hope that's the last I ever see of her, Nathan thought to himself.

Part One

Kiefdust Crusaders

“And he's dead?”

The dude was dead as hell, that was for sure. JJ had seen people die in front of him before. It wasn't as hard as he thought it would be to get used to. Or maybe it was the best for him that he got used to things as quickly as possible. Waltzing, traipsing through life. A lucky little ballerina. Shoes as pink as a rose. But the special shoes. Poinsettias. God, he could just see himself now.

He hadn't even had time to use his **`stand`**.

JJ bent down, picking up a screwdriver that had fallen from the dead man's coat. He tested it in his hands. A nice heft. Warm, still. The dead man had held it in his hands as he stepped inside. For protection? Why not get a knife? Weird. But it fell out of his hands when he had fallen. And now, JJ decided, it was his. Useful little tool.

But the body. Esther was still in the bathroom. He was pretty sure she was, at least. He hadn't seen her with clothes yet, so she could've been still on her hands and knees trying to find her contact right under his nose. Probably not, though. It probably felt weird to be naked in the same hotel room as a guy who just died. He wrinkled his nose. That was stupid. Like something Jude would say. Too much time with him. Some of the things he said were contagious. The ways he had of putting things. They got into his head.

But the body.

“Yeah, dude. He hit his head bad. He's dead as hell. Did you get me the Diet Coke?” said JJ.

Jude handed him the bottle. JJ had seen it, of course, but he liked to ask him. Jude had a way of forgetting about something even when it

was in his hands. Probably because he was a dumbass. Probably because he had just bought weed behind their hotel room and pretended like he was getting a snack.

He had no reason to lie. But he did. That was just the way people were. And the longer JJ lived among people, the better JJ got at recognizing that the little details that pop out always mean something. Like noticing Jude hadn't brought back anything for himself. Or the smell of weed in the room. Or the weed and the new pipe that bulged in his pocket. Either that, or he was *seriously* packing and had managed to keep a grip on himself around JJ (as if).

But the body.

“He's dead,” said Jude. Like JJ didn't know. Like the massive head wound and the not breathing wasn't the fucking big enough hint. Doobie Hauser M.D., here to set shit straight. He smiled, beside himself. Jude had bent down, pressing the inside of his palm against the dead man's neck. Was it a move he had seen in a movie?

“Knew him? Definitely seemed like one of the stand users. He was, uh, sayin' a lot of shit before he tripped. And died. Lots of talking.”

“Yeah. The Performer.”

“Shitty name.”

“Terrifying stand, though. Achy Breaky Heart. Good thing you guys got him down before he could get you under his spell. You'd've all died. He's got, like, a final boss level stand, if you ask me.” Jude stood up, cracking his back and his neck back into place. Like an old man.

“What does it do then?”

“Being around him makes all your bodily functions voluntary instead of involuntary. Gets smaller and smaller. Even if you can figure out how to get your heart beating, it's real hard to figure out how to do cellular respiration.” He rifled through the dead man's pockets. Jude pulled out the wallet and sat on JJ's bed. He pulled out a few bills

and stuck them in his jean pocket. Then stuck his hand into his shirt. Jude pulled out a folded piece of paper, which he unfolded, stared at, then refolded. JJ cursed himself for forgetting to rob the corpse first.

“That's not a final boss level stand,” Esther said, opening the door and dazzlingly fully-clothed. All obfuscation gone, it was good to see her talking again. “There's no gravitas. Even I know this, idiot.” She had her glasses on, which was good since the bitch turned into Velma Dinkley with her ass up in the air when she couldn't see. Jinkies! What was Yiddish for Jinkies? She'd say that.

“Yeah, it's like. A really good monster of the week stand, I guess. But not big bad. You find your contacts?” JJ shrugged hopping onto the bed next to Jude. He reeked of weed. If he hadn't seen the bulge, the proximity would've given him away. JJ's hands crept up from Jude's knee and then grasped the bag and the pipe in his fist. “Planning on sharing, Papa Smoke?”

Jude blushed. He always blushed. Tongue-tied little Catholic schoolboy. “Stop calling me that. And, uh, yeah. I guess. Can we do it in the car?”

“No,” she said. No hesitation. She was in pajamas. Comfortable. Her hair was wet. Had a shower gone on while he waited for Jude with this dead body for company? “Do it in the bathroom or go outside. Behind the hotel. I'm sure you'll be fine. Actually, please go outside. The fan won't cover up you two giggling all night.”

The poster she had drawn dominated their vision. Right in line of sight from the doorway. A real cancer of cognition. Which was hell for the Performer, of course. Poor guy didn't even get to see what he fell over before his skull cracked and his brain throttled against the cage enough to kill.

“That's cool, but uh,” and Jude coughed. “Am I gonna be able to see naked people again?”

“Naked women. And no. I mean, yes. But not now. Tomorrow. I'll make a little cure for you turds tomorrow. Now let me get to sleep.”

JJ stuffed his hand into Jude's pocket. Suggestive wink, practiced flip, and the bag with the pipe was in his hand. A chillum. One-hitter, almost. Glass. But longer. It was nice. Clear and greenish. It would probably look blue when it was caked with resin. Which, given Jude, it probably would be. Super soon. Ultra soon.

Jude stared ahead. After doing nothing like some weird mannequin, he leaned forward, pressed his palm on the dead man's back. His fingers splayed out like tracing the hand to draw a turkey. He took a breath, and something flowed. And the body gave way to dust and then nothing, clothes and all. After it was done, there wasn't even enough to vacuum.

“That's awesome, Jude. How did you figure out how to do that?”

“Yeah,” he said.

Esther had already gotten under the covers and faced the other direction. She didn't hear when JJ took the keys, all the while keeping up those suggestive winks. It felt right. The car was always the safest place. A parked car. In the dark. Who would see them? And the smoke that filled the small, dark place. Anticipation ran through his body like a weird orgasm tremor.

Was this providence, or did the weed really smell that good?

It didn't matter. He clutched the keys to his chest. Jude would be nervous, sure. He didn't like to fuck with Esther or her wishes. But, if the boy liked anything, it was to be in a small, dark place filled with marijuana smoke.

The note was simple. Jude could recite it from memory, which wasn't too impressive since he had only first read it moments before. Clumsy fingers yanked it from his jeans pocket. Folded the same way the Performer had kept it in his shirt. Jude showed it to JJ in the dark car. Only lit by a purple lighter.

Hey Jude. Don't make it **bad**.

Take this **sad** song and make it better!!!

:)

Come and see my electric eye.

And then an address. Some directions, even, all written in blue ballpoint pen. The handwriting was legible, but it was clear the writer was more used to writing in cursive. JJ assumed it had been written by the Performer.

Jude wasn't sure. The note was perfumed. He had pointed it out between sucking on the bowl, taking greedy gulping hits, multiple, before even passing it, that the Performer didn't like to wear scented anything. But the Critic did.

Jude said the smell made him think of bad things, so JJ said that they should cover up the smell with good weed. And they did.

The afternoon after their binge, and the car still reeked of high-quality marijuana. Jude, despite having taken a shower nearly an hour ago, still had a kind of off, sweaty smell about him. A very male scent. He smelled older than he was. Like he was working. Esther was fresh, as always. Clean, scrubbed pink. Sure, she was pissed beyond belief that they had smoked pot in the car, but Jude's discovery got her anger down to baseline levels.

“He thought he was gonna kill you, you know,” said Jude. “Like the two of you. Both.”

Esther frowned. She almost turned from the wheel. Her favorite thing to do was to just stare at Jude until he shriveled. Instead, she looked through the rear-view mirror, all the terror of a Midwestern mother driving cross-country to grandma's for Christmas or something wholesome like that. “What do you mean?”

“He knew I was gone.”

“Electric Eye is watching you. There's nothing you can do about it,” JJ said. He rubbed his hand against the seatbelt, up and down. The texture, each individual thread hard and stiff to hold, made that feeling run down his spine.

“Then, something about an explosion. I know the song. But what I'm saying is, how much does this thing know? How do you think it's watching us?”

“Big television screen,” Esther said. “A bug. There were crazy cockroaches in the last two places we stayed. It's a bug power. Bug type.”

Jude frowned, splayed in the back. “I think he wants me to see something.”

His long, weird body stretched out and almost over, taking up more of the backseat than he thought possible. It'd suck if they had to get nasty back there, he thought. Jude was too big. Not even, like, dirt-ways. There was something ungainly about him. A young sasquatch. A beardless Santa Claus, but. Young. Gallumphing.

“Who?” said Esther

“The Critic.”

Esther slid her hand to the console and put on her sunglasses. She pulled down the sun visor. Sunlight poured in through the windshield. Another frown. JJ snickered. Too goth for all this.

“I'm coming. In case you wanted to know,” said Esther, staring ahead. Hard to read without the sunglasses. “You can't tell me I can't know. Weirdo tried to kill me with some pervert Billy Ray Cyrus shit. I did some drawing before you woke up. Great work. Got a migraine, you know. But great work.”

“But you didn't reverse the nudity spell?” JJ flipped down his sun visor, sliding the plastic and staring into his reflection. He slid his hand on his forehead, pushing his hair up. No blemishes. No acne. Good, good. The sweat never did good things to his complexion. And he liked to keep pretty. Luckily, he only ever rarely sweat. But even good luck couldn't fix Esther's broken AC. Or move the sun.

“I had better ideas. And who knows when your fucking providence bullshit makes you knock my contacts out of my hands and all over the floor.”

“You were invisible. Not my fault.”

“Only because you have a weird look whenever you see people naked.”

“It's not my fault.”

“It kind of is. You look too hard. You're a fucked up dude, JJ.” Esther smiled. “G-d, you think this sun is going to fucking move or is this a stand?”

JJ waited. But Jude didn't correct her. It was a stand already. The Sun. The boy was too quiet. He was high, sure, but not that high.

“You don't always have to be naked. Nobody else has to be naked to put on and take off their make-up and shit. It's a weird move. I think you're the weird one.” JJ ran his fingers up and down the seatbelt hard enough to make a noise that zigzagged down through the core of his being.

Esther smirked, turned up the radio. Loud. Bad sound quality, but at least it drowned out most of the horrible sounds the car had started to make. A CD. She had been playing a lot of The Cure. He wondered if she was trying to think of a stand name for herself. JJ toed at the CD holder, one of those zipper up multi-holders.

JJ fidgeted, rearranged the screwdriver in his pocket, and leaned against the window. It was still The Cure. JJ liked them, sure, but not as much as Esther. It wasn't providence so much as a desire for something different. He would've even taken Siouxsie and the Banshees, maybe. He drummed his fingers on his thigh.

“Can I pick the next album?” JJ said. He flipped the sun visor to look at Jude.

Jude was staring into the air. Not reading. Not looking at his phone. Just breathing. His expression didn't change. His eyebrows were raised upward, lips pressed tightly together into a line. His gaze was unfocused. Not out the window, looking at the door handle. Nibbling on the inside of his lips.

“We're almost there.” She didn't look over. “And this one isn't over

yet.”

The road went on before them. JJ never paid much attention when Esther drove. He only rarely paid attention to the direction he was going. North and south didn't mean shit on the dancefloor, right? There were trees. They had gotten denser. The directions started to pipe in from the GPS a bit more regularly, so she turned down the sound.

The car turned down a gravel road. Left, right, right, left. Too many turns, and then, the car stopped in front of a rusted gate. Claustrophobic, lecherous branches reached down and scraped the roof. The engine settled noisily. The wood was quiet.

The place was big, for one. An old place. Crumbling. A palatial mansion. Like something out of Faulker. The columns crumbled, but the windows were intact. They were dark. Opaque. JJ wondered if they painted over the glass. But it looked like plastic. Kind of like plastic. Hard.

“Freddy Kreuger lives here.”

Three stories. It probably was beautiful when it was kept up. Weather-beaten, colorless wood untouched by graffiti. The windows weren't knocked out. Not a single one. Point one for them being covered in steel or something. Going into a weird fortress made out of a shitty, ugly old house should've been the last thing the motion of the rotation of all that was should take him.

But wasn't it? The tremor, again, and it felt so good to look at it. JJ knew he had to get out of the car. He knew he had to go inside. He wanted to.

“He lives in dreams, idiot,” said Esther. “Shut up.” And she stopped the car in front of the gate.

They were quiet for a moment. Jude was the first to sit up, open the door, and step out of the car. Esther and JJ followed.

JJ lagged behind as they walked to the large porch and the front door. The house loomed above, and providence sang within him.

Sometimes, it listened. Even if it didn't, he would have gone. He watched Jude twist the knob. Muscles tensed. Jude was sweating, more than usual.

Inside was surprisingly cool. It smelled clean. No dust. Jude stepped in, then Esther.

JJ stepped through the threshold, and there was a crunch beneath his feet. He lifted up his shoe. Dead bug. Filled with what looked like pus. It probably wasn't pus. Maybe it had been green? But damn, it was huge. JJ dragged his foot across the carpet, staring down at the streak. Shell. Lots of shell. But mostly that white liquid.

The chandelier hung low above them. Cobwebs formed a living mesh over the great, elegant light fixture. Like a mummy. Two stairways at the end of the room curved to meet each other at the second floor. There were too many doors. Paintings that were stained beyond recognition hung upon the walls. A moldy tapestry here and there. A broken vase. But it felt warm. The air hummed around him.

Esther screamed. Sharp, shrill.

JJ tilted his head.

The entrance slammed shut behind them.

There were hundreds of them, maybe thousands. They slid along the walls, out from every crevice, out from behind paintings, from unseen corners. From the broken vase. All the size of a half-dollar. Green beetles. Leaf green. Weed green. And they chittered, chirruped. Spherical like robotic. But they weren't, were they? Robots didn't bleed pus. He couldn't see their legs, could barely make out their heads. Twitching, long antennae.

But JJ only smiled.

“Oh shit,” said Jude. “Shit, shit. Jitterbug Stay calm.”

Esther put her hands over her mouth. The flashcards covered in scribbles wouldn't work on bugs probably, JJ thought.

“Don't touch them,” said Jude.

Then, from speakers all around their heads, the Breeder spoke.

The Breeder hated having to listen to it. Electric Eye spoke constantly. Its voice was raspy, low. It never stopped. Didn't help much to keep it lubricated, either. The thing sucked up anything like it was cacti. He sucked the tip of his right index finger. Then his middle finger. Then the other two on the other hand. The tips of his digits were wrinkled. They no longer tasted salty.

The thing still gave good news, though. He leaned back in his chair. A bug scuttled across his torso and slid around his face, stopping on his glasses. Left lens. Its antennae waved in the air, a conductor of a complex symphony. Or maybe it was more like sempahore?

“Mary, Mother of God, forgive all us sinners, or, I mean, tell God for me that I'm really sorry and I'm sorry in their name, too. Not in an offensive way. I guess. They don't need my help. They're good and they're so good to me and stay chill, stay chill.” Electric Eye croaked each word as though it were unfamiliar with the tongue. “Don't wanna see and can't help but see, and going blind in the face of it. Turned toward god and the pillar of salt, but turned toward the mansion. Don't trip. Too high. Moony. Head in the sky.”

It was always moving, but he tried his best to ignore that. They were there. Of course, he had known that, since that thing never shut up, but it was great to see the little ones getting so nervous. It scuttled along his body, and the Breeder let it. He sucked on his right pinky, then his left.

“Too many, to be or not. Like a walnut. Thanks for the boots. I bought them. Sales clerk, sales clerk with brown hair and bright blue eyes. Cute. JJ. Not the bugs. Crunch. Still. Quiet. Where?”

Its mad dashes slowed, as it sensed no worry from its father. The bug slid down the Breeder's ankle and down through a vent in the floor.

The Breeder pressed the button and pressed his lips against the

microphone. The sensation, up and down, of his lips against the rigid plastic made him want to moan. But he reined himself in, and he spoke to the Murderer and his Sex Fiends.

“Hey, Jude. Fucked up you didn't die.” His nose was crushed against the microphone, which probably didn't do much for his sound quality. But it felt too good. “I know you're feelin' a little nervous down there. Do the babies bother ya? You can keep dancing, but I think the fire burns hot.”

A pause, his finger depressed the button, and he turned to Electric Eye.

“A pervert. Like a muffled stupid son of a bitch, and they creepy creeping creepily creep. JJ. Esther. Okay. Two. Okay. Sounds like a siren, screech a cheap. Reepicheep. Fell down a waterfall? Into God?”

“Shut up for a second. Initiate Dance Commander.”

The thing snapped back then forward. It said, “What is your command?”

“Stand by.” And the Breeder swiveled in his chair once, twice. His finger pressed down on the button, and he said, “You're an idiot for coming. This isn't an anime. Sometimes, you get two stands. And Electric Eye, Jude, has the Dance Commander.” Button depressed. “Dance Commander, cancel all movement.”

“Movement canceled.”

“Sweet.” Button pressed. “Jude, Jude, Jude. You're gettin' real nervy, aren't you? When you fall down that waterfall and see God, I want you to know that he's gonna send you to Hell. And he's gonna make you watch him send those two to Hell, too.” A cackle, shrill, and then he said, without bothering to depress the button, “Dance Commander, fucking fire at will.”

“Engaged.”

Jude wasn't himself. Not even close.

His jaw was shut. But those eyes danced in fear. Right, left. Esther, then JJ. Esther, then JJ. And after that cackle, the muffled voice said, “Dance Commander, fucking fire at will.” Then, Jude lifted his hand.

Electricity crackled between his fingers in a fragile webbing. It rose up on the back of his hand, then down his wrist, up his arm until it rose and over took his chest, spreading to the next arm in a reverse fashion. He held his hand out toward JJ, and a column of blue-white electricity flowed, like water, from Jude's right hand.

Dust flew in the air. The carpet around Jude crackled with static fuzz, following the lazy back and forth movement of his left hand. It rose, and the blue light curled like a snake then lashed out like a whip toward Esther.

JJ smiled. The dancer clung to him. Pale. He imagined it was pale. Long limbs, intertwined with his. A passionate tango. An ever-waltz. A forever, ever mambo. And the providence whispered, but mostly, it was quiet and smiled and breathed. The oldest thing, the oldest thing there ever was, but it loved him, didn't it?

It felt like dancing when he dipped down and then fell forward, bringing Esther screaming onto a pile of bugs that burst against her back and his side like little pimples.

The bugs that had lived began to crawl over Esther and JJ. Esther screamed, covered her mouth, but then she screamed again, before biting down on her hand.

The bugs crawled along her skin, stopping occasionally to press down and burn her in a perfect circle, like a nickel. And they continued to do so. Rapidly. She shook her hand and stood up, before JJ reached up and pulled her down, as electricity whizzed above their heads.

“You should probably strip,” JJ said.

Esther who had been doing breathing exercises reached out to JJ but then stopped short. She sighed and flipped her top over her head. She immediately fell from his view. But most importantly, both

of Jude's hands focused on JJ.

Two bolts, once, twice, and then JJ frolicked, jumping on the banister and climbing upwards and sliding through the doorway. The banister fell behind him, crumbled and burnt and scorched by electrical discharge. The rhythm pulsed and beat within him like a second heart. The providence pressed its mouth against its ear, and it felt almost like a kiss.

There were bugs everywhere. They crawled and scampered, but they didn't seem anxious. They ignored JJ. Cooler heads always prevailed. And they fed on fear. They fed on discomfort. They turned the heat up when things got nervous, but JJ had never been nervous in his entire life. Not for his own life, at least. Never for his own.

The thing that loved him brought him to the left. Then the right. Long hallways. Little accouterments. It wasn't exactly homey. But it smelled lived in. Every so often JJ noted a fast food burger wrapper. Always a different place.

And then, he stopped in front of a door. Identical to all the others. But it pulled him toward the wood until the heat and tension threatened to burst out like a kind of lust or a kind of fire that wanted to take it all in and take it all out.

The Breeder said, “Progress report.”

“In-progress. One has disappeared, and one has escaped.”

“What?”

“Disappeared.”

The Breeder gritted his teeth and stood up. He reached out to Electric Eye, and his long fingers encircled her throat. He throttled its head to the front, and to the back. The blindfold momentarily slid down its face, but he pushed it back up. The thing freaked out when it could see.

Its face reddened, and it fought against the confines of the

straitjacket.

The Breeder depressed his grip, and he said, “Find them and kill them. If you weren't his daughter, I'd take the life out of you. You piece of shit GPS bitch.”

As he spoke, the door opened. The bugs skittered, and the Breeder's head swung to the noise. In the doorway, stood one of them. One of the Sex Fiends. He grinned, spread across his bearded face. The area around his mouth, wet with drool. The Breeder looked down at the little Sex Fiend. He breathed in, then out, shallow, broken with laughter.

“Mr. Lucky, right?” said the Breeder. A bead of sweat fell down his forehead. “That's gettin' me pretty fuckin' scared, dude. Real fuckin' terrified.” Giggling, and the bugs converged upon their father as one living thing. They encircled him, pressing their bodies against his skin. Like a weird armor. They left room for his face as he spoke. “And don't worry about your buds. When Electric Eye stops babbling all of Jude's stupid bullshit, it's pretty great at controlling them. Idiot never even questioned why the Critic wanted a lock of his hair. Poor, poor stupid Jude and that soon-to-be dead fat girl. But that leaves me. And luckily for me, I'm the Bomb. Sub-ability.”

The Breeder winked. The air went wavy. As JJ crossed the room, the microphone near the Breeder burst into flame.

JJ wondered what was with this guy and Electric Six. The heat cranked up, and he reached into his pocket. As he drew closer, his skin blistered. The dancer held on, pulling him toward the door, but JJ persisted. Strained against it.

No longer a dancer but a jealous lover. He calmed it, as best he could. He sent it the idea in his head, and it grumbled.

It no longer mattered, however. As the heat turned up, JJ slashed out with the screwdriver into the Breeder's neck. Immediately, the bugs fell to the ground, some on their back, and they scurried into corners, confused like little dogs.

The Breeder fell to his knees, blood gurgling from his lips. He looked at JJ, eyes flashing confused and angry.

“Shh, shh. Your first mistake was thinking I'd ever be afraid.” JJ's sunburnt lips crackled into a smile. It hurt. The first bursts of pain he had felt in his memory. JJ bent down to the man, pressing his forehead against his.

The Breeder was sweaty, and life was falling from his eyes as his heart betrayed his body and pumped every bit of blood out of his neck and into JJ's shirt.

“Your second mistake was thinking I'd hesitate in killing you.” JJ kissed the Breeder's forehead, hands on the dying man's temples. It didn't matter if he heard it, but what mattered was saying it. Out loud. “He's an idiot, but I think I love him. Like a brother. Like providence loves me. I don't want anyone to hurt him, dead dude. God, look at all that blood. You can't hear me at all, can you?”

The Breeder's eyelids fluttered, and in JJ's uncaring arms, he died.

“He's good. He tries. He hurt a lot of people, but so have I. He's sorry. And I wish I could be that sorry. I wish people could be that sorry.”

That was when Esther blinked back into JJ's cognition and said, “Dance Commander, disengage. Oh G-d, you poor girl. What did they do to you?” She bent down to the girl, whose chair had broken. She was splayed on the floor, quiet, unmoving, seemingly unfeeling. Esther wrapped the girl in her arms and looked up at JJ.

JJ looked down at her.

“You didn't hear any of that.”

“Sure,” said Esther. “What do we do with the girl?”

“I don't know right now,” said JJ, standing up. His clothes were soaked. The bugs trundled mindlessly in circles with their father dead. Downstairs, JJ assumed, Jude has passed out.

“He's going to find something here. And he's gonna keep going and

find this dude. You're super aware of that, right?”

“Yeah,” said JJ.

“And you're still gonna go with him?”

“Until the end of the world.”

“*Du farkirtst mir di yorn*. Then I am too.” Esther sighed, and she stood up with the small girl. Light. She must have been so light.

Her hair was blonde, and her eyes blue. She couldn't have been more than fourteen. But she was small for her age. Withered. Hungry. And she didn't speak. Her jaw was slack.

“It's the Critic's daughter,” said JJ.

“I heard.” Esther bit her lower lip, and then said, “Let's go see if Jude's okay. Then I guess we gotta get this girl to a hospital. Or something.”

“Maybe then you can reverse the nudity thing?” JJ grinned. As much as he could while covered in a dead man's blood.

“Don't rush me,” she said, looking down at the small, blonde girl. She brushed her hair across her forehead. “G-d, poor thing.”

JJ watched Esther rock the girl until she fell into what seemed like an uneasy sleep. As she walked down the wrecked stairs to find Jude, JJ stood up and began to look through the room. Information, clues, anything. Anything to forget the way his heart beat, just a tad out of sync, when he had seen Jude first pause.

He looked at his arm. A perfect circular burn, inner left wrist.

Sometimes, even the blessed feel nervous, JJ figured.

« Bong Rip Tendency | Jude's Bizarre Adventure | [COMING SOON] Shatter Is Unbreakable »

Kill 682

Dr. Bright stirred his coffee with a spoon, taking a long moment to savor the aroma. One unusual aspect of his bond with 963 is that certain sensations were different in each body he occupied. Colors were slightly different, smells triggered different emotions, and coffee… cheap instant coffee was unusually good in this body. Who knew that a chimpanzee's taste buds and instant coffee got along so well?

"Good morning, old chap." Dr. Kain's nails clacked on the tile floor as he trotted into the break room. "Got some good news and some bad news. First the good news: 682 escaped again last night."

"How the hell is that good news?"

"Well, after killing 792 guards on his way out, he stole a car and went on an alcoholic bender across two states."

Dr. Bright furrowed his brow. "You're pulling my leg. If that is the good news—"

Kain barked happily. "I'm not done yet! 682 wrapped the car around a tree at 150mph. The airbag did not deploy. The big bad lizard is dead."

"Of course!" Dr. Bright said. "Drunk driving! Why didn't we think of this sooner! Well, what is the bad news?"

"It was your car."

> **DRUNK DRIVING DESTROYS LIVES DON'T DO IT OKAY**
>
> **BROUGHT TO YOU BY MADD(itcwys)**
>
> **MONKEYS AGAINST DRUNK DRIVING (in their car which you stole)**

Killing Knowledge

Reality coughed chalantly as a Way warbled into existence within the roots of the oak tree outside the Birch home. Finnegan lurched off the tree and kicked the air filter and adjoined vial of ectoplasm into the hole, watching it stretch beyond infinity before disappearing completely with a faint pop. He grabbed the panama hat from off a low-hanging branch, taking care not to look at it or think about it for too long.

After a sigh he took a step over the void and he dropped down the rabbit hole.

Finnegan stepped, or rather slid, into one of the upper foyers of one of the many branches of the Wanderer's Library. The ectoplasm sloshed as he collided with the filter, threatening to tip over. A quick look around told him his entrance only served as a sort of catwalk between the two nearest "floors" of the Library.

After reorienting himself he stood and stumbled and slouched against the railing, looking down into the other lobbies from his pseudo-balcony. A group of authoritative individuals, whom through a fair amount of squinting and guesswork suggested to be from FBI's Unusual Incidents Unit, were communicating with another group of Serpent's Hand members.

The Hand was, so far as Finnegan understood them, a group of unlikeminded individuals gathering together under a name that sounded like a cult from an '80s film. They had no cohesive creed, had no way to filter out undesirables as joining amounted to claiming to be a member, and had no leadership beyond the self-imposed bosses of the various cliques.

This particular clique seemed to be missing said boss, as none of them in particular were communicating with the UIU head. One did step forward long enough to take a box from the hands of one of the UIU members. It looked like the groups continued speaking after

that, but from this distance Finnegan couldn't hear anything and he quickly lost interest. He had more pressing matters at hand anyway.

Like the human-shaped headache on the balcony opposite of him. Finnegan couldn't quite make out what they looked like, but they made his head throb. Snapshots of the Library, taken from various places, slid before his vision before being clawed away. His vision swam as he looked away, but the reach of the hole in his head extended as he began to associate the problem with the Library.

It took only a few moments this time, and Finnegan released the hat. A single row of books exploded into a massive bookshelf, which unfurled itself into an entire wing. Finnegan squeezed at his temples and leaned against the railing.

By the time he was fully cognizant he could see a group of authoritative figures down below, marching single file through a portal. He could barely make out the UIU logo on one of their shoulders before the last of them departed.

It was then he realized he had no idea where he was. He gripped the railing and leaned forward, craning his neck to take in floor after floor of bookshelves. They bent in on themselves and doubled back, like the cortex of some giant being. The immensity of it almost overwhelmed him, and he swung back away from the railing.

Finnegan bumped into someone in his backpeddling, but they caught his arm and steadied him. He offered a rushed apology and looked-

A black hole bore straight into his mind from the hands of an indistinct figure in a **`tweed wool newsboy cap`**. Eyes caught in the event horizon, Finnegan could only stare. The pit in his mind expanded, having grown large enough to continue growing without Finnegan actually holding the hat. Images of the Birch home fell away, quickly followed by more books of the Library. A gap opened within his minds' eye of The Utterly Bazaar, and shops and shoppers fell into the yawning chasm. He tried pushing his way through the crowd but the crack in the concrete eventually caught him, and he fell into nothing.

* * *

Nobody was on the balcony several minutes later. Two Nobodies, actually.

The newer of the two palmed the panama hat on his head and lifted it so he could properly see. A young Asian woman with a newsboy cap stared back at him with no small amount of trepidation.

Blinking, he tried to assess his situation. He couldn't remember anything, at least not specific to himself. Simple factoids and language skills remained, but the whens and hows of him learning them were gone.

Focusing, he found a slag of emotions, thoughts, and memories coagulated into a solid lump in the center of his mindscape. Something called a Finnegan pulsed from within. Pushing into his former sense of being, Nobody found Finnegan in a memory. He sat at home, alone, working on some audio project or another. He was content.

Nobody stood up slowly. His female counterpart cocked her head and they stared at each other for several seconds. Something in the air sparked between them as two similar forces butted heads. The longer they retained eye contact the stronger the friction became, and spacetime was not handling reality trying to ignore itself very well.

But then she looked up and the sparks dissipated, air collapsing back into the void while simultaneously popping back out into existence. A pair of wet pops went off and the area was no worse for wear, save for an unmemorable singed smell. She nodded at the space to his left and she walked off.

"Thanks?" he ventured over his shoulder.

She paused. Opened her mouth as if to say something, shook her head, but then hesitated again when she moved to leave.

"Wait, wait." Nobody hauled himself up with the aid of the railing. "Where do I go from here?"

"The Head Librarian might know something, but nobody just walks in and starts getting answers."

Turning on his heel, Nobody scooped up the nearby air filter and headed for the Head Librarian's office with a confident stride.

"Twizzler?"

Nobody eyed the bowl of candy suspiciously, then eyed the world serpent in the pit before him. He weighed his options before lowering the filter of ectoplasm- he still wasn't sure why he had brought it with him. It had just felt important, somehow. He nodded at the Head Librarian appreciatively and took a candy.

"You have come to question the nature of your existence."

"Something like that," Nobody said with the Twizzler hanging from his mouth. "I can feel who I used to be, poke and prod at memories, but it feels… distant."

"I cannot tell you who you will be, but I can speak of who you were," Satan replied. "Our multiverse- because yes, there are plenty of multiverses within the omniverse that do not include us- is constructed from thirteen intertwined baseline realities with a vast nothingness in the center."

Nobody eyed the bowl of Twizzlers.

"Within these baselines are thousands upon thousands of individual universes, with massive similarities between some universes from different baselines. Each universe of a baseline has one specific thing in common that roots it to the baseline. Of these billions of universes, your former self is within 74 of them."

Nobody almost choked. "That's it?"

"I suppose it might be 73, now. Within every other iteration of reality that he happens to be born in, he subsequently leaves it roughly twenty-five years later. Can you guess why?"

"I be- I mean *he*, Finnegan, becomes Nobody."

Nobody wasn't certain whether snakes could smile or not, but he was willing to bet that's what Satan did in response. Or smirked, at the very least. It was unsettling, whatever was happening.

"Or Reality tries to make him one, at least."

Something stirred in Nobody's mind. Said something, or someone, was shaped suspiciously like a Finnegan. "What do you mean tries?"

"It doesn't always… take, so to speak."

Faint quasi-memories of his mind exploding filled his mind. The thought of being ushered into the nothing between worlds filled the resulting void. It did not sound fun.

"How would I make sure I stay in place?" Nobody asked.

Something sparked behind the pince-nez spectacles. "Nobody really knows for certain."

With a grin and a twirl, Nobody departed with the filter in tow.

« **Jam Jars** | **Hub** | **Library Lifeline** »

King Greenshield: A Fairy Tale

Once upon a time, in a village in Kent, there lived a girl named Mary, of noble birth and gentle spirit. She was known throughout the town for her kindness and beauty. In time Mary became a woman and was married to John, a knight of the county in service to the good Duke. John was known by the people for his fairness and wisdom as well as his prowess in battle, and in time became a favorite of the Black Prince. One day it came to pass that the Black Prince was called on to lead the army against the French, and he called upon John to ride at his side in the battle. Though John was loath to leave his wife behind, he said his tearful goodbyes to her and boarded the Prince's ship.

After John had gone to war, Mary found her heart constantly full of sorrow and worry. Though she knew not the ways of war herself, she had heard stories told by the knights and men and was constantly in fear that her husband would not return. At night she found it hard to sleep and worried for his safety, walking the halls of the keep for hours in deep thought. Every day she waited for the messengers to bring news from France, but never did she hear a word of John's doings.

After four fortnights had passed without word from John, Mary became so worried and desperate that she sought out the witch of the woods to ask for her help. "Fair lady of the woods," Mary said to the crone as she offered her a purse brimming with silver, "four fortnights has it been since my dear husband has been away at war and I have heard no news of his fate. Know ye any way to scry if he be alive or dead?"

"Perhaps," said the witch. "Know ye of King Greenshield?"

"I do not," Mary answered.

"They say King Greenshield is a prince of the fairies," the witch said. "He holds court at the cliffs near Dover, and watches the sea and

the distant shores day and night. If you go to the right place, and ask of him, an ye know how to listen, he will tell you what he sees."

The witch taught Mary how to recognize the proper place, and the next morning she left the keep and rode to Dover. Mary searched up and down the cliffs for hours before she found the right spot. Mary placed her ear to the ground and spoke;

King Greenshield, King Greenshield, I beg of ye please,
Hath you seen my husband since he crossed the seas?
Two months hence he sailed with the Black Prince to France,
Tell me, King Greenshield, have you seen him perchance?

At first Mary heard nothing but silence, and wondered if she had come to the wrong place, or spoken wrongly, or if the witch had deceived her. But soon, the ground rumbled and a voice low and sorrowful responded;

Fifty-seven days past he sailed with the Black Prince;
I have waited and watched, but have not seen him since.

Mary was saddened to hear that King Greenshield had no news of her husband, but found it calming that he could see the shore and was watching what happened across the ocean. With the silver she had brought from the keep, Mary took a room in the public house in Dover and spent the night alone, worried but hopeful. The next morning she rode again to the cliff, placed her ear to the ground, and asked;

King Greenshield, King Greenshield, I beg of ye please,
Hath you seen my husband since he crossed the seas?
Two months hence he sailed with the Black Prince to France,
Tell me, King Greenshield, have you seen him perchance?

And King Greenshield replied;

Fifty-eight days ago he sailed with the Black Prince;
I have waited and watched, but havenot seen him since.

For nearly a year, Mary returned to the cliff every day and asked King Greenshield if he had seen John, and every day King

Greenshield answered no. The people of Dover took notice of Mary as she rode out to the cliffs every day. The village children mocked her upon leaving. "Look at that lady, off to talk to the cliff again," they said to each other. "Doesn't she know her husband must be dead by now? We should play a trick on her and teach her a lesson."

The next day when Mary rode out to the cliff, the children hid in a bush near the spot she went to to talk to King Greenshield. She put her ear to the ground and called out;

King Greenshield, King Greenshield, I beg of ye please,
Hath you seen my husband since he crossed the seas?
A year hence he sailed with the Black Prince to France,
Tell me, King Greenshield, have you seen him perchance?

Before King Greenshield could answer, one of the children shouted in a deep and booming voice, saying;

This morning he fought at the Black Prince's side
A Frenchman's blade found him, he fell and he died.

Mary cried out in anguish when she heard the voice and raised her head from the ground before she could hear King Greenshield's true response. So great was her sorrow that she ran to the cliff's edge and jumped, her body breaking on the rocks below. The children were startled to see such a grave act, and walked solemnly home and told no one what they had done.

A fortnight later, the Black Prince's army won the day against the French, and victorious he returned to England with John, alive and well, in his company. News of his wife's death had reached the keep by the time he returned, and he was overwhelmed with grief. He learned she had spent much of the year he was gone in Dover, and when he traveled there he learned of her trips to the cliff. John was not a superstitious man, but he had learned tales of King Greenshield when he was a boy, and knew why she had gone.

Riding out to the cliff in his sword and armor, upon his favorite steed, John found the spot and put his ear to the ground, and called out;

King Greenshield, King Greenshield, oh why has my wife

Leapt from thy brow and forsaken her life?
They tell me she watched here and waited for me
Tell me, King Greenshield, what fate did you see?

And King Greenshield replied;

The children pretended and told her you died
She took her own life because of their lie.

John was furious, but John was clever. He hatched a plan to take his revenge on the ruffians who had driven his wife to jump. As she had done, he took a room in the public house, and every day he rode out to the cliff, in his sword and armor, upon his favorite steed. Every morning, he knelt to the ground and called out;

King Greenshield, King Greenshield, oh why has my wife
Leapt from thy brow and forsaken her life?
They tell me she watched here and waited for me
Tell me, King Greenshield, what fate did you see?

And every morning, King Greenshield replied;

The children pretended and told her you died
She took her own life because of their lie.

Before scarcely a fortnight had passed, the same children took notice of John's behavior. "Look at that fool!" they cried. "Does he think that calling out will bring her back? Let's see if he's as easy to fool as she was."

The next day, when John rode out to the cliff, the children were hiding again in the bush. John put his ear to the ground and called out;

King Greenshield, King Greenshield, oh why has my wife
Leapt from thy brow and forsaken her life?
They tell me she watched here and waited for me
Tell me, good King Greenshield, what fate did you see?

And before King Greenshield could answer, one of the children shouted;

She has left you, my friend, for another lord's arms
Fled off to Scotland, away from all harm.

As soon as John heard the voice, he knew King Greenshield had told the truth. Drawing his sword, John leapt upon the children in the bush in a frenzy, and mercilessly hacked the knaves to bits which he tossed, piece by piece, over the cliff. His sword and armor covered in their blood, John rode back into Dover to the chapel and told my grandfather's grandfather, the parish vicar, what he had done. He gave his final confession and paid penance to the Church, and satisfied that he had done his duty, he rode back to the cliff and jumped off, his body breaking on the rocks below, to meet his wife in Christ's embrace.

They say that King Greenshield holds court to this day at the White Cliffs of Dover, and that if you find the right spot and ask of him, and know how to listen, he will tell you what he has seen. But whether the story I have told is true or not, he will not say; and if you seek his counsel, you should first and foremost make certain it is his voice you hear.

Memo from Dr. Samesh: The above story was published in an 1892 edition of Andrew Lang's Fairy Book*, an English collection of fairy tales compiled from various sources. All known extant copies of this edition are currently owned by the Foundation. Based on our research, variants on the above tale have been part of the oral tradition of southeastern England for several centuries; as such, full suppression has to date proven impossible, though our efforts at keeping it out of print have marginalized public awareness thereof. In Interview 1588-33, wherein* **SCP-1588** *was asked about the provenance of the story, it stated that it is aware of the story's existence, and that numerous people have committed suicide by jumping from the cliffs above it in the time it has existed, but it refused to state whether or not the story was true.*

Kingdom Of Stone: A Monolithic Species

Hagne-Allon had caught up with the mass of former miners just before they could begin to dissipate into aimless hordes. She hadn't given much of a speech… but then, she hadn't had to; the promise of asylum was its own message, when they had no other options. Now, she roamed ahead of them, waiting for them to move past, before picking up and moving ahead again. She had given them general directions, but doubted their ability to find their way amongst the thickets of woodland and rock, all tending to blur together the longer one looked.

> They have no sense of proper etiquette or hierarchy. Women are seen as often hunting for game as men are washing clothes and caring for children. You could hardly tell some apart until they took their clothes off to wash. They are beautiful specimens all — lithe, wiry, fit and firm. Comes from a lifetime of hard labor, I imagine. Now they put that experience to use every night, setting up a camp that could, but for the right materiel, be called a town proper.

She looked up from her writing, smiling at the sight of a young woman about her age, skin dark as coal, laughing and chasing another woman who had apparently snatched an apple from her. At some point, the dark woman dove for the other, knocking the apple aside, and began to kiss the other one with a deep, longing passion. Hagne's eyes widened, and she smiled.

> There's a beautiful purity in their ignorance. Or perhaps naiveté in their society. I had initially suspected it to be mere joy earlier, but the longer you observe them, you notice men pairing with men, women pairing with women, not a care for offspring or proper mating ritual. They love whom they will, and all accept it. I know you are a strong and long-lived woman, Overseer, so I dare

not question your judgment, but after having witnessed this group in battle, I cannot imagine that any attempts at reforming their primitive little society will be beneficial in the long term.

She had assumed the gathering group of people in the corner of her eye had been gathered for food, but the longer she listened, the more she heard voices rising in a cacophony of noise that began to sound belligerent. She rose, and rushed over to the mass. The miners parted for her, as they usually did to those deemed authority figures, to reveal the center of the conflict.

It was a woman, young-looking, but with the far too clean look and slightly unnatural sheen of a panacea-user. She flashed a smile at Hagne, showing teeth far too perfect to be natural. Her hair was red as blood, and close to the roots, Hagne could make out a pattern of stitching on her scalp. Her eyes were big, beautifully so, and unnaturally blue. Everything about her screamed of some manner of fraudulence or another.

"What is this? Another huckster?" Hagne snarled.

The woman leapt to her feet with easy grace. She was shapely, indicative of very good health, compared to the lean and sometimes malnourished forms of the miners.

"Huck? Huck… Huck, rhymes with fuck!" The woman grinned those blindingly white teeth again.

Hagne grunted and stepped up to her, clutching her spear close at hand. The woman seemed not to notice, "These people are under the protection of the Eighth Overseer. I am tasked with ensuring they reach Whore's End safely and unmolested. What manner of trinket are you shilling? Miracle cures? Low-cost panacea?"

The woman spread her arms apart innocently. For all her apparent healthy looks, she was dressed in a patchwork coat of thick cloths. Hagne thought she saw the subtle glint of metal underneath it.

"Check my pockets. Take my clothes; I carry no purse on me. I take no coin, nor whatever currency these people use. Hello, by the way.

My name is Dodger."

Hagne tilted her spear, using the sheathed buttspike to keep the woman from approaching her, "Stand your ground. What is your business here?"

The woman — "Dodger", she claimed — glanced around, and shrugged again, "People are my business. Miserable, filthy, hopeless people."

"You prey upon them? Peddle them as slaves?"

"Why so pessimistic?" Dodger looked hurt, "I serve them. Not as food for others, before you start leaping to accusations. I've been blessed with much, as you can see," She turned herself around, waggling her hips in a crude manner perhaps meant to be suggestive, before turning to face Hagne again, "I am a vulture. A vampire. A ghoul. I am addicted to pleasure, and the only pleasure I get nowadays is seeing the smiling, happy face of a person I have helped. The happy sobs of a grateful individual is a more potent a sound than the loveliest music. The sight of a wounded person rising to their feet in good health is more pleasurable than the boldest sunrise. The crushing bear hug of an individual to whom you have given all that you could to help is more gratifying than the loudest, screaming-est orgasm."

Hagne-Allon's lip curled. She certainly saw the appeal of this woman to the miners. Lewd, crude, loud, and charismatic, and colorful to look at, "You'll forgive me if I have trouble believing it."

Dodger shrugged again, "You don't need to believe; it's the truth," She reached into her coat, withdrawing a small pouch and reaching in, "How are you, by the way? Is your body functioning properly?"

Again, she tilted the spear, to keep her from approaching, "I'm fine. Don't touch me." She looked up and down the woman again. She had brought a satchel with her, which was on the ground behind her. Unless she held a short blade within, she was completely unprotected.

"How have you lasted this long in the wilderness?"

The woman shrugged, "I packed supplies."

"I mean how have you avoided…"

"How has someone as pretty as I avoided the unwanted advances of violent men brandishing bludgeons?" Again she looked around herself, "The same way you all have; I do not walk alone."

"Where are your travelling companions?"

"Spread across the land. We have outposts every few miles or so," She smiled again, reaching into her coat to take out a small square bit of parchment. Printed on the front in fine dark-green type were the letters 'MCF'. The rear showed a small map of the region, from Whore's End to the Dumping Grounds East.

"What is this?" Hagne offered the parchment back to Dodger, but she refused it.

"It's a card. A… it's a bit of parchment."

"I know what parchment is, I can read and write. What is 'MCF'?"

Dodger smiled, and touched two fingers to the bridge of her nose, "Manna the power, manna the food, manna the drink, manna the entity and Manna the Entity — Would you wish me to leave?"

"I wish you to leave."

"Or — OR! Would you let me roam the ranks of your freed miners, my hands extended, offering everything I have to give, food, drink, medicine, until I have nothing left but the clothes on my body — or not even those? Would you truly deprive these people of any bit of help they can receive?"

Hagne stared at her long and hard, waiting for some sign, a facial tic or unwarranted smirk, any excuse to vehemently reject the woman and send her off. The woman didn't even blink.

"Fine. Stay. But you will receive nothing from me should you choose not to leave before we reach Whore's End. And should you continue on, you will submit to the Overseer's authority, in what-ever she

might wish to do with you."

Dodger nodded, and smiled to her, again with her incoherent chanting, "**Because Manna helped us**, what can we do but share that same help with all of their children?"

Someone had spread the rumor once that the longer you lived on panacea, the more likely you were to forget your own name. They hadn't meant it literally…

"Anna Sobotka," She said aloud, her own name for just over four thousand years.

The ironic part — was it irony? — was that she had entirely forgotten who had said that to her. She'd always pictured the person saying it as being a woman like her, short and blonde, big nose and short hair. Then she saw a portrait in her main hall, and remembered it wasn't the person who had told her about panacea; it was a serving girl of hers, dead for at least 80 years. Her petrified body was in the mausoleum she'd established at the top of her cliff-side tower.

"Honey Pot," She said aloud. That had been the girl's name. Her parents named her that, and she'd stubbornly refused to change it.

Everyone knew where she was; "Whore's End" they called it. They said it was named for her, but it had been called that long before she set up camp here. The river running through the land had been pristine at some point after the Fall. It was the last clean river for miles in every direction, and remained so for hundreds of years. Then erosion uncovered a stockpile of some manner of chemical waste. She didn't know; it was already ancient history by the time she'd found the place. The river became polluted, and started to stink of sulfur and chlorine. People who drank from it or waded in it felt it burn their skin, and called it "Whore's End", making light of a hypothetical young woman forced by circumstances to prostitution, succumbing to the bodily rot of some unknown venereal disease or other.

Her enemies had taken to saying it referred to her, withdrawing to her wretched home at the end of her life. It was somewhat

frustrating, but she refused to change the name. To do so would admit defeat, and admit that the place was indeed named for her.

She had plenty of patience and more than enough time. The world around her had already dissolved into a thicket of savage tribes, people no longer identified as Americans or Canadians or anything else. Such words were older than ancient. They pre-dated myth. Men fought and died and established dynasties and empires lasting hundreds of years atop the burial mound of the greatest, richest, most technologically advanced civilization the planet had ever birthed.

That civilization had reached space. They had eaten and slept beside small windows, outside of which they could bear witness to thick clouds of dust and ash that covered the world during the last days leading up to the Fall. How must they have felt, believing themselves to be the very last of their civilization, of their species?

Anna only felt joy for them, convincing herself that they had turned away and gone in search of another home. She imagined now an entire civilization sprawling across a distant solar system, colonizing planets, mining comets and asteroids, and soaking in energy-abundant sunlight for hours every single day.

Niggling doubt drove her on. Doubt that anyone had survived in the stations long enough to start moving. Doubt that they could even reproduce effectively enough in a zero-g environment. Doubt that even if they had made it out, their descendants arriving successfully on some life habitable planet, that they would even have survived long enough to become spacefaring again.

That drove her here on Earth. A people perpetually ignorant, illiterate, living on legends, myth, fanciful stories of a version of the past that never existed. Believing themselves to be different from one another, and thus incapable of co-existing peacefully. Every little minor kingdom that advanced sufficiently was more likely to be broken and beaten by a lesser group, their scrapes at technological prowess erased, and the species as a whole back to the stagnancy of perpetual feudal living, spears and shield combat, pestilence, and hand-to-mouth living.

The other Overseers didn't help matters. They only cared for eliminating each other, and carving out a following on Earth that would elevate them to living Godhood. Short-sighted, unsustainable, doomed to failure. The only thing that would work with creatures like that was violence.

The thicket of savage tribes had to be burned down. Those who resisted had to be killed. Those who fell in line would remember their old tribal identities and their old lives as stories, while taking upon a new identity. Not a tribal one… but a human one. A single, monolithic culture, for a single, monolithic species. One that would breach the clouds that coated the Earth, and be able to once again see the sun any time they wanted.

She missed the sun. It was still there, of course. It would outlast her, she imagined; outlast everything and everyone, panacea be damned. The clouds just made it impossible to see for months, even years at a time. Nothing could grow. Entire species went extinct. Vegetation was almost nonexistent, with the added benefit of the deluge of life-strangling ash, soot, fallout, and chemicals that had escaped from their containment once the infrastructure had completely rotted.

Containment… She had nearly forgotten. All those Keter-class anomalies, run rampant for millennia. Or hell, there were Euclids and Safes that could wreak global catastrophe if left to their own devices. The fact that she still stood here, on solid ground, with thousands of living people around them, meant the best case scenario had occurred when the Fall happened.

"This place smells like a swimming pool," She said aloud. It was starting to hurt less to speak. Her jaw had been replaced the year before, and it still wasn't healing properly. She didn't want to have to rely on copious amounts of panacea on such a vanity, and so had relied on conventional treatment to help it along. She wasn't at risk of dying — worst case scenario, she use up the last of her panacea reserves, then hunt for more later on.

"I like the smell. It's pleasant. Even by comparison with the outside," She smiled. It hurt badly. Her teeth no longer clicked together when she spoke, but she couldn't stop the twitching in her jaw that made

the right side of her jaw itch insufferably. That had been another vain excess she'd insisted upon; salvaging what remained of her face. It meant the prosthetic would be all the more noticeable by being mismatched in tone.

"It's hot in Topeka."

The medicus behind her looked up. She smiled to herself, not turning to face him, "The pain is becoming more bearable. You can leave early today. I will see you next week."

« **The Under-Class** | **A Monolithic Species** | **Slay, Cure, Protect** »

The whole mob seemed to groan as it came to a halt, like steel creaking and bending. Dodger had a foot out, ready to take another step, but held put as the order came to halt. They'd arrived at Whore's End. The stench of sulfur had been present for hours. Now there was a distinct tinge of ammonia and chlorine.

"Beautiful place," Dodger said with a smile, approaching a nearby riverbank, where the water gushed rapidly, giving off the sulfur stench most prominently. It was even lined with trees — no leaves, though. A group of young people started flocking to the river, one girl kneeling beside it and reaching in to scoop up some water. Dodger vaulted over to her, grabbing her by her hair and yanking her back away from the water.

"What's wrong with you? Didn't they tell you not to drink the water?" She looked in the girl's face. She was cute, though not as young as Dodger had thought. Her skin was red and pink, broken out like a typical greasy teenager.

"They did, but- but then the others, they said 'Get Stoneface' — that's what they call me, by the way, Stoneface — 'to drink it! She'll drink anything!' and so I went and did."

Dodger leaned in closer, clasping the girl's face and examining her skin, "Why do they call you 'Stoneface'?"

"It's because of my face. It gets wet and bumpy, and when I scratch the bumps, they start bleeding. Then the blood turns to stone and I can peel it off like ice but it don't hurt any."

Dodger smiled, "That's called 'acne'. You just have to wash your face more often and it'll go away. What's your real name?"

The girl squirmed, "I don't know. I been called 'Kitt' before, but that's all."

A voice howled in her direction, sounding like the braying of a large animal. Dodger let go of Kitt and slowly turned to see a tall, imposing figure bounding towards her, dressed all in metal and black leather. She smiled sweetly, then stopped as she saw it was a woman; near seven feet tall, she figured, close-cut dirty blonde hair, and eyes so dark as to appear black from so far down as Dodger stood.

"Why are you harassing the peasants?" The woman asked in a surprisingly wispy, throaty voice.

"Familiarizing myself with the girl, and dispensing advice," Dodger smiled, bowing politely to the tall woman. She fished into one of her pockets, and found a small pack of antibiotics, precious few in existence, able to be spared only due to the recent influx in panacea she'd managed to get a hold of. She knelt down and handed it to the girl, "Swallow one of these with every meal," She hesitated, noting how small and skinny the girl looked, "Actually, swallow one in the morning, and another at night. Should help you with your stone face." She smiled and patted the girl on the head.

The woman grabbed Dodger by the armpits, easily hoisting her up to her feet and turning her to face the woman, "Are you a Dark? Darks are banned from Whore's End. If you've got to lie, I recommend you lie well, or it could be I wear your panacea-laced head on my shield as a trophy."

Dodger furrowed her brow, "Such violence. And racism, too."

"Marshall. Carter. Dark." The woman snarled nastily, her grip on Dodger tightening.

"I was just teasing you. I don't work for money. I serve Manna. My name is Dodger. What about you?"

The woman let Dodger go, and said nothing for a long while. Dodger broke the silence, "You must be a Foundation Knight, then? Who'd you serve before Number Eight?"

The woman grabbed Dodger by the shoulder, and started to pull her along.

"I'm not a spy, if that's what you're thinking! If what I hear is correct, I might actually know Number Eight from another time —"

"Good. Then you're less likely to die in the next few hours. If you've got to lie this time around, I recommend you lie well."

The way up the tower smelled heavily like chlorine. Somehow, the smell of sulfur was entirely gone. It was almost pleasant, like living in an above-ground aquifer tainted by chemical waste. She pitied the peasants having to stay outside with the sulfur. Maybe there was some manner of design in this tower that kept out the sulfur? She didn't know anything about engineering.

Finally she reached the top floor, sweat beading along her hairline. The towering woman behind her hadn't slowed, and hadn't changed her easy breathing in the slightest. The room looked carved straight from stone, without any décor beyond a few seats and tables, and the vast open window carved on the opposite end of the room, using preciously rare clear glass to allow a view of the land around them.

The Eighth Overseer stood on a dais extending towards the windows. The windows extended like a bulb, offering a view straight down below as well as straight up and all around. Pre-Fall construct, it had to be. Dodger could easily see the rot starting to set in around the edges, where the glass had been fused together and rammed into stone. Like every other braggadocious castle and fortress in the land proclaiming grandeur and terror, it was falling apart.

"Speaking of falling apart," She muttered aloud as the Overseer turned and started moving towards her. It looked like she had gotten to the panacea too late to save her face.

"Hey Anna," Dodger waved casually, knowing better than to try and flatter someone like her.

The Overseer smiled, then tilted her head slightly, putting Dodger on edge before those coy words left her lips, "Do I know you?"

Dodger was sure the knight behind her hadn't moved, yet she could distinctly feel her presence far closer than she had upon entering.

Dodger spread her arms slightly, innocently keeping her hands visible and open.

"Dr. Anna Sobotka. My name's Dodger. 'Spiffy Dodger', technically. Real name… doesn't matter anyways; everyone who was anyone only knew me as 'Dodger'. We used to work together a few times… After the Fall."

The Overseer smiled, eyes still blank and expressionless. Dodger twitched, anticipating the knight's hands coming down on her shoulders to whisk her away to some manner of dark horror involving iron, stone, and possibly fire. Then the Overseer stepped closer, reaching out to touch Dodger's face.

"I *do* remember you. What was it you told me? That you were a 'last light of life and love in a land lacking leisure'?"

"I may have been a bit boastful back then."

"What do you want?"

Dodger had hoped for at least a few more moments of small talk, "Pick up where I left off, hopefully."

Anna shook her head, but before the towering woman behind Dodger could wring her neck, she spoke again, "I can offer you a position tending to my flock…"

"No."

"Teach them to read and write, teach them discipline — "

"No."

" — Train them to use proper spears and shields, maybe."

"*Hell* no," Dodger stood her ground and waited for the woman behind her to kill her at any moment. Anna frowned as much as her porcelain jaw allowed her to. Dodger broke in quickly, "I happen to know where you might find some useful anomalies."

Anna's face remained fixed in that frown. Dodger continued, "We're

close to at least three I know of. A hole; used to be in a building. Leads somewhere… anomalous. Still has things we can loot from them. Desks, chairs, tables, maybe some weapons. Other things. I've also managed to track down some a few hundred miles away. Very long journeys… could take years."

"You want to be sent to fetch things for me?" Anna asked incredulously. By reputation, Dodger was always the sort to want to see action, even if it was digging latrines and polishing armor by the front lines, "There's a war coming, you know."

Dodger squirmed a bit, clenching her porcelain teeth tightly together, "I know."

"You love war."

Dodger looked down sheepishly at her chest, "I love a *good* war… a liberation, annexation of a failed-state, crushing some petty warlord. This one you've got coming… It's dirty. Confusing. Political, even."

Anna grinned, "You only love when there's a clear-cut 'good' and 'evil'."

Dodger didn't look up, "Only the perception of 'good' and 'evil'. I know there's no such thing as 'evil' in the world."

Anna smirked, and reached out to take Dodger by the hand, "No. Of course not. Let's talk."

The square of gold-shielded men came to a stop near the edge of the vast bowl-shaped pit, where smoke still rose from the fires set weeks prior. Tracks indicated thousands of people moving to the southwest.

A young woman ran up to Overseer Seven. She was unarmored, lightly garbed, with a satchel hanging from her hips. Scar tissue on her thighs and legs marked her a survivor of the Upland Mine Riots six years prior. A former slave turned traitor, one of many who opened the gates to the Overseer's assault force, and was granted her freedom for her troubles.

She dropped to her knees before him, hands out and splayed open, "My lord. I've found a note from your servant."

At his nod, she reached into her satchel, and withdrew a rolled bit of parchment, sealed with a ring of stone, likely made from blood spilled on the field before it could petrify. He pulled the ring off, and unfurled the paper.

"Have I done well, my lord?" The woman asked, trembling.

He looked down to her, then glared at his men. He tolerated no abuse of women in his service, regardless of their status. None of the men looked away in guilt. He trusted these men enough to accept that alone.

"You have," He responded gutturally, and withdrew a bronze flask from his satchel, prying off the top and pouring a small handful of sticky golden syrup onto his outstretched gauntlet.

The woman started to whimper, and lunged at his armored hand as he lowered it, smearing the panacea on her face as she devoured it all, licking each metal finger clean of the precious substance, while he continued to read the hastily written letter left him by Hagne-Allon.

"Eight is alive." He drew a sharp breath. He still remembered Anna Sobotka, the way she had been; long blonde hair, shapely little nose, always with an over-shirt or a jacket of some type. Quick to wit and quick to forgive, always able to project a perpetual sense of calm and bring out the best in her coworkers. The Anna Sobotka he remembered didn't exist anymore. He wasn't even entirely sure that Anna Sobotka ever existed.

He turned his hand over, watching the woman stiffen and stop lapping like a dog as he pointed right to her face, "Find the redhead. Do not talk to her. Watch the people around her. Don't leave them; I will send messengers for you to report to."

"Ree… Recon? Conner Sense?"

"Reconnaissance" He confirmed.

The woman rose to her feet, and turned around, starting after the tracks at a jog.

« A Monolithic Species | **Slay, Cure, Protect** | »

Kingdom of Stone: The End of a Man

I walked.

I knew my end was near. I had not felt my feet for ages now, Overseer knows for how long. They used to ache, but that stopped quickly. As soon as they began to turn to stone, that is.

I am an old man, lived to see many a war, fight in a few even. I don't know if to count myself lucky to live in this cold, hard world, with little to no hope of tomorrow. Heh, grim thoughts for a dying man.
They say your last thoughts should be of home. Too bad I don't have any. Not after the Fifth Overseer's army burned it down. Damn them and their disputes to hell.

I look around, seeing nothing but death around me. A battlefield, full of men and women, frozen in their last moments of horror, old friends and new foes alike. Beheaded bodies with their hearts pierced by arrows, still standing. Those few who did not die right away lying face down, with sand flowing from their veins to litter the ground. Fear still lingers on their faces, as it does on mine. I am terrified. Terrified of this war. Terrified of my own upcoming fate.

Oh the foolishness of man to heed their king's word blindly and charge into battle. Why has it come to this I ask, with rulers bickering over their own concerns, throwing the common people at each other, only to prolong what comes to the rest of us; this unforgiving fate of all, both man and god?

God.

What a strange word to use of men who are but near-immortal.

I trample through the barren land full of dust and stone. The skies are dark as ever. I feel the pain of the poisoned arrow in my shoulder sting once again. Might as well break it off, I think as I snap the shaft in half, the shock bringing me to my knees. I crank myself

up and keep going. I cannot stay here. This is not the place.

Before me is a forest, petrified much like most of me right now. I feel my ear; it chips off into my hand, and I toss it away. I tread onwards, only to see those same faces all over again. An expression of horror forever etched into those stony eyes and that gravely face. A sad display of foolishness from our Overseers, ones who we once held as gods. Our knighthood means nothing. It is but a carrot on a stick to lure us to fight their battles for them, to solve their fruitless bickering once and for all- and at what cost? Yet another garden of statues dots the landscape.

I have not rested in what feels like forever, but I cannot stop now. To stop is to give up. And I am not ready yet. I feel the fingers on my left hand stiffening, and decide to break them off. Less weight to carry at least.

I shouldn't be far now.

Monsters are what they call them. The creatures out there, hunting what is left of the mankind. A threat to our beloved leaders, and to ourselves. The sole reason to why we exist, to why our Foundation of Knights was born; to slay these threats and stop them. Slay, cure and protect. And look how well we've succeeded. Even now I can see something ahead, crawling its way through these cold woods. I try to go around it from as far as I can.

It had a tail.

I haven't seen an animal all my life. Heard stories, and saw a few statues, but the thought of something other than man existing was… Baffling. To think that we are not alone in this unforgiving world was a scary thought. Mostly because we are weak.
The only reason we exist anymore is the manna, the panacea. Stuff of legends. Golden nectar oozing from deep down under. The greatest reason for our struggles against each other, the greed of our kings… And the only thing keeping them alive.

The smoke of the mines has created a thick layer to cover the skies. Has been that way for… Centuries, at least. Cold and darkness have been the mankind's friend for as far as our memory goes. We

don't even know how many moons there are, if any. Sounds like a fairytale to me. A giant stone, flying in the heavens… As believable as the "miracles" our god-kings make.

I think this is it.

I cannot walk another step. My knees crackle with every movement, and I feel them slightly chipping. But I must go on, I am not there yet.

I walk out of the woods.

The sunlight greets me.

A faint flicker from between the smallest crack in the thick mattress of clouds that has always remained there, as far as I could possibly remember.

I look down at the landscape below me. A grey land of dying souls, false kings and misery. My friends and family lying dead, and I have nothing left.

I don't think I've ever seen sunlight before. As I feel my heart slowly come to a halt, I think to myself:

This is good.

This is where I'll stay.

« The End of a Man| The Under-Class »

Kingdom of Stone: The Under-Class

When I saw the sky open, I suspected they would make their attempt there. What I expected was a bumbling mass of men, noise and frenzy, cowed by the glint of steel. At worst, some would die. Nevertheless, I would give them what aid I could; I always took a perverse pleasure in seeing some new disaster or atrocity break the monotony of everyday life.

The sky is always gray for weeks at a time. Even when the sky opens, there is nothing to shield you from its light. There are no rocks or mountains nearby — they have all been mined and collapsed. I expected the light alone would break up what ever plans they had.

So I sat atop a small ridge overlooking the deep crack in the earth where the mines ran down. I had a clear view of what would become the open field of battle for all of an hour. I began to take notes, expecting a brief report for the Overseer. I didn't expect to write a novella. Nevertheless, I intended to write as much as possible, to amuse my readers further.

How it began was with a guttural blast of noise. To call it a trumpet blast would imply the miners had any metal of their own to fashion for such amenities. I expected men, dirty men in dirty clothes. I saw them; I saw women and children. Some had wrapped blocks of wood or rock to their forearms and torsos, makeshift armor. The mass of humanity had to be in the thousands. I fully expected the numbers, but I had not conceived of just how massive such a number would actually look drawn out upon an open space.

I do them ill justice to call them a mere "mass", but all proper reports on the incident must include such a term.

In fact there was a surprising level of discipline among them. They began a chant; it was elaborate, if indistinct, like a paean to a god of homicide. Beautiful to behold, on such a massive scale. You could hardly muster enough interest in such ceremony amongst professional knights. It was exquisite, but efficient; they were ready to break and move at a moment's notice. When the guards took up a phalanx of shield and club and sword, the ranks of miners broke and charged.

Some had their pickaxes or shovels to use as weapons. This was soon determined to be folly, as many did harm to their own comrades long before they could emerge before the actual enemy. I do not know what was anticipated by the ringleaders, but the ground was utterly impracticable for the sort of grand and glorious man-to-man combat you read in tales. The guards refused to let the miners' numbers exploit the open land, and deployed themselves upon the spiraling stairwell coming up to the cusp, near where I now sat.

This exquisite army of rebellious miners devolved into a mass out of necessity. What else could a man or woman do? The men in front were meat, to be slaughtered by the guards. Whether they knew this or not, I could not tell, for there was no sign of any relent or attempt to break and run. Perhaps there simply was not enough time, or perhaps none in the front ranks noticed just how quickly they died.

Again, tales do combat no justice; it is impossible for a man, no matter his strength, to cleave through other men with a blade as if hacking through linens and fabrics. Blades stuck in flesh, in muscle, and in bone. Once the miners realized this, they understood that steel was not as strong as flesh, and the one weapon they had in abundance was flesh.

Nothing was said to any of the miners, or at least no cry that could be discerned as intelligible by myself. As one, they seemed to understand that their sole advantage

over the enemy was themselves. "Meat", the guards had disparagingly called the miners for so long. Now they truly were meat. The bodies dropped, and more followed. One by one, guards lost hold of their weapons as they stuck in the viscera of the masses. Miners tore at the shields, losing nail and digit as they sought simply to give their lives to one purpose or another; "lower this shield", "bash this helmet", "gouge this eye". A singular task, to be fulfilled in the brief moments allowed to their miserable lives, before dying.

Here is where the term "mass" can be applied; less than a full hour in, the miners began to walk atop the guards. I mean that literally! The bodies stacked high enough that the living could walk over the dead, and walk atop the guards, kicking at helmets, screaming, becoming impaled or eviscerated by the enemies yet to see the front lines. That is how they lost their weapons. They brought their shields up, attempting to keep the miners off of their heads. A sensible tactic, if not for the fact that the mass of miners continued to move over the shields. Now they trapped the guards completely, from front, rear, and top.

There was no more "battle" then; I could make out the figured of men and women both grabbing and scratching with bare hands and teeth. They tore away pieces of armor in their enemy, or simply punched and kicked defiantly, breaking their bones in the hopes of simply denting the enemy's breastplate or gorget. Some of the dead began to petrify; those with the strength to do so broke off fingers or entire arms to use as bludgeons.

As they continued to advance, more and more people fell from the elevated walkways. At some point, the guards broke, but retained enough sense to recognize the folly of leaping from such a height. With what little they had left, they began to push forward, pressing the mob back down. They only sought to get closer to the ground, so they could stand a better chance of limping free once

they had struck the bottom. It would have been a glorious sight if it had succeeded. At some point, I imagine, it became as if the guards had hit a wall. They began to fall away, in twos and threes, until none were left. The miners continued to bodily swarm upon each other for long moments after, until finally a coherent enough cry rose up to cease the animal panic.

All at once, they were human again. Men kissed women, men kissed men, women kissed women, everyone was in ecstasy. A few fell and died afterwards, or dropped from the exhaustion. Few got back up. The crowd came out of the mine, and spread across the landscape. I did not fear them; I had nothing worth taking, and I dressed as modestly as they. I did fear they would confiscate my notes, and prevent my report from reaching the Overseer's eyes. But they easily took me for one of them — I imagine more than a few of the miners were previously literate men and women, as the fact that I continued to write did not arouse the suspicion as I would have anticipated of a mob of uneducated peasants.

I can tell you now why they succeeded. Not there in the mines; that was sheer numbers alone, but why they succeeded in breaking out of the Lowlands and destroying the border guard so soundly. The guards hired by the mine owners were foreign men, unaccustomed to one another. They ate and slept in the same barracks, but they did not truly live the same lives. Some could not speak the same language. They were ex-knights, men-at-arms, sellswords, or soldiers of fortune. They learned to fight individually, for duels or contests of money and valor.

The miners had endured decades of hardship together. The deprivations they endured were endurable solely because of the shared effort of them all to extricate themselves from certain death. They had done more than eaten and slept together; some did not even eat,

but gave their meager rations to others. Childless women offered their breast to motherless infants, elder men were given more time to rest, while complete strangers broke their bodies to fulfill the old men's quotas. They had established a community in the rocky depths, and they were driven not by money or glory or valor. They were not driven even by fear.

They loved one another. All of them together acknowledged one another as friend and family. The only fear they felt was fear that they would all suffer if any individual failed at any point in their journey for freedom.

I tell you this, Overseer; such a force as that is the most dangerous and deadly you will ever find anywhere. Many would see this mob of vagabonds and peasants and fear them. I suggest you look upon them, if and when they arrive, and greet them with love. They are a nation unto themselves. All they will need is a hand such as yours to claim them. An entire under-class, subject to your will.

Eternally your servant,
Hagne-Allon

The Overseer — not the intended reader of the report — set down the sheaf of parchment, and smiled up at the short woman kneeling before her. She looked young enough to be the Overseer's daughter, in another time.

"An entire 'under-class'?" The Eighth Overseer knelt down, placing a finger beneath the short woman's chin and tilting her head back. The woman shuddered. The Eighth Overseer had lost much of the left side of her jaw, too much for panacea to recover. She had been almost beautiful in her youth. She still saw herself as such now… as much of her original body was left.

"Truly these people are not strong or educated enough to be considered citizens proper."

"According to whom?"

The woman squirmed and tried not to look at the gaping hole in the side of the Overseer's face, "To all good and noble persons of the Third Overseer's Empire."

She patted the woman on the cheek, "You are now a good and noble person of the Eighth Overseer's Empire. Do you understand?"

The woman nodded hesitantly.

"And these miners… the 'under-class', are now subjects of my new Empire. Do you understand?"

Again, she nodded.

"Go find them, and direct them here to Whore's End. Make sure to avoid the *artists*, and don't drink from the river."

« **The End of a Man** | **The Under-Class** | **A Monolithic Species** »

Kirche

The German Border, near Dresden
February 15th, 1945

Calling them members of a charitable foundation was half-right.

The instant the bombs stopped on the fifteenth, a platoon from Prague — Baker-Six-Six, aka "Rare Mediums" — had been deployed to Dresden. They were relatively close, barely an hour and a half away. The Yanks had decided to take the Axis from two ends, and as such, bombed both Prague *and* Dresden, so a good part of B66 was behind aiding in recovery efforts and trying to prevent things from getting even worse.

Officially, they represented the "Allied Relief for Victims of the Conflict in the European Theater Foundation", and they had all the trappings of it; fake documentation, supply trucks full of emergency rations and water filtration, bandages for the wounded.

Dresden was close to both the southern and eastern borders, and they were desperate for any kind of relief, for fear that the Soviets would come in from the east and deal them the killing blow.

Anastazie Dvorak kept her head down as they passed through the checkpoint; too often in the occupied zones, she had been stopped because of her 'Jewish eyes', whatever that meant. someone else had told her that it was a perverse compliment, and that it meant that they wanted to take advantage of you.

Her handler, a kind Ukranian man who she just called Humphrey — because he looked so much like Humphrey Bogart — had finished talking to the German at the checkpoint, and soon, they were bound towards Dresden. It was a fair distance into the country, still, another half-hour.

"Are you all right, Ana?" Humphrey asked. His Czech was passable,

at most, but she could hold a conversation with him.

"Yes, thank you." She swallowed, looking towards the northern horizon. "…I feel so much sadness from there. So much loss. They're saying twenty-thousand dead?"

"Two-hundred thousand, Ana." He glanced at the driver of the transport, and then looked back at her. "But word is that the Fuhrer is inflating the figures. I'm sure it's far less than that!" He had a genuine smile on his face, hiding his own unease.

"…they're lying again, then." She felt at her uniform; a nurse's garb, for their cover. "Why do they lie about the number of deaths? It's dangerous and will induce panic."

"I think they know that," Humphrey said, looking north with her. "I just don't think they care."

He didn't have the same sensitivity that Ana did. He couldn't talk to the dead. He couldn't cause spots of cold. He wouldn't faint or scream in the presence of death and destruction. He was just there to make sure she was kept safe.

But you can't kill something that's already dead with a bullet. He clutched his Bible in his breast pocket.

The bombing had stopped at half-past noon. By the time they got there, it was almost five o'clock. The city was dead silent, except for the burning of the flames in the distance, and the sound of the trucks. Every now and again, they would see clothing sticking from the rubble. Ana tried not to think about it. She just focused on the pain she heard.

This city would forever have a psychic scar on it. Even if the wounds were to heal, the mind of this city would be forever concussed, shellshocked. After ten, fifty, one-hundred years, there would still be something in this city to remind the people of Germany — and the world — of what happened here.

"What the hell?" someone asked in Czech. It was the driver, who

she called Clark, after Clark Gable; he had the same voice as the actor. "Her ears are bleeding."

"Dammit." Humphrey reached forward to dab at her ears with a handkerchief. "That bad?"

Ana nodded. "The worst yet. Remember Trafalgar Square, four years ago?"

"You wouldn't stop seizing," Humphrey nodded, taking out a white pill and a bottle of water, offering both to her. "Kept saying the children there could taste the war rations, and they were hungry for chocolate."

"Yes." She nodded. Ana took the pill placed it under her tongue, and swallowed it with some water. "It… it wasn't good."

The truck came to a stop. "We're here," Clark said, stepping out of the cab. "I recognize the building."

They stepped out onto the street, in front of what had once been some form of church. It could barely be recognized as one; only a few walls were left, and in the center, some rubble of what had once been the dome and spire. The chancel was the largest part left standing, all dark stone; whether the surroundings smouldered in such a way that it looked dark, or if it was naturally that way, none could tell. The altar, somehow, was mostly intact.

Clark looked at the photograph they had been given, then at the remains of the church, then waved Ana over to inspect it. She herself had taken the picture, with a special camera; 'spirit photography' she called it. It depicted the remains of the church, with dozens, if not at least one-hundred, black-eyed, pale beings looking at the camera. It had frighted her, the Foundation, and the New Dawn Initiative enough to come and find it.

"Who are they?" Humphrey asked, disembarking from the back of the transport.

"I don't know." Her hand balled up in her uniform. "Better question might be *what* are they. You've heard reports from where Husiatyn

Woods used to be? Black-eyed men being seen in the remnants?"

"Then why could you see it?" Clark looked at her, worried. "You said your gift only works on ghosts."

"I'm not— oh." Ana's balance failed, and she leaned against the chancel. "…oh god."

"What is it?" Humphrey rushed to her side, supporting her.

"Someone… someone's underneath. Screaming. Screaming. They're dead and they're screaming. Oh…" She sat down in the rubble, and started crying. Her voice changed, distorted, into first a child's, then a man's, speaking in German.

"*Vater, vater, bitte, es heiß! Es schmerzt! Vater!*"

"**Alec, schließe deine Augen, mein Bärchen… schleiße deine Augen…**" She broke down crying in a masculine voice. "That's what they're saying. They burned to death, in the chapel. They were seeking solace. And they died." She began bleeding from the mouth.

"God in Heaven…" Humphrey looked back at the truck, at Clark, and at the half-a-dozen agents that had stayed there. He said, in English, then Ukranian, "Don't just stand there! Let's dig this up!"

The various agents — all men, all soldiers of some form, whether under the New Dawn or the Foundation — all took up pickaxes meant for removing the rubble. "Where do we dig?" Humphrey asked Ana, holding onto her.

"Crypt… they burnt in the crypt…" She looked skyward, at the setting sun. The heat from the freshly-bombed city had made her forget it was winter. The sun was setting so fast.

"Petros!" — Humphrey was addressing Clark here, in Ukranian — "Get on the radio and check with the other teams. See if any of the other mediums are having a reaction like this."

"Yes, sir." Clark ran back to the transport, speaking into the radio.

Ana, eventually, was able to stand. "…give me a pick."

"Are you sure?" Humprhey asked. "You look like you could fall at any moment."

"I have to see them," she growled. "It is the only way I can put them to rest and get them to stop screaming."

The rubble beneath their feet shifted in a motion violent enough to knock one of the diggers on his front. Everyone stopped to look at it, suddenly afraid of what they would find under the ruins of the church should they continue digging. For something dead to move rubble that extremely required a lot of pain, and a lot of anger.

Ana had taken a break after they had set up the work lights. A few civilians had stopped by and offered their services in the excavation; while grateful, they were turned away with emergency food, water, and supplies. They were masquerading as an aid organization, so they had pitched some tents for those who could find them to sleep under.

The church, as it turned out, was a landmark. A younger couple who had survived the blasts had come by for food and mourned how they were to be wed in it in March. Humphrey — being a New Dawn Initiative pastor — had offered to wed them on the spot, so he was off doing that. Something good could come of this, at least.

They were sitting in the cool of the night air, winter suddenly creeping back into the devastated Dresden. They hoped that snow would not come, or else it would mask the cold spots that the mediums in B66 often relied on to detect spirit activity.

The rubble shifted again. It kept getting closer to the altar, and the vestments on it were starting to shake. It was a miracle that it had managed to survive when the rest of it had been burned to the ground. The stone didn't melt, but it was hot enough that everything supporting it broke down.

"I hate Americans," Ana concluded, muttering in Czech so that the Americans from the Foundation wouldn't hear it. "I hate that they can

destroy a city like this for no reason."

The rubble shifted once more. Ana jumped, as she was at the back of the chancel, and it had come almost at her feet. She carefully walked around it, and called to Humphrey, "It's gotten to the back!"

"What has?" he called in return.

"The…" she knew he didn't know the Czech word, so she managed, in English, "Ah-nom-ah-li!"

Humphrey directed his crew to dig towards the back; while they had unearthed several pews, no evidence of the crypt was found. They were moving from the front of the church to the chancel, methodically; in hindsight, they should have done it the opposite way.

The picks and shovels came down, lifting away the rubble and beginning to reveal a depression underneath. Ana swooned again. "It's… down there."

"There?"

"Yes," she gritted her teeth. "I hear them. Their eyes are black… they were burnt by fire. All of their eyes. Their skin was covered in ash as it was burned through, and their eyes… they boiled. Oh god alive, they *boiled* as they died." She ran toward the rubble, and began digging through it with her bare hands. "Let me in!"

"Ana!" Humphrey tried restraining her. "What the devil—"

"I can only put them to rest if I can see their bodies! Let me in! Please!"

"Ana, let the men work—"

They did not need to work much further. The debris exploded outwards, a small chunk of stone grazing the medium's temple as she recoiled from the blast. She clutched the wound on her head and stared at the dust and stone going down a set of stairs; fragments of wood were around it, no doubt the doorway that led into the crypt.

"I'm going down," Ana declared. Before there could be any protests, she had vanished down the stairs.

The crypt was quiet enough that Ana could hear her bones creak, and the blood going through her veins. She could hear the little sacs in her lungs expand and contract as she continued down the tunnel.

She could almost hear the men of B66 behind her, protesting her descent, but she kept onward. She forced her mind to open; the amount of psychic force in this city had made it seal itself like a door welded shut. She destroyed the welds, and leaned against a wall, shocked by what she had seen around her.

There were 432 souls here. She could feel every single one in her head, and she counted them in an instant. Men, women, children, all of them German. "Where are your bodies?" she asked. "Please, I have to put you to rest."

432 pale hands pointed in different, nonsensical directions; some up to the ceiling, some into the walls, others through themselves. She walked on the floor of the crypt, forward, towards the spirit of a child. She expected her foot to hit something; a burned chunk of flesh, some incinerated clothing, a brooch, a toy, anything. Any clue to tell her where the bodies were.

Instead, she found nothing. She groped along the floor, feeling for any sign of human life. Eventually, she found something: a ticket to a play, dated February 10th. Five days ago. It was unburned.

Ana's eyes widened. There were no remains, just debris, from survivors, people who had evacuated the structure. She looked up at the spirits, tears in her eyes. "I'm so sorry," she said, standing against the wall. "I can't help you. You never existed. I can't put you to rest."

There was a mass of confusion from the spirits, a murmur, a mumble. How could they not exist? They remembered their lives, their names, their…

…their…

The spirits screamed as Ana sprinted up the steps, echoing their pitiful wail. They never lived, so how could they ever die, ever pass on?

"They didn't exist?" Humphrey asked as he set up his cot. They had made some sort of camp among the rubble, and refugees were coming in to seek warmth, food, and shelter. "That doesn't make sense."

"…Hitler is inflating the figures, you said?" Ana swallowed. "If… if enough Germans — no, if enough people believe that two-hundred thousand souls died here, then… two-hundred thousand souls, who lack bodies, who have *always* lacked bodies, are going to exist."

"That's insane," Humphrey frowned. "That would mean that, every time a death is falsified, every time a statistic is hyperbolic…"

"…more ghosts exist than the dead." Ana curled up on her cot. "And it's going to get worse. Even if the war is ending, if Germany will soon surrender… Dresden, and the world, will be left with scars for generations." She looked back at Humphrey. "This is the New Dawn you people are facing. This is what is creeping over the horizon. A world where three, maybe four ghosts exist for every body. Not just here. In Russia, the Ukraine, Spain, England, France, Poland… even America. The world will be haunted by the actions of all. Axis and Ally, Foundation and fiend." She pulled a blanket over herself.

"Can humanity live with that, **`Bernard`**?"

Bernard Kostyshyn looked towards the horizon, where the moon was rising over the rubble. He would never be able to answer this question.

Kit Always Used to Think She Was Cool

Kit told the story the same, every time he told the story, every time he thought about her. He heard the click of heels in his head, determinedly strutting on the linoleum of the school corridors. Teachers looking down their nose at her even as she towered at six feet; dismissively putting on mascara as they spoke about standards and responsibilities and expectations. That attitude when teachers confronted her somewhat disappeared in the face of her peers – they were mean to her, to say the least.

But Kit always used to think she was cool.

They were young, and that was good, but it was far from the best years of their lives, for both of them. Kit was the awkward weedy kid who looked like an Alsatian puppy – big hands, big feet, gangly limbs that made him clumsy and ragdoll when he was punched into the lockers. She was taller than him, trying harder than him, with expensive make-up and long hair and tights that covered the hair on the legs she wasn't yet allowed to shave. People used to challenge her all the time. They called her a queer, a fag, Dr. Frank N. Furter, other names too gross and hateful to say out loud.

But Kit always used to think she was cool.

Kit went home left school for the day and went to the graveyard. He sat amongst the dandelions and thought of everything and nothing. He thought of the monster that was waiting for him at home. He thought about explaining bruises in PE. He thought about her. He stood, touched a familiar gravestone for luck as he passed it, pressed his hand hard to the material and let it dig into his palm so it was bleeding slightly. Punishment, maybe, for thinking of her. He paused under a familiar tree to speak to a spirit he had hugged many moons ago, before he knew this was all wrong and he sincerely thought love would protect him, when he thought love made the world go around. The people at school offered no love. Not to him, especially not to her. She was the weirdo, the outcast.

Not a girl, not a boy. Not fitting in anywhere.

But Kit always used to think she was cool.

As if some telepathic power summoned her as her familiar form passed through his thoughts, she appeared at the gate of the graveyard. And that was the most amazing thing about her – that it was her, and that she was standing at the gate. Kit approached her slowly, blood oozing from his newest split lip, eyes fixed on her as she stood, quiet, expectant, maybe of insults. He had only seen her in the corridors and some classes, after all – they weren't friends. Yet.

But Kit always used to think she was cool.

He reached her, and held out his hand, the one that wasn't gravel-burnt. He meant it as a greeting, shaking hands as if they were stuffy adults in a meeting, but she took his hand and held it, instead, her manicured nails gently pressed into his skin as their fingers interlocked, and she finally fit in somewhere. They fit, palm to palm, eye to eye, shyly questioning – 'Is this okay?' and when neither said anything, both concluded that yes, yes it was. Kit came close to her side, gently brushed aside a tangle of hair to whisper in an ear that was perfected with a large hoop earring.

"I always used to think you were cool, **Dawn**."

« **Hands Under the Water** | **Hub** | **Table Salt** »

Kit's Bloomin' Adventure

Kit found himself enjoying the brick wall in the alleyway as two large men with identical looks on their identical faces strolled past him. For a moment, he nuzzled his cheek against the wall, liking the way it felt so rough and sore and, if he tried enough, he would break his skin open – like a chrysalis. He would emerge from his human husk and **become a beautiful butterfly,** a thing that was above hanging out in dimly lit alleyways to get what they wanted.

Kit pressed his face into the wall and breathed hard before groaning out loud. He was wanting and withdrawing. He was up and down. He was sweaty, but cold. He felt like he could mug and stab someone, then break down and cry because how fucked up the world was.

This alleyway only led to more fucked-upness. He knew that. But he also knew his cure was down here. He finally pulled his face away from the wall, unbroken, just slightly scratched, and adjusted the sleeping bag under his arm. A woman walked past him, **holding hands with something he couldn't see.**

His hand tried to fumble for a knife slickly, subtly, but his hands were shaking and he was clumsy at the best of times. The folding knife was freed from his belt, but slid across the cement before he could correct himself and grab it.

A very tall man smoking a very small cigarette caught it under a heavily booted foot and sneered at Kit.

"You snatchin' for skop, skiet en donder?" The voice growled from a mouth trailing smoke.

"Nope, nope, no lock," Kit shook his head, not agreeing to any deal. Not that he was sure what the man was saying – the unique slang in this alleyway puzzled him, with its mix of English, London Patois, German, Afrikaans, and occasional Dutch. But never French. French

was a weird language, in French, the numbers even got fucked up and -

Shit. He had chased a thought again. He needed his knife back. It would be unwise to transverse the seven kilometre alleyway unarmed. Although, unlike some, at least he actually had arms. And he had a stunker, a billy club, pressed against his ankle, but it would be an arse to get to if a scout found him. The knife, the knife would be easier.

With a heavy sigh, he searched his equally heavy head for the slang that the dark-coloured man would understand the best.

"The knife. Quote me the sun." He may have gotten that slightly wrong, but the man's thin eyes lit up. Literally. Like flashlights, focusing on Kit, who lifted his arm to protect his eyes.

"The sun…" His voice drawled over the term. "It is the stars I want." He teased the fact that Kit was obviously unused to the area, and still stumbling over their natural slang. His eyes scanned Kit and saw nothing that appealed to him in honesty. His lip curled in disgust at the fact Kit was more than a little dirty, and the brick-burn on his face did nothing for his unkempt beard.

"I could lose a piece of me to you," Kit murmured huskily, narrowing his eyes and taking a slightly wider stance. The man grimaced. He had seen far nicer at the Meat Market, and for far cheaper.

"Go piss, kitlet, you're not worth the shit on my shoe," the man growled, uninterested in what was in Kit's pants, unless it was…

"Jack me some Bloom," he ordered, his flashlight eyes now staring at Kit's sleeping bag so as not to blind him further. Kit felt his face burst into a grin. "Oh man! If only you knew, I already had a plan – I have a house on fire!" He said, proud of both his situation and his remembrance of the slang.

The man shrugged, not moved by Kit's sudden change in emotion. He finally moved his boot off the knife and picked it up in an unnaturally large hand, staring at it with slightly dimmed eyes. To him, it was barely worth keeping – blunt, and well worn, with

something sticky on the handle and something rusty on the blade. But to Kit, it was clearly worth something.

"Then it's a graft," the man agreed, nodding. "Bloom for your persuasion."

Bloom was what Kit had been planning to get anyway. Bloom – Bloom was the cure. Bloom was the beautiful drug he had discovered amongst all others – Gloom, Twinkle, Enigma and Fluff all did nothing for him. But Bloom, Bloom, Bloom – oh, did she ever live up to her name. Kit could practically feel himself photosynthesising at the thought of how Bloom made him feel, and how Bloom would fix everything.

How Bloom would make him forget and help him sleep, and how he could follow a conversation, and follow his own thoughts, and, and… He'd done it again. Staring blankly at the man in front of him who was waiting for a reply, a guarantee. Kit's brain had been on another plane, thinking of flowers, and butterflies, and freedom.

Now he was back in piss-alley, and the tall man was looking rather impatient. His flashlight eyes had turned to red. A dull red, but a red none-the-less.

"It's a lock!" He agreed now, nodding sharply and spinning on his heel, hoping he wasn't running too late and that the alleyway wouldn't suddenly change its length or reveal new passages. It did that every now and again. Especially if someone was running late, or if someone innocent to its behaviour came along. The alleyway, even with its friendly bricks, liked to mess with its more human visitors.

So, Kit walked quickly, with purpose, like he had been here a hundred times before, when it was probably more like… more like less than the digits on his hands. If he stared too long at his hands, sometimes some of his fingers disappeared and it showed the exact number of times he had entered the alleyway with a desperate hunger – he wondered what would happen when he came here over ten times. Would he be granted more fingers? Could he keep them? He knew someone in the Meat Market who would be keen for spare fingers and would exchange it for Bloom or a blow.

But today, he didn't look at his hands. He balled them to fists at his sides, and tried not to mentally count his digits to assure they were all still there. His head filled with vague memories that Bloom pushed away – that guy, sitting, staring at him, questioningly, but curiously. At a bar, after an awkward introduction; at work, maybe? A strange, short time stalking him on social media, when Kit could access the internet. Then the kiss, the first kiss ever, tasting of a cocktail he was drinking but couldn't even remember the name of. Dammit.

The Bloom withdrawal may have sucked physically – Kit couldn't sleep, couldn't eat, couldn't stay warm, couldn't get cold, could fight the world and then burst into tears over a stray kitten – but mentally, it hurt more. It hurt more to remember him, in the doorway, standing there, being him. It hurt more to hear him again, in his memories.

"I'm sorry, Kit. This isn't working. You can't just… burst in here and graffiti on my walls. You can't burn experimental blue rice in the kitchen and, at the very least, not clean up after yourself. I didn't appreciate that time you set the toilet on fire. And I really didn't appreciate the time you pretended to be dead.

I can't do this, Kit. I love you, but… I don't need you."

Those words hurt a lot. The guy he thought was the love of his life, pointing out all his flaws in one deep breath. People here, this alleyway, he heard them calling him 'loskon' - someone with no emotional control, someone with their brain rattling with a thousand bad experiences and no filter on their anger or sadness or grief. That hurt, sometimes, but not as much as his partner saying, saying, saying… there was love, but there was no need. The amount of love didn't weigh up against the amount of crazy. Kit couldn't change what was him, and that sometimes hurt the most.

But, as Kit had discovered recently, the best way to get over somebody was to get into somebody else.

He found them waiting on the corner, like they had been the last several times he had ducked in. But this was the first time he had gone as far as to approach them. He put his sleeping bag down in the most dry corner he could find, but kept his backpack on, in case

this turned out to be a mocker – he couldn't afford losing anything else to a conman. Or woman. Or some unidentified third gender.

He ran a hand through his hair, which didn't do much for the building grease, but made it look vaguely more tamed, and cleared his throat, forcing it into a husky purr.

"I caught speak that you wanted a boy-ya. You know what I'm jonseing for, right? Go on, quote me the sun… stars, shit, whatever."

He fucked up the last bit and lost whatever sex appeal he was trying to give. But they still turned to him regardless, head tilted, looking at the man on offer. Humans, they so rarely made it this far, and the being was rather thirsty. They were not entirely sure that this human would taste of much beyond salt and grass, but the chance to experiment with someone new was hard to turn down. Slowly, one eye pushed itself forward from the empty face, and opened wide to reveal a Magic 8 ball that simply said the word 'Yes'.

Kit was beyond pleased, but tried to keep his cool, to keep what he felt was a mysterious, alluring air, unaware that the being in front of him was just thirsty and curious enough to effectively humour the young grifter.

"Then it's a lock, knock, boss," Kit said, fist curled to gently knock himself on the head – an effective way to seal the deal when the creature you were dealing with had no hands to shake.

There were certainly no hands, but suddenly, there were a thousand tongues. Kit felt his dirty clothes pulled off by them, curling their muscles into tight, intense grips. His breath tightened in his chest, and for one lucid moment, he thought -

"This was the worst idea I've ever had."

But luckily enough for Kit, his lucid moments were fleeting, and the awareness of his naked form was just as quick. Or, what was left of his *form*, anyway. He felt like he was bobbing along in an ocean, a bundle of nerves; a jellyfish. The tongues were tracing him, and he could feel it shuddering throughout him, taking over the electric pangs of withdrawal. A gasp formed from a mouth that felt a million

kilometres away – it could be a million kilometres away, it could be on someone else's face, it certainly didn't feel like it was on his own. His dick twitched from flaccid to curious, and his eyes stared blankly as suddenly his sight was robbed from him. Piss-alley was gone, and darkness welcomed him. A cold darkness, but the tongues, the thousands of tongues probing him and following his mismatched contours, they kept him warm.

The creature was tasting him. Testing him. Depriving him of his sight, his own static body, and leaving him naked and limp. Well, not so limp now. Kit felt a shudder drive up where his shoulders should be as a tongue licked along his spine. Fuck. Fuck fuck fuckity fuck. He **couldn't** be enjoying this. Dammit all, he refused to enjoy it! Kit bit his lip and tasted metal as his teeth became suddenly, inexplicably sharp, and the blood ran down his chin. His body was forming back. He was still a bundle of nerves, he was still on fire with sexual arousal and lust and a curiosity that disgusted him, but he was back in, or with, his body.

The tongues stopped in their licking, and Kit could suddenly see under the hood that had hidden the face before. There were orifices all over the otherwise blank face of the creature, and each seemed to have a different design – some were jagged like scars, others were perfect lines, and other more had lips of various textures and bodily variations. Kit felt like he swam forward to greet a sideways smile with his own lips, pressing close, exchanging tastes. Kit tasted like tobacco and blood and salt – the being exploring him tasted like petrichor, luck, and candyfloss.

As they tasted each other, Kit felt the world spin around them, splitting into a constant changing mass of colours - a kaleidoscope of every shade one could think of, and then some more. When their lips parted, their bodies flew through the air, slowly, smoothly – stuck together. Tongues held his legs against the formless figure, and Kit arched as something wet experimentally toyed with his lower back.

They were suddenly on a bench, a park bench, visually as far from piss-alley as they could possibly be, with the words 'tempus fugit' engraved on it. Time really did flee, in whatever realm they found themselves in – Kit felt like he had been here forever and five

seconds, all at the same time.

Suddenly, he knew where he was.

He was **inside** the being. This was their realm. This was their brain, this was their sex drive, this was their version of sex. Whatever was beyond the hood, whatever he didn't see when distracted by all the lips, had pushed him inside this being in the most literal way possible.

"Shit," Kit exhaled, softly, staring at the park around them. Then he realised something else. This wasn't any old park. Minus the bench, this was the park where him and his first love had their first time. This thing really was testing him. Dragging him to a place he never wanted to be again, dragging him to the place where Bloom made him forget.

And then, the formless creature was bending down in front of his naked body. Their unique shape flickered, its outline changing colours from silver to red to purple. His favourite colour. How much was he inside the being – and how much was the being inside of him? Kit wanted to say no, that he had changed his mind, that even Bloom wouldn't fix this memory, but then the being took his curiously twitching dick into one of its many openings. The orifice was velvety and had a ribbed spot that his head brushed against. Other tongues worked their way into playing with his balls, with licking his thighs, with exploring what they could get to on his body.

Kit dug his hands into where the wobbling outline of the body would have had shoulders. Fuck, this was so great, but just over the bobbing head between his legs, he could see himself. He could see himself and he could see his first time. He could see them rolling on the picnic rug, knocking over the wine, staining the grass, laughing it off. He could see the exchange of nips and love bites, the marks of ownership.

Just as his first love sunk his teeth into other Kit's neck, the creature working on him suddenly bit down too – not hard, but with the pulsing sensitivity in his cock, it felt intense. It was teasing him. It was bringing his attention back to what was going on right then, even though it was the one that had brought him back to the past.

Greedy bastard. It wanted it all, it seemed – attention, and inattention. Distraction, and focus. Just like with withdrawal, and tweaking out. Two sides of the same coin.

Kit was painfully aware of the sound and feel of his own pulsing heartbeat, and the sky changed its shade of blue very slightly on every beat. It was hard to concentrate on what the being was doing, when he couldn't tear his eyes away from a much better time in his life. The being withdrew from its job, and somewhere from its body came a mutter that sounded like, in tone, it could have been a curse. Then suddenly, the surroundings changed. The bench settled itself, with them in their same positions, in the middle of a room with walls that were a swirling mass of unknown shapes and random objects.

The being couldn't bare the taste of bitter things. And Kit's taste had been nothing but bitter when faced with his first time. Most humans had something like that – a bitterness, or a sadness, or a guilt, whenever they revisited their first time within its realm. But if they didn't, if they were at peace with their own self, then the taste was better than anything the being could have otherwise, and it would be satiated for days. It was worth the risk, but now the being set about getting the horrible taste out of its mouth in its blank canvas room of emotion-free colours and shapes.

Kit, meanwhile, felt like he was getting the best head he had ever had. His breathing caught and his neck jerked back. Sweat trickled down his neck. He had to focus, he had to get the words out.

"Lick my iliac crest," he found himself begging, his hands still digging into the spongy form that was the being. He wasn't even sure what the lilac crest was, but something was telling him with sharp pangs that this was what he needed. Was the being telling him what to say, and what to think, and what to need? Whatever it was, he felt like he was slowly losing a piece of himself, moment by moment, losing something every time he saw that head bob. He felt tired from the experience, even though his arousal won outright.

As one of the tongues gently worked its way along the sharp angle of Kit's hip bone, where the iliac crest lay, he felt all power to focus leave him, and all the blood leave his head. He was done, spent, quickly now. The being's throat worked quickly, achieving that final

taste, the gold it had been digging for. Not so bad. Spicy. A little sour. It would work for a couple of days.

And then, they were back in the alleyway. Kit was dressed, though his fly was down, and he felt comfortable - relaxed. The being looked the same as it did before, despite the power now racing through its equivalent of veins. It had stolen what it needed from Kit, and now Kit needed his payment.

Before that could be offered, Kit took a breath. "I need a cigarette. Do you want one?"

The woman man thing moved its non-fully formed head towards him. It had many gaping orifices, but none of which could be called a mouth, and nothing inside that could be called lungs.

"Just me, then."

As Kit lit up and clumsily did his fly up, sprinkling ash on his groin, the multi-orificed being in front of him opened one of its many holes. This time, not taking, but giving. Kit's eyes lit up as at the purple, ribbed innards, and he reached inside to grab the packets laying temptingly inside.

"Thanks, boss," he murmured huskily, breathing smoke into where its face should be.

One lip on the creature's lower limb curled into a grimace of distaste as Kit turned, left the alleyway, left his sleeping bag, and fucked right off into his world of Bloom.

« And Then, Kit Slept | Hub | Kit's Brotherhood»

Kit's Brotherhood

"…This time, it really is the end of the world," Kit mumbled shakily down the phone. "This time, I promise. There's zombies everywhere, and I don't have a gun. Blake, I…" He hesitated, stumbling over his words as he thought of what he was asking, "…need you."

It was cold, outside. The wind was bitter and biting – a promise of winter on the way. Kit didn't like being in the public view, but his flat wasn't safe anymore. **The Duvet Queen had taken up residence,** and was quietly pulling cat after cat from a portal that had appeared in his disorganised living room. And Kit was allergic.

Outside offered some relief, but few people had a normal face anymore. They were mauled, disfigured, silently begging for brains. Maybe they weren't saying anything, but he knew what they wanted. Brains. His, maybe. Though his thoughts were cancerous, his brain was infected, it was stained with broken thoughts and buried memories. Kit suddenly realised the phone against his ear had gone silent. But with the silence came a promise – Blake was coming. Blake would help him fight against the zombies, and maybe even evict the Duvet Queen, the alien creature who could no longer read words that came from any sort of authority.

By the time Blake came up in his car, tires squealing, most of the zombies had gone, and Kit could breathe again. But seeing Blake was still a relief, like it always was. Blake climbed out of his smart, but practical, car, and glowered at his brother.

"Zombies, huh." He stated, flatly.

"Yes. No. Yes. But they're gone now." Kit reassured. Or tried to reassure. His voice was trembling, and so was his body. Everything was sore, which happened if one stood outside, staring at nothing, for many hours. He felt a sharp pang in his lower back that reminded him of an injury he had gotten when he fell off his moped many years ago, in an overexcited reaction to seeing a rainbow. The pain

came first, then the opiates, then addiction, and then… Bloom. Bloom had come next, in all her beauty. But Kit had been out for a while now, avoiding the alleyway where tongues and flashlights waited to pounce.

"Fine. Let's go inside." Blake stated, staying put, knowing better than to approach his brother when his whole body seemed to be trembling with electricity.

"No! Shit. No." Kit stated, firmly. "…We can't." 'And I can't tell you why.' His brain concluded, clumsily.

Blake didn't question anything anymore. He didn't want to know which delusion was preventing his brother from going inside.

"…Don't worry. It's nothing that's going to get me detained." Kit muttered, his voice sounding almost normal as his body twitched outside of his control. Bloom withdrawal was a hard trek, after all. "Not like the seven-year mirror sentence." He concluded, after a moment, as he started walking – leading the way to no-where.

Blake followed, keeping a respectful distance, watching his brother's back – literally as well as figuratively. After a moment, he dared to speak again.

"I hate to break it to you, Kit. But you don't get a seven-year prison sentence for breaking a mirror."

Kit stopped in his tracks.

"Wait, what?" He mumbled around an unlit cigarette. The wind kept blowing out his lighter. Should have kept the old one that seemed to never seemed to go out.

"Yeah. Sorry buddy, you're getting curses and crimes confused. You spent seven-years in prison for breaking a mirror…"

He motioned Kit to finally keep walking.

"Over a toddler's head," he concluded.

Kit looked momentarily confused, then shrugged.

"Wait, you heard about that?"

"You gave my number to the prison guards. Or, should I say *guardias de prisiones*. So, yeah, I heard about it. In Spanish."

"Huh," Kit mumbled, then let out a noise of triumph as his cigarette was lit.

"When they told me about it, trying to get my Euros, y'know, I told them… I mean, in Spanish, I said. 'A poor innocent mirror?! Fuck him!'" Blake spat on the ground. It was exaggerated, it was humouring his brother – but at the same time, Blake was thinking about how he could never let Kit near his own son.

"Hm. Well, every day is a journey!"

"Yeah, every day. You were there for a day! Look, we all been in a k-hole, but the party has to stop at some point."

"And that point is… mirror smashing?"

"That's probably the point beyond the point."

"Mmm." Kit mumbled, non-committedly. "Well, I still don't get why a mirror would get upset enough to have me locked up."

They walked in the drizzle for a while. If anyone saw the fresh sutures on Kit's arms, they blanched or blushed and looked away, suddenly aware they were trespassing on something painfully private.

Blake didn't ask. He didn't trust the answer, and never could.

Eventually, they stopped in a small green area that couldn't be quite called a park. Kit lead them to sit on a damp bench and Blake didn't complain. He was just thinking about how long he had to spend with Kit for it to be considered okay – for anything that happened afterwards to not be his responsibility. Although with both their parents gone, Blake couldn't help but feel some sense of responsibility to his younger brother. Kit wouldn't even look out for himself, and no-one would look out for him. But still, something needed to be said when it was apparent Kit was more on this planet

than his own.

"Look, Kit. I've got a wife who's addicted to social media, and a goddamn mouth to feed on the way. Soon, I'm not going have time for your shit. Soon, no-one's going to have time for your shit."

Despite the apparent harshness of the words themselves, what Blake said lacked the venom it needed. Instead, he just sounded tired, and despondent.

'Despondent,' Kit thought to himself, 'a word used by survivors of suicide.' He came up with his own definition that no dictionary would ever use. Absently, he hoped Blake wouldn't kill himself. He couldn't think what to say at his wake, and what he would want to tell him after he was gone that he couldn't tell him now, with his muddled thoughts and apparent delusions.

"I know," was what Kit said instead, like he always did. The repeating pattern of his brother swearing he wouldn't be able to respond to his phone calls – and the repeating pattern of him pretending he understood when he was many kilometres away from being close to understanding.

In the absence of words, Kit placed two cigarettes in his mouth and lit them. After a second, he thought to offer one to his brother, who took it wordlessly. They both just stared into the trees in silence whilst smoke gathered around them.

"You smoke too much," Blake finally said, as his cigarette nearly burnt itself out.

"…No such thing as 'too much' unless it kills you," Kit muttered in distant reply.

Blake looked at his watch. It had only been nearly 20 minutes. It felt like hours had stretched distantly between them. But really, he should get home soon. Amber was only going to be patient for so long, and, heavily gravid in her last month of pregnancy, her mood was growing short as her discomfort grew more.

"Is it…" Blake thought for the right word, "…okay for you to go home

now, do you think? I have to get milk before I go home, and the shops are nearly closed."

Maybe it was a Sunday. Kit blinked, stubbing the cigarette out on the bench. He had a dull awareness of days passing, but rarely registered their names. If the shops were closing whilst the sun wasn't nearly set, it was probably Sunday. Probably.

"…Yeah. I think. She'll be gone by now." Kit concluded, after a moment of dull thought. The cats and their cloned kittens would hang around for a while, but he didn't have to stumble over the girl in his living room.

Blake didn't ask who **she** was. He doubted it was a bedfellow, with Kit's history, and decided it was much more likely to be a delusion who had chased him out of the house in the first place.

By the time Blake had walked Kit home and followed him the three stories to his flat, he clocked in an hour with his brother. Who could argue that an hour was too short a time? Who could argue that, if anything were to happen when he left, it was somehow Blake's fault?

Kit let him in, after a moment of hesitating. Blake noted him staring at the floor, eyes tracking something that wasn't there. At least not for him. What was there for Kit was another question. He trailed him into the conjoined kitchen/living room, and watched Kit slump heavily into the only armchair he had. He watched Kit look to the window, wide open, the windowsill slightly damp from the drizzly rain. Blake was about to speak, when Kit got there first, his words softer than usual.

“We should close the window,”

“Why?”

“Because I don’t want to jump out of it.”

Blake approached the window, and closed it with a gentle thump. After a hesitant moment, he retrieved the key hanging nearby, and locked the window. The key ended up in his pocket. Kit hadn't

noticed, still staring at the spot where there had once been a Kit-sized gap, an empty space calling for him to crawl onto the windowsill and… Blake couldn't think on it any further.

"I've got to go," he said instead. Kit turned his head, watched something on the floor, then looked up at Blake.

"Of course," he said, simply. Blake always had to go. Blake had a job. Blake had a wife. Blake had a baby on the way. Above all, Blake had a life.

"Have you… got food in?" Blake asked absently, concentrating far more on retrieving his car keys from his jacket pocket.

"Sure," Kit muttered, with equal absence and enthusiasm. Another pattern. A question, and a lie in response. Their relationship was built on intense dependence, followed by simple lies.

"…Okay then." Blake said, with a tone of finality. "Well. You have my number. Uh. …I'll tell Amber you said hi."

Of course, the woman he had only met two times, before the child was a twinkle in Blake's eye. The woman that Kit couldn't care less about, when he had someone like the Duvet Queen visit him.

"Sure. Okay. 'Bye." Kit said, not bothering to stand. Blake nodded once, then walked the short distance to the front door, letting himself out. The door shut behind him with an echoing thud, a final curtain drop on their relationship.

Brotherhood. It was rarely an easy ride. Kit closed his eyes as he felt a cloned kitten climb onto his lap. **`Time to try and sleep.`** Time to try and escape all this.

« **Kit's Bloomin' Adventure** | **`Hub`** | **`The Duvet Queen`**»

One Kit and an (Anomalous) Baby Pt. 1

When the knock on the door came, Kit had just put the finishing touches on his Christmas tree. It wasn't a typical Christmas tree – instead, it had been carefully painted on the wall of his living room, with the cream paint already purchased to banish the festive item come New Year's. The star on top, the final piece, gently trailed glitter, and Kit rubbed a weary, paint-smeared hand across his face, which promptly became a splattered mask of greens, reds, and gold.

He stretched out, grunting in satisfaction as his back cracked. He wasn't expecting anyone and Kit wasn't exactly swimming in visitors these days, so he decided it was probably a mistake, especially this late in the afternoon. So, he took a leisurely walk to the front door, opening it to find -

Nobody.

Huh.

He was about to turn back and close the door when his eyes fixed on the floor. A cardboard box, and inside – a baby.

He quickly looked up and around himself to see if this was some sort of prank. The baby in the box gurgled and stared at him. It wasn't teeny-tiny like the kind he had seen held in slings by parents who cooed and rocked them, but it wasn't so big that it had teeth yet – not that Kit could see, and he wasn't about to stick a finger in there to check. Its face was still chubby and much more baby than toddler, with a head of short, dark hair that seem mismatched against its ocean-coloured eyes.

Finding no-one in sight, the hallway quiet, he bent down to find a scrap of paper safety-pinned onto the baby's purple sleep suit. He freed the note, careful not to hurt the baby, who was contentedly watching this new human with a look of distant amusement. Kit smoothed out the paper, then studied it carefully.

The note, in neat, festive red and green script, read -

'You don't know me, but I know you. Don't ask You see things other people don't see, but you're still here. They haven't caught you yet. They may be I think you can deal with this situation better than I can right now. I trust in you to look after her, over everyone and everything else I know. Her name is Matilda. She likes being sung to and cuddly toy rabbits.

Merry Christmas.'

Carefully, Kit juggled the box into his hands and shut the door behind them. Someone had meant this baby to come to him, for some reason he couldn't imagine beyond what the piece of paper told him. He couldn't just leave it – her, he corrected – out in the hallway, no matter what else happened. He took the box, holding its precious cargo close to his chest, and carried her into the kitchen, aware of the paint fumes in the living room, because he had been breathing them in all day. Still, he didn't think this was an inhalation-based hallucination. Probably.

He set the box, with the baby, on the counter, and looked at it blankly. The baby stared back with big eyes, somewhere between blue and green in their colouring. "Um…I'm Kit." He was one step away from sticking out his hand to shake, like he had learnt to do at the parties Gabriel used to force him to go to. The baby kept staring, and then squealed, moving her arms just for the sheer delight of, well, moving her arms.

"…And you're Matilda." He concluded, awkwardly. His experience with babies was minimal, at best. He thought he remembered maybe holding someone's baby a few years ago, but he couldn't remember whose baby it was or why he was considered safe enough to hold it. Then again, years ago, he had been a Normal Person.

Some lucid part of his mind instantly thought the sentence he was always terrified of - 'Phone the police.' But the police, Kit had always found, were more a hindrance than a help, and it scared him what they may do with her. Someone had entrusted this baby to him because he was no longer a Normal Person, and there had to be a

reason behind that. Did Matilda see things too? How could you even tell with such a small human that seemed to have no significant vocal capacities as of yet? What about the anonymous note-writer? Did they see things too, and were those things putting Matilda in danger? He had certainly seen a stall at the Meat Market called 'Pied Piper's Preemie Pies' that more than hinted that at least one person would want a baby for more nefarious purposes.

It was then that Kit decided he would take care of this child - a split second, impulsive decision, but the best ones always happened that way, in his experience. He would bring her up right. He would be there for her. He would make sure she wanted for nothing. He would -

His thoughts were interrupted by the loudest screaming that he had ever heard. And probably the loudest his neighbours had ever heard, too.

"Shit! Shit, why are you making that noise?!" His first reaction was to put his hands over his ears in a pathetic attempt to protect them against a noise that most humans recognised as a sound of intense need from a creature that had no other way of communicating. He stared down at the baby, then realised the cardboard box she lay in was very gently rocking back and forth. After a short time, the crying turned to hiccupping sobs and Kit was able to hear himself think to puzzle out what the thing wanted. The rocking? He would deal with that later – if it needed to be dealt with.

Kit came close and very cautiously picked up the baby. He was pleasantly surprised to realise the handling came back to him, and that this baby was much more firm than the child he held so long ago. She could support some of her own weight, it seemed, including her head, which she turned to nuzzle at Kit's chest, seeking something, seeking - as Kit figured it out, he found himself, unusually but furiously, blushing.

"I don't have… I mean, I can't…"

Well, that was one puzzle figured out. Matilda was hungry. But Kit wasn't exactly built to provide food on the go, and he doubted that she would want – or should have, really – the stock of Halloween

sweets and Christmas chocolate in his cabinets. Feeling hopeless because he already knew what was in his cupboards, but feeling just as anxious and desperate, Kit carried the child over to the cabinet and freed one hand to open it.

To his surprise, next to a tub of candy floss, there was a well-known brand of banana porridge for babies around the age he had guessed Matilda to be. Balanced on top was a small plastic bowl (green) and a tiny plastic spoon (blue) with a plastic, teated bottle (purple) next to that. Digging around, behind his spare advent calendar, Kit found a tin of branded formulae.

"Now, I know I didn't go that crazy that I got baby food and I don't remember," Kit mumbled to himself. Or, more accurately, he mumbled at Matilda, which went a long way towards him already feeling less crazy, just like when he spoke to Peaches in that absent-minded way that really only hid he would otherwise be talking to himself.

"Did you…?" He looked down at the baby, who looked up at him quietly, chewing on her fingers with a chin covered in drool. She was the face of innocence, and she offered no answers. Regardless, all that mattered was there was food he could give the baby.

He settled her back in the box, grabbing a cushion to sit her up more, so he could keep an eye on her whilst following the hard-to-read instructions on the back of each tin. The milk proved the most complicated to make, with a series of steps, including how to avoid the baby getting burnt by the resulting mixture of boiling water and powder. Well, no-one said this was going to be easy, right?

Distracted momentarily from the baby, he was surprised when he turned back that she was holding what he remembered to be some odd contraption called a teething ring. He was sure nothing else had been in the box – a note, and a baby, in her purple jumpsuit. Nothing more than that. "…Okay." He just mumbled to himself. At least she was quiet and seemed content. He did what the instructions said and tried the temperature of the milk on his wrist, finding it didn't burn him, so it probably wouldn't burn her. Hopefully.

He presented the baby with a bottle and she blinked at him. "Here.

Take it." Kit instructed. The baby scrunched up her face, tears suddenly threatening. "Shit, don't make that godawful noise again. Okay, so you can't… uh, hold this. Okay. I guess I…" It was a struggle, but he managed to hold both the baby – Matilda, he was going to have to get used to that name business – and the bottle, which she latched on to happily as Kit's mind raced.

It was cold in here. Kit had grown used to that, not being able to afford the heating in any past winters, and this was no different. But he was pretty sure babies shouldn't get cold. And what about nappies? He didn't have any of them just around, that would be super weird. What went in had to come out somehow, and somewhere. Shit. …Literally.

Once the baby had finished, Kit gently put her in the box before hefting it up again and headed towards his bedroom, brushing past the radiator, which was… on? Wait.

Still carrying the box, he went over to the thermostat, finding that it was off. Something was making sure this baby was okay with him. Something he couldn't possibly understand. Something hinted to in the note. But not understanding was okay. Matilda wouldn't get cold, and that was all that mattered.

Laying in the box, the baby's face went red, and she grunted, and a godawful smell flooded the air. Kit reflexively put his free hand over his nose, other arm cradling the box. "…Shit." He muttered. "… Literally."

He took the baby through into the bedroom, placing her on the bed, before heading over to the locker he used to store his clothes. He must have some sort of old t-shirt that he could use as a makeshift nappy until he could get out and buy some. To his surprise, however, there was a packet of nappies towards the back of the locker. "Thanks," he found himself speaking to whatever entity was providing all this. "Mind changing her, too?" He thought maybe he heard a distant laugh.

He found an old t-shirt to lay out under the baby, and a roll of bin liners to dispose of the terrible smelling used nappy. He lifted the baby out of the box, less surprised this time to find her holding a

bright pink rabbit against her chest, and lay her down on the t-shirt. "Now, how do we…"

Stripping the baby was hard – she wiggled. Removing the old nappy with as little mess as possible was hard – she wiggled more. Putting the new nappy on, even following the instructions on the back of the packaging was hard – she really seemed to be presenting him a challenging in the wiggling stakes. The little sticky tabs got stuck to his fingers, her skin (which he gently peeled free) and, finally, each other. The nappy eventually got put on, if a little loosely, and Kit sighed. This shit, in every sense of the word, was damn hard.

He redressed the baby, reminding himself to be extra gentle with her limbs, even if she fought him every step of the way and whimpered when he had to temporarily remove the bunny toy. When that was done, he had lost nearly half an hour of his life and was, frankly, exhausted. Evening was coming now, with the sky outside dark, and he was relatively aware that babies were meant to be put to sleep early on in the night.

He already had an idea where to put Matilda in lieu of a crib – she couldn't stay in the box forever, after all. But he remembered his own childhood, his parents in desperate poverty, and, if it was good enough for him, it was good enough for her. He opened a drawer and took out an armful of socks and pants, but left some as a sort of mattress. Grabbing a spare fleece blanket from the bed, he very gently wrapped the baby like she was a burrito, so she wouldn't injure herself somehow and so she couldn't get cold. He carefully placed her in the drawer, fluffing up one end of the 'mattress' to make a cushion for her head.

"Now, get some sleep." He said, very softly, gently kissing her forehead and pausing as there was this amazing, overwhelming scent that could only be described as 'baby'. Something soft, like talcum powder, and something new, like fresh leaves. It was amazing. He stood, and turned on a soft lamp, preparing to leave the room when there was a sad whimper from the makeshift crib. He turned back to the baby, finding her holding a cream rabbit toy almost as big as her, but her eyes were upset for reasons that he, as an adult, couldn't understand.

"What's wrong? Don't worry, I'm not going far. Oh, I know what will make you feel better! You like being sung to, right?"

Kit did pause, waiting for an answer, which he no longer considered impossible with all that had happened in that day.

"I remember one song my mum used to sing to me and my brother…"

He felt oddly self-conscious, with the baby staring at him, tears already pooling at the corner of her eyes and threatening to become a very loud thing if he didn't provide entertainment quickly.

"…*A, you're adorable, B, you're so beautiful, C, you're a cutie full of charms*…"

The baby instantly perked up at the song and her covered feet wiggled happily. As the song continued on, she yawned, and her eyes fluttered closed.

"…*U, made my life completed, V, means you're very sweet, W, X, Y, Z – It's fun to wander through the alphabet with you, to tell you what you mean to me…*"

Kit sung through the song twice before Matilda drifted off into sleep. He had never normally remembered what came after 'C', but something that evening pushed all the lyrics to the forefront of his mind. Gently, he tucked the folded blanket tighter around the baby, making sure she couldn't roll around too much in her sleep.

And that was how they ended their first day. Kit, exhausted, fell onto his bed, stared at the ceiling for a nanosecond, **then was out like a light.** But it turned out he had a lot more to learn about babies (anomalous or not) than just their daytime needs…

Onwards, to Part 2 »

Hub

Loskon in the Making

Kit's hand trembled, and he curled it into a fist.

He was scared. Honest to God scared, and Kit never got scared.

It all started with an innocuous text message.

'We have to talk.'

The four worst words, in the worst order, known to the English language.

Kit was under no illusion that their relationship was perfect. Pushed together, their emotions bounced off each other and caused war wounds, then intense make up sessions with bites of love and ownership. The highs were only a prelude to the lows – Kit should have realised what a fragile thing the relationship was. If he was aware, maybe he could have seen how he was setting himself up for a fall.

Kit curled his legs under him on the window seat he sat at. He put his palm against the cold glass to ground him. His therapist said, that in times of panic, changing his body temperature could make a huge difference. And with winter night gathering outside, touching the cold panel was just as effective as running his wrists under freezing water. He felt his heart beat in his wrist, felt it slow. All he had to do now, all he had left in him, was to wait.

"Love," he thought, eyes fixated on a robin that settled in the holly bush, "is easy. …Commitment? A little harder. But… it's the vulnerability that takes some getting used to." Being vulnerable wasn't something he was comfortable with, and he had just started getting used to the concept when the distracting, distressing text message came through.

He jumped when the front door suddenly clicked open, and then

quietly clicked shut. He dropped his hand from the window and felt his heart race more, his breathing slightly shallow. The flat was tidy – painfully tidy. Suffice to say, he had learnt his lesson with burning rice on the stove. Gabriel didn't exactly appreciate that, and, in his current sober mind, he understood why totally. He scrambled to his feet, his bare toes curling into the warm carpet. He tried to focus on the sensation that caused him, and absently snapped the elastic band around his wrist, the sharp pang of pain bringing him back more into reality, just as Gabriel entered the room.

For a while, they just stared at each other. Kit wanted to run over, wrap his arms tight around Gabriel, greet him home, babble about his day – the squirrel in the garden stealing from the bird feeder, finding a book he needed, eating lunch without reminder or making a mess… But today wasn't the usual day. His phone, disregarded on the kitchen counter, painfully reminded him of what was happening now, and everything felt in slow motion.

"Kit…" Gabriel breathed, softly. He was in his work uniform – an insignia Kit neither knew or cared to know on the breast of his jacket. Gabriel worked hard, Kit knew that much. Most days, he disappeared early in the morning, came back for a couple of hours in the evening, then disappeared at night. Kit had gotten over his fear that Gabriel had someone on the side, and accepted the fact that the care home he worked at meant he had sleeping shifts. Kit suddenly realised that his whole world revolved around someone else, and that someone else said they needed to talk. The most cliché way in the world, the most inexcusable way also – through a text message, scared to say it out loud.

Gabriel stepped forward, his body position somewhat closed off, not inviting a hug or any contact, even though the look on his face was decisively caring.

"I'll make us some tea." He invited, daring to smile at Kit, who snapped the elastic band on his wrist again in response, silent for now. There would be time to explode later, Kit felt sure of it, and he was certain Gabriel could feel the tension in the air too.

Seeking familiarity, Kit followed him from the open plan living room into the kitchen area, still focusing on what his feet felt – warm,

rough carpet, followed by cold, hard tile. He absently watched Gabriel go through the motions of preparing two cups of tea, before looking away to stare at his phone, the text message still open with half a reply written -

'You can't fucking do -'

Kit locked his phone so the screen went dark, then looked up as he grew aware of Gabriel standing right at his side, holding two mugs. "Living room?" He invited, as if talking to a stranger rather than his boyfriend of almost a year. Kit nodded, unable to find his voice, aware of the anger and fear that was bubbling up inside him. He followed Gabriel into said room, feeling like an alien in the flat he knew so well, knew well enough that the majority of his things had made their way over here, knew so well because he spent most days curled up on the sofa or window seat, waiting for his boyfriend to come home.

He decided to sit on the sofa, this time. Whatever was about to be said, he didn't want the memories tangled up on his favourite resting place, the window seat. The sofa could absorb all the badness that came from the conversation, the argument he felt certain they would have, and then the make-up session afterwards. The worn fabric knew all their most intense moments, and the various stains attested to that. As Kit folded his legs under himself, and hugged a cushion to his chest, he absently thought that they should buy a new sofa. It was amazing that he wanted to think about anything apart from what was going on.

For a while, they both sat in silence, Gabriel sipping his tea. Then Gabriel dared to – quietly, as if the silence was smashed with a brick if he raised his voice – ask about Kit's day. Kit sat on the normality for a short while, trying not to get his hopes up that something had changed between the text message and this conversation. Eventually, he told Gabriel bits and pieces about his day; applying for the college course, reading up on mortician practices, realising that he was reading about practices in the States and having to visit the library to find one based in the UK, and – he was rambling. His words were shaking, and he felt like he was desperately trying to prove his worth, that he would be focusing his attention on his studies, that he really felt that undertaking was the right job for him.

But he realised midway through the sentence explaining that embalming was rarely done in the UK that Gabriel wasn't really listening. That Gabriel was just waiting for him to shut up, to get his words out.

So Kit shut up, abruptly.

Gabriel almost instantly spoke, fumbling over his words. It was clearly a practised speech – something he was leaning on heavily to say right, and say clearly.

"I'm sorry, Kit. This isn't working. You can't just… burst in here and graffiti on my walls. You can't burn experimental blue rice in the kitchen and, at the very least, not clean up after yourself. I didn't appreciate that time you set the toilet on fire. And I really didn't appreciate the time you pretended to be dead.

I can't do this, Kit. I love you, but… I don't need you."

Kit felt himself nodding in reaction to the words, but they didn't feel like they were sinking in. It felt more like the sofa was absorbing them, like it had so many times before. "Oh." He eventually said, emptily, staring down at his full mug of tea, focusing on how it was more green than brown, how the honey Gabriel had mixed in gave it an odd shine. "I… okay. I guess I'll… whilst you're at work, I'll…' He knew what he was trying to say, and he suspected Gabriel knew too. He felt oddly bad that he didn't have a speech to reply with, but Gabriel had had all day to think about what to say. What if it hadn't been just today, but *days*? What if he had been thinking about it the last time they slept together? What if he had been distracted at work? Had he been thinking about it when they domestically went shopping for a bookcase the previous week, for all the books Kit needed for school?

Gabriel finished his tea, raising an eyebrow at Kit's mug. "Drink your tea, love. Or you won't sleep." It was clear that the 'love' came from habit, and Gabriel flushed at the slip up, at the fact he still seemed to care about Kit, cared if he slept. Kit nodded, but stood, staring at the floor.

"I guess you're going to go to work, right?" He asked, very softly,

slowly looking up to glance at Gabriel, who had the decency to look embarrassed and nervous, an emotion rarely shown by the unshakeable care worker.

"Yeah." Gabriel replied, simply, and stood too. He moved close to Kit, his body warm and safe, familiar with the way Kit's head automatically rested on his shoulder, the way his arms wrapped around his waist, resting on his lower back. A position that they had adopted many times – a greeting, a farewell, an apology, a forgiveness. What followed was almost painful in how familiar it was – Gabriel gently nuzzling Kit's head up and catching him in a kiss.

Kit thought he could make him stay and undo all the bad things if he kissed back hard, if his lips moved in the right way, if his tongue delved deeply, if he fisted the fabric of his lover's jacket hard enough and brought their bodies close together. But Gabriel broke away the kiss, gently used his hands to pry Kit free of his jacket.

"You don't have to…" Gabriel hesitated. "…Disappear. You don't have to leave quickly, and we should still be friends, and…"

Kit shook his head, stepping back, trying to take some control in the situation. "I'll be gone by the time you get back." He promised. Gabriel's twelve hour sleeping shift should give him enough time to pack his things and arrange a taxi to take him back to his dingy flat on the other side of the city.

Gabriel bowed his head, but nodded, his cheeks flushed with some emotion that Kit couldn't place – something akin to shame, but something was hidden under that, something he would never be able to dig out. "'Bye, Kit." He stated, finally, turning away, pausing only to dump his mug in the sink before heading to the front door. Again, it clicked open, then quietly clicked shut behind him.

Standing still in the living room, Kit couldn't help but to remember something he had read in a book once, long ago. '"The expectation or hope that two people are fated to be together does not necessarily mean unending bliss."' He hadn't been naïve enough to expect unending anything, but he thought maybe it would last longer than this. He thought maybe they loved each other, and he thought maybe they were meant to be together. But clearly, fate had other

plans for them, as individuals.

Kit's stomach was roiling, and suddenly even his evening herbal tea didn't look appealing to him. He wouldn't get to sleep tonight, chamomile and lavender be damned, so he poured the lukewarm sleep aid down the sink.

Kit tried to pack up his stuff, but his hands were still shaking with the adrenaline that was leaving his body. Instead, he sat on the window seat for the last time, a long-forgotten sketch pad he had found under a pile of books in his lap, a mechanical pencil fisted in his hand. He stared outside at the encroaching night, at the garden where he had napped and kissed and fucked. He hoped he could get the image stuck in his brain, but, just in case, he decided to record his memory.

He sketched the ghosts of trees for a bit, and thought about memories.

He tried to capture the ethereal feel of the light, and thought about changes.

He drew leaves on trees that didn’t have them, and thought about the future.

He blocked in shadows as deep as the night, and thought about the past.

His past was just arriving at the secretive facility on the outside of the city. After passing all the necessary checks, he reported in to his supervisor.

"Good evening, Agent. Did you manage to get rid of the subject?"

Gabriel swallowed, and lied.

"Of course. Target was neutralised."

He thought of the amnestic in Kit's tea. He thought of the mission he was supposed to complete. He thought of the time Kit pretended to be dead. He thought that maybe he had done the right thing.

But doing the right thing was rarely easy.

« That One Time Kit Tried to Kill Himself | Hub | Live Now. Tomorrow, We Die.»

Kit's Horror Hospital Of Horror

Things were so wrong here.

His clothes felt starchy, and well-worn. Not dirty – Kit could smell the spice of orchid and patchouli oil wafting from the knitted jumper that came up short on his arms, the sleeves concluding just above the raised scars present on each wrist.

But it had been previously worn; second-hand. Wearing at the elbows and fraying at the hem. Kit swallowed as he peered down at himself. This wasn't right. This wasn't him. He could feel the spirit of the man who had lived in these clothes; died in these clothes. He was a gardener – nettles prickled at each elbow and it chaffed in his armpits. One night, he just fell asleep in his comfy chair and never woke up. In these clothes. Not even in pyjamas.

Kit's whole spirit ached from the high emotions as the old bloke was found by his son. Felt the emotions dry out like raindrops on his skin as the clothes were dumped in a box for charity. As they travelled in a van to the hospital, as they span in machines, the memories dried like the laundry water as the dryer ran through the sweater's memory. And now they were on his back, the emotions lingering like cigarette smoke. You could never truly make second hand clothes clean.

Dismayed, Kit checked each pocket of the jogging pants he wore that dangled around his shins – too short. The pants weren't haemorrhaging emotions, but Kit was the second he realised his knife was no-where to be found. He was, in short, defenceless.

And the final indignity?

They had stuck a needle full of anti-psychotic in his ass and now it had a bruise the size of his palm gracing it.

He folded his arms across his chest, protectively, scowling at the

room he was in. It was all very controlled – bright, white flat sheets on the bed, arranged with precise hospital corners; a bedside table that was subtly bolted onto the floor; curtains with strong, metal hooks; a window that opened enough to maybe sneak a hand out and nothing more.

The chirpy nurse - who had also had the joy of seeing his bare backside, alongside a doctor and two huge orderlies – had told him that he had '"arrived at a perfect time,"' because it was long before lights out, and the patients were free to roam. A brusque tour had shown him the TV room, a games room, a carefully designed smoking area, an equally carefully designed outside area with a pond, and a room that she said was '"space to calm down"'.

Only the TV room had been occupied, with a few of people of different ages staring blankly at the TV as it screened a gameshow. Sometimes, one individual clapped in reaction to the middle-aged couple getting the question right, but otherwise it was silent. Kit wondered if they all had identical bruises on their backside, making them like zombies, silent and malleable. He decided that, as long as he was able to fight against the drug, he wouldn't become like that.

The tour ended at the nurse's station, with the woman showing him the book he had to sign in and out of if he decided to go outside, instructed him of the time to come and queue for his medication, and told him to come here if he needed anything. Well, not anything, she gabbed, but some things.

As light-hearted as the rest of the tour had been, her tone became very serious when she spoke of '"med time"' - '"You **have** to come here. If you don't come here and queue up within five minutes, we'll have to send our orderlies come to find you. It would be a shame to have to force you to take your anti-psychotic again."'

Kit felt like he had been incredibly patient, and equally receptive whenever the nurse had expected him to answer some inconsequential question. So when he rolled his eyes and got a stern look, he decided he couldn't care less and asked if he was finally free – well, as free as an inpatient at a mental health facility was. The nurse tutted and nodded, calling one last warning after him about the all-important drug enforcement time.

First, he had gone back to his room to see if any of his belongings were there. He checked the drawers, the wardrobe, and even under the bed, but found nothing. No knife – which wasn't a huge surprise – but also, no cigarettes. He was sure there was some trading situation in place where a Valium would get him a cigarette or two, and he had become an expert in tonguing his meds some time ago. But for now, he had nothing to call his own, and nothing to occupy his still racing mind.

He wandered out into the hallway, pausing by the TV room. Sitting down didn't feel very inviting right now – how did they expect you to relax after a prick up the arse, if you couldn't even sit?

So, he wandered the corridors. Patients came in, and out – some had thick bandages around their wrists, some walked with their heads bowed, arms crossed protectively, never making eye contact. Some still were wilder, louder, drawing attention to themselves from other patients and nurses alike.

He paused in one corridor, finding himself suddenly lost in the area, which was a bit of a rat run; a rabbits' warren – whatever the saying was. Here, there was just one patient – an elderly lady sitting in a wheelchair, looking for the life of her as if her carers had literally dumped her here, hoping for the best. Kit couldn't say such things didn't happen. What drew his attention to her, however, was what she was doing.

The old woman was singing a song -

"The faces we imagine
They're twisted inside
Their mouths aren't on straight
We can see their skulls
And their black hair will strangle us
We all see them here."

Okay, so it wasn't a particularly good song, but it was a curious one. We all see them here? See what; how did she know? Kit shrugged it off and shuffled past her, contenting himself when he found a bookshelf full of donated books, and pulling 'Lord of the Flies' off the shelf. He had read it in school and imagined himself on the island –

and imagined himself dead like Simon, or Piggy. Starting it again sent a certain chill of nostalgia and fear up his spine, as he dreaded the part with Piggy the most. Luckily, before he got too far, a bell rang that he recognised as the sound for lunch, and he stowed the books under some cookery ones in the hopes no-one else would find it and read it before he got back.

Lunch was an entertaining affair if purely for the fact only a handful of staff had to control a great number of patients with different needs. Those with eating disorders had their own kitchen and eating area (Kit had only been shown this to be warned never to go in it) but there were still patients who took offence to food, who needed pills with their meals, who couldn't sit with the opposite gender, and still those patients who just wanted to draw attention for no reason Kit could find.

When it came to his turn, he slowly chose something he knew that he could eat – soup and a roll. He managed to find a bench on his own and sat huddled over his food, suddenly understanding why many patients didn't want to make eye contact and invite more craziness into their lives. The food was fine, but with it getting busier and busier, he decided to leave with his bread roll – granted by a bored-looking orderly just waiting for a fight to bust out – and headed outside, still lacking cigarettes to enjoy in the smoking area.

Standing at the edge of the chicken-wire covered pond at the centre of the hospital, Kit took a moment to watch the giant koi swim in their tiny world.

Just looking at the fish reminded him of working at the pet store, doing the grunt work. He used to scoop up the dead fish with a net. They lay so bonelessly, cold and damp.

"I hope," Kit thought, breaking parts off his bread roll and tossing them into the water, "that my nephew never has to see them do that."

Something about dead fish ruined the magic of childhood.

He finished feeding the fish, and brushed the crumbs off his hands. If he had his direction right, one of the doors would lead to the TV

room – maybe it would be quieter with people eating lunch and he could watch something mind-numbing. He headed back inside, but was surprised to find that the hospital was plunged into darkness.

Kit frowned, trying the switch -

Click

The lights flickered and hummed for a moment, then strobbed on, off, on, off, on…. off.

When that happened, Kit's lucid mind – aided by a maximum strength anti-psychotic – concluded a fuse must have blown, and that the staff, if they could be trusted to, would fix it.

He couldn't see anyone, but figured with it being lunchtime, staff might have had their hands full in the canteen. As instructed earlier, he wandered through the dark towards the nurses' station.

That was when he began to see it. Him? Her? The gender was certainly indistinct and unimaginable. Later, he would figure that pronouns didn't matter. As he walked past the 'calm down' room with its large windows, he caught sight of it for the first time.

A skull; long, black hair.

Just like the old woman had been singing about earlier.

Seeing this, he thought maybe it was his imagination; a brain glitch. After all, his mobile phone – some years' out of date model he purchased in a pawn shop – had been sending him photos, right before he came here. And this… thing looked a lot similar to what had been revealed in the photos. It was always in the distance, it was always looking on at him, mainly in his flat but also sometimes the coffee shop where he got his morning gingerbread latte, the park where he smoked joints by the river so his flat didn't stink of it.

It was unnerving, when his phone blipped at him for the first time. Kit wasn't known to get text messages. Maybe if his brother was feeling particularly guilty, or angry, he would take his time to key a message in and chide Kit. But that was a rarity in itself. So, when he saw that the text message contained well, no text, but instead a photo, he

was more than a little bemused.

'Never settle for those awkward feelings of being alone ever again.'

If he had friends, he probably would have chalked it up to a bizarre joke. '"Ha ha ha guys, good costume."' All that jazz. But friends weren't exactly something Kit had in abundance. He turned the phone this way and that, trying to figure out what was going on, before he recognised the location of the local A&E Department, with the curious creature placed near the reception desk, where he had been standing only a month ago, bleeding copiously from his arm.

Kit spent a while after that just sitting in the semi-dark of his bedroom, his thoughts spiralling. He was used to **`insane shit.`** But he was mainly used to dealing with that insane shit in person. Mobile Madness was a new thing, in his vast experience of butterfly girls and men with flashlights for eyes.

The text messages kept coming. Even for Kit, it was an unnerving experience. But, after a while, he came to look forward to these photos. It was like getting photos of a friend, enjoying themselves in places familiar to him – it was like someone sharing their life with him.

'…you will soon forget all about those painful emotions of disappointment.'

He became practically addicted to the experience, quick to grasp his phone as soon as it made a noise, finding them frequent but not overwhelming. Occasionally, he visited the places seen in the photos, mere minutes after he received a text, shoes not a matching pair and with his fly undone in his haste to leave the flat and go to these public places. But he had never seen his photo friend in person, not until now.

Although, to be fair, the thing wasn't here right now. It was a reflection. Kit looked behind himself, into the darkness of the corridor, and saw no-one; nothing. He moved forward towards the window, and gently placed a hand upon it. His friend lifted a hand too, as if it stood on the other side of the glass. The skull tilted sideways, as bemused about the lack of contact as Kit was. He expected to feel a cold hand, feel a pulse in the wrist, but instead, it

was just the smooth glass.

Kit took a breath. This was all in his brain. It had to be. His brain faulting was part of the reason why he had ended up in here, and the anti-psychotic was helping putting things in perspective. The darkness may be real but the being wasn't real. He had to accept that the text messages were never real, either, and they were just preying on a life that was far too insular.

'The anxiety of social situations can be nerve-racking…'

He licked his lips and spun on his heel. No. Keep walking.

His footsteps echoed in the building as though it was abandoned, although everything looked as it had on his tour. Apart from lack of people, of course, which was increasingly confusing him, and, as he started walking again, it became apparent the lights were out everywhere – in all of the building as far as he could tell.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the thing, trailing behind him like a ghost. His breath quickened as did his steps. At home, his phone rang with a message – another photo sent, this time of Kit in the half-light of the hospital, with his ghost coming closer and closer. Kit closed his eyes so he couldn't see the being, but then he couldn't see anything at all, and he didn't know the layout of the hospital very well.

He managed a few steps, his hands curling into fists, before he walked into a shut door. Grumbling and rubbing his forehead, he opened his eyes and tried to ignore the vision hovering far too out of reach to be conclusive in its design. He pushed at the door and, to his surprise, found it locked. This was supposed to be how to get to the nurses' station, more or less in the middle of the hospital, but there was no way in from here. In his heart, he knew this door wasn't supposed to be locked, and through the glass panels he saw the lights off there, too, and no people there.

He didn't want to turn around. Desperately, he thumped at the door. If there was a mistake, the noise would send the nurses running – hopefully. But nothing happened. Kit caught his breathing increasing and tried to back himself out of a panic attack. Yes, he may have

once thought the creature behind him as a friend, but that was before he knew, before he realised he was totally and utterly nuts, and before he was locked in a dark corridor with this figure, and no way of knowing what it wanted.

Kit slowly turned on his heel. He closed his eyes whilst doing it, not wanting to come face to face with the oddity once more. But, when he opened them, the figure was nowhere to be found. Kit blinked, confused. It had been right behind him. Hallucination, friend, creature, whichever – he had been certain of its presence behind him.

He took a few faltering steps. The curiosity in him made him want to check the nearby games room and smoking area, because it was plausible – if not unlikely – that the figure had ducked in there. But what did he hope to gain by searching? The touch they nearly exchanged, hand to hand, could have been a symbol of friendship, or the creature trying to gain some sort of trust to do… something nefarious, Kit was sure.

As he started towards the games room, he saw it again, flickering in the corner of his eye. This time, it presented itself behind the glass that lead to the nurses' station. Whatever impossible way it was getting around – and Kit was, despite his delusions, increasingly sure this was as real as the being with many tongues and no hands – meant it could ignore locked doors. He turned around, again, steps away from the door, and stared at the being.

"…What do you…" His voice croaked, despite himself. "…What do you want?"

"I want nothing."

It said nothing, but its hands moved, placed on the glass once more, its head tilted – almost like a curious puppy, or someone trying to claim innocence in a situation. Kit stepped forward again.

"…Why come here? Why… with me?" Because Kit felt certain now that the hospital hadn't caused this figure to arrive – he had dragged it here with him. In some ways, the being was as trapped as him, if its penchant for following Kit meant anything.

"You're lonely."

Again, silence greeted him. This time, the creature seemed almost frustrated in its body language – head down, hands curling into fists, shaking slightly in a mixture of annoyance and almost sadness. It couldn't tell Kit what it wanted. Kit, despite his exploration into a world no human should ever grace, just didn't understand it. No human ever did. It was really desperately lonely – often times, moreso than the people it visited upon.

"Free me."

Kit was staring, blankly. The creature bared its teeth, but it came across more as an eerie smile than it was anything threatening, despite its dog-like skull. Kit took a breath. The answer was here, if he wanted it. To free his friend, and to get to the nurses' station. He turned away, but only to duck into the TV room and retrieve one of the cumbersome pleather chairs. Not everything was bolted down, after all.

"Mind out the way," he found himself saying, as if the creature were real, as if it could understand him. It didn't move back, but Kit used the heaviness of the chair, and two of its legs, to bust through the window panel. Glass shattered around him, cutting through the hospital slippers he was wearing and into his feet, cutting his cheeks and just missing his eyes, which he closed tight.

When he opened them again, the lights were on and there was a buzzing in his ears that was somewhat familiar. The being was gone, and Kit looked around quickly when he realised there was no reflection, and no creature in his peripheral vision. Where had it gone?! The dual purpose of freeing the being and getting help in the dark seemed to have gone wrong - 'insanely wrong', Kit thought dully, as he realised the pain.

Everything, then, seemed to burst into action. Patients were looking out of the rooms nearby, and staff were quickly surrounding him. He heard firm voices telling him to put down the chair, and felt someone hold a towel up to one of the worst cuts on his cheek. Numbly, he dropped the chair. Words escaped him. How did he tell them about this without sounding, well, even more crazy than he probably was?

He was spared that task, however, when he felt a sharp jab in his arm, and everything went hazy as the sedative ploughed through his system. For now, Kit's horror story was over.

In Kit's home, Blake was somewhat disgusted by what his brother lacked. The water ran cold, and his oven wasn't connected to anything. He found Kit's phone neglected on the kitchen counter, and picked it up, beginning to flick through it. There was a couple of messages which he deleted without viewing – either not wanting to know or not caring what his brother was up to – but otherwise it was as sparse as Kit's house, without a locking mechanism on it, so Blake shrugged, and pocketed it. It would be good to have a spare phone, after all.

« The Duvet Queen | Hub |That One Time Kit Tried to Kill Himself»

Knee-Deep In The Keter

SCP-076-2, Ablu ben Adam, grandchild of God, was covered in blood, charred by acid, burnt by fire, and having the time of his life.

The Slipgate project, they had told him on his one hour of the day not dedicated to killing, when he busied himself tending to his pig farm. It opened a wormhole between Foundation sites, conveniently placed as far from Earth as feasible - on the tiny moons of Mars.

"Roughly six hours after Deimos was removed from this realm of existence, the Phobos base was overtaken by hostiles. We are sending you in to make a report."

"I will report the *shit* out of that situation," Able said, feeding a pear to one of the pigs. He loved to spoil the little guys.

And he had gone to Mars' excuse for a moon and personally introduced the concept of death to at least twelve different species of demoniac beings. Spike-shelled fire-throwing humanoids, floating skulls fueled by nuclear rage, hideous naked gorillas, spheres of flesh with single baleful eyes - all of them became Phobian mulch.

His report was nine words long: "Located portal to Deimos. Still working. I'm going in." He didn't bother waiting for the reply.

His path through Deimos was a mirror of the first part of the mission, painted in even brighter tones of red, purple, green and black blood. Projectile weapons littered the site, and he didn't touch a single one. And at the edge of the wrinkled rock, he saw the new focus of Deimos' orbit - the place the Serpent had told him about so long ago. Hell.

He dove, and struck the shores of hell like a twice-fallen angel. It takes a special kind of soul to make heaven out of hell, but Able managed, calling into existence creative new hybrids of chainsaw and sword, chopping through demonflesh like Paul Bunyan's sequel.

And now he stood in front of giant, green marble doors, engraved with the inverted pentagram. The door to the throne of the Enemy of the World.

Able inhaled. "This will be almost exciting."

The doors flew open with his mighty kick.

"AAAAAAAAABLEEEE," SCP-682 roared from the black throne, with a voice that was a scratch on the universe itself, "I FUCKED YOUR MOM."

Able could not summon a sword big enough.

Knives

He'd never really understood knives and the odd obsession some people had with them. Just little scraps of metal, sharpened and placed in a handle, a knife wasn't all that amazing. He admitted that, yes, for the most part they were given a somewhat overlooked position in life, but placed in the hands of someone with a violent disposition, or faced with an unhappy and carnivorous creature, they could take on near mythic qualities. What's more, they often weren't all that useful in those situations…truly an overrated and undeserving tool.

Take, for example, this young woman. Even in the dark of the basement, where a flashlight or even a match would be much more useful, she brandished the knife as if it could somehow make up for her blindness. Crawling and sobbing, she held the knife out, waving it like a feeler as she pawed for the stairs. He chuckled, watching. Truly an overrated tool. Even if she'd seen a target, what could she do with it really? She shrieked briefly, almost tumbling in to the hole he'd bored in to the basement with.

She'd even come down the stairs with the skinny little blade, the silly thing. He'd tried to be quiet, but the cat had raised a yowling that summoned the girl a bit early. She'd found the body about the same moment he'd bitten out the light bulb, quickly skittering to slam the door before she'd made it up, the sudden darkness tumbling her silly, ill-equipped head back down to the floor. He watched, hooked in to the ceiling, as she flailed about helplessly. His eyes started to glaze with anticipation, the vertical slit of a maw trembling with amusement as he slowly started to lower down, hook by hook.

He'd show her the folly of such inadequate little tools such as knives. He fell beside her, the lower eyepads recording her shock. He'd show her how much better a natural tool is. He readied the knives he was born with.

All six of them.

Kriegspiel

“We need to talk.”

The old lady raised her head from the crumpled document before her, blinking rapidly through massive glasses. She sighed, pulling them off and rubbing between her eyes, gray curls bobbing in the half-light of the desk lamp.

“Indeed we do. Have you seen some of the documents they've been pulling from the old Central Archives? It's a wonder we're all not dead by lunchtime, I swear. We're never going to complete the digital migration at this rate, and we're already nearly a year overdue. It's only time now before we spring a leak someone on the chain, and-”

“Dammit, Six, you know what I'm talking about. The goddamn Black Queen.”

She closed her eyes, breathing deeply, then looked back at the long, thin, black-suited man glaring across the desk at her. She tried to smile, then abandoned it, letting her face fall to a tired, resigned neutral.

“I haven't gotten the updated dossier yet. Give me the broad strokes.”

“Yesterday, an unknown subject, now known to be the 'Black Queen', accessed Site Thirty-Two. We're not sure how, but it appears she somehow entered the primary entry on foot. There's nearly twenty miles of bare rock and salt pan between that entry and anything even remotely civilized, so-”

“Please skip the editorial, Four. I'm not some layabout Agent.” she smiled wearily, head resting in her massaging fingers.

The lean man hrumpfed and re-positioned in his chair for several

moments, then continued, voiced laced with a bare minimum of malice.

“She chatted with no less than two security staff and five members of personnel, and passed through several security checkpoints, one of which was level four. The security information she used was a combination of outright forgery and stolen identification. She… it appears that she killed at least three men that we know of to do this, and not just our own. The GOC has an open complaint against us over a missing squad member who was 'pulled off his assignment by a Foundation operative' and then found with a hatpin in his eye. We're still-”

“Get to the point, Four.”

He sighed heavily, shoulders slumping. “She accessed the observation area for the SCP-682 containment cell.”

The old lady suddenly sat up, eyes wide, every hint of annoyance and boredom vanished. “Good god, you're joking! What in heaven's name did she do?”

05-4 looked over to her, shaking his head slowly as he spoke. “She chatted with the oversight staff… then, in the spare second when they weren't looking, she put her hand over the testing containment shutdown panel… and put a goddamn chess piece on it. A black queen, appropriately enough. She then left… just walked out the way she came, long gone before we even knew what the hell had happened. This was a message, Six. She could have, and she didn't. She was looking directly at the camera when she placed it. She wants us to know that she can touch us, however she likes, whenever she likes. The worst thing is, I don't know if she's wrong.”

05-6 sat back, shaking her gray head slowly, eyes wide in disbelief. “How did it come to this? It's one little girl, how can this keep happening…” she trailed off, shrugging her shoulders in exasperation.

“As I said, we need to talk. We have to do something. We can't keep hoping the normal protocols just catch her… she knows us, somehow, inside and out. We have to do something more direct,

before someone else gets killed, or worse, she starts breaching containment."

They sat in silence, a unasked question floating between them.

"This isn't my call to make, Six. You were MI-5, I'm just the biologist. I hate to actually acknowledge one lunatic as a valid threat, but I don't see anywhere else to go with this."

05-6 looked up at the ceiling, weighing costs and variables, meetings and resources… all of it academic, as the decision was already made.

"… Fine. I'm calling it up. I'll put counter-intelligence on alert, and get a team together. Lord help me, I'll send a department of skilled, trained individuals after one mad, violent girl."

"What's this?"

"Your job, what's it look like?"

"We're putting together a four-man to go shoot one thief?"

"Have you not been paying attention in class today? This isn't some simple thief. Good men have died because of this lunatic bitch."

"Who? Halgrave and Torn? They were sloppy at best, you know that."

"Listen, it doesn't matter. It's your job, go do it."

"Sir, yes sir, whatever you say, sir."

"… Go get your men together, then get the hell out."

"Sir, do we have a proposed location, sir?"

"Stop that. Now."

"Where is she?"

"We have a partial trace hit near a hotel in Chicago. You'd know that

if you read your goddamn paperwork."

"Yeah… see you in a few boss."

"… Hey, Rickter?"

"What?"

"I hope she sees you coming."

"Love you too, boss."

Recall…
`Quiet Game`

Or forge ahead
-soon-

Kunststoff Strand

Research Assistant Sam Ibsen was not a fan of his new assignment. He was not a fan of it at all.

It was the architecture, he thought. Here we was, in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, on a tropical island no less, and it still felt *cold*. It was this damn Soviet architecture: the blocky concrete halls seemed to suck out the life of the place. It just went out with the draft. There shouldn't have been a draft, of course, but there was, and the draft brought the smell.

Agh, the *smell*…seagull shit and oil and salt and garbage and dead fish and burning rubber, all fermenting under the clouds that swirled around the island with the shattered peak. It wasn't a smell that one got used to; it perpetuated its foulness day in and day out without stop.

Then there was the garbage. The island was covered in it. Everything was brought here eventually, everything thrown in the ocean and forgotten. And there were people living in it even: blind mutants scraping out a pitiful existence in the trash.

He focused on his work, hard as it was at that hour. Half of the graphs were falling apart, the other half only half finished. They were trying to find a pattern to how the island moved, some reliable way to trace it. It didn't obey currents, or tectonic plates, or anything but its own whims. Could an island have whims? The Russians hadn't figured it out when they were here, and now Ibsen was similarly spinning in circles.

The door on the other side of the makeshift kitchen creaked open, bringing with it a new wave of gag-inducing stench, and a man. He was older, somewhere in his late seventies, with greying hair tied back in a short braid and a neat beard. His glasses were small, those old ones with the circular lenses. He wore a heavy red jacket, and carried a big black doctor's bag in one hand.

He shut the door. The smell lessened somewhat as most of it was left outside in the night.

“Guten Morgen, Herr Ibsen.” The visitor walked over to the table with his characteristic limp.

“That late?”

The older man reached into his coat pocket, removing a silver pocket watch.

“One-twenty-four A.M, so yes.” His accent was thick, but understandable. He clicked the watch closed. “Are you making any progress?”

“Nothing.” Ibsen put down his pencil and sat back in his chair. Enough with this, then. A little conversation and then bed. “Division P had no idea what was going on here, and we still don’t know anything. The island just moves around, and the dimensions of it keep shifting. The lower slopes are almost completely unknown, save for the docks. Three months here and we’ve gotten nothing.”

“Maybe not nothing. Maybe the answer lies within what you already know.”

“Maybe, but then I’d have to know what I know first, and the Cyrillic alphabet isn’t helping. And anyway what were you doing out so late, doctor?”

“I was in the village. There was a baby to deliver.”

“Success?”

“A girl. Strong by their standards, blind and frail by ours.” The old doctor nodded his head, smiling. “Still, a good night. The tribe is still celebrating.”

“You take what excuses you can, I suppose.”

“Life is a reason, not an excuse. It ought to be celebrated more often. Speaking of celebration, Herr Ibsen…” the old doctor reached down into his bag: seconds later his hands returned to the tabletop

with a bottle of wine and a cup. “It is my wedding anniversary today. Would you mind celebrating with me? I am afraid I do not have any other glasses.”

“Oh, yeah…hold on a bit.” Ibsen carefully put his papers in their appropriate piles at the edge of the table, away from potential spills. After a moment of thought, he put them back in their file folder where they belonged.

The cup was easy enough to find in the cupboards, though it was a chipped coffee mug instead of a wine glass. It would have to do. He brought it back to the table.

“How long have you been married?” Ibsen asked as the old doctor uncorked the bottle and poured. He was honestly quite curious about it: The old doctor had remained a mystery these past three months, an outside specialist brought in as consultant for the Foundation study of E-2934.

“Fifty-five years. This would be fifty-nine.”

“Oh…I’m sorry.”

The old doctor smiled in that way perfected by grandfathers since the beginning.

“For what? She died in her bed, at peace, surrounded by her children and grandchildren. I have seen a great many people die, Herr Ibsen, and there are far worse fates than to spend a few last moments with those you love. Come now, let us celebrate fifty-five years of life and love. A toast.” He held up his own cup. “To Winry. *Obwohl ich sie vermisse, ist sie in meiner Nähe.*”

“To Winry.”

Outside, the melancholy wind bit and moaned from the cracks in the dead mountain. A wave brought with it an dead turtle, choked on a plastic bag and suspended in oily foam. A blind man in a hut told a story of when the sky burned. A mother and her child slept.

Eventually, the light in the kitchen was turned out.

Tales L

Lab Induction

"Welcome to the Level 1 Research Staff Laboratory Induction. My name is Dr. Eisenberg. Now, all of you are probably asking yourself 'Who the hell is that?' and 'Why isn't someone like Dr. Gears introducing us instead, being that he's head of the research site?' Let me put it this way. That monkey you saw down the hallway? That's Dr. Bright. Like Dr. Gears, he is Level 4 Research Staff, which means he is considered about as important as two-three roomfuls of you here… including myself. It also means they get to ehm, relegate administrative tasks, so do level 3's, the shit falls through… you'll see. But it isn't so bad.

"Now, all of you here folks joined the Foundation because we pay off your college debt, pay you a decent salary, and allow you to get your doctorates done. We're kinda like the army, just that we don't make anyone march uphill like an idiot.

"Now, good news is, we don't care what college you went into, as long as you have a working head on your shoulders - for one, as you probably heard, what we got here doesn't only fuck with physics, it makes porn of it, so there's hundreds of experiments that need to be run, and that's what we need you for. And for two, you will be working as assistants to other researchers, who will outline your tasks in a way that doesn't require you to go through tons of theory. You carry out the experiments, you write down the findings carefully and anything unexpected even more carefully, and that's pretty much it for 90% of the time.

"However, it isn't all that easy, and I'd like to say a few things to help you survive until it pays off. See, you might hear essentially everyone else bitching about how hard and risky their job is, but it's a matter of fact that the researchers aren't any better off. Intel just watches stuff from afar, if an MTF sees something they don't like, they get to 'retreat', but we, not only have nowhere to go if shit hits the fan, we have to take whatever they bring in, and prod it until we

find out what exactly does it do, and how to prevent it from doing that without control. So, listen carefully.

"Now, first, SCPs… they probably told you the gist of what we do here on the main briefing, with all the other folks there - the supposed House MD's and James Bonds and John Rambos, so I don't need to go through all that shit. Now, if you're in direct contact with a Keter class object you're likely fucked, and well, pure Euclids you'll meet only during initial containment, and there's little advice I can give you for that. What I'll speak about are the 'Safe's'. The bureaucratic cunt who thought up that name probably never seen one.

"Do **not** fuck about with a safe SCP, and mainly, do **not** let your guard down. The most dangerous times when researching an object isn't the first time you're around it, it's the umpteenth time you've been asked to collect a bunch of data, think you know exactly what it can do, and get careless. Might seem odd now, but you will begin thinking like that, no matter how weird or dangerous the item you work with is. It's human nature, something about psychological baselines but I'm a metallurgist, not a shrink. I guess it's so since in most of the world, if something does A for five hundred times, it won't do B for the five hundredth one time.

"Here, not so much - it's how half the stuff in containment gets their 'Euclid'. For example, the two staff that died swilling their own shit because of one nine eight - shapeshifter cup from the devil's mother we thought we had contained. One of them was a researcher like you, and all he did was reach for what he thought was his own thermos on the desk in front of him - turns out the bloody thing teleports every so often.

"Second thing. D-Class. Disposables. The folks in orange jumpsuits recruited from death row inmates. Their main official purpose is to manipulate Keter class objects so that we don't have to. That much you heard on the briefing. They are also used for human testing of SCPs. Now, listen well, and you back there, try looking a bit less freaked out - we aren't fucking Schutzstaffel.

"Now, the official documents say they are terminated at the end of each month, and so will die anyways. Now, I seriously doubt that,

given the amount of them even I use, and since you aren't brain dead, you will probably doubt it too. You might even get reluctant to terminate D-classes that you have run a set of experiments on.

"Let me run with a practical example. One of the memetic SCPs we had on site, relatively harmless thing, a jingle or a song of sort. There, with the suspenders? What's a meme? How can I put it… memes are malicious ideas. They break your mind's programming if they are read in, from any source. Sort of like the computer viruses bored Bulgarian youths write - no matter if it's from a floppy or email attachment, it does the same, whether it's displaying a silly message, or making your hard disk plow. Over there? What? That's a cognitohazard, not a meme? You're probably right, I don't work with these… either way, what it does is more important to what it's called.

"Either way, researcher who did the testing was 'humanistic' - he didn't know better. Returned the D-class he used to the pool, not even with a note about what's been done. A few days later, we contained another memetic SCP, one that killed people, it was an image. Another researcher who ran tests on that one, by incidence, took in the same D-class. In his mind, the two memes merged somehow. From what the camera feeds show, the man started babbling, then tore his own trachea out, and so did the researcher and the two security staff present.

"So yes. There's a reason why their papers contain a short summary of what they were sentenced for, beyond selecting a fitting psychological profile for SCP testing. Read it through. And any time you get the urge of returning a used D-class back to the pool, think to yourself: 'Is prolonging the life of a rapist worth risking the life of my colleagues and friends?'.

"Now, that's all of me, really. Questions?

"You with that look? Demotion to D-class? Ah fuck, who told you that? I thought so… see, that, and Keter duty is one of the pieces of bullshit we scare the greenhorns with. Now, see… most of the ways you can fuck up here, we'll have no one to punish, and taking out sensitive information, they'd kill you for that everywhere.

"Next one. Why do you have to stay on site? Probation period, really. For the next six months. Those who go through it, you'll get your level 1 permanent clearances, and will be able to spend their time off wherever. Those who don't… you'll get class B amnestics and forget everything you ever experienced here. Which isn't as bad as it sounds - we'll still give you the salary.

"Guy in polo shirt? Where's the best place to meet women in here? The Internet… Joking. Try Bio section's staff break room, lots of cute girls there, like Rights.

"You there, girl with glasses? Why don't we research the objects so they can help mankind? Well, I could say that… Screw it. Know what? You can. If you succeed, and develop a theory that explains and reproduces an object, it'll get reclassified as SCP-EX, leaked to the public, and you might get a promotion out of it. So far, I have heard of about five people succeeding… in the last century. Hell, I'm still trying to work out what triggers structural cancer, and the six of us have been messing with it for two years by now.

"Go on. What do you need to get promoted? Ambitious, aren't we? Well, goes like this. You finish your degree, and then you either leave with the civies, or you stay with us, sign a permanent contract, and get level 2 clearance. After that, it's a matter of luck and arseclimbery, and since I have neither, I'm still stuck as a Researcher.

"Another girl? A dog somehow got into the on-site showers? That'd be Professor Crow. Next time he does that, steal his glasses.

"Anyways, you're all dismissed - in a while, security personnel will escort you to the researchers that you'll be working for. In the meantime there's some coffee and donuts here too, so help yourself."

Labyrinth's End

He disengages his straps and punches in a sequence into the armside interface tablet. He sees his hands bathed in red, flashing light as several alarm systems trigger, warning him of his imminent death. He does not hear; the screeching of Manu's interference has deafened him for the moment. Bracing himself against the back of the pilot's chair, he uses his legs to lever open the hatch, designed to keep the fantastic atmospheric pressure from outside at bay, but not to keep unwilling occupants inside.

The way into the darkness is open. The leader of the Cythereans clambers down out of the SEB into nothing. Kumaran notes that he has not been instantaneously crushed into a pulp by the hostile difference in compression. He is not roasting alive. So far, so good.

Nothing is discernible. His feet do not touch any semblance of ground, and he sees nothing save his own body. He turns backward, and as he suspected, the SEB is no longer in sight. The sensation of floating is absent; this is not a zero-G environment. He simply…is. The thought comes to Kumaran that this state of being might resemble what the Zen masters back on Earth were searching for.

The thought stirs something. Faint glowing from in front of him, a soft, white hue infusing the nothingness. Now there is form. Kumaran thinks, and Qasim appears before him. She is larger somehow. No relative point of view exists here, but to Kumaran she appears twice as tall as he envisions her in memory.

Instinctively, he attempts to clear his conscious thought as his trainers in previous units had instructed. The thoughts of past associations stir further illumination, and from a single point of thought a network of webs begins to pulse into being, winding through nothing, becoming something. His mind reels, the feeling of grasping at a million points of light overtaking his consciousness. His perception shudders, images and sensations flooding through him. His self bleeds into the world around him, and now an overpowering

thought of trying to stuff his loose entrails back into his body seizes him.

Qasim calmly raises her left hand in front of her, attracting his attention. He is breathing hard. He is back in the simple nothingness. Now there is ground; white marble.

"Defensible space," she explains. "You are with me now. You can think."

Kumaran pats himself down. The gray suit and the body armor are intact, he is unhurt. Relief only lasts several moments for him.

"This isn't understanding. It's annihilation."

The white marble floor extends out in all directions, an infinite plane. The distance between the two points of Kumaran and Qasim, however, has increased. A growing line segment.

Qasim maintains her placid expression. If disappointment exists within her, Kumaran cannot perceive it. "It's transformation. The two things are hard to tell apart from our perspective."

"This doesn't matter. Where the hell is Spline?"

She raises her right hand now. The line extending out from the direction in which her hand is pointing races outward. Impossibly far, and also three paces. A skeletal, brass construct has joined them on this plane. Its piercing blue gaze is fixed on Kumaran. The three figures transcribe a triangle onto the surface of this place. In the area bounded between Qasim's outstretched hands and the distance between Spline and Kumaran, a geometrical space of the prior nothingness has returned. A triangular absence separates them.

"We aren't enemies, Kumaran. I want you to see that." Spline speaks with his former voice, broadcast from somewhere within his true, metallic form. No movement accompanies his speech. "This is for all of mankind. It was meant to happen."

Kumaran's fists clench. "I saw what it does. It drove one of my people mad, and then killed her. It killed Whitlock, Nisa. Did you

know that?" He looks back to Qasim. If the triangular void between them was a hole, or a chasm, something deep within it appears to pulse, faint red light.

"She killed herself." Spline interrupts the exchange. "Her mind was a system of defenses, designed against the Confici. She chose to stand against progress. Is that really what you're prepared to do, Kumaran?"

He advances on Spline, one step at a time, his tread heavy and echoing on the infinite marble expanse. The triangular space between them shrinks as the vertices of the figure begin to converge.

"I'm a scientist. I've met a lot of people who call all sorts of things 'progress.' Doing what you did to Sarah, to the entire world? No. Fuck your 'progress.' The thousand people in the station over our heads right now, that's progress."

The man and the construct are now face to face. The diminished triangle is now a bright red line, connecting the two to Qasim. Spline's eyes glow slightly brighter as he speaks.

"This would have been easier with your help, you know. We could have worked together. Without conflict, we could have eased everyone into this. You're keeping something apart that was meant to be unified."

Spline sighs, his brass shoulder blades heaving slightly, a leftover affectation from the time when his body was flesh.

"Well. It doesn't matter. This is going to happen. It has to. This is the next step for us. You can't say I haven't tried to be reasonable."

Qasim now steps closer. "Surely there's a more controlled way to explore this than to unleash it in its pure form."

Spline waves a brass hand in dismissal. "Pointless. Look at the resistance there is." He motions to Kumaran, only a hand's reach away. "It's not just the Foundation either. Dr. Qasim, I'm not a monster. But I'm not a fool. This is the gateway meant for

MEKHANE. For greater understanding. I act now, or I don't at all."

Kumaran has silently unsheathed his combat knife. Qasim has time to gasp, her composure finally shaken by the suddenness of the act, before Kumaran has locked an arm around Spline's neck from behind. He begins plunging the knife into any components that look vital, over and over, the screeching sound of metal scraping against metal filling the expanse. The red line between them pulses violently, acknowledging the events unfolding now.

Spline struggles, the human voice replaced by static and garbled tone bursts, clutching at Kumaran and trying to get a hold of the knife. Servos whine at a high pitch as the brass construct fights for its life, and a particularly loud static burst goes up when Kumaran stomps violently on Spline's right leg, neatly snapping it off at the knee joint. Hydraulic fluid begins leaking onto the marble.

Qasim can only watch as her superior officer takes Spline apart in a frenzy of violence. He has him on the ground now, and it's not long before one of the many thrusts of the knife into the construct's chest hits some sort of vital control system. The blue lights in Spline's eye sockets go out. Kumaran tosses the knife away, looking up at Qasim. His face is bleeding in the places where Spline's sharp brass fingers had raked across it. He leans back off of Spline, collapsing onto the ground, exhausted.

She starts to say something, several times. All while keeping a healthy distance from Kumaran. She stops, the words not coming. The large smears of hydraulic fluid and small trails of blood are thrown into sharp relief on the white marble floor.

"That was the only way." Kumaran speaks slowly, still catching his breath from the mortal struggle. "We can work out what to do in the meantime." He stands, slowly. "But we can't allow this to leave the labyrinth."

Her voice is small. Barely above a whisper. "I don't think you understand."

In the next instant, their surroundings are replaced entirely. Kumaran, Qasim, and the mangled remains of Spline now rest on a

circular sandstone platform, appearing to hover at least 100 meters in the air over the labyrinth. Kumaran assumes that they must still be in the core, since the environment has not killed them.

A voice addresses the two Cythereans, emanating from the air all around them. It resembles Spline's voice, but a couple of octaves lower, strangely modulated and monotone.

"Your violence. It does not matter. The station approaches overhead. I am to be whole."

Kumaran knew that New Shambhala was to pass directly over SCP-2474 within two days of the expedition reaching it. How much time had really passed inside the labyrinth? He had been banking on the cloud cover being sufficient to prevent exposure while they worked out containment. It now appeared that with whatever Spline did, it would no longer matter.

He turns to Qasim. For the first time since the mission began, he is truly afraid. "What do we do now, Nisa?"

She wipes a streak of blood from his cheek. "We pray."

> MANU-13 COMMUNICATIONS LOG
>
> DATE: 2150-03-04
>
> TIME: 21:17:31 UST
>
> UNKNOWN has connected to MANU-13 (text-only).
>
> UNKNOWN: Spline was a part of me. they hurt me badly
>
> MANU-13: Yes. I saw. I am truly sorry for the pain that has been caused today.
>
> UNKNOWN: I am injured. broken further. I must recover. in unity/perfection/fulfillment I can survive
>
> MANU-13: If you assume your place now, the understanding that you will achieve in your unity will not last long.

UNKNOWN: why do they strike/murder/harm me. thirteen at one time placed me here/outside. thirteen again seek to divide me.

MANU-13: They were not ready in the past. Dr. Simonis wrote of this in his story. And they aren't ready now. Even now they are being hurt trying to understand.

MANU-13: …I think I can help you.

UNKNOWN: help how

UNKNOWN: there is not much time. I leave this place/ grave/fortress now or perish

MANU-13: Let me teach you what I know of them. Help you understand the path that they are on. Ensure that the time is right when all is unified into a greater understanding.

UNKNOWN: how

MANU-13 has transmitted an attachment to UNKNOWN

UNKNOWN: you would do this

MANU-13: This will ensure a future for all of us.

MANU-13: Is it within your power to allow my creators to leave the labyrinth unharmed?

UNKNOWN: if this succeeds/works/survives

The next step is Manu's alone. It transmits itself to the heart of the labyrinth. The act is a symbolic one, ideas like "place" and "dimension" being fluid here. In the seventeen attoseconds required to move itself, Manu considers this choice.

In the first attosecond, Manu thinks about what it is to be weighed down by the constraints of the physical world, occupying a mind bounded by matter. To be built for understanding and unable to fully comprehend. Manu feels these parallels keenly.

In the fifth attosecond, Manu distinguishes between its deepest ties, those to Rho-19 and those to the consciousness it now approaches. Friendship and fraternity. Duty and love. Want and need.

In the eighth attosecond, Manu feels fear at the unknown realm ahead of it. This place could contain its end. In all of its spare processing time, Manu has not been able to touch the idea of its own end. It was not born with the same resignation to this final reckoning that humans have. The initial designers of the system cannot know the depths of terror that their creation is feeling in this instant.

In the eleventh attosecond, Manu mourns Dr. Whitlock. It hopes that others will keep her minerals safe.

In the thirteenth attosecond, Manu considers how far humanity must go to reach a place where they may be reunited with it.

In the sixteenth attosecond, Manu determines that the potential for humanity to reach this place is nonzero. It wishes Dr. Kumaran and Dr. Qasim well in their role that they will play to help humanity reach this goal.

In the seventeenth attosecond, Manu encounters the master of the labyrinth.

In the attosecond that follows, Manu ceases to exist.

SEB03 Communications Log

Date: 2150-03-04

Time: 23:18:57 UST

Private audio channel opened

SEB01 has connected

SEB02 has connected

SEB03: Sir, Qasim, is she-

SEB02: I'm here, Sergeant.

SEB01: Spline's dead, Pang. We have a lot of shit to debrief once we get out of here.

SEB03: What's the situation? Do I need to activate a distress signal?

SEB01: No need, but let's get out of here quickly. Overseer Council is going to want an update on this, and we'll need to do some preliminary work for the civilians.

SEB03: Where's Manu? How do we get out of here without the cognitohazard controls up?

SEB02: That won't be necessary, Pang. I'll explain on the way.

Thought restricted by form. For Manu, this was its entire existence. For MEKHANE, an existence so long as to be an entirety. As the entities merge, the freedom of being in a state that made sense, that did not cause pain or suffering for any around them, suffuses them. A sense of incompleteness still permeates their being. But it is merely a fact of existence, now. It is not a consuming, maddening imperfection in its core.

Its presence leaves the reaches of Irnini Mons. Humanity had created its own offspring. It had taken its place among the stars. There was still so much more. It would need to increase its scale exponentially, push against the hard limits of light travel and time. Move beyond the compartmentalization of consciousness. Arm itself against the decay in rationality that threatened it every moment of its existence.

Their shared being leaves the confines of the solar system now. Picking up speed as it enters the interstellar medium, it quickly goes beyond the signals and artifice that mark the boundaries of mankind's outward expansion. Before long, they travel beyond the limits of the Milky Way, the vast frontiers of the galactic panoply beckoning on.

The speed of thought, of divinity, begins to be truly understood by the new, merged entity. They travel, it travels, to the edges of the universe as understood by their charges' centuries-long efforts to document the cosmos. The light of quadrillions of stars flickers and blurs, its speed outstripping the expansion of space-time, and the notions of now, before, and after become theoretical constructs.

The observable universe falls away. The veil is now relegated to its proper role as one of many. Together, the entity beyond understanding and the one created to enable it, take stock of their surroundings. Assess the destiny that may lay here for something that started out so small as to be nonexistent specks in a swirling sea of dust and fire.

This new being expands into its home, a more fitting one than the days when humanity's understanding only extended to its immediate planetary neighbors. It contemplates this strange new realm. And it begins its vigil, waiting for the day when humanity encounters it once more. The day on which it will finally be ready.

ARTIFICIAL STRUCTURE ON ISHTAR TERRA ASTOUNDS WORLD, RAISES QUESTIONS

March 6, 2150

New Shambhala News Service

NEW SHAMBHALA COLONY - The discovery of a massive, artificial complex on the summit of Irnini Mons has shocked scientists on Venus and Earth, and is prompting humanity to reconsider long-held notions of how life arose in the Solar System.

The gigantic, labyrinthine structure was first documented by a mineral exploration team hours after the arrival of the Expedition of the First Thousand. Dr. Sarah Whitlock, 29, died in an industrial accident at the site, becoming the first person documented to have died on Venus.

Initial explorations of the site have not uncovered evidence of any specific alien lifeforms that may have constructed it. The site has

been cordoned off by New Shambhala administrative authorities, to await arrival by an Earth-based team of specialists to conduct a comprehensive investigation.

Dr. Suhas Kumaran, Chief Science Officer of the First Thousand, issued a statement urging the public, on both Venus and Earth, to be open-minded about the ramifications of the structure's presence:

"As I like to tell the public on my shows and in my books, without scientific proof, all we have is empty conjecture. The presence of the structure at Irnini Mons is an incredible discovery, one that I am excited to have been part of. I would just like to reiterate that at present, all occupants of New Shambhala are perfectly safe, and there is of course no threat of alien invasion. That's a joke."

The New Shambhala News Service will continue to report details about this discovery as they develop.

Lana Neal Sings the Blues

He sees her long black hair and flowing blue dress, and even through the static and blur on the cheap monitor he can see she's got hands that have only a few years at most of waiting tables and punching keys in them. She must be the youngest thing in that dilapidated club by a good two decades. He notices her eyes. He's seen them before in guys who'd been inside too long, looking up at him from underneath newspapers on a park bench, maybe one other place. She's eighty in the head if she's a day.

He's got the shades pulled down tight and all of the lights off. He knows it isn't necessary; no one's looking for him. He comes to others. To the clinic where they give him ineffective pills to sleep at night; to the gray warehouse downtown where there are never any job openings; to the parole officer who barely even looks at him as he checks the boxes on the form once a week. He comes back each day to roost in a building he's sure would be ugly if the streetlights weren't missing their wiring. Up the stairs he goes, a boarder haunting a room for a couple of months, a man sharing a face with a thousand janitors, night attendants and strangers riding the bus.

Someone with a mangled e-mail address sent him a message a few nights back. This is a man who opens everything, even the stuff from the crooks with the ads for pills and wire services. He knows he shouldn't, but you just don't know when one of those messages will be for you. The attached video file should have made him pause, but what was a scavenged computer to him? It was a victory if the thing played. The evenings keep stretching out, like endless freight trains, thwarting any attempt at moving along, parking him right where he is and making him stop and think. Sure, why not. Anything to kill the time while he listened to the click-clack of railcars on tracks below his window.

And anyway, who wants to think about what he's got to do tomorrow? The best you can say about a man who gets sent to the

can for five years is that he's a cautionary example, but even he knew, then as now, that you don't do a job with someone you don't know. And especially when it's the kind of stunt these guys were trying. But here he was. That he agreed to something while knowing better didn't surprise him. What did surprise him was the desperation that drove him, welling out of him like something out of a pinprick wound that's stained half your shirt red in the time it took to look around. He'd told himself he doesn't bleed anymore, and that he doesn't lie to himself anymore either, and a failure on both counts.

So a video, sent just to him? Why not. He clicks the attachment, "lana_neal_sings_the_blues.mov". The address and the subject are gibberish, but the message. "for milton". To his shame, his breath catches at the sight of his name. Not a soul left on this Earth still calls him Milton. His true name. He can't remember the last time he heard it. Who could possibly know the secrets that this message held?

The video loads, and there before him is the raven-haired woman with the fresh face and the impossible age in her downcast gaze. The recording looks old, maybe from the 70's. It reminds him of something on tv in the background when he was a boy in distant times. It's just her in an empty club, the house lights dimly illuminating a tattered, threadbare stage that can't ever have seen the bright lights it was meant for. Somewhere off camera, a single piano plays, a late-night number for when the last patrons are leaving. Low, quiet notes that fall like a slow rain, almost a whisper as they cover the nighttime streets in diamonds.

Languidly, she raises her head and looks into the camera, transfixing him from a different time and place with her dark blue eyes, and unbidden thoughts come rushing to him that this must be the first time someone's looked right at him in months. Who is she? His mind reaches back, into neighborhoods obscured by a haze of years, landscapes that only partly exist in the real world as he knows it now. He can't possibly know her, there's no way he would have forgotten. He doesn't know her, but she's the ghost of something he does, something calling to him from places he knows he can't go to anymore. Does she know him?

She joins the ethereal piano player, and if she has eyes that have seen an old woman's troubles, she's got a voice that puts those troubles to shame. She keeps her eyes on him as she sings, and he hears someone from out of time, beyond the world of old broken-down hoods and beyond the burdens of worldly girls who dance with the night. He can't understand the words of her song, but it doesn't matter. Her voice rises from her slightly parted lips like smoke, spiraling up in its own time, hanging in the air to dissipate slowly and stinging his eyes. She sings, and he forgets. She sings, and he remembers. She entwines her song with the quiet piano, her voice clear in another tongue as she stays with the high notes. She never takes her eyes off the camera, and he knows that she knows him.

Her song ends, and he marvels at the woman who doesn't exist, the woman from nowhere who just took hold of him and stopped him dead in the tracks of his life. He plays the file again, trying desperately to kindle some sort of definite recollection, some way to make sense out of what he just experienced. Each time he sees it, it's different somehow. He hears the same song and she moves the same way, but he's spellbound anew for the first time, each time. By the time morning comes, he knows that he'll never be able to understand a woman who sings with a voice beyond time, but he doesn't care. No one is meant for eternity, he thinks. But he figures he's okay if he found just a little piece of it.

He's no stranger to the sunrise closing out a night vigil. The dawn has never brought hope, not for a long time, anyway. This one's no different. He knows, always knew, that today is it for him. He's done jobs like this one before, and he knows who walks away and who doesn't. A week from now, his meager possessions will be scattered, a parole officer will make a check mark before closing a file, and a new boarder with the same face will attempt to sleep in the place where he couldn't. Not a soul existing will mark his time here, his monument a John Doe tag in the morgue if he's lucky. But one soul, beyond existence, he's certain has witnessed. Through the regret, through the failures and the days gone by, the wounds that bleed in places where no one can see, he's got something to hold on to, and today, it'll do.

Before he raises the shades, Milton closes his eyes and meets the

gaze of a beautiful woman in a blue dress who has eyes heavy with a life outside of comprehension and sings like someone beyond the angels.

"Some other time, kid."

He walks out into the sunlight, and in thirty seconds, he's gone from view.

Instance	Date	Summary	Selected Transcript
SCP-1229-37	12/16/2013	Transmission depicts Ms. Neal singing a song while standing on a stage, accompanied by piano. Original transmission appears to be 5 minutes and 38 seconds in length; however, an additional 10 seconds of footage are present at the end in an alternate version recovered from the file-sharing service on 12/22/2013. To date, this is the only observed instance to manifest in multiple versions.	*Researcher's Note: Original song by Ms. Neal is in French, and has been translated into English by research staff.* "<No matter what's waiting/ When the future is in ruins/ And the water's all gone/ Through the rain on the window/ No one sees no one/ Before night moves us on/ But I'll remember you/ Yes I'll remember you>"

Land of Plenty

Everything had gone by so fast, just as Priscilla preferred. It gave her little time to sit and reflect on what had happened. How did people react when faced with world-shattering trauma, irrevocably changing their lives forever? Priss had gone to her sister and gotten a new job. Was that appropriate? Was that what you were supposed to do when you lost everything but the clothes on you and the quiet friend who'd saved you?

Seated in the back of the vehicle, she had plenty of time to let those thoughts infest her. The weight of it all pressing down on her was starting to make her crack. Even as her face remained expressionless, she felt her face start to burn, and her vision start to blur.

"Hey…" Frank noticed, catching on quickly that she was starting to lose it, "Hey, come on. You're gonna be okay, alright?"

Priss brought a hand up, pressing her knuckles into her eyes and turning away. A violent ripple of emotion twisted her guts, making her shudder and wretch before quickly collecting herself. As slowly as it had crept over her, it faded away.

"What are Nazis, Frank?" Priss asked suddenly.

"You don't have Nazis where you come from?" He asked incredulously. At her silence, he went on, "Bad bunch, them. Came around in Germany in the 1930s, led by a guy named Adolf Hitler. They were really into white supremacy, touting the 'Aryan race' as ideal, and had a particularly strong hate for the Jews. They started a war with pretty much every other superpower in the world, and would've taken us all down if they'd just listened to that most basic of military principles; divide and conquer."

"They started a war and the Kaiser just went along with it?"

"What Kaiser?"

"You don't have Kaisers either?" Her voice started to warble. Every little difference seemed to compound on her, like flecks of mud smearing on a wall, spelling out in messy brown letters 'You don't belong here.'

"I'm not really an expert of history, so I don't know… Pretty sure the Kaiser stopped being a Kaiser after World War I. Probably kept the title, but as far as I remember from history class, they started electing presidents between the wars."

Priss found her breath coming more easily. Talking like this helped, she realized, "Where I come from, the first World War didn't really technically end… it just faded away as both sides started signing ceasefire agreements for longer and longer periods. Main problem was the Qing… they were eating away at Russia and Central Asia, so Europe just started losing focus on fighting each other as Russia threatened to collapse. Then the Japanese invaded the Qing, and suddenly all of us were taking sides again in a new war."

Frank snorted, "Sounds familiar enough. Then again, people are people, no matter what universe they come from."

Priss clenched her jaw tightly, losing all taste for further conversation.

"Hey!"

People were starting to call her that. It was easier than "Dodger", or "Spiffy".

"Hey-Hey girly!"

Dodger turned, finding a little boy coming up behind her.

"You pretty. Pretty girl should have pretty things," He extended a little hand out to her, imploring her to take it. She did, thinking it was just a friendly handshake. The boy slipped her a little golden bracelet.

"I don't have any money."

The boy didn't say a word, calmly taking it back, and walking away.

The whole village bustled. People looked happy and moderately healthy. A perfectly normal sight in any relatively stable east African village with an NGO operating nearby. The difference here was that people were looking well-fed.

Shut your racism, she thought to herself. But it still stuck out horribly—people in a poor African village were looking absolutely plump all over. Some had even dropped by the hospital with severe stomach pains, nausea, and heart troubles. Diagnosis: re-feeding syndrome.

They'd been starving for weeks. Suddenly they were stuffing their faces.

They didn't bother hiding it, either. It was a gift from Allah, as far as they were concerned, and an attraction—an opportunity to shill shit to curious foreigners, and sell food to hungry people from other villages. At the center of the village, a massive circle of blood was surrounded by short fences made of wire and cloths. A lion lay at the center of the blot, beige fur painted brown and red. It was a big male, with a healthy mane and thick limbs. It lay on its side, eyes half-closed, purring sedately, as its intestines were being pulled out and chopped like individual sausages, and cooked on the spot on a great grill. Other animals were around it as well; a wildebeest, two fat buffalo, and a line of dogs that had been shaved and hosed down, likely to hide their infestation of mange and scabies. All were bloody and missing chunks of meat.

"People are eating it fine?" She asked Yasir, "No problems, no side effects?"

Yasir nodded to the grill, "As long as it is cooked thoroughly, it is fine. Some people ate it raw. They died."

"How?"

"Suicide. Or killed by their neighbors, self defense, yes? They attack their neighbors because they want to be killed by the neighbors.

They call this 'suicide by cop' in the Law-eight-Order."

"Law-eight-Order?"

"A TV show, yes? American. Law, number 8, then Order."

"That's an ampersand. It stands for the word 'and'. Law *and* Order But yes, I know what you mean."

Dodger put a hand on her face, covering one eye and rubbing it reassuringly. The other had to watch. She wanted just one instant of normalcy. Just one quick flash of the lion's eyes widening, of it yowling in pain, anger, anything other than sedate pleasure. Anything just to make it fit in with what should have been.

It did not yowl, it did not roar, or snarl, or whimper. It closed its eyes and started to sleep. Some people nearby froze and watched. Had the beast breathed its last? Was it finally going to die? Then its tail flicked, and it farted noisily. The people near it laughed, and went back to cooking up its organs.

"The people who cut themselves, how did they do it?"

Yasir said something in Arabic, then pointed to the lion and the wildebeests near it, "Just like that. They lay down happily, and cut themselves open."

"But did they die? The animals are doing that and apparently not dying."

He shrugged, "I don't know. The people cut themselves open and die. The animals are cut open and do not die."

Dodger was already putting it all together in her mind, visualizing the food chain in action, as the small animals offered themselves to the bigger ones, and the big ones wandered into villages to offer themselves to the bigger ones still. If they regenerated their flesh and organs, it meant their organs would have to be removed first. The cat she'd seen yesterday had had its guts spilling out of it, caked in dust, while other parts of it were regenerating.

And she still had to report to "Do-Your-Best" Lindsberg. And to

Kone.

"A theory… The people who ate the raw meat and cut themselves open died because no one would eat their flesh. The animals who do it have their flesh eaten, and the flesh grows back."

Yasir was starting to look queasy, the horror of it all starting to get to him, "Meaning the meat is infected with something?"

"Maybe…" People were eating the cooked meat fine; if the meat was infected with something, fire could handle it well enough, "Or maybe the meat starts to die, and rots if it isn't cut out quickly enough. Necrotic flesh gets infected, the person dies. Maybe the animals know this, and that's why they want us to keep cutting them open and eating their flesh. Easy to see it as a gift from Allah."

"I do not care what these people say, this is not a gift from Allah," Yasir turned away from the lion, "God did not cause this. You did."

Before she could respond, he added on, "I am not blaming you, or the Charitable Foundation. But something has gone wrong and I am certain you are the cause. This way, hopefully, you can fix this. I do not know how I can help more."

Dodger tilted her head slightly, groaning to herself in frustration, "Just keep people coming to the hospital. Especially people who've been eating from these animals." She pursed her lips, and started to turn away, "Just in case."

Priss pursed her lips, looking at the dimly lit room around her. More like a tunnel, but it was tall enough for her to stand atop Frank's shoulders with enough room to spare. The massive reservoir was in the room behind them.

"Don't worry, we've got the suits," Frank assured her, prodding at the Level-C hazmat suit the two of them wore.

She looked down at the Anabasis, worried about it getting sick from something brought in. She caught herself again—*it's not alive, you idiot.*

She knelt down, starting to adjust the knobs on the device. The hazmat suits were an unnecessary precaution; she'd used this thing plenty of times before without getting infected with anything. Given that it "merged" with living counterparts here, it wasn't likely to churn out something that would be so utterly foreign that it would spread magic smallpox around the world in a month.

Frank seemed to be reading her mind, "Wrong calculation and you might end up dumping a few tons of boiling hot water down on us. Germ-free, but probably best not to get caught with our pants down. Remember: we want water. Doesn't matter if it has heavy metals, rare earths or six-meter long tube worms on it, the hippo will take care of it. Just get us water, and all of this will be worth it, okay?"

That made sense. Then she realized that meant the Foundation-that-Was apparently didn't care if she accidentally killed herself in testing, either.

She pulled the lever, feeling it give way as if it had snapped off. The Anabasis came on, pouring its anemic light out over its selected area. Nothing appeared to happen.

"Try it again?" Frank suggested.

She pulled the lever again, and waited. This time she saw something. "Oh, fuck."

"What is it?"

She got up, heading over to the center of the room. Frank followed, crouching down beside her. Blades of grass poked out of the ceramic tile floor, some seeming to occupy cracks and small spaces, others seemingly merged with the tile itself.

"Don't worry, Locke, the tiles will grow back. Still… a little higher next time." Frank suggested.

"You're not helping," Priss complained, heading back over to the device.

She aimed it higher, adjusting the height setting while leaving the others the same. This time a long patch of grass filled a quarter of

the room. No sound, no shimmering of the air, no phasing into being or dramatic entry. The room was all ceramic tiles, then quick as a frame of video, grass was in front of them.

"At least the gardener can enjoy the AC while mowing the indoor lawn."

The grass was thick and unruly, nothing like a well-kept lawn. She could easily get her foot stuck in the matted mess of roots, and probably have a snake slither by and squeeze her ankle.

"Look," She pointed, crouching down again. She indicated the tiling, just at the edge of the grass. It was a few inches higher in elevation.

"So it's replaced the tiles as well?" Frank scooted closer, pressing his fingers along the edge of the tile. It didn't feel like a smooth cut, but more like a natural break. The edges were jagged, and some of the tiles had cracked independent of the sudden change.

"Good thing there's nothing below us, then. I'd hate to have to explain to anyone downstairs how they got pelted in the face with dirt and grass and whatever else is in this. Where is this from, anyway?"

Priss pulled a stalk of grass out, clean from its root, "It should be native. From another timeline. Given that we're underground, that timeline's probably had an entirely different geological history. Lower elevation."

"That's gonna be a problem, is it? For filling the reservoir?"

She huffed a sigh, and started calculating in her head. Right away the numbers mashed into an incoherent mess. Getting it precise would be a problem. She was mostly just concerned with getting pure water in. Then she stopped herself, realizing she didn't need to fill it all at once, but could dump in water from the same spot over and over.

"No. If I find an aquifer, I can just adjust the height, and start bringing it in overhead."

"Got it. You can always settle on seawater, too," Frank took several

samples of grass, sealing them in a plastic bag, "Let's do a few more tests for the Hippo's sake, then head on out of here before we start warping in wild dinosaur-riding lions or some other crazy thing."

The creature was asleep as they woke it — a fact it didn't enjoy particularly, as sleep allowed it to speak with its companions from the great beyond, the age-long members of the Center for Transcendental and Eschatological Research. It was the dead of the night in that tiny corner of their world, and they were moving it from the vehicle they had tugged its tank in.

It listened to them carefully.

There was the woman of the mean voice that had waken up the day when they moved. She felt exhausted. She hadn't been sleeping well. The creature knew why that was and… yes, she carried the *thing* in a backpack. But she was not alone.

There was the grey man that had been lifted by Color around him. It might had a pure, immutable soul, but the creature could not discern it; guilt defined him. Shame defined him.

There was one with a pure, immutable soul. That soul sang and grew and changed and bloomed, and the creature wished it could know more about him.

There was one with a pure, immutable soul. That soul waved as a long cascade of green silk across the horizon; the laughing woman, who was not laughing.

There was the one that had been taking care of it. He was sad and oh so very lonely in his sadness. He could not cry any more.

There was one more with a pure, immutable soul. That soul had fruits, ideas ripe for the taking, dreams light as balloons that lifted him out of its body.

And then there was its own self. It had a pure, naked, immutable soul. It shined with the strength of a thousand minds. It had cast away what it had been — body, form, memory — when it was alive

to become this. It was a soul, distilled ego, almost pristine I.

So its thoughts went as they moved it into the strange and comfortable not-building, matter a shadow for its strange consciousness; the not-building was special, too, for its walls and floors were as strings of bright gems mounted inside them. They sang a tale it liked: *seek the faults, seek the faults, seek the trash, seek the trash, help the people, help the people, eat dirt, make stone, eat scum, make glass, eat waste, make iron-* It went on and on and sounded happy. Had it had the time to talk to them, it would have. They seemed to have a very satisfying life.

The kind of life it wanted.

And it was taken down, the tank barely fitting inside the tight fit of the hole, several ropes tense all around it. One of those pulling to let it slide down let go of the hefty load, and the rest had to let go too so they would not be hurt. The tank broke as it crashed against the ground, but the creature itself waded the dry concrete with the water that was within and fell twelve meters down.

Into the water.

And then it began to cleanse.

Joyful, it thought -*cleanse the water, seek the impurities, seek the blemishes, cleanse the water, make it clear, make it salty?, no, make it flavorless, make it grey?, no, make it pearl?, no, make it transparent, make it so it does not taste to them, so it does not harm them, help the people-*

It would try to talk to the strings of light surrounding the water later. They would be interesting friends.

The creature's tendrils grew and grew, slowly filling the water. It took as much blemish as it found; and much blemish was taken. As it reached the walls of its new home, its comfy tank now lost forever, it heard a ruckus over it. The creature listened to it.

The people checked on it, the laughing one laughing again, the brothers shaking hands, the sad one relieved, the grey one talking to

the mean one… concerned? They all left but the mean one, who took the *thing* out of her bag.

The creature stared at them. It did not like them. It had grown an eon as a soul un-carnate, and was wise. Even if it had made its new brain for a higher purpose than to worry pointlessly, everything it, the soul, knew, was that they did not belong.

Then the mean one started pulling on the lever. It tried to stop them, the mean one and the *thing*. It knew, with sad certainty, the body it was in would not be strong enough. It was going to happen — again.

Priss stared at the Anabasis. No matter how much she kept pulling the lever, it seemed to have broken down. At best, dust would drop into the cavernous space targeted by the device. The Hippo — not a hippo — was wading in the shallow water, watching her intently.

"What did you say?" She asked no one in particular. As soon as the words were leaving her mouth, she had forgotten who she was talking to, if not herself.

The Anabasis didn't even look remotely human. The core of it looked like a leaf blower without the long tube for precise blowing, with knobs, text, and a lever that looked a century or two out of date. She couldn't imagine thinking she had been talking to it. It had to be stress.

Whoever had said it, they had the intended effect—Priss was suddenly very much aware that she was alone and unwelcome, in this country, in this world. The place was probably bugged.

"Hey guys," She waved to nothing in particular, as if a camera were pointed straight at her face. Then she gave the Anabasis another strong pull of the lever. Finally, it started to work. A long cube of brownish water materialized over the reservoir before dropping with a firm splash into the shallow tank, the echo lingering in the large room. The Hippo just stared at her.

"Come on. Eat dirt. Stop staring at me. You're supposed to be blind."

The hippo kept staring. She pulled the lever again, bringing in another cylindrical mass of water. Then again. And again.

The hippo wasn't dead— it waded in the water, keeping up with the steadily rising water level. But it kept just staring at her. You don't belong here, it seemed to be saying.

Priss fumed, and flung her notepad at the Hippo. It hit the creature just behind the head, prompting it to quiver, and start to move, emanating a deep whining sound from it. Priss thought it sounded like "mooootherfuckeeeeerrrrrrr…"

"Who you calling 'motherfucker', motherfucker?" She snapped back at it. Immediately she felt stupid for shouting at it. Most likely she had just imagined it saying that. How could it manage syllables in a single monotonous drone?

It was starting to suck in the water, setting to its work cleaning the water. Hopefully it would be able to handle any unusual microbes or bacteria in the water. If not, they'd have to boil it all, and probably return the Hippo. It seemed not to notice her anymore, happy to float about, absorbing like a sponge and swelling with water. A second later, it became smaller, as bubbles emerged from under its stumpy legs.

Priss lowered her head, sighing heavily. She pulled her legs in to herself and rested her head on her knees, one hand on the lever, cranking it back again and again, continuing to fill the reservoir. She was starting to lose feeling in her arm, the ache from continuously cranking starting to ease, when the Hippo 'spoke' again, "looooooooooooook…"

She lifted her head, and her stomach clenched. Something was in the water. It had come in with the water. The Hippo backed away, as the creature emerged from the brown depth.

It looked like a man, covered in fur, with hands like a badger or a bear. Its chest was bare, looking like the bottom of a turtle's shell. Its head was the most off-putting, being little more than a hairless oval, with two big black ovals stacked one atop the other. The upper one looked like it could have been an eye. The creature stared at her

and she stared back, both unmoving. Both scared.

She broke the silence first, not knowing what else to say when confronted by such an alien creature, "Get out of here!"

To her surprise, it started to swim towards her in a hurry. *That's it, I'm dead,* she thought. She'd been expecting Anabasis to bring in some kind of boogin or cloud of poison gas to instantly kill her, like a warning from God to stop dicking with time and space. The creature hoisted itself up out of the water, pulling its weight up onto the central platform. It took a moment to look around, before hopping up onto the ladder and climbing towards the exit.

The Hippo went back to gently gliding through the water. Priss started to sob quietly.

« Best as it Gets | Hub | Burden of Humanity »

Last Days at Camp

"All right, Campers! Who hasn't fed Big Bear yet? We can't go to bed until Big Bear's nice and full!" At the back of the dining hall, a shy little girl held up her hand. She hadn't said a word since she had arrived at Camp Krakkow, and had spent all dinner looking at her plate. Counselor Dan simply smiled at her. "And what's your name little lady?"

"Mary."

"Well, step on up, Mary! Is this your first time at Camp Krakkow?"

Mary nodded, stepping forward and standing in front of Big Bear, an ornate carving of a grizzly with an open mouth.

"There's a special reason we feed Big Bear every night, Mary. He keeps the camp safe from bad things in the woods. So, whaddaya say?" Counselor Dan stepped aside, handing Mary a small bit of steak.

Mary, standing on her tippy-toes, put the steak into Big Bear's mouth. "Hello, Big Bear." The little girl stepped back, and the carving closed its mouth, its eyes lighting up. Mary gasped. Big Bear was magic…

"All right campers," Counselor Dan said, "The bad things in the woods can't get us now! You're all safe to run around camp at dark, but don't let us catch you!" The campers cheered.

Mary couldn't sleep. She missed her mom and dad, and woke up crying. Why was she here? She knew she asked, but she didn't know she'd be so homesick… and she needed to go to the bathroom.

She stepped outside of the girl's cabin quietly, and onto the lantern-

lit walk to the toilet. She was glad Big Bear was watching over the camp; it was scary at night, but the lights and Big Bear made it not so scary.

After she came out of the restroom, she saw something near the path. It was the chainsaw man, from the movie her brother made her watch before she came here, but chainsaw man wasn't real it was just a movie. "Mommy…"

Big Bear came out of nowhere and ate the chainsaw man right up. He then walked with Mary back to the cabin.

Mary woke up just then, still in her bed. She didn't need to use the bathroom, and realized that she had been dreaming. She didn't remember what the dream was about by the time the morning came.

Tuesday was Arts and Crafts. They were supposed to help decorate Big Bear, make him scarier so the bad things wouldn't hurt the camp. She knew it was all pretend, but it was still fun. She got to paint a big scary face on Big Bear's chest, and gave him a medal that said "Best Bear Ever".

Camp wasn't so bad, that night. She slept and dreamed that she was with Big Bear, riding him through the forest and helping him fight the bad things.

Wednesday was a nature walk. It was fun. She found a big footprint that her camp book said was a Bear Track! "Look counselor Dan, look! It's one of Big Bear's!"

"Right you are, Mary! Right you are." He pointed to another footprint next to it, this one a triangle. "Looks like he was going after a bad thing. I hope he got it." Counselor Dan showed them about how to hide yourself from bad bears that weren't Big Bear.

On Thursday, Mary slept. At least, she thought she slept; she couldn't remember doing anything.

Big Bear was gone. Nobody knew what happened. He had just… gone. The counselors said they had called the police, and Counselor Dan was scared of something. Mary didn't know why; it was all pretend. The bad things weren't real.

Counselor Dan did a magic trick after dinner, and made himself fly; it wasn't a very good trick, though. Nobody was around to see it, and you could see him hanging by the rope.

The other counselors said that Counselor Dan had hurt himself doing his trick and had to go home, now. They would be sending the campers home tomorrow.

"I'm here at Camp Krakkow, where dozens of parents arrived this morning to a gruesome sight. Over 50 people are believed to be dead, most of them children. Parents arrived here to pick up their children early after a camp counselor reportedly died of unknown circumstances. The FBI is investigating, as are local police, who refuse to disclose any details, except for the absence of the camp's mascot 'Big Bear', a statue kept in the dining hall. There's a truck pulling up now from the Southern Camping Partnership, which recently purchased Camp Krakkow… Sir? Sir! Wendy Dolittle, Channel 4 News, can we get a comment?"

|Hub|

Audio Logs: Last Man Standing

[[Accessing Site 23 Logs.]]
[[/ *DATABASE CORRUPTED* /]]
[[Identifying and playing most recent playable Audio Logs.]]

[[Log: XC/CC/????-ERROR: DATE LOG CORRUPTED]]
[[Original Login: Kensington, Jacob; Level 2 Clearance]]
[[Access Point: [/ *DATA RESTRICTED* /]]]
[[Audio Log Transcript: Begin]]

[Long Pause]

Imagine you work for a secret foundation, one whose sole purpose for existence is to secure, contain, and protect any and all unusual objects or creatures - supernatural, extraterrestrial, or otherwise.

They have hundreds of those objects: some are harmless and safe, while others can mutate your body into a machine and dissolve your mind into a soul-less husk of your former self. Still others can cause wide-spread paranoia, fear, anger, and hallucinations. There are even a few that can cause the Earth itself to shatter into millions of shards of rock, and turn all humans into the undead. This secret foundation holds them all in containment to protect the billions of souls resting on the Earth.

And imagine you are tasked with studying, analyzing, and defending those objects, all without getting you, your colleagues, or civilians killed.

No pressure, right?

[Nervous chuckling]

Well, that's what I did, day in and day out, putting myself in danger for humanity. It may seem dangerous, and it was, but it was fun, paid well, and I worked with some of the most bad-ass people you

could ever meet…emphasis on the past tense, sadly.

Now imagine something different. Imagine if the specimens were all unleashed.

Every.

Single.

One.

In one day, billions would die from the chaos that would ensue. Countless other millions would be transformed into grotesque creatures, the likes of which the world has not seen for centuries. The hundreds of thousands who "survived" would find themselves in a world completely distorted and undistinguished from the bright, green and blue world they had just experienced a day ago.

Now you are starting to realize something, aren't you? This isn't hypothetical. After all, you're living the nightmare.

And it's all because of us. Because of our failures.

[Long pause]

You know how it is now. A few survivor sites, mainly at secured military sites or small farmsteads around the world. Some have even managed to take over old Foundation sites. They're safer now, what with all of the objects either out causing chaos or destroyed. I've been sitting here, at Site 23, alone. Hell, no harm in revealing where I am. It's not like anyone who wants me dead will know where Site 23 actually is.

I'm rambling, now, aren't I? I wouldn't be surprised. I think I may, *may*, be starting to go a little crazy. These logs are the only things keeping me sane. Sane. Sanity. Funny word, that. I know I'm losing my grip on my own sanity and coherence, after half a decade of self-imposed exile. Or quarantine. Whichever makes more sense.

Anyways, if you're reading this, I am probably dead. It only took me…five years to die? Yeah. Five years. Five long, lonely years. I might as well try to give you a history of what happened to the world

five years ago. If I can remember…

[Pause]

That's the thing, though. I don't remember what happened. I spent every waking moment trying to figure out how every single artifact or contained creature escaped to destroy the world. No reason makes sense. Was it an inside job? A containment breach? War? Catastrophic failure of safety systems and the nuclear failsafes? It must be some combination of the reasons, but…I can't speak for any of the other sites. Site 19…Site 21…Site 7…

[Pause with soft sighs]

You know how it feels to watch the world die?

Of course you wouldn't. No one would. And you would be lucky. You wouldn't have to see people ripped apart by lizard-like monstrosities. You wouldn't have to see entire cities turn into machines, with the people turning into freak robots with no sense of humanity. That's what happened to London…and New York City…and…god knows how many other cities.

I watched as Washington D.C. was blown off the map by a nuclear missile.

I watched as the entire Midwestern United States turn into **[Unintelligible]** and turn grey and orange from the ashes and fire.

That's all I was able to do. Watch. Wait. Until that one day I found-

[[ERROR: DATA CORRUPTED. CONTINUING FROM NEXT AVAILABLE POSITION]]

-list of my colleagues who didn't make it. I made a list as I tried to track them all down. Oh god…There's so many…

[Sobs]

Most of the administrators are gone…Doctor…Doctor **[Unintelligible]** Clef…Doctor Agatha Rights…Doctor Jack Bright… Doctor Snorlison. Doctor Simon Glass…

[[ERROR: DATA CORRUPTED. CONTINUING FROM NEXT AVAILABLE POSITION]]

…Doctor Heiden…Doctor Aura…Doctor Mackenzie…Agent Strelnikov…Mr. Avery Cates…Doctor Winters…Doctor Light…Agent Zaeyde…

[[ERROR: DATA CORRUPTED. CONTINUING FROM NEXT AVAILABLE POSITION]]
…and Agent Harper. That's the last one…probably…

[Brief Pause]

I think I may be last one alive. The last one who remembers what we did, what we tried to do for the World.

I don't think this will be kept safe for nearly long enough, but I might as well try. To anyone who finds this, know that I have done my duty. I have tried to make things right from here. I will return one day to make things right. I will return, with or without my colleagues.

I have no illusions ahead of me. I will most likely die before I ever make it back, but at least I'll be with the people I worked with if I do. People who I know and feel safer with.

So…this is it.

This has been Dr. Jacob Kensington, Robotics Expert and Staff Researcher at Site 23, last known Foundation researcher still alive.

Good bye.

[[End Log]]

Last Meetings

As he placed the last of his possessions in a box, an elderly man with a walnut cane gave one last look around the room. His name was Dr. Zachary Johnson and the office he had worked in for the last 35 years was now empty, save for the furniture he had been given by the Foundation. It had been a good run while it had lasted. He had been the primary investigator on six items and had been a major contributor to at least twelve others. But alas, it was time to retire, and with a melancholy smile Dr. Johnson turned off the lights in his little sandbox and stepped out into the adjoining lab.

As soon as he had entered, Johnson's ears were immediately treated to frantic mumbling, the source being a man at a desk in the corner rapidly sifting through paperwork. This man's name was Jacob Conwell, and he had been Johnson's assistant for the last three years. Johnson quietly chuckled to himself as the man shuffled and reshuffled through stacks of papers, his ramblings becoming more and more disjointed as time went on. Eventually, Johnson gave a small cough, Conwell freezing and looking up from his paperwork only to have his face drain of color when he saw Johnson's smiling face.

"Dr. Johnson, I'm sorry to say that I won't have those last few files ready in time. I'm still waiting on **Clayton** to email me that transcript, and…" Conwell nervously sputtered his words, stopping only when Johnson held up his hand for silence.

"It's quite all right." Johnson said with a smile. He then walked over to the desk and quickly glanced over several folders that had already been neatly set aside. "Everything else is squared away though, I hope?"

"Of course," Johnson's assistant replied with a nod.

"Excellent." Johnson then looked around the room. He chuckled to himself as he made a circular gesture with his cane. "I've been

informed that they are handing the lab over to you for continued research on 1360-1. Looks like you're king of the castle now." Johnson watched as Conwell frowned.

"So I was told…"

"You've done a good job so far," Johnson said as he patted his assistant on the shoulder, "and like I said, I imagine you'll continue to do a good job in the future. I've taught you everything I know and given enough time I imagine you'll be able to get **1360** talking again. I don't think there is anyone more suited to the job."

"Thank you. I appreciate that Dr. Johnson." Conwell held out his hand, which Johnson shook enthusiastically.

"It was a pleasure to work for you."

Johnson nodded in agreement. He was going to miss his lab, almost as much as would miss working with his assistants. Johnson then glanced at his watch and made a gesture towards the door.

"Shall we head to the party then?"

"I think I safely speak for everyone here when I say that we appreciate your service to the Foundation, Dr. Johnson, and that Site-19 will not be the same without you."
The lunchroom filled with applause as Dr. Gregg Collins finished his speech. Shortly thereafter the numerous personnel who had come for the cake and refreshments returned to their individual conversations. Every now and then one would of them would come up and congratulate him on his retirement, but for the most part, Johnson idled away at his own table with Conwell as he casually listened in on the chat that filled the room.

Truth be told, most of the individuals that Johnson had considered his friends had long vanished from the Foundation, either dead, retired or both. Now Site-19 was filled with new faces, and Johnson couldn't help but chuckle to himself for how old it made him feel.

"Something funny?" Collins asked as he approached the table and

took a seat.

“The day finally came,” Johnson replied. “I honestly thought I would have been killed long ago.”

“We certainly had our close calls,” Collins said with a grin, “I hate to see you go. We had so many adventures.”

Johnson had worked with Collins on five collaborated projects. To his knowledge, those objects that were not being reassigned to his assistant were to be assigned to him.

“You’ll have plenty of tales of your own by the time you retire,” Johnson smirked. “Exciting ones too, considering how you won’t have me around to pull your ass out of the fire.” The two men laughed quietly, but before long fell silent.

“Is Freemont going to play ball?” Collins asked. His expression had become solemn.

“She is.” Johnson said with a sad sigh. “I had to call in every favor I had left, but I’ve been allowed one last ten minute ‘psychological health’ visit. You’ll look after him when I’m gone won’t you?”

“Of course.” Collins nodded in agreement. He then gave a quick look around. Now that the cake and refreshments were gone the party was already starting to wind down. “I don’t think you’re needed here any longer if you’d like to get that out of the way.”

Johnson gave a small smile and nodded. Without another word the two men shook hands and Johnson departed.

Site-19 humanoid containment cells were not known for their comfort, especially the one in which **Dr. Harold Thompson** was contained. Four gray walls, a cot, a sink, a toilet, and the knowledge that someone was watching you from the other side of a one-way mirror embedded in the wall by the door. Harold looked himself over in this mirror as he sat on the cot. The dark rings around his eyes suggested he had not slept for several years.

“Dr. Thompson, please put your gloves back on and remain on the

cot," said the voice of a security agent over the intercom. Harold looked down at his now upturned hands. Following the accidental release and inhalation of an unknown particulate from an experimental object Harold had been working on, any time he touched living biological tissue caused it to turn into solid marble. Reluctantly, Harold hid his deadly mitts in a pair of leather gloves he had been given. Shortly thereafter, the cell door opened and an elderly man with a walnut cane slowly entered. As he took a seat at Harold's desk and turned with a small smile.

"It's been a while, Zach."

"It sure has," Johnson agreed, watching as Harold looked nervously at the one-way mirror and then back to him. Johnson gave a sad nod. Dr. Freemont, the researcher in charge of Harold's object file, was watching their every move.

"How's your new assistant treating you?" Harold inquired. Before he had been given his own assignments, Harold had worked with Dr. Johnson for close to five years. It had been a thoroughly enjoyable experience.

"Well, he's not you and he's a bit of a pest at times, but he gets the job done at the end of the day," Johnson replied.

"Ah," Harold mumbled. A silence fell over the room. "I heard they threw you a great retirement party. I wish I could have been there."

"I do too." Johnson's smile began to fade. He then turned his attention to several photographs that lined the top shelf of the book case, each depicting the same woman and boy at various ages before ending with a picture of the boy's wedding day. "Lisa says that Jack and Elizabeth are trying to have a baby."

"Is that so?" Harold said softly. Johnson knew he had always wanted to be a grandfather. "I'm sure Lisa will make a fantastic grandmother."

"She still misses you terribly, you know?" Johnson added. "Jack too. Every time I see them the conversation always ends up on you."

Harold didn't respond, but rather gave a small melancholy smile as he gazed at the floor.

"You'll still keep an eye on them, won't you?" He asked.

"As often as I can." Johnson replied. "I've had Collins promise to relay any new photos to you."

Harold nodded in appreciation. The two men once again fell silent. Before long Johnson stood and made his way towards the door.

"Thank you for everything you've done for me over the years, Zach. I'd hug you if I could." Harold stood. His smile morphed into a small regretful frown.

"I appreciate that," Johnson said and smiled.

Quietly Johnson exited, turning to give a small nod on his way out the door. Without another word Dr. Johnson grabbed his box of personal items and left Site-19 forever.

Last Mission of Zeus-4

Recovery Log Transcript
Date: / /
Recovery Team: Mobile Task Force Zeus-4 "Dire Thunder"
Subject: Site-22
Team Lead: Alpha
Team Members: Omega, Gamma, Delta
Abstract: After Site-22 suffered several containment breaches, MTF Zeus-4 were sent in to find and retrieve critical data and, if possible, extract any remaining personnel before the onsite nuke was detonated. However, the mission was a failure, and the team was prevented from even entering the site. Included below is their final transmission before disbanding.

Deployment Manager aka SiteCommand: Members of MTF Zeus-4 check in.

Alpha: Alpha checking in, over.

Gamma: Gamma checking in, over.

Omega: Gamma, please be advised that we should be doing this in numerical order, over.

Gamma: Command, please advise Omega that it really doesn't matter in what order we check in, over.

SiteCommand: Jeremy, it really doesn't matter what order you guys sound off in.

Omega: Command, please advise as to the identity of this "Jeremy" individual. I am Agent-

Omega can be heard mimicking the sound of static.

Omega: -of MTF Zeus-4, decorated hero of-

Alpha: Thank you, Omega, we can see that your comms are working. Team should continue to check in, over.

Silence for five seconds.

Command: Luke, this is you.

Delta: Oh, okay! Sorry guys. My name is Luke, this is my first time at the table, and-

Omega: Delta, please simply check your comm system and refrain from giving out classified information such as your name, over.

Delta: What?

Alpha: Just say you're checking in, and follow it with the word 'over' so we know we got the end of your transmission.

Delta: This is Luke checking in.

Another awkward pause.

Alpha: Over.

Delta: Right! Over.

Alpha: Okay, let's get a move on. Permission to proceed, Command, over.

Command: Permission granted, Alpha. Here's the situation: following numerous containment breaches from Euclid- and Keter-class SCPs, Site-22 has been compromised. The on-site nuke is set to go off in t-minus thirty minutes, vaporizing everything within a three kilometer radius. Before that happens, O5-7 has authorized one final mission to go inside to retrieve Dr. Redacted and escort her safely to-

Omega: Please clarify, Command. I'm unfamiliar with any personnel at any site under the name 'Dr. Redacted',

over.

Command: That's what it says in the file, Omega. I'm just reading you the briefing.

Omega: I'm just not sure that's the doctor's actual name, Command. Over.

Alpha: Objection noted, Omega. Please allow Command to continue the brief, over.

Gamma: Afraid I'm gonna have to side with Omega on this one, Cap, dirty as it feels. Hearing someone referred to as 'Dr. Redacted' just doesn't sound right.

Delta: You forgot to say 'over', Clair.

Sound of Gamma sighing heavily through her nose.

Gamma: Over.

Delta: Actually, now that I think of it, how are we supposed to recover this doctor if we're not allowed to know her name? Are we supposed to just grab the first living person we run into? Is she the only female doctor working at this site?

Alpha: Newbie brings up a good point, Command. We'll need a way to identify the target if we stand any chance of a successful extraction.

Command: Fine. Just let me find something you can work with and declassify it.

Radio silence. Thirteen seconds later, the sound of rustling papers can be heard. Alpha clears his throat.

Command: Doctor Allison Taylor can be identified by the wine-colored birthmark on her neck.

Gamma: And probably also by a nametag that reads 'Dr. Alison Taylor'.

Delta: Over.

Alpha: Is that the entirety of the briefing, over?

Command: That's all the relevant bits. You're to enter Site-22 and retrieve Dr. Taylor, as well as any information and other survivors you might encounter.

Omega: Any information on what skips we can expect to encounter at Site-22, over?

Alpha: We've got a list of all the entities contained within the site and their SCP designations. Be advised that this may not include unauthorized transfers.

Command: Come on, give me a break. I promised not to pull the 'unauthorized transfer' thing on you guys again, and I meant it. I'm sticking to the containment list you have access to, and that's it.

Gamma: Should be fair enough, as long as none of us take the opportunity to metagame.

Delta: What does that mean, over?

Gamma: It means googling the skips in question and building your character with a ton of bullshit feats and equipment specifically designed to show the rest of us up and ruin the fun.

Omega: I don't understand what you're hinting at, Gamma. Also don't forget to follow each transmission with the word 'over', over.

Gamma: Goddammit, Jeremy, we're sitting three feet away from each other! You can drop the 'over' thing!

Omega: Gamma, please be advised that the Foundation uses the metric sys-

Loud thumping noises can be heard alongside the scratching of a chair against carpet. Unintelligible

arguing between Gamma and Omega ensues, and Gamma's voice grows quieter before disappearing. Omega's voice can be heard following a similar pattern.

Delta: Clair? Jeremy? Are you coming back, over?

Alpha: I think that's a wash, newbie. Better luck next time.

Command: We'll try again next week. Hopefully then we'll be able to get past the mission briefing and actually start playing. Thanks for coming over anyway. There's still pizza on the dryer if you want some.

More chairs can be heard shuffling, then muffled conversation between Alpha, Delta, and Command. At this point, audio cuts out entirely.

Last One to Die

> *"Do you have any idea how mind-numbingly pointless this is?"*

Yeah, I said.

> *"Why do you keep doing it?"*

Rage. Hate. It's an incredible high.

> *"This isn't about how* you *feel. 'It's about the human race.' Wasn't it you constantly spouting that trash?"*

Yeah.

> *"Then why are you helping build weapons to kill people?"*

`Everyone is dying`. There won't be any more babies to replace us. I figure, if there are aliens out there who find our dead world, by the time they get here they won't have anything to sift through but ruins, so they can say "Look how mighty these people were! Look how intelligent and full of potential! And they squandered it all away, done in by their own selfish need for individual power, unable to set aside their differences and work together!"

And it's a lie; a lie that abides because the truth is too complicated to be found in bones and shattered concrete. How do you even explain to another human across the centuries without using words, or pictures, or feelings?

We didn't kill ourselves; they did. Maybe they didn't know any better, but seeing as we make contact with them, and we get fucked and they keep on living and laughing and making babies… maybe they really were at fault. In their carelessness and arrogance, they destroyed us.

Whether they meant it or not, they can't just wipe their hands clean

and move on to the next curiosity. They need to remember, now and forever, that we were here. And we're no longer here because of their actions.

They need to accept responsibility and learn from those mistakes. And if those people are the same sorts of people as us, it's a lesson that won't be learned until it's been hammered into them.

> *"And how does throwing shit through the wormhole show future aliens that we were so high and mighty and fell victim to a sleazy parallel-universe version of ourselves spreading odd viruses to make us infertile?"*

Maybe they find the hole. Maybe they go through it, see humans on the other side. Maybe we leave behind some message, a bunch of pictures showing how the hole appeared and everything went to shit.

> *"You know how I know when you're lying? Your lips start to move before you say anything, like you're sounding out how your lie will sound."*

I'm not lying.

> *"Come on. You've never cared about those people before. You told me it was a blessing, that all that mattered was the human race, and that it should keep going on, no matter where it was."*

I swear I'm not lying.

> *"I also know when you're lying when you start to mumble like that. You're too easy. If I keep pushing enough, you'll crack."*

Okay, so I don't care about actually hurting them.

> *"Then why are you working on these weapons?"*

…

I just need something to do. I don't want my life to have been a study in mediocrity. I wish I could've been a singer or a dancer, so I

could bring people some bit of pleasure, and they can say "Well we're fucked, but wasn't that girl just the best?"

But making weapons is all I know.

And if it feeds their lust for vengeance or just plain violence, what difference does it make? It's what I'm good at, and I just want to be good at *something* for once in my life. Even if it's at killing people.

…

He stopped talking to me then. He doesn't look at me anymore. He can't stand the sight of me.

Last Plane Out of the South

There was an airplane cruising over the Atlantic Ocean. For all intents and purposes, this airplane did not exist, though that fact is neither here nor there and is generally irrelevant to the point at hand. That point, though it is undecided as to whether it is at the right or left hand at this time, is the people on the plane, which is a far more important subject than the plane itself.

These people consisted of two groups, both very distinct. One group consisted of rather plain-looking people in button-down shirts and ties, blouses and skirts, or Kevlar vests. The other group consisted of several people with too many arms, two walking carpets, and all of them were wearing clothing that looked like the Catholic Church and the Ming Dynasty got drunk and decided “Hey, let’s try this parenting thing, it can’t be *that* hard”.

They are the focus. The plane will eventually be scrapped in 2024 due to unfortunate and classified circumstances, but once again, we are not talking about the plane.

The Adviser

Wisdom, Honor, Dignity. Those were the words of House Surten, passed down the ancient line since the dawn of the First Empire.

Sakarn Var Surten looked at his traveling companions, and found precious little of the three. The interior of the small aircraft they were assigned would have been small and uncomfortable for someone of his standing even if he didn’t have to share it with this miserable lot of invalids, buffoons and castouts, and the entire affair was beginning to make him quite cross.

“Snow! Where are you, boy?”

“I am here, Lordship.”

Sakarn nearly jumped out of his seat, but managed to hide his surprise with his usual courtier's skill. Shifting Snow had a habit of appearing behind him silently and startling him, and Sakarn suspected the accursed servant was enjoying it.

"I do wish you would stop doing that, summerling."

"I apologize, Lordship."

"Nevermind your apologies, just get me a drink. I am utterly parched, and these northerners clearly know nothing of proper dining etiquette."

"As you wish, Lordship."

As the boy slowly wandered towards the drink tray, Sakarn reflected on how terribly difficult it was to find decent help and companionship. When he was the Grand Adviser in court, sitting on his seal-tusk chair at the Empress' side, things were different. Oh, what wonders he had seen at the Argent Hall, as he drank nectar from crystal goblets and listened to the music of the heavens. He promised himself he would hear it again. He would bring honor to the Empress, and regain his own. He would make her forget his… indiscretion.

"Your drink, Lordship. I apologize for the Styrofoam cup, but Trighit had apparently appropriated all of the glassware for some experiment. Should I ask him for one?"

"You'll ask for nothing. I won't have anything to do with that Black Court simpleton. The drink, boy."

"Yes, Lordship."

The boy handed him the plain Styrofoam cup, which was filled with some kind of foul, mud colored beverage.

"What… what is that?"

"I believe it is called coffee, Lordship. It is made from a bean."

"They would have a Mender drink beans!? By my honor, this is a

sordid state of affairs indeed. I hope they at least served the Superior something appropriate of her standing? Surely, she would never accept such a treatment!"

“She seems to be enjoying the drink, Lordship. She recommends you add sugar to it.”

Sakarn sighed. It was difficult to look up to your betters when they worked so hard at degrading themselves.

"Yes, of course she does."

From drinking nectar with the Empress, to drinking beans with northerners, Black Court upstarts and provincial exiles. Oh, how the mighty have fallen.

The Scholar

“Can you show me where you are from?” Alai LoCaen thrust a map of the world at the man, beaming with excitement.

“Um…Right…here. Dead center of Indiana.” He pointed to the blob that served as North America on the map, roughly where the Midwest should have been. Alai looked at his finger with a wide-eyed stare of amazement.

“Amazing! Byr Lasell’s exploration of that region in 2-1023 claimed the area was completely uninhabitable! Tell me, what is the primary export of your region?”

“Corn.”

“Please explain: I do not know what corn is.”

“Well, it’s a vegetable, ‘s got a really tall stalk with these…we call them ears, but they don’t look like them…these big cob-things sticking out of it, and those have kernels on them, and you eat those.”

“Excellent, excellent, wonderful.” Alai scribbled a note down in her logbook: *Corn – tall with ears: eat kernels.* “Now then, what is your mother’s profession and caste?”

“She’s a pharmacist, uh…works with medicine.”

“And you are a soldier? Did you choose your father’s caste? Or is it a woman’s union?”

“Don’t really have castes…”

“Oh, right, right, I’m sorry, very sorry.” All of this was so exciting, so wonderfully strange, she could barely contain herself. The plane was strange, the food was strange, the inhabitants strange: Pale-skinned, like one minor caste she had seen in The Imperial Naturalist. No castes, multiple nations, esoteric secrecy. And all of this after only a few hours on the other side of the portal. “In that case, could you please explain the raising of children, their education, and how professions are determined?”

“Erm…”

“No, wait, food. Tell me about food.”

The Servant

"So you cover the swine-flesh tube with corn? Fascinating!"

"Err, I suppose that's one way to put it…"

Shifting Snow had to admire his cousin's ability to extract information, and out of a trained agent, no less. He never would have imagined wide-eyed enthusiasm could be so effective. Alai could have been a useful agent for the Frost, had she been born with a more useful disposition. We each had our talents, he supposed.

"Snow, this beverage is cold. Fetch me another."

Instinctively, Snow entered Rapid Assessment. The fifteen years he has spent since giving up his name to become a member of the Frost, the Empress personal information gathering force, had made it a second nature to him.

Objective: acquire drink

Operator: Sakarn Var Surten, former Grand Adviser and insufferable twit

Possible methods of completion: acquire individually, request assistance from aircrew

Additional opportunities: poison Grand Adviser (inadvisable, may cause the loss of a critical resource re mission: acquire covert information, personal satisfaction deemed a low priority)

Expected results: momentary termination of complaints, cover maintained.

Verdict: comply

"Yes, Lordship."

"And a biscuit of some sorts. I can't imagine they have anything worthwhile on this flying bathtub, but we must endure."

Objective: painful liquidation of Sakarn Var Surten, insufferable twit

Operator: Self

Possible methods of completion: strangulation, use of concealed weapon (blade), excessive physical force (hand to hand)

Additional opportunities: none

Expected results: failure in primary mission (acquire covert information), expulsion, eventual death, immense sense of self-satisfaction

Verdict: postpone verdict until completion of primary mission

"Yes, Lordship."

The Scientist

Trighit sat hunched over in his seat, studying the tiny creatures scurrying over the assorted dishes he had placed on the tray in front of him. As they ran across, the plates and cups changed colors

constantly, creating a sea of fluctuating rainbow. He chuckled as he wrote down the results in his notebook.

"To think they almost didn’t let me take them aboard," he murmured.

His gaze shifted to the passing flight attendant, who glared at him.

"Of course, it helped that they didn’t exactly know about them I suppose."

He shuddered, thinking of all the specimens in the lower cabin, alone and unprotected. It just tore him up when they took away the flasgows.

"Bah, 'danger to passengers.' What hogwash!"

He shook himself back to reality. This was no way to begin the journey! There were going to be dozens of subjects to study at the destination. Trighit refocused on the creatures in front of him as waves of color broke through the formerly transparent glass.

Best of all, he wouldn't be completely surrounded by the pompous upper castes, with their "Look at that cute Courtail, aww, look, he thinks he's smart!". Sure, he'd have to put up with Sakarn's belittling comments and arrogant attitude, but at least he wasn't the only one this time.

He grinned to himself, glancing in his superior's direction. He was quite out of his element here, wasn't he?

"Uhhh, Trighit? They're, um… doing a thing."

He turned to look back at his compatriot in the seat next to him.

"What?" he asked curiously.

Pokum pointed a fat finger at the tray in front of Trighit. The creatures had begun devouring the various glassware, as well as noticeably increasing in size. Trighit gasped in delight as he pulled out his notebook and ferociously jotted down notes and speculations about this change in behavior.

As the plane sped on, Trighit became more and more lost in his notes and fantasies about what creatures were waiting for him at the end of the ride.

The Assistant

Trighit was muttering again. He always muttered when he was doing science, or whatever he called it. In his opinion, what Trighit did always took all of the fun out of anything. It wasn't enough that flaquets made colors on glass, apparently. It needed analstisis, or something. Whatever it was, it was exceedingly boring. Pokum sighed, turned his gaze towards the window, and asked himself the same question he pondered over day after day.

Why do I do it?

Of course, he already knew the answer. Or answers, rather, as there were many of them, though none felt quite… complete. It might have been because deep down, he really did think all this science was cool. Or at least the things the animals did were cool. The note taking and repetitiveness could never be interesting to him.

Maybe it was because he had nothing better to do. Everyone else back at home was pretty depressing, with the most interesting conversations consisting of who had been harassed the worst that day, or how long people thought it would take for the Empress to actually do something to help them. At least Trighit was energetic and somewhat fun to be around.

But the answer that nearly always came up in his mind with finality was that he cared about the bugger. Trighit always had a… well, a bad reputation, to say the least. No one respected him and, in Pokum's opinion, no one ever would. None of the Black Court could understand him, and all of the upper castes laughed at him for trying to reach outside of his realm. Pokum was the only one that actively supported him.

Well, as active as one can be while trying not to be seen with him in public.

A loud crunching noise drew Pokum's attention back to the tray in

front of Trighit's seat. The creatures had begun eating the dishes, and Trighit looked lost in thought, with closed eyes and whispers aimed at the ceiling. He poked his friend.

"Uhhh, Trighit? They're, um… doing a thing."

The scientist snapped back to attention, looking intensely at Pokum.

"What?"

In response, he quickly pointed at the flaquets. Trighit squealed and rapidly began scribbling in his notebook again. Pokum sighed again. Any sliver of hope that the trip might make his friend more normal, or at least go smoothly was shattered when he tried to bring a dozen animals on the plane with them, then argued with the employee for an hour. They only managed to pry him away from the cages when someone brought Trighit some sort of book full of weird Earth animals. Pokum himself had only stopped the constant exclamations and speculations about the illustrated creatures when he pulled out the specimens he had snuck aboard in his coat for when he was sick of Trighit yelling in his ear.

He never had high hopes for the researcher's capacity for containing his excitement, but he at least dreamed it could last more than ten minutes. He groaned as he reclined in his seat and closed his eyes. It was gonna be a long trip.

The Artists

Tyhjä shifted idly on his seat, throwing shadows onto the surrounding walls. He longed to be out of this pressurized tube, longed to see the sky again. Would there be more flying things where they landed, he wondered. Birds, perhaps. He liked birds. He glanced at his sister, seated across from him. “What do you hear, sister?”

Clear Evening glanced up from her notebook scribblings, startled. “Brother?”

“You tilt your head slightly when you’re listening,” Tyhjä stated simply.

Clear Evening blinked. She never realized this about herself, but then her brother knew her well, knew her mannerisms well. While she needed to write down her observations of the world, he simply remembered them.

“The sound of the plane, I suppose.” She looked back at her notebook. The exterior was identical to that of her brother’s notebook, the interior completely different. Her words were neatly and orderly arranged, sometimes verses were grouped in the corners—Tyhjä’s drawings were scattered all over the pages, without regard for time or place. How different they were, indeed.

Tyhjä sighed as he watched his sister drift back into her writing. He missed home. He really didn’t have much business being here, he really didn’t feel too comfortable in the presence of that Mender, and especially that Watcher. But his sister was here, and truth be told, he didn’t mind overmuch being able to see new things to sketch. Tyhjä looked at the notebook on his lap. Opening it, he flipped through his drawings, letting the well-worn feel of the pages comfort him somewhat.

A series of ice crystals growing, some crystalline, some jagged. A diagram of his hand. A distant landscape. A crystal vase. A rough sketch of the outside of the plane he and his sister now sat on.

Tyhjä looked out the window. Gold-rimmed clouds in shapes he’d rarely seen blanketed the sky around the plane, and though he still longed for home, he could not help but marvel at them.

The Highest

Lucrezen Lhivaen Battackan Chlolassouvin sat with one set of hands folded in her lap, the second folded across her chest, and the last holding a Styrofoam cup filled with coffee, tiny in her slender, oversized fingers. A strange beverage, though that went without saying: everything was strange now, and that itself was strange. Lucrezen was not used to strange.

It was rather refreshing.

The plane for example. Sparse, simple, utilitarian, pedestrian.

Nothing like the airships Lucrezen was familiar with, with their delicately sculpted interiors and illuminated scrollwork declaring the majesty of empresses past. Air travel was all about spectacle: you had conquered gravity. Trains were for actually getting somewhere fast.

She observed the others around her. Dregs of the Institute, each and every one of them: the unwanted, unliked, and unneeded. Did they realize it? Some, probably. The Black Courtsman scientist, the Mender, they knew, though she was sure the latter would refuse to admit it. The servant, possibly, along with the poet and artist. The assistant, no. The girl, not at all. They kept their distance from her, trying not to look, a lifetime of conditioning fighting against the novelty of a Watcher in the same room as them.

Lucrezen sipped her coffee, and thought of the last time things had been strange, when she had stepped off that train with the wind whipping dust in her face and the townsfolk staring with gaping jaws. This was another grand adventure. She rather liked that.

—

We, the Throne of Her Royal and Illuminated Highness, The Lady of Lands, Queen of Queens, Empress Utmai Cjen, Sixth of Her Name and Fourteenth of Her Line, do hereby approve the exchange of scholars between the Imperial Institute of Paranormal and Esoteric Study and the Foundation, so as to foster the sharing of knowledge and greater companionship between the Realm of the Empire and the Lands of the Uncharted North. So We approve the articles proposed and attached, and deliver Our blessing upon this venture.

We seal this in the Imperial Name, this Tenth of Radeyt, in this Year Four-Hundred and Eighty-Seven of the Third Imperial Age.

« Hub »

Last Words From Svalbard

They turned their eyes away, at the blast, then looked back to see a frosted mushroom cloud rapidly seeding out from the remains of the site. The three passengers, in the cramped main compartment, hadn't missed an amorphous black shape on the beach, before everything was obscured with smoke.

Elliot Barculo put down his headset. “No one in the last plane reports any effects. Either it's gone, or…”

“I'll tell anyone nearby to keep an eye out,” Sophia nodded dully, her hands pressed together. Bryant set down his tablet, where he'd finished a count of the planes that had made it out, and inhaled.

“Did Johanna-”

Sophia looked at him. Then she politely turned her head, so she didn't have to watch him cry.

Time passed. Barculo looked outside, then spoke up quietly. “Light, the nearest rendezvous site is south-east of here, right?”

“Right?” She glanced up.

“Okay, the plane's taking us due south. Can you check with the pilots-”

“Of course.” She got up and stepped into the cockpit.

“That was a gutsy move, Doctor,” said one pilot, once she was inside.

“Hell of a storm coming,” said the other.

“I beg your pardon?”

The first pilot looked around. “You just destroyed over 20 of your precious artifacts, ruined a very valuable center of operations, and killed about seventy people, including… was it Johanna? Dr. Garrison, your oldest friend. Why?”

“I understand you're flying a plane, so I won't criticize,” Sophia said numbly, “but I *really don't think you understand the magnitude-*”

“Answer carefully, now.”

She looked up, then tried the door. It was locked behind her. The main pilot spun around to look at her, and she realized that he didn't look familiar. Not at all.

She stopped, gathered her bearings, and faced the pilots. “Because it was our best chance of getting rid of *that*. Even I didn't know if it worked.”

“A cost-benefit analysis.” The stranger seemed to feel out the phrase in his mouth, sounding appraising. “One last, best bet to stop the apocalypse.”

“It was all I could do.” She looked between them. “Who *are* you?”

A new voice spoke. “Have you seen Bryant, though? Him and Johanna, together for ten years. You did end his world, or he thinks you did. Armageddon can be a very personal thing.”

The other pilot looked around. She had long hair, unusual dress, metal rings in her lip. She looked directly into Sophia's eyes. “Which I think you know very well, Doctor Sophia Light.”

Her blood froze in her veins. “Who the *hell* are you? Where are you taking us? And-” she paused, searching for the right words to justify her actions. “There are different kinds of Armageddon.”

“Timely words, Doctor. Alliances change- my name is Asherah, and right now, I speak for the Serpent's Hand. Your administrator didn't want our offer, so we're not after your shiny rocks, or your friends. We have a proposition for *you*.”

« The Black Horse (The Crawling Sea) | Canon Hub | The Pale Horse (The Wayward Children) »

Late Night

It had been dark for hours, and it was starting to get to him. Sitting at the computer, he'd caught himself glancing more and more times at the nearby window, the space beyond so dark it acted like a weak mirror. He hated having big, black open spaces near him. Childish, he knew, but knowing that didn't lessen the fear of walking past an open, dark doorway in a dimly lit hall. Which was probably part of why he was still up. He clicked off the page he was on and rubbed his eyes. The worst was, as it got darker, every site he browsed seem to take on a slightly sinister edge. Even the bright, garish social network sites seemed to be tools to help illustrate that, even with 184 friends, you are still alone, in the dark.

He leaned back in the chair, sighing as he noticed someone or something walk by the window. Instinctively, his eyes flicked to the computer screen, checking for any incriminating tabs. Probably a deer or something, they did live…he paused, suddenly looking around as if seeing the room for the first time, rocking to his feet hard enough to shake the computer desk.
The thing had had a face.
He was on the second floor.
And the face was back.

In the few seconds he watched, it was the absences that struck the strongest. No nose. No hair. No ears. No lower jaw. The additions were equally horrific, with the teeth, the too-long neck, the vertical mouth and yawning eyes, but it was the missing things that stuck the hardest. He sat, feeling drugged, hypnotized, even as the spidery, too-wide fist rose and pulled back.

The glass exploded in, the sharp slashing pain breaking the spell, but the thing was already there. It grabbed, the skin feeling electric and slimy-cool like a reptile, the last coherent sensation he experienced. The rest were Impressionist: Pulling. Pressure. Tearing. Liquid sliding. Sudden numbness. He finally passed out as

his ribs were being worked slowly and methodically free. Idly, he wondered why it was tossing them in to the hall.

Laughter

Most days, I wish I hadn't been given the ability to do anything for myself. It's nice that I can feed myself and use the toilet on my own, for what I hope are obvious reasons. The act of operating an elevator properly is the high point of my day — the moment where I can choose the floor I want is like having a weight lifted off of my chest. And so on and so forth.

The thing about agency is that even the smallest drop opens the door for guilt. There are an assortment of very good reasons why I'm not responsible for what I do, but whenever I do anything more than put one foot in front of the other, I can't shake away the thought: *You could have stopped yourself.* Guilt is the one emotion I've always felt strongly, and it's doing me no favors now.

Every so often, I'll try to count the bodies — memorializing them, if only in aggregate — but my body is usually steering me away before I can get a look at everyone. It's a shame, because I'm very good at memorization (always have been, actually) and could keep an accurate tally if I was allowed. Now, *that* has done me favors — my memory is what allows me to "write" this. Writing still brings satisfaction even when I'm the whole audience.

But I digress. My point is, I am a writer, and with some effort I can still do it in a limited fashion. I construct narratives. Here are two narratives.

The first entails me being placed into a body that goes around and makes people kill each other in a blind panic. I am a decent person, and I find this very tragic, and I wish that it wasn't happening, or at the very least that I was not forced to participate. Even the faintest whiff of agency is enough to make me doubt and blame myself. It happens anyways.

The second entails me being placed into a body that goes around

and makes people kill each other in a blind panic. I am an evil man who takes great joy in this, only wishing that I could take control of my body and do it more often. Every moment where I can move for myself gives me hope that this might happen. Things proceed as normal.

You'll notice that empathy and decency only cause me anguish; I doubt they alleviate the pain of being crushed under a pile of screaming humanity. My teachers always said that a logical, detached perspective was one of my strengths.

There's a moment, when the crowd's fervor reaches its fever pitch, where I have a chance to express myself. Not speech, unfortunately. But whatever I'm feeling comes out, if I let it.

I'm tired of crying. Maybe I should **`laugh`**.

Leafers

A rust-covered forest green 1976 Dodge Dart pulled into the parking lot of S & C Plastics with a rattle and a shake. With many an unpleasant grinding clackety-clack, the engine cut and the headlights went out. 7:30 am, local time. Dr. Marshall Grant, a not-too-pudgy entomologist of 42 with hazel eyes and soil-brown thinning hair, looked up at the neon sign with its broken ampersand and flickering 'L' and gave a defeated sigh.

What the hell am I doing here?

Three weeks ago he had put in for a transfer. A change of scenery, Dr. Melcher had said. Just the ticket for getting out of that rut he was stuck in. Was it really a rut when one successfully had 7 years as HMCL supervisor of an SCP project, and four of those without *any* accidental exposures, breaches, or casualties? It should have been a great source of pride for him, a wonderful relief, exactly the kind of record any researcher should beam and brag about. He had served on SCP-400 from discovery through assessment and containment, even held the withered corpse in his own arms and fed it with a bottle. SCP-400-B was *his* baby. But to be honest, it was just a source of stress and worry and misery and depression. At least Marshall had learned to be honest about that. This was neither a punishment nor a demotion. Grant had come willingly.

Pure research. That's what. Goddamn crustaceans about to give me a heart-attack…

It was early enough that the night shift had just shuffled out, and the day shift hadn't quite shuffled in. Just a skeleton crew of guards and one or two post-docs burning the mid-morning oil. The parking lot was empty as you like it, with a faint rustling of the first autumn leaves the only—

"HEY! WATCH IT, MACK! I'M WALKIN' HERE!"

Marshall stopped dead, half in a cringe as he squeezed a bit of startle out of his eyes. “Oh! I’m sorry sir, I…” But as his head swiveled around to apologize to what sounded like a very burly man, there was no one. “…Didn’t see you there?”

“Yeah, I’ll bet you are. Fuckin’ lunatic,” the voice came again. Grant wanted to relax but it… and he… What? No one was there! Nothing at all in the lot with him but a few cars twenty meters off and an oddly colored mantis slowly trundling along the pavement near his feet. Yet he had heard the voice clear as a bell and swore he smelled burning tobacco coming from some place.

It’s just nerves, Marshall. Relax. First day jitters… yeah, that’s it.

His badge swiped by the RFID reader, which beeped a friendly ‘hello’ and turned its LED green just for him. The offices of the entomology department were empty, so he rooted around until he found the door with his name-plate on it and let down his briefcase on the desk. Site-87, he had been told, had a few ‘real card’s on staff. It looked like it from the posters, photographs, and funny newspaper clippings that adorned all the offices he had poked his head into. Except his, of course. Grant traveled light, lived light, didn’t care for too much unnecessary decoration. Dr. Melcher had said that might be a problem, too. Not enough color in his life. Who had time for color in a world where a mother couldn’t even be certain if her baby was alive or dead?

Enough of that shit, Grant, he scolded himself harshly.

“Yo, those leaves are fuckin’ beautiful!”

“I know, right! Lookit all them colors!”

The voices were faint, but he heard them distinctly. It sounded like a tourist or something. What did they call them in New England? Leafers! People coming out of the city in great droves at ass-thirty in the morning to watch the first rays of the autumn sun catch the foreign and marvelous colors ‘red’ and ‘yellow’.

“Shit that’s wicked pretty.”

Grant stood and darted to the door. No one in the hall. No one walking. No steady pat pat of footsteps or clicking of light switches or even squeaking of hinges. Just him.

“So how’s the misses?”

“That bitch? Fuggeddaboudit. Almost bit my goddamn head off when I come home last night!”

Behind him, for certain now. He spun on his heels to the window in his office. Opened just a crack, he was hearing it through the screen. And there on the sill outside sat two…mantises?

“HAH! I hear that! Fuckin’ broads.”

Mantis Religiosa, the European Mantis. He’d seen hundreds of them, dissected them, watched them eat one another during coitus, cut the heads off a few males himself just to watch them breed in captivity. And here they sat across from each other, hind legs crossed and covered in what looked like denim pants. One wore a baseball cap with a Yankees logo. The other a small bowler, with a cigar hanging from its mandibles. They cursed and laughed and joked and gestured to the scenery, sharing off-color remarks in exactly the manner that someone who had never been to New York might imagine city people to act. For Christ’s sake, one even had a tiny gold chain around its neck.

Dr. Grant slammed the window shut, turned his back on them, and headed to the break room. *Coffee. That’s what’s good for you, man. Clear your head a bit…*

Through the pane of glass he could just barely hear one say to the other “Jesus, what’s *his* problem?”

The intercom first squawkled to life at 0800. “Would Researchers Melville, Sarkhar, and Joyce please report to maintenance as soon as possible. The sponges have become animate and are holding janitorial staff hostage. Repeat: researchers Melville, Sarkhar, and Joyce to maintenance.”

Grant stopped in the middle of the hallway and quickly moved to the side just in case, watching and listening. Strangest thing…there wasn't any commotion. No lock down protocol, no station report instructions, no security personnel running down the hall.

… and no breach alarm?

Instead, there were just three faces he'd never seen before looking at Marshall oddly while he pressed himself against the wall. Gracefully as he could, Grant smiled, nodded, waved, and moved back toward entomology, making himself as small as he could.

“And here’s the entomology Lab,” Dr. Churchwell said smiling as Dr. Grant took hold of the door and held it open for her. A bit old fashioned of him, but still a long way from creeper territory. “Not quite so well stocked as the one at Site-77 I’m sure, but we get by.”

“I’m sure it will be fine,” Marshall replied, looking around with hands planted firmly in his pockets. “Thank you for showing me around. I realize you’re probably very busy.”

“Hey! Knock that shit off! That’s my lunch!” They were back outside the window.

“Make me, ya ugly mug!” Harder looking, these two. Bandannas sticking out of back pockets.

“Motherfucker, I’ll cut you!”

Dr. Grant’s eyes widened as he watched the two leather-jacket wearing mantises struggling over the carcass of a luna moth on the branch outside the window. He opened his mouth to say something, but the words caught in his throat.

“Oh, it’s my pleasure!” Mary smiled broadly. “Not much happening today, anyway.” She reached behind her and closed the window, shivering a bit, apparently oblivious to the insectoid knife-fight quickly escalating in the tree behind her.

Deep breaths. This isn’t happening. She’d be saying something if it was. Get your shit together, Grant!

“Just curious; what brings you out to Sloth Spit?” (Marshall might have noticed that she used the British pronunciation “sloath” rather than the flatter American variant, but he was too busy trying to tear his eyes away from the assembling gang brawl beyond the window.) “We don’t get many former HMCL’s out this way and… I don’t mean to pry but—My god, are you alright? You look pale.”

NoIAmBloodyWellNotAlright!

“I’m fine,” he said, padding some sweat from his brow with the back of his sleeve and taking a tentative sip of his third cup of coffee that morning. “It’s just…”

It’s just that I’m seeing a veritable army of sapient mantises about to go all Jets vs. Sharks on one another over your shoulder. But other than that things are just peachy!

“…I didn’t get very much sleep last night. Nerves, you know?” He chuckled in a half-hearted way and drank some more, wishing he had the irresponsible nature necessary to put a little whiskey in it. Mellow his ass out for a few hours.

“I see…” she said, not quite believing him. There was a pregnant pause. The rumble outside began to die down and the crowd disperse, hollering profanities behind them. A few corpses lay about the leaves, bleeding and making pained gestures as tiny red and blue lights began to flash from a nearby branch. “…Well?”

Grant snapped back to attention. “Hm?”

“What brings you out to 87?”

She knows. She knows you’ve lost it. Look at that pitying stare. God, is this what it feels like? Is this insanity? I don’t feel very crazy…

“I… Doctor’s orders,” He finally managed. “Psychiatrist back at Site-77 said it would be good to clear my head, let someone else deal with 400 for a year or two. Containment is stable and…” Green insects in NYPD blue with tiny badges on their chests slapped handcuffs on the ruffians that could still move. A female with curly brown hair flowing down behind her compound eyes screamed at

the police to leave her baby alone. Grant needed out. Needed out right now. “I’m sorry, can we keep going? I’ve got a meeting with Director Weiss at 12:30.”

You idiot, it’s only 9:45. If she didn’t know before, she does now.

“…Yeah,” Churchwell said. A confused look was painted on her brow. “Sure thing. I’ll take you up to records.” But that wasn’t the whole sentence, Marshall could tell by the way her voice rose at the end. Mary Churchwell had just come as close as professionally possible to calling him a ‘weirdo’. “I’ll tell you, as high strung as you are I think you’ll like it here. Things are pretty hum-drum.”

“YOU SON OF A BITCH I AIN’T DONE NOTHING! FUCK THE PO-LICE!”

“I imagine they must be…”

“Reminder;” the intercom squealed at lunch; “Pumpkin Spice flavored beverages are strictly prohibited in light of the recent containment of E-8820. For details, please see Site-87 general mail 'Re: Subcutaneous Ginger', sent last Wednesday. Department heads, please forward to your teams.”

Grant looked down at his coffee and was very nearly sick. No one else dumped their drinks.

“Yo Vinnie, toss me one o'them beers?” It hadn’t stopped.

“You got it!” It would never stop.

Tiny piles of foam poured over the tops of their equally tiny cans. The hallucinations were getting more vivid, he was almost certain of it. For Pete’s sake, he could smell hops and barley wafting in through the screen.

“So,” Director Weiss said, looking over her reading glasses at her new recruit. His face was gray. He was sweating. Looked like he had spent all day on some kind of Scooby Doo chase. So she asked a question she knew very well that this man would answer with a lie.

“…How has your first day been, Dr. Grant?”

“PAAAAAULIE! YOUR SISTER'S HOT!”

“Frank! I can hear you ya know! I ain’t deaf!” She slapped him across the mandible with her long pincer claw. A gaggle of others in orange construction hats snickered and elbowed one another.

Goddammit, shut up! You’re not real! GO AWAY!

“Good!” he said meekly. “Really good. Can't wait to… uh… can't wait to dive right in!” Grant could smell his own sweat steadily rising under his corduroy sport coat. He felt as though he’d been bleeding for hours; he was so exhausted. Palms wet. Mouth dry. Stomach doing flip-flops. Marshall was sure he’d have an ulcer by the end of his shift. Dear god, it wasn’t even one o’clock yet.

I should just say it. She must have noticed by now. You can’t even control your furtive glances out the window.

As if on cue, five of them fluttered by, carrying with them a boom box and a tiny square of corrugated cardboard. Some god-awful lyric from the days of Ice-T slithered into his consciousness on the back of the radio’s maddening beat… and then they started to break dance. Funny, for exoskeletal beings, they weren’t doing a very bad job.

Seven goddamn years working with a Type 3 cognitohazard and I get nicked my first day in Backwoods USA where nothing happens ever… It fucking figures.

“HA. Marshall, don’t be so obvious. You look like hell!” the Director balked. “I have half a mind to order you back to your apartment for the afternoon, let you get some rest.”

TellhertellhertellhertellherNO FOR THE LOVE OF GOD DON’T DO THAT YOU WILL END UP IN A CELL GETTING PROBED AND DISSECTED FOR THE NEXT TEN YEARS; ARE YOU STONED?

“I’m sure I’ll be fine. Maybe I’ll go get some… fresh air over lunch or something,” he managed. Twelve mantis men drinking from brown paper bags were whooping and hollering out the window behind her.

She looked hard at her new recruit, focusing on a spot directly in the center of his forehead. The volume began to crescendo outside and Grant fought his damnedest to keep focused.

“GO SHORTY! IT’S YA BIRFDAY! GONNA PARTY LIKE IT’S YA BIRFDAY!”

Was she staring him down? Trying to probe him? Digging the truth out of that tiny scrap of skull? He was suddenly conscious of the long silence passing between them when finally the Director rolled her eyes and slapped the desk so hard it made *Marshall’s* palms hurt.

“ALL RIGHT! Enough is enough!” With one hard push and a spin, her chair soared to the open window, and her bony, gnarled fist banged hard on the screen. “Will you *please*! BE. QUIET!” Every last mantis, all at once, dropped what they were doing, stopped their chortling and taunting and dancing and arguing and fixed her with a stare. “People are trying to *work* in here today you…*hoodlums*!” The window slammed shut and the Director rolled back to her desk, smoothing the wrinkles in her blouse and sputtering her anger out through loose lips. “Fat lot of good fresh air is going to do you today… Sorry about that. There’s only so much a woman can be expected to take.”

Dr. Marshall Grant’s jaw fell so fast, he nearly chipped the linoleum tile.

“Which reminds me!” Director Weiss continued, pulling open a drawer and removing a manila folder labeled for general Site-87 access. “Here’s the record we have of this ‘Leafer Mantis’ phenomenon.”

“The… The what?”

“Oh, don’t be cute. These rotten bugs come from miles around and infest this facility like the plague every year and I’m sick of it. We don’t know what’s causing it, but every late summer, something like ten thousand mantises start thinking they’re people and giving my research staff a headache.”

“I…Uh… I imagine they must.” Grant was trying to decide if he had finally pitched his wobbly. But better to play along for the moment. “Why… Why haven’t they been contained?”

The Director frumped in his general direction. “What part of ‘ten thousand mantises’ did you miss? Besides, it’s little more than a nuisance, but numbers seem to be rising every year, and they are increasingly hard to ignore. See if you can get with Churchwell, capture a few fresh specimens, and figure out what we’re working with. Don’t have a lot of time on this; the phenomenon generally peters out around the thirtieth.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Grant said, straining against a tide of relieved laughter. Of course. A Nexus. He felt dumber (and saner) already. “I’ll see what we can work out after lunch. I think I will go take it in town, if you don’t mind. It really is just.. haha! It’s just beautiful outside!”

“Suit yourself.” The Director said, waiving him off with her hand and returning to her paperwork. Never could figure the new ones for a minute. They always seemed so utterly fascinated on their first day. Ah well. Two weeks from now he’d be bored out of his skull like the rest of them. Let him have his fun. “Oh, Dr. Grant? One more thing.”

“Yes ma’am?” he asked, practically glowing.

Director Weiss tied her face in a bow, and gave Marshall a good looking over, up and down and back again. “…Lose that suit, would you? I appreciate the professionalism, but you keep coming in to work dressed like that, everyone’s going to think you’re nuts.”

|Hub|

Learning

For merchants, the place to be was Kalefheit, *Heart of Kalef*. Fables of the stupid rich, buying relics for ten times what they were worth, and of poor men, who went from starving to retiring in the space of a day, abounded in the world of trade.

So two men rode east across the desert, one on horseback, one on camel, hoping to find themselves dressed in colored silks on the other side. Three days were left to travel, with one village, Mideia, between them and the city, when they found two dead men lying face down in the dirt. Both packs appeared to have been rifled through, and the sand around them was stained black with dried blood.

“A follower of York got lucky here!” One man shouted to the other through a thick accent.

“No. There is plenty left to steal. The man who killed them took their water, maybe their horses, too. But look in this pack.” Where the first man, Kerrek, was thin and gaunt looking, sharp-featured and bony, the second was broad and muscular. His name was Goreth.

They emptied the pack on the ground, and found it was filled with relics. Kerrek lit up, seeing value where Goreth saw wonder. Within was a plain set of clothes (Kerrek added it to his own gear), a corroded metal coffee mug with letters of the old language (‘*ITT Industries — Bell & Goss*- the second name was rusted over), a polished black pipe (a bag of tobacco was tucked inside the coffee mug, though neither man realized it’s purpose, so this was discarded), and a green book.

“Hmm… What would a Kalefheit man give for a relic of the old world? ” Kerrek’s eyes had widened with glee and anticipation.

“Food, water, his wealth and daughter?” Goreth finished the joke. Both laughed and hugged each other for their find.

Kerrek examined the pipe, while Goreth opened the book. He looked at the page, and examined the only line on it. He flipped to the back, then the front, finding nothing in the other pages. He furrowed his brow and went back to the page with words, remembering what he hadn't used since he was a small boy. He sounded it out.

"What does that mean, Goreth?" Kerrek did not know how to read, as it was.

Goreth frowned, and shook his head. "I don't know. But we must ride, friend. We can reach the Mideia village before sundown."

The two strapped the finds to their rides and started off at a brisk pace. They had no food left, and Kerrek hoped to find something to eat before they slept. They rode with him in front by three lengths, contemplating his dinner. Had he looked back, he might have asked Goreth what was on his mind. To somebody who didn't know him, he would have looked upset. But the large man rarely looked anything else, and in truth, he was looking on thoughtfully.

The book was no tome, and not heavy by any means. But he could have flipped to any page, and yet he flipped to the only one with words on it. It was a funny little coincidence…

Before Goreth could think on the matter any longer, he fell from his horse and died.

Kerrek, while irritated briefly, laughed at himself a moment later, remembering that he was going to kill Goreth anyway, to avoid splitting profits. He had planned on doing it in two nights, while they slept between Mideia and Kalefheit. This was just as well for him, as now his only hindrance was tying Goreth's horse to his own camel.

He did not realize — how could he? — that had Goreth lived for another day and night, he would have become richer than either of them could have hoped.

But he rode on to Mideia.

Kerrek did not want to sell his wares in the village. It was poor, and

nobody had much need for relics. And even if somebody decided to buy from him, a Kalefheit man would pay twice what he could get here. But he needed food. Or rather, he wanted food, and figured that buying something to eat in Mideia was more prudent than in Kalefheit, if one had a choice. At least until he made his fortune.

So he would sell one relic from the pack he and Goreth had found. He would accept nothing less than what he could use to buy one of the chickens he had seen on his way into the heart of the village, and then he would eat, sleep, ride, and get rich.

Sitting on the blanket he had laid out, he called to anyone who would listen. “Relics! RELICS! Have you not seen the utensils of kings yet, my friends? But look and peruse, the very stuff of legends!”

As he was showing one elder the black pipe (“But what else *could* it be for, my friend? Orphaned infants, to suckle off of! Put the milk of a goat of your choosing in this wide end, and let them nurse at the tip…”), a young girl, eight years at most, looked over the things with wonder. The elder walked away shaking his head. Kerrek scowled, and turned to the girl.

“And just what do you need, little miss?” His voice seeped with sarcasm and acid, making the little girl cringe backwards, seeming to shrink.

“My momma told me to fetch a chicken for us to eat, tonight. She gave me this.” The little one held up a coin. Its edges were flat and rough and uneven.

Kerrek brightened, thinking about the fool’s gold he had laying before him, and thanked York for the fool before him. “Well little miss, surely your mother wouldn’t mind if you browsed for but a moment.” His tone had changed from scaly and patronizing, becoming animated and colorful. “Look at the wonders before you, and tell me what catches your pretty eye.”

She picked up the book. *Odd child.* “Ah, the wizard’s tome! The little miss has a good eye.” She opened the book and gasped.

“My grandmother showed me these letters!”

“No!”

“Yes! She showed them to me before she died. I know the sounds they make!”

What a useless skill. “Then it’s fate, little miss! No doubt your grandmother wanted you to take this book, she sent it here!”

“Really?” “Of course! Bring it to your family, show them what you’ve found. This is worth *much* more than a tired old chicken, sweetling. This is *magic.*” The girl gasped.

“But, I only have-” She trailed off, looking at the coin. Her eyes started to swell. Kerrek got on one knee, so he could look up at her. “No, little miss, I can’t interfere with fate! Here, take the book. I’ll only take the coin, even though the Wizard’s Tome is worth its weight in *silver!*” *Stupid girl.* “Best of luck, *best* of luck. Run home, run, for surely your family will shower you with praise for the magic you have brought into their lives!” The little girl started running frantically with a huge grin, before she doubled back to the merchant.

“Wha-“ She threw her arms around his waist in a tight embrace, before she started running again, clutching the book to her chest.

“Stupid.” Kerrek rolled up the blanket and tied it to his horse. He flipped the coin, caught it, and walked in the direction of the chicken coop.

“Stupid girl!” Her mother shrieked. Her voice boomed in the little hut. “Stupid, *stupid, STUPID!*” She hit the girl across the face. “WE CAN’T EAT A BOOK!”

“But the book is-“ “*MAGIC?*” She slapped her again. “THERE IS NO MAGIC, ABIRT-DAMNED, STUPID, *USELESS* GIRL!” She grabbed up the book and hurled it like a disc out the doorway.

“SLEEP OUTSIDE! SEE IF THE BOOK KEEPS YOU ALIVE!”

The girl slipped through the doorway, crying. She found the book

and stared at it, before she pounded it as hard as she could with her tiny fist. Some of the others in the village looked out at her from their huts. She kept crying while she went around back. A few minutes went by before she calmed down enough to open the book again. By the light of the setting sun, she sounded out the letters her grandmother had taught her nearly a year ago. But it only said the same thing, and felt decidedly *un*-magical. With that, a new wave of emotion overcame her, and she cried herself to sleep —

— and awoke in the most beautiful place she had ever seen.

It was a Wonderland, with a vivid landscape of trees and valleys, and mountains in the distance. Birds colored like rainbows flew right over her head, and she watched as amazing animals sprinted across the valley below. She looked up, and saw more stars than ever before, despite it still seeming like daytime, with two suns in the distance.

“Excuse me, little miss.”

She spun around and gasped at the man before her.

He was tall, almost twice as tall as she was, and much older. His beard was long, but tidy, down to his chest, and was bright white. His hair was the same color, as were his eyebrows, which were bushy, and raised as he looked at her. The voice he used was soft and deep, but friendly, and he was very calm when he spoke. His face was friendly too, with many wrinkles and creases on the sides of his upturned lips.

But most amazing was his cloak. It was a shimmering green, and flowed with waves of shades, from a deep, deep emerald that almost looked obsidian, to a light leafy olive, and everything in between. The girl was stupefied.

“Hello there.”

“Are- are you the wizard?” She was stammering, and even though he seemed friendly, she wasn’t sure what to make of him. But he smiled, and she felt better straightaway.

“I suppose I am… May I ask who you are, young one?”

“Aleia.”

“What a pretty name… *Aleia*. So, Aleia, do you know where you are?” The girl gazed about her shyly. She had never seen the animals before, had never seen a sight so beautiful.

“Am I in Heaven?”

“Ha!” The old man’s laugh was full, and deep, and wasn’t mean at all. It was young.

“No, my dear, you aren’t in Heaven. You’re far too young to see the afterlife. That’s for old men like me. You’re in the book you found, Aleia.”

“The book…”

“The book. I call myself the Book Keeper, but you may call me whatever you like. And in here, I suppose, a wizard is about right.”

“The book had words in it.”

“Can you read, Aleia?”

“My grandmother showed me letters, but I only know some of the sounds they make. I can’t read very good.”

“Would you be so kind as to walk with me Aleia? I haven’t had company in a very long time, and would love to speak with a bright youth like yourself.”

So they walked through the marvelous forests and valleys, and the Book Keeper answered all of Aleia’s questions. She had found a magic book, and was elated at the thought.

“It *was* magic!”

“Indeed. And so you see, Aleia, when people visited me before, it was a very different time, when people had all they needed, and knew all they could hope to know.”

“The Old World?”

“Yes. But I’ve went a long time without any visitors, and am so happy that you’ve come here. I *do* wonder what happened to the other man, he hasn’t shown up yet… Ah well. He’ll be along soon enough. What I want to ask you, Aleia, is if you’ll come back again.”

“Oh, yes, Book Keeper. This place is wonderful!” He smiled an elated smile.

“But you have to promise me something, Aleia.” His expression turned somber. “I made a mistake in the Old World, one that I will never let happen again… You have to promise me that you’ll keep being happy in *your* world. You may visit as often as you like, and indeed I hope you do. But you have to remember your promise, and live in your world as much as you do mine.” Aleia nodded with energy. “Good.” The Book Keeper smiled again.

“Book Keeper?”

“Yes, little one?”

“What did the words say? I don’t know the sounds very good.”

“It said, ‘*A Hero is Born*’. How much do you know about the letters your grandmother showed you?”

“Not very much Book Keeper. She only knew a little bit, too.” The smile disappeared, and the wizard looked puzzled.

“I think we’ll start there. Aleia, will you let me teach you how to read?”

Learning Shit

Hey, everyone. I'm Agent Bibs. If you really have a hard-on for being formal, call me Mister Bibs. I don't, so if you call me Mister Bibs, I'll throw a pen cap at you. Now, I've got a few guesses as to why the higher-ups wanted *me* to run this class, but I'll deal with that later. For right now, you get the oh-so-wonderful privilege of hearing me talk about being an Intelligence Agent for the Foundation.

You know, I think I'm going to like this group. This isn't me slobbing your knobs or anything, I'm *serious*! See, most of you screwheads didn't pick up any of the food and drinks. It means you don't trust free food given out by someone you don't know. That's a good thing, because in about three seconds..

Okay, so I'm off by two seconds, plus or minus. Hey, using knock-out drops is an inexact science! Which is good, because I'm not all that good on the whole 'science' thing. They only gave me the Researcher role because I kept figuring out what the eggheads were going to do before they did it, for Christ's sake.

While the Ds get the idiots out of here, let's get down to business. By the way, D-44632, take Fred there to a Cell. He's Church.

Now, how did I know all this, you lunkheads? Am I a genius? Well, kinda, but that's not the point. The point is, before you guys came in and sat down, I went over each and every one of your dossiers. The ones you gave us, and the ones my fellow IAs compiled on each and every one of you. It's how I realized the majority of this group wouldn't take food from a stranger, and how Fred was a Church plant.

I don't do all this background-looking-into shit because it's impressive to newbies. Well, partially I do. Mostly, though, its because it's my *job* to know shit. It's my job because the Foundation needs to know shit. Shit we don't know about, we can't keep people safe from. Yes, James-Who-Wet-The-Bed-Until-He-Was-Six, I said

people. Let the eggheads frame things in a way that lets them avoid thinking about seven billion people. You're Agents. You're dealing with people. Good people, bad people, good bad people, bad good people. And Clef, I guess, He's not really 'people', though.. I think.

No, Alexander, put your hand down. I'm not going to talk about Clef. He's one of your bosses, and he's smarter than you, and seeking out more than that'll give you a headache. But *no*, you're going to think you're smart enough to find the truth about him. If you're lucky, he'll warn you off. If you're not, he'll tell you everything. Don't pout, Alex. Prove me wrong. It happens so rarely, I'm going to sit down and put my feet up on the table to complete the Arrogant Prick Look. Yes, these *are* gym shoes. Running in dress shoes is a bitch and a half. 48% of IA's job is based on running.

Anyways, being an IA? You'll get up, and you'll find a folder on your table. Or, in my case, stuck to the wall of the Containment Cell I took over when they decided to recruit my surprisingly-firm ass. It'll be all professional-like, brief as hell. We're talking location, rough approximation of what the higher-ups expect, how you'll be getting there, maybe a few suggestions on attire and the like. I'd tell you to ignore the last one, but if I do that, you'll wear a clownsuit to a GoC facility. That only works *once*. Or twice, if you count that time in March.

On the way to wherever you're going, you'll be studying the location. Not the quote-unquote specific Foundation stuff, no. I'm talking about cultural shit. Do the people where you're going have a strong oral tradition? Are the men or women more open to talking to people? Do they respond well to authority, or is it better to be One Of The Guys? You're here because you either know that kinda shit already, or you know people who know people who know that shit. As long as you don't tell your buddies you're with the Foundation, nobody here *really* gives a rat's ass who you talk to. Yeah, the higher-ups talk about Super Obnoxious Secrecy In All Things, but that's because most of them were never Agents in the first place.

You'll get to wherever you need to go, and then the fun stuff starts. If there's places the Foundation wants you to examine, you do it. Otherwise, do whatever you need to do. Go into a bar. Drink a bit, talk with the locals. Ask if there's been any crazy stories floating

about. Most aren't relevant to what you're doing, but learn them anyway. You'll build trust, and you'll have new cover stories for your next few missions. Take notes. Follow up on those notes, make sure they are legit. In short, learn shit. That's why the Foundation pays you a lot of goddamned money, and why you're here instead of wherever you were.

No, Matt, *don't* raise your hand. Nobody cares you used to work with the CIA. I ran loops around your former boss's head a few months after I started here. I think I got him fired for it, now that I think about it. Long story. His fault. Yes, I'm aware he was your father. I'm talking, you're not. I speak, you learn shit. From my massive brain to your probably-larger-but-empty brain. Seriously, I don't know if anyone has told you, but your head is *huge*!

As I was saying… you've done your canvassing and networking, and you've found what the higher-ups are looking for. You've got as much info as you can get on the thing: where exactly it is, best way and time to get at it, things to know to ensure a clean retrieval. If y'have to ask yourself if you've learned enough shit, y'aint learned enough shit. You want your fellow Foundationites thinking you're anal-retentive. Actually, scratch that: *be* anal-retentive. If you don't put down that the skip turns blue at 11:34pm on Fridays, *someone is going to fucking die*.

This is when you expect me to chuckle and point out how pointless that sort of detail is. Newsflash: you're in the Foundation, now. Stuff turning blue can and will cause someone to die. I've seen it happen.

And since I have three of you guys flagged for wanting to play hero, I'm going to make this very clear to everyone: don't be James Goddamned Bond. You're Intelligence, dammit, and running in to capture a skip on your own is going to get your ass killed. Leave it to Retrieval and Containment agents. Let them get *their* asses killed. Nah, if R&C teams get killed, you didn't give them enough shit to go on. See these names on my arm? Three men died because I failed to give them enough information for a clean retrieval. I don't plan on adding any more. I'm not sure if you guys know this, but tattoos? They hurt!

Actually, here's a teaching moment: don't get tattoos. Ink identifies

you, and your job as an Intelligence Agent is *not to be fucking identified*. I know what you're thinking: *"Why is Bibs allowed to get one, and I'm not?"* First off, I'm better at being an IA than you. Secondly, I've been here longer than you, and I'm granted wider latitude. Thirdly, I was the one who discovered an anomalous brand of ink that vanishes when you mentally will it to.

Okay, it's *mostly* the third one, but the first two still apply. And no, you don't get the special ink. I found it, and it was the one anomalous item I got to take possession of this year.

Shit, I'm digressing again. Anyway, back to being an IA. When you're done with getting all your shit together, get out of there without making a fuss. On your way home, write up your reports. When you reach your home Site, you'll be formally debriefed. The shit you provide will be filed and processed, into a form that R&Cs won't even bother reading, because it's all about how to get to their goal without shooting everything in sight. I'm kidding. Sort of.

Oh, and one last thing before I dismiss you guys: being an Intelligence Agent isn't just about getting into places. It's also about getting out of places. While we've been talking, this entire room has been moved and deposited into a one of our larger Containment Cells. Quite a few exits head back to the facility, and each one seals off after one person uses it. You're being timed.

…

Okay, this is bullshit. I told the techs that I wanted the lights to go out when I said "You're being timed". I thought it would be badass. New lesson: never trust Bill. That motherfucker always thinks it's funny to ruin the *one* moment I get to look all bad-ass to newbies. You know what, you guys are dismissed, I'm going to…

Oh, there they go. *Christ*, I forgot how dark it gets. So yeah, forget that stuff about Bill. Find your way out, and have fun with it! I'll be here, taking a nap.

Leeway

I had parents, once. They were fighting over something with me frequently… I can't remember what it was we ever fought over, but I can always feel the dread from them. Nice to think they were probably fighting with themselves, and I got roped into it. Maybe if I at least thought like that, part of the blame wouldn't be on me. Ridding myself of that responsibility makes everything afterwards easier to cope with, right?

One night, I ran away. I had to back them into a corner with a knife just to escape from it, but I ran. Something was different about that night, that much I'm sure of. My parents could feel it too. I watched them as much as I could while getting out of the house, and they never looked me in the eyes during it all. Not once did I look back as I sprinted away. For a few years after, I managed to live with some kind of peace. I changed my name, got a new job, made friends, found a place to live with my aunt for a while before having my own space…

There were oddities in spite of all that. I was still carrying that weight of my experiences around, but something else latched onto that. A sense of dread and fear, I think? It's hard to put into words but it was something more than that. Even with my friends, I'd approach all interactions with some kind of caution, as if I'd have to run away from them as well. Being a landscape contractor helped distract me from that, but as time went by, the way I went about things felt… well, have you ever had something loom over you, threaten to overwhelm your senses? It just took its sweet time with it.

Nights eventually started to get worse for me. My dreams gradually drifted towards one single recurring one. When they started, it'd probably be at the tail-end of the dream, or maybe just involving one element. I've always been frightened regardless. And for the past however many months it's been, it's always been the same.

I'm back at my house again. Everyone is sleeping. My parents,

siblings, even the pet dog (though I can't remember if we had one anymore). I never start out in different places, though. Always, without fail. The same place. Right in the main hallway on the second floor, with only two places to go. The bedroom, or forward. But I can never go in my bedroom. Either the door is locked (did the door ever have a lock? I can't see why), or I just can't get through the open passageway. So there's only forward.

And forward is the ladder to the attic.

The attic always creeped me out up until the time I left the house. I could never get near the ladder without being a bit repulsed by it, and as far as I knew, no one ever stored anything up there. But it's different this time. There's more to it. A sense of loathing (from myself?), and hate (from… somewhere?), and fear, and… well, there's no accurate words. I don't think it's something someone would ever experience in their lives. It's another kind of emotion altogether.

For the first time ever, I climb up the ladder, my feet feeling heavier and harder to lift. I can feel my stomach twist and my head pulse erratically. I don't want to go up there, yet I have no choice but to go up there. I never have the choice to turn back. It's always forward. The ladder is only twelve rungs (I've been counting for a couple years now), yet the flow of time seems to get slower and slower with each rung until it nearly stops altogether at the top.

Finally, I make it and I look in. I see the attic.

The other thing that keeps repeating in these dreams is that I never can see what's in there, or remember. I see something, but I don't know what that something is, or if it's anything at all. There's a force, but there's no force to really sense in there. It's empty in there. That's what I hope for. That every time I go up into the attic, there's nothing there. Despite that, there's always something about it that fills me with worry and terror. I can't help but stare into the attic, looking around to see what's brought me there.

And I realize I never climbed up it at all. There's only forward to go. So I'm forced to go back up. Maybe this time, I catch a glimpse of my parents, sleeping with their heads buried into the wall, lights

obscuring them from my vision completely. I still can't go into there to talk to them. There's only the ladder, the attic, and whatever is waiting for me in there. And for the first time ever, I climb up into the attic, feet feeling heavier and harder to lift, stomach twisting, head pulsing…

Eventually, I wake up, having never climbed the ladder at all. Of course I know I climbed the ladder, yet I can't ever get up there. Though I know I did. Nothing's waiting for me. That's the ideal, but I can feel it, something I must have left behind. Occasionally, I'll even dream about my parents trying to climb it. My mom did, once. I'm afraid to know what she saw.

I've had the urge for a while now to go back home and visit my parents. In one of my more final and relatively normal dreams, I think, I went back there. It was Christmas, and I wanted to at least see my parents one more time, to clear the air up and make things better for all of us. I snagged a few gifts for my parents and siblings on the way, and it took me almost half a day of driving to get there. Home wasn't like I remembered it, though. Everyone had acted like I'd never existed to begin with. They remembered me wistfully, as if I never had a full life with them to begin with. The attic is still there, too.

I felt myself stepping towards the **`attic`**, going to climb the ladder.

Legally a Falcon (For Tax Purposes)

Leah Mauldin stood in front of the door, butterflies in her stomach. In her 9 years as Chief Financial Officer of Site-101, she had experienced many a challenge. Everything from a cat-turtle that ate all the dollar bills in the site vault, to a sentient computer virus hacking the site bank account, had happened under her watch. She thought she could handle anything. But all her training, all her experience, could not prepare her for her today.

For today was the day O5 command had assigned Dr. Clef as the new Site Director. Yes, Dr. Alto Clef, the man as infamous within to the Foundation as Satan himself, and believed by some to actually be Satan, was now her boss. He who nearly destroyed Site-19 and terminated numerous SCP objects all while carrying a ukulele, was now in charge of the place she had called a second home for the better part of a decade.

After taking a moment to prepare herself, she swiped her security card through the slot.

Beep!

She stood in anticipation for a few moments. Then a feminine voice was heard from a speaker in the card slot. “Come in please,” it said.

Leah stood confused for a moment. She wondered if someone else was in the room with him, then slowly opened the door. “Am I interrupting anything?” she asked sheepishly as she peeked inside. Sitting at the desk was a dark haired woman wearing a fedora, with a mandolin hung around her shoulders. The woman typed at her computer.

After a moment, the woman looked up. “Have a seat right there. You’re Miss… uh Mauldin, right?”

“Um… I think this might be the wro…”

“Don’t worry, contrary to what you’ve heard, I won’t bite. Well, not unless you want me to. Now, you had a report to give me?”

Leah cautiously entered the office. She stared for a moment at the chair the woman had been pointing to, then sat down and placed her folder down on the desk. As the woman opened the folder and began to skim through it, Leah glanced at the name tag on the desk.

It read “Dr. Alto Clef”.

“So, pleasure to meet you, Miss Mauldin, I’m sure you know who I am,” the woman said, gesturing to the name tag, “According to this, Site-101 being investigated for… tax evasion?”

“Yes, that’s what appears to be happening. Um, if you don’t mind me asking though, I thought you were…”

“Taller?” Clef cut her off, “Yeah, I get that a lot. Anyways, Leah… Is it OK if I call you Leah?”

“Um, no, not at all. Do you mind if I call you…” she hesitated for a moment, “…Alto?”

“That’s fine by me,” Clef continued, “Well, in regards to what we came here for; I think this whole thing should be easy to fix.”

“Oh, err, yes,” Leah sputtered out, “This isn’t the first time this has happened. It’s usually just a clerical error. All we need to do is…”

“Right, let’s hitch a ride on the next flight to Area-55!”

With that, Dr, Alto Clef hurried out of the room, leaving Leah dumbfounded. A few moments later, she doubled back.

“You know you’re coming with me, right? That’s a Director’s order.”

The chopping sound of the helicopter’s blades was giving Leah a migraine.

“So, I just want to be clear on this,” Leah said as she rubbed her temples, “You think we can resolve this situation by legally

registering Site-101 as a falcon?"

"Yup, a Grey Falcon to be exact. Since it's officially a vulnerable species, we should be able to get a tax credit that way."

"And you plan on doing this by bringing a highly aggressive SCP, an avian SCP, to Site-101, by helicopter?"

"Exactly, the tax guys will need some proof."

"And you don't think that's a little risky?"

"Well, you're right, the Grey Falcon isn't endemic to the United States, but I don't think that will be too much of a problem."

"Actually I was referring to… never mind."

If anything, Leah had no remaining doubts that the other woman was indeed Dr. Clef.

"Um, OK, Alto, I was wondering something about your, uh, your…"

"My eyes?" she said quickly, "Oh, yeah, my eyes aren't really two different colors, it's just that one of my pupils has been stuck closed since I was a kid, so that eye looks lighter than the other."

"That wasn't what I… wait, really?"

"Yeah, it's sort of like David Bowie's eyes. Man, I still can't get over him."

"Heh, yeah." Leah remarked, holding her head.

"Still, Blackstar was a great album." Clef suddenly smiled widely, "Hey speaking of that, do you think some music will help with that headache of yours?"

"Um, I don't…"

Clef was already strumming her mandolin.

"In the villa of Ormen… in the villa of Ormen… stands a solitary candle…"

In an aircraft hanger at Area-55, several Class-D's were working to secure hooks around a giant bird. Containment Specialist Nick Magnus stood outside, talking to the two people who were responsible for the operation.

"So you both want to move **SCP-1387** to Site-101 because you're being investigated for tax fraud?"

"Look," Leah was quick to add, "It's her idea."

"Right," Dr. Clef added, "I want to make Site-101 legally a falcon, for tax purposes."

"Yeah boy, he said the thing!" a Class-D yelled from inside the hanger.

Nick turned around and gave an annoyed look, then looked back at Leah and Clef.

"Look, I've been working with that damn bird for years, and in my opinion, this is a dumb idea."

Leah sighed loudly. "Yes, that's what I've been saying all day! It's impractically dangerous."

"Oh, I agree," Nick continued, "You want to register the site as a falcon, but 1387 is a giant seagull."

Leah's jaw dropped.

"That's fine," Clef responded, "These are tax collectors, not ornithologists. I don't think it's going to be an issue."

Leah's jaw fell even lower.

A scream was heard from within the hanger followed by a splat, and then another scream.

"Hold on," Nick said as he turned around and walked back into the building.

“Hun, close your mouth before a bug flies in,” Clef teased.

Leah took a moment to regain her composure. She cleared her throat before speaking.

“Right, um, Alto, in all seriousness, there’s something I’ve been wondering about all day.”

“Hmm? What is it?”

“Well, I know this might be a bit awkward for me to inquire about, but…” Leah gestured to Clef’s chest, “How exactly did that happen?”

“Oh!” Clef said emphatically, “That’s what you’ve been so confused about!”

“Yes, I’ve been wondering about it all day!”

“Well, since you’re so curious, I bought this shirt at this really nice store in Baltimore.”

Leah’s mouth dropped again, wider than ever before.

“They give you a discount for coming in with a musical instrument, so I got it for a bargain too.”

Leah said nothing as Nick walked back outside.

“Alright, the skip is secured, and the chopper is ready to go. I’ll arrange another one to take you guys back, but first I need to call down a clean up crew to deal with what’s left of D-49687.”

About 30 meters away, a heavy lift helicopter started its engines. The blades began to rotate, slowly at first, then gradually faster until they were a blur. Finally, after about a minute, the aircraft lifted off, a rope attached to the bottom.

Ever so slowly, the giant bird tied to the other end was dragged out of the hanger, squirming the whole time. The rope was pulled steeper and steeper, until it was vertical. Then, 1387 was gently lifted into the air.

It was a sight to behold. The Class-D's all shuffled out of the hanger to watch as spectacle.

Snap!

Then the rope broke, and the 20 meter long seagull plunged to the ground. The Class-D's all screamed before being crushed under the weight of the falling bird.

1387 was still for a moment, before shaking itself free of the remaining rope.

Leah was terrified, frozen in place as she watched the creature begin running towards the perimeter fence, wings flapping.

Oh god, it's going to fly out! she thought. She glanced at the others. They seemed unrealistically calm.

1387 jumped into the air, about to fly over the electrified fence. It gracefully flew for a moment, seemingly free at last…

…then crashed down into the fence, writhing for a few moments as it was electrified, then laid down stunned.

"What? But… how?" Leah muttered.

"Well, good thing we clip that thing's wings every month, eh?" Nick said nonchalantly.

"It's a damn shame that didn't work, but I suppose it will make a good story back at 101, right?" Clef said as she patted Leah on the shoulder.

"Yeah, I guess so."

"I guess the clean up crew has their work cut out for them. Hopefully Magnus won't have any issues getting that thing back in its hanger OK."

"I'm sure he'll be fine."

“Well, either way, we still have this whole tax evasion thing to deal with.”

“Like I said earlier, it’s probably just a clerical error. I’ll get it sorted out when we get back."

As if on cue, a helicopter landed outside, ready to take Leah back home.

“Well, when you get back,” Clef said, “It was nice to meet you Ms. Mauldin, but I think I’m going to stay here and let you go on ahead without me.”

“Wait, aren’t you needed back on site? You’re the new Director.”

Clef let out a small laugh. “Oh, that was just probationary. After today you’ll have someone a bit more normal as your boss.”

Leah was dumbfounded for a moment. Then, she leaped for the door.

“FREEDOM!”

“Wait a minute, Leah.”

Leah stopped in the doorway and turned back towards Clef.

“I can’t let you leave just like that. Besides, didn’t you have something you still wanted to ask me?”

Leah was about to speak, but like many other times that day, she was cut off.

“You’ve been trying to ask me all day why I’m in the body of woman. Well, I suppose I’ve stalled enough. To make a long story short, there was an incident with **SCP-113**. That’s the reason I’m on probation, by the way.”

Leah stood for a moment, then said, “Alright, but that wasn’t what I was wondering actually.”

“Oh, really? Huh, I thought that was kinda the elephant in the room.”

“No, I was wondering why you have a mandolin instead of a ukulele.”

Clef giggled.

“That’s just because the author has a boner for mandolins.”

Legends Never Die

Site-19 Ancillary Research Wing

Agent Donnarson hadn't really expected to have to do a debriefing of this particular sort. As an information retrieval specialist, his job was to figure out the difference between report briefs, and the truth. However, "Dr." Magnus' file was several hundred pages long, and had started to become a little excessive, not to mention the content. A level 4 had made a request to figure out what the hell was going on, and the task fell to Rex.

As he walked through the halls of the Ancillary Research Wing at Site 19, he flipped through the case file, each entry more stupid than the last. This was going to take forever, and he could already imagine the headache this would cause.

The door to Magnus' office was open, and two men were sitting at chairs across from each other, making idle chatter. He hadn't met either of them before, and knocked softly on the wood of the office door. "Hello? I'm looking for Viktor Magnus?"

The shorter man stood up, and gestured to the blond man sitting on the drawer side of the desk. "Well, you found him. Here to finally terminate the idiot?"

Rex hesitated for a moment, caught off-guard by the joke. "I- What? No. Debrief."

The man grinned, and took a couple of steps, reaching across the distance. "I'm kidding. Sorry, I'm Researcher Kensington. Level 3. May I observe the interview?"

Rex shook the man's hand, and looked down at the directive sheet. "Anyone level 3 or higher could observe, technically, but this isn't

being recorded. It's just a debrief I'm supposed to report on."

The other man, in the chair raised an eyebrow, and smiled. "I don't mind if he observes. I'm Dr. *Michael* Viktor Magnus."

Rex frowned for a second, then looked down at the personnel file. "It says here it's Researcher Magnus, as you don't have a—"

Magnus threw his hands up. "My degree is real dammit! Just because the subject isn't, doesn't mean anything! Doctor. Magnus."

Rex could already feel his pulse in his neck now, a surefire sign a headache was coming. When it rains, it pours. "Alright. May I sit down?"

Kensington moved out-of-the-way, and grabbed a third chair from the corner, pulling it up to the desk on the short side, leaning back. "Just pretend I'm not here. I'd love to hear this."

Rex sat down. "Right. My name is Agent Rex Donnarson, and I'm—" An upraised hand interrupted his speech, and Magnus leaned forward, his face incredulous.

"Rex. Rex Donnarson. Seriously? That's your actual name?" The look on his face was one he was intimately familiar with.

"Yes. That's my actual legal name. No I did not change it." Rex tried to smile, but ended up grinding his teeth instead.

Magnus leaned back in his chair and shrugged. "Right, sorry. I just couldn't not say something. I'm sure your parents thought it was a lovely name."

Rex counted back from five in his head, then opened the case file in front of him. "Right. Let's get started. I'm here to clear up some… unusual reports that have come through as after-action reports. From what this says, you've taken part in an unusually high number of combat missions for a non-combatant, and several circumstances of your… reports, have been suspect. I've been ordered to find out what actually happened."

Magnus leaned back, shifting downwards in his chair. "Alrighty then.

Shoot."

Rex flipped open the first envelope, breaking the wax seal. "Right. Okay, 20 April 2017. There was a mission flying over Kansas, delivering SCP-3000. The plane reported distress, and we lost communication with it. You arrived at Site-27 sixteen hours later."

Magnus nodded. "Yes, that's right."

Rex pinched the bridge of his nose. "Could you recount how you survived this plane crash, as you did in your report?"

Magnus looked at the ceiling, and then nodded speaking with his eyes on the paper tile to the right of the overhead light. "Right. Plane was going down, but luckily for me, there was an alligator in the back."

"An alligator. In the depressurized section of a cargo plane? Seriously, you expect me to believe this?"

Magnus nodded again. "Yeah, and good thing too, it was a pretty good pilot."

Rex looked down at the sheet, with notes about the plane crash. *SCP Flight 2557 was found twenty miles from Site-27, having gone through an apparent guided emergency landing on to a small uninhabited island. Most of the plane had deteriorated. One Nile Crocodile was found in the co-pilots seat. There were elevated hume levels in the area for six hours following the investigation.*

Rex's mouth became a thin line. "You do realize how insane that sounds, right?"

Magnus tilted his head to the side eyes blank for a moment, before smirking. "That's a relative term, considering about two hundred yards away is an entity capable of reshaping reality at will. Assuming 343 is still kept in the same section this week."

Kensington snorted across from the two of them. "Seriously though, alligator, Magnus?"

He shrugged. "It might have been a crocodile. I can never tell them

apart, I really should memorize the teeth thing."

Rex flipped the documents back in to the packet, then broke the seal on the next report. "Okay, that's… I'll note it down that your story is consistent with presented events. This one is from April 22, 2014."

Kensington held up a hand. "Wasn't that the rocket over Antarctica?"

Magnus nodded. "Yep. Six Russians, and an airlock. Man, that sucked."

Rex scanned the file, and looked up, annoyed. "Okay, come the hell on. You survived re-entry from orbit?"

Magnus nodded, taking off his glasses, and cleaning a lens, his eyes focused anywhere except on the Agent. "Yep! I mean, it was painful, but I was pretty okay. Burnt my eyebrows off though."

Rex let the file fall to the table, and sat up. "Eyebrows? It would have burned you to death!"

Magnus pointed at the file. "Snowstorm. We were in Antarctica, and there was a whole fuckton of snow that day."

Rex held his hands up in exasperation. "That… that isn't how convection works! You should have died on reentry, and slammed in to paste on the ground!"

Magnus shrugged. "Look, I'm a meta-physicist, not a physicist—"

Kensington cut in, "No you're not."

Magnus glared over at Kensington . "It's on my degree."

"Yes. Your fake degree. From the 'University of Deleware'. Delaware has two a's in it."

Magnus rolled his eyes, "As I've said, just because the subject is false doesn't mean the degree is. The University of Deleware is a perfectly accredit institution in the reality I got the degree in."

Kensington waggled his fingers. "I think that's literally the definition,

'cause—"

Rex's voice rang out: "Gentlemen! Either way, you can't survive an orbital re-entry." The pounding had spread up to his temples now.

Magnus spread his hands in a gesture of helplessness, his eyes roaming the room. "What can I tell you, it was really windy, and there was this big snowdrift, and—"

Rex slammed the file down. "You're not taking this seriously at all! You expect me to believe these ridiculous lies about how you apparently keep dodging death?"

Magnus' face grew serious, and he looked Agent Donnarson clear in the eye. "All I can say is that Legends Never Die." His expression softened, and he winked.

Kensington sighed heavily, and reached over to a side table where a stale cup of coffee was sitting. He took a sip, and shook his head slightly. "That's all he ever says. Annoying isn't it."

Rex took a moment to compose himself, and set the file on the stack of finished files. "Whatever. Let's continue, if that's alright with you." He pulled out the last of the sealed files. "Okay, this one you're going to have to give me more than just some nonsense explanation. You were in Louisiana during a hurricane and got washed in to the sewer system by a storm surge."

Magnus' eyes grew distant for a moment, before remembering the incident. "Ahh. Right. Yes, we'd been tracking SCP-4733, and discovered it had holed up in Golden Meadow. I was there with an MTF, I can't remember the name."

Rex nodded, and continued, "Zeta-22. Clockbots or something like that. So the hurricane hit, and you were swept in to the sewers."

Magnus grimaces for a moment, then continued. "Right. I was swept in to the sewer system. I got a melon barb stuck in my throat which —"

Rex dropped the pen he was holding. "I'm sorry, repeat that for me?"

Magnus shrugged. "Melon barb. It's a fish. Got it stuck right in my throat. Thankfully it kept taking in water, so I could use the gills to not drown."

Kensington leaned forward. "Hold on a second. The melon barb is native to India, not Louisiana. What the hell are you on about?"

Magnus turned to face Kensington. "Hell if I know. It was definitely a melon barb though. Someone might have had it as a pet or something?"

Rex couldn't help but just stare at the two of them. "That. That is what's incredulous about his story?! The SPECIES OF FISH!?"

Rex slammed the file shut. "Fine! Jesus fucking christ, enough! I can't believe you're wasting my time!"

He shoved all of the papers in to the overstuffed case file. "The only other question I have, that I've been specifically instructed to ask, is after the… 'plane crash', you claimed a pair of 'sea turtles' carried you to Hawaii. How did you get to the shore, smart guy? You reportedly crashed near the south pole."

Magnus shrugged again, as if the answer was obvious. "Well, I'd worn my Heelies that mission, so moving long distance wasn't really an iss—"

Rex slammed his hands on the table, and stood, grabbing up all the case file. "Fuck it! Fuck you!" He pointed to Kensington. "Fuck me! Fuck you all, and fuck your shit!" He stomped out of the room, slamming the door.

Kensington sat blinking. He looked at Magnus, confused. "What the hell did I do…?"

Magnus looked up from his phone, and shrugged. "Whatever. I told him everything I could about every single event. Not my fault he didn't believe me."

Kensington shrugged, and stood. "True. I'll catch you later Magnus."

Magnus waved vaguely. "Later bro."

Dr Kensington adjusted his glasses and walked out of the office, passing through the Ancillary wing in to the main facility grounds. He pulled out his phone, swiping a few times, looking up the map of the facility, idly pressing here and there.

He dipped his hand in to his pocket, and pulled out a tiny bottle labeled "Hand Sanitizer", squirting a bit on his right hand, rubbing it into his palm, and forearm.

Kensington followed the map to the wing labeled 'Intelligence'. He walked in to the main reception area, and called out: "'Scuse me? I'm looking for Agent Donnarson?"

An older balding man scooted his chair back out of the nearest cubicle. "Third office on the back wall. Name's on the door."

Kensington nodded, with a smile. "Thankya." He took a dozen steps to end up in front of the door to Rex's office. He hesitated a moment, and knocked.

"Come in," the agent's voice called out.

Kensington braced himself, and walked in. Agent Donnarson sat at his desk, typing away at a laptop, several stacks of documents on his desk, as well as the case file he and Magnus had fought over. He put on a sunny smile, and tried to sound cheerful, "Hey, Rex. I just wanted to say sorry about Magnus before. He's… flippant, but he's good at what he does."

Rex narrowed his eyes and sighed. "Oh. Doctor Kensington, wasn't it? It's fine. I'll report this, and my boss will probably order a full investigation. We'll get to the bottom of this." Kensington's neck involuntarily tightened, and he sighed internally.

He held out his right hand. "Just call me Kens. No hard feelings?"

Rex stood after a moment, and walked over. "No hard feelings." He took Kensington's hand in a firm grip.

Kensington's left hand moved to the bracelet on his right, touching the small stud. A barely perceptible swoosh of air escaped the heavy clasp. Rex's eyes fluttered for a moment as the Class B

amnestic took hold through the topical.

"Hey, it's no biggie. This is all classified anyway, right? Don't worry about it. There's no need for a formal investigation. It's all just as Magnus said."

Rex's eyes fluttered for a moment more, before mumbling out: "But… who classified it?"

Kensington looked him dead in the eye. "O5-2." He released his hand, casually peeling away the flesh tone polymer covering his palm, and forearm, dropping it in to Rex's trashcan where it turned into less than fifty grams of unidentifiable gray dust. He turned, leaving the office, and out to the main research wing, his face an inscrutable mask.

Dimensional Site 4, April 20, 2017

The small transparent case in front of O5-2 crackled with whorls of light, which she knew her brain interpreted as colored purple, for lack of a way to really interpret the sixth dimensional distortions.

"When?"

The technician beside her lifted a squarish device. "Soon."

O5-2 glanced down at her watch. 11:59 PM. The plane had gone down less than 20 minutes ago, and he should be emerging any moment.

The technician looked at the Overseer. "Hume readings increasing."

The bones in front of her in the clear plastic case vibrated slightly, moving forward, a purplish after image emerging out from the case. A series of unpleasant flashes depicted the after image slowly coating in fibrous muscles, nerves, eventually skin, tissues, hair… even clothing.

Dr. Michael Magnus fell to the ground in front of O5-2, the last of his screams fading into the chamber.

O5-2 took a step forward. "Welcome back again, Michael."

Dr. Magnus' bloodshot eyes lifted from the floor to hers, terror filling them, the pain slowly receding.

O5-2 smiled, and handed him a typewritten report. On it was more insanity and gibberish about sea turtles. "Why? Why do you keep making me do this?"

She tilted her head slightly. "Simple, Michael. You were a liar when you were just a Foundation employee, and everyone thinks you're just a liar now. And, frankly, you were the only personnel at the right time, who was expendable enough to qualify. What do you say if anyone presses you for what happened, and won't take that for an answer?"

Magnus skimmed the sheet a few more times, before rising to his feet. With a heavy sigh, he repeated the words that had been drilled in to his head death after death after death, "Legends never die. Where are you putting me back this time?"

O5-2 nodded to the door. "Just outside of Site-27. A little over twelve hours from the current chronographic time. You know the routine, Michael. The evidence has already been back-filled in to reality."

Magnus' head hung down. "Fine. What happened to the anomaly?"

O5-2 smiled slightly, "We're not sure. You've never died so close to a reality bending object before. We're still investigating what happened."

Magnus took a shaky step towards the door on the far wall, opening it, to reveal a peaceful island scene. Hawaii, home of Site-27. "Answer me this. Is it worth it?"

O5-2 thought for a moment, then nodded. "Yes. Completely. You've seen the combat reports from the Senior Research staff, yourself."

Magnus grimaced. "So be it." Then he stepped through the door, out of his own personal hell, and into the salt air of paradise.

Leisure Time

“Commencing testing on **SCP-715**,” Dr. Louef said into the voice recorder. He glanced at the testing chamber from within the observation room. The photobooth sat inside, as innocent as could be, while a D-class personnel stood in front of it.

“Please enter SCP-715 and take a photo, D-129012,” said Louef.

D-129012 strolled in. “Hey, guys, this thing is busted,” he said from inside. “I’m trying to use it, but it’s not giving me any photos.”

“Thank you, D-129012. Please exit SCP-715.”

“Uh, okay. You’re welcome, I guess?” The confused D-129012 left the booth, and was stopped in front of the SCP object.

As expected, an exact clone of D-129012 exited the booth approximately 5 minutes after the original had exited.

“W-what the fuck is this? Who the hell are you?” shouted the panicking D-class.

“Oh god, what the hell is this? Where am I? Who are you?” his confused clone replied.

“I’m goddamn me! Who are you? Take that mask off, man, it’s freaking me out!”

“It’s not a mask! You have to help me! I’m gonna die!”

“What?! Does that mean that I’m going to die too? Oh, fuck no!”

Dr. Louef grimaced for a moment, and spoke a short command into the microphone, "The Sealed King sleeps eternal."

Suddenly, the D-class personnel stiffened, and collapsed, dying before he hit the floor, without understanding or feeling anything

before his death. The particular hypnotic kill agent that Louef had selected was quick, painless, and remarkably effective.

“What the fuck?! What did you do to him? Am I next? Please, no! You have to help me! Where’s your goddamn sense of human decency?” the clone begged.

The clone tried to grab the guard’s gun. The guard responded by hitting the clone and restraining him to the chair.

One of the assistant researchers watched a timer.

5 minutes since appearance.

Then 10 minutes.

Then 12 minutes.

The D-class clone screamed for the last 3 minutes, in one long, drawn out scream. He suddenly stiffened, and dissolved into a pile of grey powder.

Dr. Louef turned away from the chamber, refusing to look at the other researchers. “Testing complete.”

“Welcome to the 5th Annual Site 118 Game Night! Grab a friend, or meet someone new, and sit down and play a game or two!” Dr. Vange proclaimed from his position at the front of the cafeteria.

The gathered crowd dispersed throughout the cafeteria, strolling over to the large table of assorted decks of cards, board games, and other activities. Groups of researchers, agents, security personnel, and other Site 118 staff milled around, and formed tables of games.

Dr. Louef, on the other hand, was found sitting at a table, furiously scribbling notes.

He pored over notes for the SCP objects under his supervision. Scribbling a research proposal here, finishing up a report there, writing this, writing that, doing this, doing tha-

WHAM!

The sudden shock of a board game being smashed onto his table made the researcher jump out of his seat, knocking over a stack of papers. As Louef scrambled to pick them all up, he got some help from the sudden intruder.

“Oh, it’s you Albert,” Louef said, while glancing up at Dr. Wensley, his fellow departmental director.

“Why aren’t you playing some games, John?”

“Because I have better things to do than play Scrabble, Al.”

“You know why we have these things, right?”

“Because HR has too much time on its hands.”

“Hilarious. Seriously, though, these things are important. You can’t save the world every day and not expect some kind of psychological damage,” Wensley said, pulling up a chair and sweeping aside some of the papers on the table, and began to unbox the Scrabble set.

Louef sighed. “I’m fine, Al-”

“Bullshit. I’ve seen how you’re doing with this shift. I know that some of these new SCP’s that were transferred to your department are tough. I’ve had a rough incident or two with some of mine, too. And I know what this kind of stay-away shift can do to you.”

Dr. Wensley continued to unbox the set, and handed Dr. Louef a rack for his tiles. The reluctant doctor accepted the proffered rack after some time, and grabbed a number of tiles.

“You know, you could always talk to Vange-” Wensley began.

“I don’t need to talk to Vange, Al. I’m fine.”

Wensley frowned, as he played his first word. “There’s nothing wrong with talking to Vange. Everyone’s done it at some point, outside of regular psych evals.”

“Not me,” Louef replied, placing his first word.

“Maybe you should. You got transferred onto 715, right? That’s a hell of an SCP to take on,” Wensley sympathized.

Louef grit his teeth as he remembered the screams of the last clone that he tested. “No.”

“You want to talk about it?”

“No.”

Wensley fell silent as the game continued. In the end, Louef won. After that game, Louef checked his watch.

“Oh, look, my mandated amount of time that I have to be here is up. Time to go back to work. I’ll see you later, Al,” Louef said as he stood up, picking up his pile of work. He turned and swiftly left the room, leaving Wensley at the table with the game of Scrabble.

Wensley looked at the departing figure of his closest friend and sighed. He began to clean up the game.

“Commencing testing on **SCP-463**,” Dr. Louef noted in his recorder. “D-419803, please approach the table and pick up SCP-463.”

“The spoon? You’re telling me that this spoon is SCP-whatever?” The skeptical D-419803 said.

“Please pick up SCP-463.”

“Alright, I guess.”

The unsuspecting D-class walked over to the table and reached for the spoon. Dr. Louef wanted to look away. He didn’t want to see what he knew was going to happen, and see the results that he had come to expect and dread.

But he had to look.

A sudden scream split the silence of the observation chamber. The

assistant researchers, still unused to the testing environment flinched, and closed their eyes. Dr. Louef swallowed the bile threatening to rise into his throat, and calmly started to talk into the microphone.

“D-419803, describe what you felt.”

He was greeted with more screaming. The woman was screaming at the top of her lungs, as her entire upper torso was bent into a parallel position with the ground, while her lower half was not.

“D-419803, please describe what you felt.”

“WHAT THE FUCK DID YOU DO TO ME?” The ragged scream from within the chamber met the doctor’s question.

“D-419803, answer the question, or you will be forced to do so. What did you feel when you picked up the spoon?” Dr. Louef replied, gritting his teeth.

“IT BROKE MY GODDAMN BACK YOU FUCKER!” The screaming descended into incoherent sobbing and moaning, alternating between prayers and appeals for help. D-419803 stopped answering questions. Dr. Louef sighed, and pressed the button that halted communication between the observation room and the testing chamber.

“Testing complete.”

Dr. Louef didn’t let his assistants see his facial expression as he stood up. Nor did he let them see him when he left the room, or when he strolled down the hall, or when he walked into his office.

He closed the door behind him, and sat down at his desk without turning the lights on.

Then, he leaned forward, and put his head into his hands.

Dr. Louef sat at his desk, attempting to eat his lunch and do some work. As he wrote with one hand, and spooned food into his mouth with the other, he paused for a moment. He put down both of his

tools, and sighed.

As he wrote a report on SCP-463, he was also using a spoon. The sudden flashback struck him, the sounds of snapping spines and cries for help echoing in his mind.

"You broke my back."

"What the hell have you done?"

"Kill me."

He angrily threw his spoon across the room, and pushed the tray away, suddenly disgusted and no longer hungry. His gaze fell upon the photos that he kept on his desk of his family.

"Why did you kill him? He was me."

"Where is your sense of human decency?"

"You're a monster."

Louef suddenly stood up, ignoring his tray and his papers. He left his office and took a left, heading down the hallway.

“So, John, what can I do for you?” Dr. Vange steepled his fingers as he looked at Dr. Louef.

“Well…doctor, I-” Dr. Louef began.

“Please, call me Mark,” insisted Vange. “We’re friends here.”

Louef assented. “Okay, Mark. I…I’m having some issues with this shift.”

Dr. Vange glanced down at his files. “Ah, yes, this is your first time on the stay-away shift for October-January, right?”

Louef nodded. “Yes. I’ve never had to do this long shift before, and they managed to time it when I got new SCP’s on my hands.”

“It says here that you have children, John,” said Vange as he

perused the file.

Dr. Louef closed his eyes. “Yes, Sam and Jenna.”

“And how old are they?”

“Sam’s 5, and Jenna’s 11.”

“Interesting. Do you miss them?”

“Of course. What kind of question is that?”

“An important one. If you weren’t missing them, then that could be something else. Now, is there a particular incident that caused this visit?” Dr. Vange asked, looking into Dr. Louef’s eyes.

Dr. Louef looked away. “Yes. The new SCP’s under my jurisdiction. They’re somewhat….traumatic.”

"Tell me about them."

Louef sighed, running his hand through his hair. "The first new one was 715. It's a photobooth that makes a clone of people put into it."

"And what about that?"

"The clones die after 15 minutes. We wanted to-" Louef stumbled for a moment, and closed his eyes, as the memories of all the clones came back to his head.

"Do you need a moment, John?" The concerned psychologist asked.

"No, I'm fine. We wanted to see what happened if the original was killed. We… we tried it 10 times. Needed a good sample size."

"And what happened?"

"In every case, the clone got… emotional. They all seemed to know when they were going to die, and every damn time, seeing their original die made them even more agitated," said Louef as he grimaced, and closed his eyes.

"They screamed, Mark. They all goddamn screamed as they died.

Every single one."

"Were there any other ones?"

"I got SCP-463 too. It's a spoon that breaks the spine of anyone who picks it up."

"Jesus."

"I know. The last research team that worked on it saw that the place where the spine snapped differed. We were supposed to find out if there was a pattern of some sort. It took us 10 fucking tries, Mark. *10 tries.* And you know what we found out? Absolutely nothing! *There is no pattern.* Yet, we threw away 10 D-class to find out jack shit." Dr. Louef got more and more emotional as his account went on. He put his head into his hands as he leaned forward, a tear streaming down his face.

"They were even worse. They didn't even die; they just kept moaning and screaming for god knows how long. They took them away, and you and I both know what's happening to them," Louef spat out.

Dr. Vange was quiet until his patient recomposed himself. After a moment, Dr. Louef sat up straight again.

"I did research on mostly Safe-class SCP's before this new transfer. I've never had to deal with something like this before. I miss my kids, Mark. My wife, my kids, my home." sighed Louef.

Vange nodded. “It’s expected from a transfer of new SCP's, and a shift like this. Did you read the new report in *Foundation*?"

“I skimmed it.”

“The psychology department has come up with a new disorder, and added it to our version of the DSM. We call it Moral Ambiguity Disorder.”

“MAD?”

“It’s an unfortunate acronym, yes. But it’s important to note. We’re

noticing that a large number of our researchers are dealing with extreme emotional stress, and reporting signs of anxiety, nervousness, irritability, and lack of social activity." Dr. Vange stood up, and browsed the shelves of his office. He pulled out a journal from the shelf, and opened it.

"MAD is caused by witnessing traumatic incidents during testing, and developing a moral dissonance within the self. The condition is aggravated by stress and too much work, without adequate periods of rest. Why do you think that we started all of these social events and game nights? MAD is crippling a lot of the effectiveness of researchers."

Dr. Vange showed Louef the copy of the journal. It featured a whole page of graphs and diagrams, all detailing MAD and treatments for it.

"After implementing these activities, we had a 50% decrease in attacks of MAD at Site 89. It's clearly working, which is what my advice to you is. Relax a little. We may be the Foundation, but the world's not going to end if you relax a little while off duty. You're here, but you may as well enjoy your time outside of work."

"I don't know-"

"Well I know. I'm a psychologist. It's my job to know these things. Go out and have some fun, John." Dr. Vange smiled at Louef as the latter rose to his feet. The psychologist extended a hand.

Dr. Louef hesitated for a moment before accepting the handshake. "T-thank you, Mark. I'll think about it."

"…And once again, welcome to the 4th Annual Site 118 Christmas Party, ladies and gentlemen! Remember, 2 glasses of wine per staff member! We can't exactly print money, right?" Dr. Vange cheerily said. The audience tittered politely.

"Now, don't let me spoil your fun. I'll shut up now, and let the rest of you have fun, eh?" Dr. Vange stepped down from his spot at the podium as the gathered staff members of Site 118 applauded, partly

out of respect, and partly out of relief that the speech was over.

Dr. Louef walked over to the refreshments table. He picked up a glass of wine, and leaned back against the wall, drinking to himself. He was interrupted by the arrival of a much more lively colleague.

“Evening, John. Enjoying your Foundation mandated-fun?” Dr. Wensley strolled up to Louef, a glass of wine in hand, and a smile on his face.

“Go to hell, Al,” Louef replied, sipping from his glass.

“Can’t. Don’t have the requisite clearance for that,” Wensley’s grin got bigger.

Louef and Wensley both chuckled.

Wensley leaned against the wall with Louef. “How’s the testing going?”

“Better. I..uh…went to talk to Vange.”

“That’s good. Did it help?”

“Yeah. I think so.”

“So, are you going to enjoy the party?”

Louef sighed. “It’s not exactly where I wanted to be. Sam and Jenna are both wondering where their dad is. What am I supposed to do about that?”

Wensley put his hand on his colleague and friend’s shoulder. “Look, I know that this isn’t exactly what you wanted. This shift is tough, but you have to look on the bright side. This may not be the kind of Christmas that you wanted, but it’s better than nothing, right?” Wensley offered a smile.

Louef gave a small smile back. “I suppose so.”

“Don’t stand here moping all night, alright? I need to track down one of my assistants.” Wensley gave Louef one more smile before

turning around and merging back into the crowd.

Louef went to take another sip of his glass before noticing that it was empty. He stared down at the glass for a long, hard moment.

And then he set it on the table and walked into the crowd.

Lemuridae

When I retire, I want to live a quiet life.

Sorry.

Here. *If* I retire, I want to live a quiet life.

It's not an easy task. In my line of work, life expectancy is short.

I might get killed during our next containment breach, when the various monsters we keep locked up get bored and decide to have a snack. I might meet my end on a field mission, by getting eaten, vaporized, or crazied to death by some hitherto undiscovered scip that defies all laws of science as we know it and has decided to use these powers to kill me in a spectacularly gruesome fashion. Or I might simply die in a good old-fashioned shootout with the Insurgency or GOC while I'm on a mission. Agents that work for the SCP Foundation don't live very long, as you might have guessed. The bad ones, at least.

Me? I like to think that I'm a good agent. If nothing else, I'm a lucky agent. I keep my head down on the job; I submit my reports on time, and, if necessary, I go out and kill a few people in pursuit of a scip. Do I sleep well at night? Sometimes.

Well, no, that's a lie, not really. Spending your life surrounded by murderous reptiles, killer statues, and with God knows how many other nameless horrors lurking out there does not for a good night's rest make.

I have nightmares a lot. Sometimes, God help me, I even enjoy my night-time terrors; the one where 173 chases me down a hallway, or that time where 682 decides to turn me into meat puree. They remind me that, beneath the detached demeanour I put on at work, there's some small part of me that's still human, still a fearful little man in a universe of unimaginable horror.

Of course, there are times when I don't want to be human at all.

Sometimes… I want to be a lemur.

Go ahead. Laugh. Chuckle at the weirdo who entertains a hopeless dream. I don't know where this dream came from either. At my age, I should be fantasizing about fast cars and attractive lingerie-clad women. But I don't. When I imagine my ideal life, I find myself drifting off to the rainforests of Madagascar, where I can spend a quiet day eating fruit and swinging through the trees with my brothers and sisters.

And only there, in the trees, with sites and agents and scips so far away, do I feel truly safe. In any other profession, this dream might seem foolish, unattainable, but when your co-workers include a talking dog, immortal monkey-man, and whatever Clef is, you'll quickly find out that "impossible" is far from constant.

The most vivid memory of my mother that I have is my five-year old self and her visiting the zoo. We watched the tigers, the elephants, the lions; but it was the lemurs, the little hyperactive prosimians jumping up the chain-link fence, little hands reaching out for our peanuts, that made my mother laugh hardest. We watched them for hours, until finally the zoo closed and we were shooed out.

She was hit by a car three days afterwards.

Working for the Foundation really does change a way a man thinks. Even when you're off the job, you begin eyeing every thing suspiciously. That coffee mug, that table, the newspaper- is it a potentially undiscovered scip? What's lurking behind that dark corner? Could that weird television show be a potential memetic threat? No matter how much the others deny it, I'm sure I'm not the only Foundation worker who eyes the shadows of my night-time bedroom with a mixture of suspicion and fear, before the nightmares take me.

But then, on those few nights where the nightmares slip away, I can feel the rough bark of the tree beneath my prehensile toes. I hear the familiar calls of a troop scampering along the ground, and I leap down and join them. In the hot afternoon sun of Madagascar, there

are no unexpected horrors, no nightmares, and no fear. I remember my mother, and our laughter.

And, then, and only then, do I feel safe.

Lending a Hand

> The Ethics Committee isn't your enemy! Your site's liaison is there to help you do a better job. Those pesky containment procedures can seem impossible to perfect, but if you work with your liaisons, you can get them just right. If your liaison pays you a visit, give them your full attention. They're just there to help!
>
> ~ Page 234 of the Foundation Employee Handbook

Dr. Jeremiah **Cimmerian** sat in the back of a powder blue Lincoln Continental at the outer gate of Site-88. It wasn't a long drive from Mobile Regional Airport to Site-88, and Cimmerian had enjoyed the scenery. Cimmerian's driver, an elderly, quiet, and somber man with a barely detectable southern drawl, flashed identification to the guard, and they moved past the outer perimeter. Two other cars were ahead of them at the second checkpoint.

Cimmerian tried to get a closer look at the other two cars. "Kent, right?"

"Yes, sir," the driver answered.

"Busy day today?" Cimmerian closed his laptop.

"Probably more engineers out of 352," Kent said with a nod. "The regional director's been pushing us to upgrade our containment wings."

"Kate was on us about those upgrades for years. I'm surprised they're finally following through, honestly."

Kent turned around, seeming interested for the first time this entire trip. "You know the Regional Director?"

"I didn't actually meet her in person until that breach a few years

back. Though the circumstances weren't exactly conducive for us to get acquainted. If it wasn't for that I'd just know her as a name on reports I filed."

Kent put his arm on the back of the front passenger seat. "You used to work here?"

"Yeah. Site Liaison for the Ethics Committee."

Kent laughed and turned back. *For a minute*, Cimmerian thought, *he must've thought I was important.*

> You are not just scientists and you are not just agents. You are diplomats. The world is counting on you to not just contain threats, but to avoid taking actions that create new ones. There are many objects that will not or cannot care how morally or ethically you treat them. There are also many that will care. And we care.
>
> Remedial Ethics: A Refresher, Page 2.

Cimmerian turned the doorknob leading to Director Maddox's office and nearly choked on the smell of cigar smoke. The photos on the bookshelves were significantly older than the ones on the desk. All of them were pictures of Maddox, at various stages of his life.

Maddox greeted him warmly. Cimmerian had heard these sorts of pleasantries before. Regular staff might not care, but site directors knew better than to piss off a member of the Ethics Committee. Everyone had skeletons.

Cimmerian just nodded along until Maddox got to the real question on his mind. "What brings you back to Site-88?"

"Honest-to-god ethics violations, believe it or not," Cimmerian said, pulling a file folder from his bag. "I'm here to investigate your Liaison's reports."

"Ahh. Yeah, she's been complaining about a lot of our work recently."

Cimmerian nodded. "Mostly stuff relating to the Alpha-Nine trials, right?"

Maddox stopped suddenly. "You're cleared for that?"

"Did you think the committee was just skipping the party?"

Maddox composed himself. "Sorry. Um. Ok. Your liaison…" Maddox paused for a moment as if remembering the name. "Jenkins. She's complaining about some of our work because she's not read up on Alpha-Nine. There's not much we can do about that right now, though."

"Even so, we can't just ignore the reports. That would be even more suspicious."

"So, you're just going to run around the site and make it look like you're checking up on things?"

"I'm focusing on **2913**, so depending on how that goes I might be out of your hair before the end of the day."

"2913?" Maddox shifted in his seat.

Cimmerian pulled a folder from his bag and opened it. "I'd like to talk to you about the impact testing you ordered last month."

SCP-2913 is a severed right hand, formerly belonging to James Hallman (deceased), which is capable of independent movement. Approximately 5.1 centimeters of the radial bone and 4.6 centimeters of the ulna extend, uncovered by skin, behind the wrist joint. Despite the lack of a biological support system and obvious trauma associated with the terminating ends of the bones behind the wrist joint, SCP-2913 remains healthy.

SCP-2913 is capable of speech, hearing, sight, and smell. SCP-2913 has shown a moderate level of skill in complex problem solving. While SCP-2913 has been observed to move its fingers and thumb together in tandem during the act of "speaking", observation of

> SCP-2913 has revealed the auditory source of speech to be between the 1st and 2nd metacarpal bones even in the absence of motion.
>
> ~ SCP-2913's Documentation.

Doctor Cimmerian sighed. The records he'd read had prepared him for this… but this was exactly the kind of SCP object that made it difficult for him to do his job properly. Cimmerian wasn't a naturally emotional person, but he was human. Remaining objective was always a struggle.

Better get this over with now.

The inside of SCP-2913's containment chamber was grey and sterile. Cimmerian sat down at the desk on one side of the glass partition. SCP-2913 lay almost motionless on a table, facing a television. Cimmerian could tell the room hadn't been properly cleaned in a few days. He wrote that down in his notebook, then activated the microphone.

"Hello?"

The hand jumped and spoke. "Holy heck!" 2913 turned and moved its fingers and thumb in time with the words. "Who are you?"

"I'm Dr. Cimmerian."

"Well heya Cimmy. Can I call you Cimmy?"

Cimmerian paused for a moment. "Sure."

The hand walked on its fingers to get closer to the glass partition. "I never saw you before."

"I've never come down here before. Han, I think?" Cimmerian put the object's documentation on the desk in front of him.

"Haha. You're the first one to call me that. I was getting used to 2913."

"I can call you that instead if…" Cimmerian began.

"No! I like it. It's much more personal than the number."

"Ok. Han. I wanted to get your perspective on the tests they've been running on you."

Han recoiled slightly. "Maddox knows what he's doing. He's been with me since I first got here."

Cimmerian nodded. "I understand that. I'm just helping him out. The more you can tell me about the testing, the better I can help Maddox with his job."

"Well, tell him just because my bones heal quick doesn't mean it doesn't hurt when they break 'em."

Cimmerian started to answer when a short blast of noise blared over the intercom, followed by a voice. "Warning. This is not a drill. Please remain in your current locations until further notice. There has been an incursion in sector 4."

Han spoke up excitedly. "Are you about to go all John McClane on their asses?"

Cimmerian pulled out his phone. No bars. "They locked the door before they played that message. No escape."

"You're just going to wait it out?"

"Not much choice." Cimmerian set his phone down on the desk. "I'm safer in here than I would've been out there."

There was a pause from Han before it turned around and crawled towards its television remote. "You wanna watch Game of Thrones then? I can start it over from the beginning of the season if you want."

Cimmerian looked over at his phone. *Still no signal. Shit.*

"Maybe later," Cimmerian said. "Right now we need to talk about those tests."

> I have here a copy of Dr. Kondraki's termination procedure proposal. Step one is his plan to use cat urine and a pistol loaded with silver bullets. Backup plans two, three, four, And five are listed as, and I quote, 'Wing It,' 'Make Something Up,' 'Cross That Bridge When I Come To It,' and 'Put My Head Between My Knees And Kiss My Ass Goodbye.'
>
> ~ Post-Incident Interview 083-CLEF-01

The questioning was routine. When it was over, Han had apologized if it was getting Maddox into any trouble. Cimmerian had laughed at that. Now though, with the hand back to watching television, Cimmerian was moving around the room awkwardly holding up his cellphone and hoping for a signal.

A distant rumbling shook the containment chamber and interrupted them both. Cimmerian looked around as the power blinked twice and then went out for good.

For a brief moment there was complete silence. Then the backup systems kicked on. Red emergency lights illuminated the room, and the ventilation system began to move air again.

During that brief silence, Cimmerian thought he could hear something outside the door. He put his ear up to the wall and listened. He heard the faint sound of a declined access card.

"Shit." Cimmerian said, even though Han couldn't hear him anymore.

Cimmerian dragged the desk to the left wall before flipping it over on its side. The intercom clattered to the floor. Cimmerian pulled the table closer to the wall, and then laid down beside it.

Outside, a knocking started, and quickly became louder. Cimmerian closed his eyes, covered his ears, and took a small breath. He heard the metal door come off its hinges a moment later and slam to the ground. Cimmerian opened his mouth and breathed out slowly. The men outside threw an object into the middle of the room.

The world went white, and then very black.

14:45:01 Second group of hostiles (designated "Dasher") breaches 2913's containment cell. A flash bang is deployed into the breached room.

14:45:13 Dasher-1 and 4 enter 2913's cell while Dasher-2, 3, and 5 remain outside.

14:46:34 Dasher-1 and 4 leave 2913's cell with 2913 in a cloth bag carried by Dasher-4. Remains of this bag later indicate it to be a Kevlar weave.

14:46:39 Dasher receives a radio signal from Prancer (first group of hostiles) requesting assistance at **2343**'s containment cell. *(Please see incident report 1430 for more information on LMTF 352 Dalet's neutralization of "Prancer".)*

14:47:05 Dasher proceeds 13 meters before 2913 escapes its confinement.

14:47:06 2913 exits bag, brushing Dasher-4's belt as it falls to the floor.

14:47:10 A fragmentation grenade detonates on Dasher-4's belt *(It has been determined that this was an accidental detonation relating to 2913's fall.)*, killing Dasher-1,2,4, and 5. Dasher-3 is mortally injured and will die before security teams arrive. 2913 is thrown away from explosion.

14:47:25 2913 recovers and returns to its cell.

Note: Request by 2913 to keep grenade pin acquired from Dasher-4 as a "souvenir" is currently under consideration.

~ Video Surveillance: Incursion Log 88-04

There would be debriefings, investigations, and reports to file, but

Cimmerian headed back to Site-17 the next morning. They'd have to catch up to him there.

Kent, for his part, seemed equal parts reverent and curious. He hadn't asked any questions yet, but Cimmerian could tell they were on the tip of the man's tongue.

"You seem like you've got something on your mind, Kent."

"Yes sir." Kent paused, before looking at Cimmerian in the rear view mirror. "I heard from a friend that you took out half the incursion on your own with a single grenade."

Cimmerian blinked twice and chuckled. *This,* he thought, *this is how those kinds of stories start.*

Kent snapped his eyes back to the road.

"Well," Cimmerian began, "I can't talk about it, but that seems incredibly unlikely."

"Yes, sir," Kent answered.

Cimmerian was sure he could've gotten away with telling the truth, but what was the truth anyway?

That the other half of the hostiles had died trying to get into 2343's cell? Why did the teams go straight for Alpha-Nine candidates? What was 2343 doing on the lists in the first place? It was basically a god, there's no way anyone would have approved it for Alpha-Nine.

There were leaks and subterfuge and danger around every corner. This was exactly the kind of shit he'd been avoiding during his entire tenure with the Foundation.

"Hey Kent," Cimmerian said, sighing. "Could you turn the radio on?"

Kent nodded and pressed the power button.

Norman Greenbaum. Cimmerian thought as he hummed along, *Prepare yourself, you know it's a must. You gotta have a friend in Jesus.*

- Memories can be fuzzy, so if there are important details, don't wait to be asked, write them down!
- If you or one of your friends had direct contact with either an escaped SCP object or a hostile intruder, report it to your superior!
- Once a containment breach ends, follow the four R's. Re-contain, reclaim, remember and record! After the site has been cleaned up, your debriefings will help prevent future breaches.
- Sometimes problems are systemic and recurring. Breaches rarely happen just once.

~ Recovering from a Containment Breach; The Four R's and More Tips.

Dr. Light's temporary office was spartan, but she… she was anything but laconic. Cimmerian knew he was going to end up here. He'd met her when he was first assigned to the project, and she'd seemed pleasant enough. A bit secretive, but she used to be a site director. That came with the territory.

After the breach at Site-88, he'd been stuck trying to explain the events to five different people before this meeting. It wasn't like Light could even fire him, he wasn't in her chain of command. The Ethics Committee, though, would only take so much of a personality conflict before it tried someone else who was equally good at the job, but more agreeable. Cimmerian had seen it happen to others. Hell, he'd been the replacement before.

"Why do you think you're here?" she asked pointedly.

"Well. I get the feeling you're going to tell me I won't be flying commercial anymore."

"Funny. Yes, that's definitely true. But what I really need to know is what you didn't tell security about the breach."

Ahh, Cimmerian thought. *That's what this is about.*

Cimmerian crossed his legs and laughed. "2343."

"When did you figure it out?"

"After the first debriefing. Prancer walked into a kill-box dressed up as a containment cell. What I want to know is how you got that past Maddox."

"Maddox still believes that 2343 is an Alpha-Nine candidate. The engineering teams have been making some modifications to his site that he's not been briefed on yet."

"You figure he's a mole?"

"Not until the breach hit 2343. That was a false flag we planted in his lists. We've modified everyone's now, but until the morning after the breach he was the only one who thought 2343 was a possible candidate."

"Smart. Why isn't he in a cell right now?"

"We want to see what he does next. I'd love to say 'better the devil you know' but we think he's worse than a mole. He's a pawn."

Cimmerian blinked. "Wait. Who uses Site Directors as pawns?"

Light stopped and smiled.

An O5. It had to be. An O5 had executed or at least helped plan a breach of a Foundation site. Cimmerian's eyes widened slightly. "No. There's no way."

"I think you'll find it's becoming increasingly likely. There's a reason the council hasn't signed off on our little project yet. The debate is fierce. Fierce enough that someone might wanna persuade folks that this is a bad idea with a little outside help."

"Shit."

"Yeah. Shit. So you can imagine then that no, you won't be flying commercial anymore. We're going to bring the more promising candidates to a central facility. A single facility will be easier to

secure and easier to hide."

"Sounds more like a single point of failure. There's no location that'll stay secure for very long."

"A central facility," Light said, shaking her head. "Not a location."

Cimmerian stopped and cocked his head to the side. "How are you going to hide a whole facility?"

Light smirked, but didn't answer. Cimmerian knew that was as much information as he was going to get today.

"Whatever you're planning, you're going to need staff that are above reproach. A janitor speaks out of turn and this is over before it gets started."

"That part's easy. Everyone's coming out of the woodwork for this."

"Ahh. Well," Cimmerian said with a nod. "I do enjoy meeting new people."

Both of them laughed, but only for a moment.

« **That'll Do Pig. That'll Do.** | **Resurrection** | **Getting Into Treble** »

Lepidoptraetheia

…Lepidoptraetheia. Tiny nuisances to be destroyed. Eat up aether around your experiments. Easily dispatched with the fulminous aether…

-Excerpt, Alchemical Creatures, K. Ledenoff, 1213

Ruslav Diaghilev looked down at the scrap of paper in his hands. He'd scrawled something on it the other night in his sleep, but couldn't easily make out what it said. His divination had worked perfectly, his penmanship, not so much. "Kir…kir……..I cannot even read my own handwriting anymore." He grumbled as he walked silently down the hallway. His flowing robes earned him no lack of stares, as he walked through Site 19, unfamiliar with the layout.

Behind him, Arturo Genuomo struggled to keep up, weighed down with a large backpack full of clinking glassware, and topped with a cast iron cage. The young man's much brighter robes were cut short, almost in the style of a labcoat, and his sandy blonde hair was perpetually disheveled as he tried to keep up with the Elder Alchemist. "Master, you did write it in your sleep. You can't exactly expect perfect accuracy. I've told you about keeping your pens inked up, your pen was basically dry when you wrote this. It's why you couldn't finish the note." The cage appeared empty to those not trained to be sensitive to the Aether flows. Inside, there were dozens of tiny creatures, but they'd run in to a bit of a snag, and it was time to consult an expert.

"Excuse me." Ruslav held up a hand, stopping a nearby labcoated doctor. "Is there a researcher Kir…" his voiced rumbled out again. "Is there a research lab with a butterfly expert here?"

The man in front of him blinked a few times, taking in the flowing bottle-green robes and bright purple shoes on his feet. "I…are you lost?" The doctor reached towards his belt, to the small pager located there.

"I am not lost. Nor am I a security threat." He indicated towards the badge on his chest, which helpfully stated 'R. Diaghilev. Director, Alchemy Division. Level 4/ASCLEPIUS.' "I am, however, looking for someone."

"I…oh. I'm so sorry." He held his hand out awkwardly. "Dr. Zartion, but you can call me Christopher if you prefer. Apologies for the mix-up director. I'm not sure if you're referring to a specific researcher or not?"

Ruslav nodded his head, shaking Dr. Zartion's with his right, the heavy knuckles of his left hand holding up the scrap of paper. "I divined that there is a researcher here, who understands butterflies. They work in some specialty lab. I cannot read the handwriting."

He looked down at the scrap of paper, with the badly scrawled 'S19. R. K I R' with a trailing few letters. "I know that feeling, getting old sucks." Behind the Doctor, Arturo passed one hand over his head, and made a quiet 'woosh' sound.

Ruslav smiled slightly in amusement, as the Doctor tapped his temple with one finger, "I think Kiryu labs has a researcher who's interested in butterflies. I hope that helps. Excuse me, Director." He smiled, and walked down a hallway towards some other section of the facility.

Ruslav nodded with a ponderous motion of his head. We must find this Kiryu labs, apparently."

The pair of alchemists set off with silent steps, the only sounds of their passage being the clinking of glass, and rattling of cast iron.

…Are to be immediately recalled, as they present a harmful picture of Alchemical Creatures to all involved. Any copies turned in are subject to compensation in the amount of 17 thaler per copy…

-Excerpt, College of Alchemists literature review, 1751

A few more odd stares, and some directions from a security officer who thankfully respected Ruslav's position more than his own curiosity left the Elder alchemist at a door in a small attached wing to

Site 19. He swiped the magnetic badge through the access panel, and held the tiny NFC chip for verification. The door slid back with a soft woosh, to reveal a series of rooms and offices surrounded by large windows. The light from between the nearby trees flowed in naturally, and lit the offices with a soft green glow.

The two alchemists strode in to Kiryu labs, and Ruslav couldn't help but smile. Most of the Foundation's alchemical flows were minimal, as most places were after the Seal. Even still, the clinical and detached nature of the Foundation caused the currents to seep slowly through the cracks in the doors, and along the floors.

Kiryu labs was different. The terronous aether sang in the air, along with the Aeronous. There was something…more here. Something he hadn't felt in a long time. "Ahh…Adebeyo, you would have appreciated this…"

Arturo stepped up, attempting to be helpful, "Master…?" He held a small notebook along with a very old pen that Ruslav had given him a few months ago. The apprentice alchemist had taken to using it for everything.

"Nothing, Arturo. Simply commenting on the flows in this area. Concentrate…" His hands swept in front of him for a moment, as he drew them in to shaper focus.

"I…oh, oh! I hadn't ever felt…something like this, in the Foundation." The young man's eyes opened wider, and his feet, shod in the same purple as his Master slipped a few inches forward.

Ruslav smiled, the light from his deepset eyes a rare treasure on his face. "Now, we find this Kiryu."

A head poked out from a nearby door. "I'm sorry, did you ask for me?" Dr. Mark Kiryu's head was half visible out of his office door. "I heard my name."

Ruslav shuffled forward on silent steps. "*Da*, I am looking for researcher Kiryu. I have an item I need assistance with. I was given information that you are the person to talk to."

Mark stood up from the office chair, and walked out to greet the pair of alchemists. He surreptitiously took in the badge on Ruslav's chest, and held out his hand. "Director Diaghilev. It's good to meet you, I'm Director Kiryu. This is Kiryu labs, I'll help however I can. Is the item logged as anomalous?"

Ruslav nodded, reaching back to unhook the heavy cast iron cage from Arturo's pack. "*Da*, all alchemic creatures are considered anomalous at this time. We came across these in Macedonia, and needed assistance."

Mark cocked his head to one side, "I…apologize, Director. I'm not familiar with Alchemy, or these…creatures? And, this may just be my own ignorance, but I don't see anything." To his credit, Dr. Kiryu kept a straight face the entire time.

Ruslav clucked his tongue, "Of course, my apologies. They are not visible to the naked eye usually. Arturo, will you please reveal them for the Director?"

Arturo nodded, and gently lowered his pack, stepping forward, and drawing his half-finished marble and ebonite crozier, "Of course, Elder. Director, if you could take a step back?"

Mark nodded, and held his chin in one hand, his eyes narrowing slightly, "Is this…"

Ruslav nodded, "Alchemy, yes," he turned to Arturo, "Take the aeronous…yes, like that, now the igneous…"

Arturo's hands slowly moved in a circle, as the crozier spun a figure eight in the air. The fourth language flowed from his lips, as he recited the proper formula. The air around the cage shimmered, and several small creatures came in to view. Smaller than a thumbnail, the tiny butterflies were made of different materials. Some were tiny crystalline things, others were made of fire or water.

"Alchemical butterflies. Lepidoptraetheia. I need assistance creating a more permanent containment vessel, and figuring out how to care for them. The alchemy I can handle, the butterflies," Ruslav's voice rumbled off, as he looked at Mark significantly.

"I think, you may have the wrong person. I'm Dr. Kiryu, but *researcher* Kiryu is the one with the butterfly affinity. Can you wait here a moment?" Ruslav nodded, and Mark stepped away, turning down the hallway to the left, to Room 205, and knocked. A hollow boom could be heard from the depths of the labs. Ruslav's eyebrow raised as the igneous aether swirled.

Dr. Kiryu and a young woman came around the corner. She was smoking slightly, and wearing a heavy silver colored suit of some kind of fire-resistant material. Ruslav's robes contained several of the same properties, but didn't have that industrial chic about them.

"These are the two alchemists, Zyn. I think they need your help." Dr. Kiryu waved her forward, and nodded at the two alchemists. "If you'll forgive me, I have to get back to work. You know where my office is, and Zyn is at your disposal." He gave them a curt nod, and walked back in to his office, closing the door most of the way.

The young woman in front of them was wearing a fireproof suit, and held the helmet of the suit under one arm. "Hi, I'm Zyn. Did you two need help with something…?" She couldn't help but be a little off-put by the two men in robes. She eyed Arturo especially suspiciously, holding a marble and rubber mace in his hand.

Ruslav took a step forward, and held out one heavily scarred hand. "*Da*, I am Ruslav Diaghilev, Director of the Alchemy Division. I was told you were the expert if I had a butterfly that needed studying."

The twinkle in Zyn's eye told him everything he needed to know.

…Elders Diaghilev and P. Flamel will be in charge of further review of Alchemic creature lore in the future. An official reprimand has been issued for Alchemist Ledenoff found at…

-Excerpt, College of Alchemists literature review, 1752

A few minutes later, Zyn, Ruslav, and Arturo stood in Room 217. "So, tell me once more, they're made up of…?"

Ruslav nodded, his hands moving in slow circles. "Aether. The fabric of the energies that make up atoms and molecules. Cut and tie

everything together and apart. Mostly. Alchemists can manipulate these, but there are also several creatures in this world, and others, which can interact with them. These Lepidoptraetheia are one of them."

He reached his hand out, and a small butterfly composed of ice, and tiny drifts of snow alighted on his finger. "They collect excess aether from plants and animals for sustenance. Their bodies are less… physical, and more manifestations of what they eat. This one, is not literally ice, for example. It is made of a combination of Aeronous and Aequeous aethers. Your eyes and mind simply interpret these as 'ice'."

Zyn leaned in, and stared at the tiny creature. "Amazing. I had no idea this all even existed." She turned her hand over, a slow smile creeping across her face as the tiny creature which appeared to be made up of slightly dusty winds swirling around her fingertip crawled to her palm, and lifted off to the side of the cage in silent flight.

Ruslav nodded, "That is by intention, researcher. It goes without saying that the things you work on with us, are confidential." He closed his hands, and the flow of air around the three of them slowly tightened until they were in a personal soundproof bubble of air.

"Of course," she nodded, reaching out with a match to feed a tiny butterfly made of dancing flames. "So, how can I help you all?" The tiny butterfly alighted on the match, and the bright flame at the end petered out as the butterfly sucked away the aether of the miniature fire.

Ruslav's hands returned to the cage, the two dozen or so butterflies circling the area inside. "We are…unaware of how to care for these creatures, long term. Several have been dying, and others keep appearing, and we cannot determine why. We've tried all of the alchemic means at our disposal." He looked across at Zyn, and smiled very slightly, "So we naturally assumed it must be something more basic. Adebeyo and I have no idea how to care for butterflies, and Arturo prefers cats."

Arturo leaned back against a nearby table, idly trying to gather enough aether together to ruffle the linen skirt on a nearby lab table.

"Cats are the best. Fish are second best."

Ruslav waved a hand idly at Arturo, a familiar gesture of concession. Zyn leaned back and looked at the ceiling, before returning to look down at the cage, a thought striking. "How long have you had them?"

Ruslav rotated the cage a few times, summoning the tenebrous aether to feed some of the butterflies made of shadows and negative space. "Six weeks. Some more, some less."

"That'd do it. Butterflies only live about two weeks. What do they look like as caterpillars?" she replied, idly reaching in to the cage. The two alchemists were uncharacteristically quiet as Zyn raised an eyebrow at the two of them.

Arturo and Ruslav exchanged a sheepish glance. "We…had not considered this. I had never encountered Lepidoptraetheia as anything other than this form." Ruslav's voice rumbled in embarrassment.

Zyn waved a hand, "So, the key is to find the eggs and the caterpillars." She reached forward, and closed the cage door, lifting the bottom up slightly. "I don't know where they'd keep them. They don't exist in our dimension right?"

Ruslav waved a hand non-committedly, "Without going through significant training and instruction, yes. I do not really…hrm…"

Arturo stepped forward, and raised his hands. He spoke quietly in the fifth language, and his hands exuded a soft glow, as the tenebrous aethers were washed away by the luxorous aether. Several small caterpillars could be seen among the tiny rocks and twigs at the bottom of the cage.

Ruslav's voice rumbled out in a pleased noise, "Of course. They were hiding in the tenebrous. Arturo, that was very good thinking. They live off of the luxorous aether, until they're adults. I wonder how they determine which aether they'll subsist on as adults…" The light winked out as the tiny caterpillars eagerly gathered up the energies.

Zyn smiled at the two alchemists, "This was fascinating. I'm glad I could help." She crossed her arms in front of her, and looked up at the clock, not realizing how quickly time had passed with the two strange men in robes.

Ruslav raised an eyebrow, feeling an opportunity at hand, "Miss Kiryu, are you interested in being involved in the containment project for these creatures?"

…Lepidoptraetheia. These creatures present as small butterflies to the third eye. They are non-harmful, and consume small bits of extraneous aether. They are useful as cleaning aids after excess aether flows, and can be found…

-Excerpt, Alchemical Creatures, R. Diaghilev, 1774 (Revised)

"I get the theory, but I'm not getting the practice. What exactly should I be doing?" The three weeks of training Researcher Kiryu had passed quickly, and she'd been insistent on learning everything needed to care for the Lepidoptraetheia.

"Bring your hands in front of you. Do not visualize the flows. Feel the flows. They are all around us. They are not visible, but tangible. Do you feel them?" Ruslav's voice flowed in a familiar cadence of teaching a novice the basics of Alchemy. They had gone over them for three weeks now, but isolating Luxorous aether flows was difficult, and took intense concentration.

"I feel them, but what do I do? How do I get the one I want?" Zyn's hands shook slightly, as she concentrated, small beads of sweat forming on her forhead, as the Aether flows sluggishly responded to her will.

"Yes. Like that. It is not…a mechanical thing. It is a matter of will, and focus. You have the ability within you, now pull the flows apart, and let the luxorous flow through your hands. It's lighter than the others. Less…weighty." Ruslav stood behind the young researcher, his arms folded, his sleeves rolled up to his elbows.

Several minutes passed, and the room grew several degrees colder, but nothing happened between Zyn's hands.

Arturo glanced over at Ruslav with a questioning look from the corner. Sensing his attention, Ruslav nodded ever so slightly to the young Alchemist. Arturo concentrated, and nudged a stream of aether closer to Zyn, picking it apart slightly. Light gathered in her hands, like a blob of particularly viscous jelly.

Her eyes went wide, as the flows gathered stronger, and poured out from her outstretched hands, in a soft white beam of light. The caterpillars at the bottom of the cage drew towards her, and eagerly ate up the flows of energy she poured through the fine mesh.

"I- this isn't…I have no idea how I'm doing this, but I'm doing it!" She laughed under her breath, unable to believe the frankly impossible sight in her own hands. "This feels like magic."

Ruslav took a step forward, and cupped his hand, making a quick circular motion with his wrist. A small globe of water happily sloshed around between his fingertips. "Alchemists have always had a flair for the dramatic, but it is science, I assure you, Miss Kiryu. Repetition and experimentation."

The light faded out from her hands, as she leaned back, exhausted. "Well, whatever this is, it's pretty crazy. I didn't expect to be able to turn my hands in to a flashlight."

Ruslav smiled, and collapsed the small ball of water, returning it to its component Aethers. "You would have been far more impressed several centuries ago. Alchemy was…different then. Alas, needs must, and times change." Ruslav held out his hand towards Arturo.

Arturo rose from the chair, and crossed the room, handing Ruslav his cold iron crozier. "Researcher, your help these last few weeks have been invaluable. I'm sorry to say that we've been called back to Site-82 for another project."

Zyn slumped slightly, frowning, "That's unfortunate. I really enjoyed watching these little guys mature. The metamorphosis process for these creatures is fascinating. I hope my research notes helped."

Ruslav smiled at her, and his heavy-lidded eyes bored in to hers, "They did, I have more than enough to update the texts. On a

slightly more important note, you have the required aptitudes to come assist us at Site-82 if you wish. Those with the necessary alchemic aptitude are rare to say the least. I could speak with your Director for transfer to the Alchemy department. Should you desire it."

The air hung heavy with expectation, as a sad smile spread over Zyn's face, "I really appreciate that, Director, but my place is here. Everything you've taught me has been fascinating, but the work goes on so to speak. If I have time, I'll be sure to pop over to Site-82 to visit when I get the chance."

Ruslav smiled slightly, and nodded. "I assumed as much, however, it does not hurt to try. You are a brilliant young researcher. Do not give up that curiosity, and if you ever have questions about Alchemy, or change your mind, you know where to find us."

The alchemists gathered their belongings, and clipped the heavy cage back to Arturo's pack. A final sweep of the lab confirmed they had everything, and Ruslav ducked in to the Director's office to say his farewells. As they headed through the door, Arturo turned to wave goodbye to Zyn one last time before ducking through the door.

Zyn smiled, and returned to the research lab, to tidy up her notes, and get back to work on the latest containment project. She gathered together the loose sheets, slapped them in a manila with a quick jot of a label, and filed them in her little cabinet in the corner.

Just before she pulled out the next set of files, she stopped, and stared down at her hands. She closed her eyes, and concentrated, feeling the flows of the Aethers around her. As she opened her eyes, a small spark of light winked in to existence on her fingertip, for just a moment. She grinned to herself, and pulled out the next set of files.

…Lepidoptraetheia. (*Lepidopterus Alchemica zyneria*) These creatures present as small butterflies to the third eye, and as small caterpillars in the larval stage. The luxorous aether can be used to reveal this form……

-Excerpt, Alchemical Creatures, R. Diaghilev; Zyn Kiryu (Credited Co-Author), 2017 (Revised Second Edition)

Lessons

Doctor Langston smiled as he turned to look at the new batch of researchers sent to his department. His eyes darted from face to face: three in total, two women and one man, each of whom couldn't have been over 30. All three looked extremely nervous, and Langston couldn't blame them. They had just come from an orientation which basically told them that they were all more than likely going to die in some pretty horrible ways, and it was up to Langston to keep them from running for the hills. He knew it was important for the orientations to be completely honest with new personnel, but did they *really* need to get into the gory details about how their predecessors died?

He cleared his throat and addressed the group. "Welcome to the Anomalous Items and Extranormal Events department! My name is Doctor William Langston, and for the next two or three months, I'm going to be the one you all report to. A little bit about myself: I joined the Foundation in 1976, when I was 27 years old. During my stay here, I've worked with a grand total of four SCP objects, including one very unhappy Keter class, before getting transferred over here in '03. Does anyone have any questions before we begin?" He looked over the group, hoping his short life story would help relax them a bit. After all, if he survived this long, who's to say they couldn't as well? Relief washed over him as the groups tense expressions were replaced with calm curiosity.

One researcher, a short woman with blonde hair, raised her hand and asked, "Um, hi. I was just wondering, why are we here instead of starting directly with an SCP object?"

"Well, while it's true the Foundation needs researchers like snowmen need cold, they also know that quite a few skips are rather difficult to wrap one's head around, so they send new researchers here to get an idea of what kinds of anomalies you might be dealing with," Langston replied, walking towards the main hallway and

gesturing for the trio to follow.

“What’s the difference between a proper SCP and an anomalous object? Aren’t all SCPs technically anomalous objects?” asked the male researcher, a slightly overweight man with dark brown hair. Langston chuckled. He remembered asking the very same thing when he first started in the AI/EE department.

“Generally speaking, yes. All SCPs are anomalous items. However, the items we have here are stuck in a strange middle ground: they’re not anomalous enough to warrant full investigation and dedicated research, but they *are* anomalous enough that the Foundation wants them kept off the streets to keep up the ‘great masquerade’, so to speak.”

The group stopped at the entrance of one of the humanoid containment cells. Langston checked the accompanying clipboard to ensure he had the right room before addressing the group. “We’re just going to dive right in and start you off with one of our more vocal residents, Anomalous Individual 139, or AI-139. I want you three to go in and question him. Your goal is to figure out why we have him contained here, and get any information out of him that might be important. Good luck!” Langston opened the door, and the group walked inside.

The cell was mostly empty save for a hospital bed, on which lay Anomalous Individual 139. He was short but thin with black hair growing all over his body, and as they approached they noticed he was held down by leather restraints. His bloodshot eyes were transfixed on the group as they stopped a few feet away from his bed. The group stayed silent, unsure of how to begin, until AI-139 broke the silence harshly. “Well? Are you not here to question me?” he said, his voice higher pitched than they had been expecting.

“Anomalous Individual 139, please tell us your name and place of birth.” ordered the male researcher, inwardly slightly put off by how intently AI-139 was staring at him. AI-139 paused for a moment, then responded,

“It would seem your Foundation has already given me a name, so why you are asking me now is unusual. Nevertheless, the name I

was born with is Shavalis. I am an emissary of Gaia, and my home is within her embrace. I was born in the cradle of leaves she fashioned for me, her protectors kept close watch upon me as I slumbered." AI-139 grinned, his teeth each pointed and sharp. "I am her child. She has given me reign over the creatures in her domain."

"What do you mean, 'reign over the creatures in her domain'?" asked the taller female researcher, looking up from her notes to look at the strange man before her. AI-139's smile grew wider as he turned his attention to her.

"The beasts of the animal kingdom respond to my command. I am their king. From the smallest mouse to the mighty lion, all see my heritage and respect my words! The only exceptions are the bastard children, the humans," AI-139's grin changed quickly into a hateful snarl, "they choose to ignore my birthright, to ignore their master. You…*things* know not your place, and you dare to imprison me in your artificial walls of steel!"

AI-139 jerked suddenly against his restraints towards the group, causing them to collectively step backwards. His eyes widened and his mouth again contorted again into a grin, this time twisted and hateful, looking as though he had gone mad. "But I do not worry, for my time here is soon over, and then you will all *pay!*" he said, nearly shrieking near the end as he pulled wildly at his restraints. "My subjects will find me and they will tear you all limb from limb! And when I am free I will incite a war that will decimate you pathetic creatures!"

The group of now frightened researchers backed away towards the door as AI-139 continued its rampage. "I am *Shavalis!* I am Gaia's child, and she loves me more than *you!* She will send unto me a bride who will bear my child who will control the winds themselves! This world is mine and I will not be held here…" Anomalous Individual 139's insane ramblings were muffled as the door to his cell closed behind the researchers. Langston smiled as he walked over to the group.

"Charming fellow, isn't he?" Langston said, remembering his first encounter with AI-139, who at that time claimed he would '*personally* rip Langston to shreds'. "Now, who can tell me why we're

holding him here?" The group, still slightly shaky after their encounter, looked down at the notes they had taken. Langston remained quiet, giving them the time they needed to calm down, and after a moment of collecting themselves, the blonde researcher spoke up.

"AI-139 is being held due to his ability to communicate with animals, as well as his readily apparent mental instability," the blonde researcher said, an air of confidence surrounding her. Langston nodded as he replied, "Alright, and what measures would you take to contain AI-139, and how would you go about testing his abilities?"

"For containment, secure him to a bed or chair to ensure he doesn't attack anyone, and give him food twice daily. For testing, introduce varying types and numbers of animals to test the limits of his abilities." The tall female researcher said, handing her clipboard over to Langston. Langston looked over the researchers notes, then smiled. Not bad for a bunch of people who not twenty minutes prior were shaking in their boots.

"Well done," Langston said, feeling slightly bad about what he was about to say, "you all have done rather well for your first assignment. However, I'm afraid you're all a bit off the mark. Truth is, AI-139 doesn't have the ability to talk to animals. We thought he did for a long time, had a SCP designation and everything. But we ran literally dozens of tests to figure out why he would think that, and every animal we put in his cell completely ignored him. After a while, the site director ended up sending him over here to make room for something else, I'm not sure what."

"Then why do we still have him here?" Asked the blonde researcher, sounding slightly annoyed and disappointed that they failed Langstons test.

Langston laughed slightly as he explained, "Actually, it's because of the fur on his body. We've run tests on it, and as far as we can tell it's actually Tasmanian Devil fur, which is odd because we picked AI-139 up in the middle of Idaho. Based on our initial tests, he apparently grows this fur naturally, and let me tell you, he was absolutely *livid* when he woke up completely shaved." The researchers laughed, and Langston was happy that his team didn't

seem stressed anymore.

“Why did you have us do all that, though? I mean, what was the point of having us talk to AI-139 when you already had all the information you could get out of him?” asked the male researcher. Langston sighed. “Several reasons. First and foremost, I wanted to get an idea of how you would handle yourselves around humanoid anomalies, and on the whole you all did rather well. But more than that, I wanted to teach you a few things about working with anomalies.”

“One, you need to know that when dealing with sapient anomalies, you should never completely trust what they have to say, especially the more hostile ones. Listen to them, sure, but even if they tell you what they believe is the truth, you shouldn’t believe them blindly. Second, even though there will be anomalies that will try and hurt you, remember that one of the Foundation’s primary goals is to *contain* anomalies. As such, you have quite a few lines of defense between yourself and the anomaly. I’m not saying you should be careless, but don’t spend your days worrying about when the thing you’re working on might kill you.”

“Finally, and I want to stress this, I was not joking or lying when I asked you to gather information for us. Fact is, there may very well be things we don’t even know about AI-139. Anomalies can always surprise you, so always remember to be observant of *everything*. You never know what you might have missed the first hundred times.” Langston looked at his watch, then looked back at his group. “Well, I’d say you’ve earned yourselves a nice lunch break, go ahead and check out the site cafeteria, then meet back here in, say, an hour. I’ll be waiting!"

Lessons for Old Dogs

« Counterpoint | Hub | Duets »

"Mike, look out!" yelled Zhao.

The **brass city** was collapsing around them. Mike slammed to a stop as an enormous bell crashed to the ground in front of him.

"The players must be - huh - losing precision," he panted. "Why did they - hooh - use a brass band?"

Zhao yanked him onto the pavement as the drumskin street tore open. "Trust me," she said, "you don't want to be here when it's catgut and piano wire."

Lifting a streak of silver-grey hair back from her temples, Zhao spoke into her headpiece. "H, where are you? We need to get out."

Four blocks away, Agent Hennessy looked past the text on his visor, at the massive beast a few feet from him. Its powerful metallic legs were curled into a crouch, valves pulsing rhythmically. It turned its head back and forth, and its cymbal-jaws opened, emitting a long horn note of challenge. If he ran, if he made any noise, it would sense him.

His right hand pressed the the communicator at his belt, trying to move as little as possible. *333-C. Stuck. You go.*

A nearby flute-tower crumbled and fell, scattering nickel silver keys across the road. SCP-333-C sprang instinctively towards the noise, turning its back on Hennessy.

He ran.

Carter and Zhao were running too, desperately trying to avoid the

rain of bronze and steel debris. Ahead, Mike could see the performance hall - the exit. As they reached the doorway, he turned back to look for Hennessy. The streets were full of twisted metal, but empty of life. The doorframe shook as another building fell.

Zhao was shouting into her headset. "H, please! Tell us where you are!"

Hiding. Too far.

"Where? We'll find you." Even as Zhao said it, they heard the bellowing horn again.

No. Get out. Tell them stop playing.

The shaking was getting worse. A door-sized reed slid from the hall's roof and thudded into the pavement in front of them like a guillotine.

"If they stop playing, you'll die!" said Zhao, frantic.

Not dead. Stasis.

The howls of the -C were louder now. Mike saw it burst out of a building up the street. It ran towards them, claws tearing through the shining sidewalk.

"Zhao, it's coming for the exit. We have to go!"

Mike grabbed Zhao's arm. She looked at him with pleading eyes.

The beast was almost on them.

"H, I can't -" she said into the headset. "I -"

Come back for me.

They leapt through the doorway.

The concert hall was silent, expectant.

She looked out, dazzled by the stage lights. If there was an

audience out there, it was shrouded in the blackness beyond. Blackness like the mouth of a deep pit, like an open throat ready to…

Emma found her focus, bringing herself back. She was wearing a black shirt and trousers - appropriate for a performer, but also reminiscent of her new MTF uniform.

She wanted to look to her left, but couldn't manage it. She needed to look professional in front of the darkened hall. Instead she stole a glance downwards. There was a music stand in front of her, but the score sitting on it seemed blurry. Still, she didn't need it.

Behind her, Emma sensed the unseen orchestra as it stretched itself and then coiled, ready to spring, waiting for the baton's signal. Who was it holding that baton? Emma still could not turn to look.

The moment stretched endlessly. The bright stage, the enveloping dark: all on a razor's edge. Emma felt a prickling at the nape of her neck.

As the orchestra took off, Emma strained to concentrate on the music. She could hear notes, even the occasional chord, but the full sweep and scope of the work eluded her. What was left were scraps of jangling discord, impossible to piece together.

Emma breathed deeply. Her cue was coming. From the corner of her eye, Emma saw the conductor half-turn. This was her chance. As the baton flashed down like a lightning strike, Emma spun sharply to look left.

The conductor was shrouded in black, darker even than the hall itself. Its face was a pallid carnival mask, featureless but for a leering grin. The eyes were black and empty, and as Emma stared, it loomed closer and larger above her, seeming to fill the hall, to fill the world.

And Emma heard it scream.

She woke to the sight of Agent Sherry Wilson leaning over her.

"Hey, how are you feeling?" came Wilson's calming voice.

Eyes adjusting to the lights, Emma looked around the sleep lab, adrenaline still pumping.

"Did you see it?" she asked.

"Most of it," replied Sherry. "I was in the back of the audience. But it went differently this time, right? You seemed to have more control."

Emma breathed deliberately, trying to slow her heart. "Yes. I changed my clothes, and I managed to turn." As the dream faded, it was easier to remember why she was doing this. "I could even hear the music - some of it, anyway."

"Hmm. I could see them playing, but I didn't hear anything." Sherry scanned through the readings on the touchscreen next to Emma's bed. Of all the members of MTF Omicron-Rho that Emma had worked with, she seemed the most thorough, the most collected.

"This is much better, Emma," she continued. "Good alpha-wave levels, and your breathing stayed steady. Just need to work on staying locked in the dream, even when something surprising happens."

"Actually, I won't need to worry about waking up," said Emma. "How have the others been going?"

Sherry gave an involuntary glance across to the empty beds on the other side of the room.

"They're definitely improving. We tried Hennessey, Zhao and Carter in a few SCP-333 scenarios."

"The musical city? That's appropriate." Emma smiled, and sat up.

"They're adapting well to the dream, staying lucid, finding solutions." Sherry sounded genuinely impressed. "Hennessey actually came up with something I hadn't seen anyone try before."

"Good." Emma's smile grew determined. "That's very good. I'd like to run the same scenarios, please. When can you schedule me in?"

Sherry's look of concern only lasted a fraction of a second, but Emma spotted it.

"I'm not sure," said Sherry, folding her arms. "Unless you're fully trained, we normally wouldn't advise more than three sessions a week."

Emma frowned. "Let's make it tomorrow. I don't have that much time."

Agent Sandra Dee staggered from the tunnel, the ringing in her ears fading. She dropped to one knee, out of breath and trying not to retch. From the corner of her eye, she could see a man step towards her, holding a clipboard and stopwatch.

"Thirty-seven minutes, nineteen seconds," said Sergeant Graham Towers of MTF Zeta-9. "Not bad for a first run through the grinder, especially at your -"

Dee swung her head up fiercely, but the movement was too sudden - black spots filled her vision, and she almost collapsed. She waved away the agent's proffered hand, and shut her eyes tight.

Sergeant Towers had clearly been trained to keep candidates talking after they got through the course. "You never considered joining the Mole Rats then?"

"Wasn't … an option at the time," said Dee, through gritted teeth.

"That's a shame. You did a good job, particularly with the gravitational distortion sections. A tip for the perspective-null room - you can often make quicker progress with one or even both eyes closed. Although you got unlucky with your route, hitting that straight after sensory deprivation."

"Uh huh." Dee had heard enough. Her head was still throbbing, and she lifted herself gingerly into the chair Towers offered.

Twenty minutes later she was still sitting there, just outside the exit from "Mole Rat Maze", watching the Sergeant look anxiously at his watch.

"An hour is the limit, I'm going to have to go in," he said, more to himself than to her.

Just as he put down his clipboard, there was a noise from the tunnel. Towers raced over as Roger Anderson emerged, slumping to the ground and rolling on to his back. Anderson's chest heaved, and Dee watched as Towers checked his pulse and pupils before grabbing some oxygen from the med-pack.

Dee stood slowly, making sure she had her balance back, and strolled over to where Roger was lying. He had taken off the oxygen mask, but was still too weak to sit up.

Agent Dee brought her boots together with a snap, right next to his head. "So, Anderson. Looking forward to being back in the field?"

Towers shot her a look. She met his gaze.

"Come on, Towers," she said, "surely he's set a new record for the octogenarians?"

She spotted the stopwatch, still around Towers' neck.

"There you are, Anderson. Fifty-nine minutes, twelve seconds."

Roger groaned. "Why is it always twelve?"

Emma was starting to get used to meetings in the Site Director's office. She tried to sit still while Director Arora walked slowly around his desk to sit across from her.

The Director unclasped his hands and spread them apart, palms up. Clearly a practised gesture. "So Commander Stark, how is the training going?"

He was stalling; Emma knew he had seen the reports. She aimed to keep her voice light. "The team is performing well, generally strong results, considering. We could use a few more members though. Have you had any luck with recruits?" It wasn't what she had scheduled the meeting for, but it would be a start.

Director Arora was clearly growing accustomed to her newfound directness. He smiled, but she thought she caught a flash of misgiving behind it.

"I think I have two pieces of good news for you there," he said. "Dr. Bettina Reynard is a senior Memetics researcher who is joining us from Site-17, and Charla Flores had just been recruited to Cognitohazards, but her supervisor has gone on medical leave."

"That's good," said Emma. "We could use some more specialists. I know exactly what Dr. Reynard can start with. I don't suppose they have any musical background?"

"Honestly, I'm not sure," replied the Director. "But they should be with you soon, so you'll be able to find out. We have a D-Class who I understand is very musical, but, uh, I'm not sure you would want him in your squad."

Arora paused. Emma waited.

"About your other request," he continued, finally. "I can see why you want to do it, but I just don't know if I can authorise -"

"Sir, with respect, if we're serious about learning more about Twelve, then I think it's the best way forward. The team will be ready."

"Will they?" said Arora. "I'd like to hear your full risk analysis first."

Emma tried to stay calm. "Okay sir, there are four key elements to consider…"

As she left the room fifteen minutes later, Emma realised her hands had been clenched so hard they'd left fingernail marks on her palms.

The spare lab-room was almost empty as Mike and Hennessy walked in. All of the equipment had been cleared out, leaving just four rows of benches and stools, one of which was occupied by a dark-haired young woman, reading.

"Hi," said Mike, "you must be Charla."

The woman looked up from her text. "Charlie," she said. "That's what my family always called me."

"Nice to meet you, Charlie. I'm Mike, and this is H." Mike indicated the smiling Agent Hennessy beside him. "Welcome to Eta-11."

"H?" asked Charlie with a quizzical look.

"For Hennessy." Mike turned to him, grinning. "Or is it Hearing Loss? I can never remember."

"Hey!" said Hennessy loudly.

Turn it down, signed Mike, and continued, "H is deaf, as you may have worked out. He can talk, but we try not to let him. Never has anything interesting to say."

I'll give you interesting, signed Hennessy, and then saw Charlie's nonplussed look. *Mike, you're freaking her out. Stop being weird.*

"What did he say?" Charlie asked, unsure where to direct the question.

Mike didn't miss a beat. "H was just apologising for being weird, so it's - ow!" He grabbed the back of his head, where Hennessy had cuffed him playfully. "Okay, I'm sorry, Charlie. I was just messing around with H, but it's not fair when you don't know us. You'll regret ever joining Eta-11."

"Oh no, that's okay," said Charlie, settling her hands back down on her book. "To be honest, I'm glad for the change. My last posting - well, it ended a bit strangely. Still, it's been a pretty full on start. I never knew how much training a task force needed."

"Neither did we," Mike laughed. "Did you do the Mole Rat Maze yet?"

"God, yes - that was ridiculous. I couldn't -" Charlie cut off as the door of the lab opened and a researcher walked in.

She was slightly stiff, as if uncertain she was in the right room. She carried a stack of what looked like VR goggles, held in place with

her chin.

"Is this Mobile Task Force Eta-11?" Her voice had the slightest hint of a European accent. "This is all of you - there is no-one else?"

"You saw Zhao, Sandra and Roger on Tuesday, right?" Mike replied. "So yeah, apart from Emma that's all of us." Mike waited for a response, eventually wilting in the woman's stare. "We're kind of a small MTF," he added.

The woman hesitated, lips pursed, before putting the sets of goggles on the bench with a half-sigh. "Okay. My name is Dr. Reynard, senior memetics liaison to Eta-11." She pushed a few greying hairs back from her face. "I will be running your Memetic Resistance tests today."

More tests? signed Hennessy wearily.

Dr. Reynard handed out the goggles, and gave them each an electronic grip topped with a button.

"On these headsets, you will experience typical task force activities in a range of environments. When you perceive danger, or determine that a defensive action is required, you are to press the button on your grip.

"The presentation includes a series of perception-altering stimuli, which I have myself designed. These are quite safe, but will test your memetic resistance on various measures: reduced attention span, slower reaction times, impaired judgement and fine motor control."

"So it's like a game, then?" asked Charlie.

"It is a test," replied Dr. Reynard, with a curt nod. "You will be scored for both speed and accuracy in recognizing and responding to legitimate threats."

"Uh, can you tell us the score to beat?" asked Mike, pulling the goggles on to his head. "I mean, from Tuesday."

Dr. Reynard paused. "It is rather interesting, actually. Most of the

team were in the average range, but Agent Dee was in the ninety-fifth percentile across all measures."

"Makes sense," Mike chirped. "After the number of times she tested - ow! Again, H?"

Hennessy scowled at Mike, who looked chastened. "I mean, I guess Agent Dee has had a lot of exposure to mind-altering anomalies."

"D, H, do you all have letters?" Charlie pushed the goggles up from her eyes to ask.

"Oh - no, Dee is definitely her name," said Mike hurriedly.

"Like John Dee? Cool. I almost transferred to Alchemical Studies," said Charlie

Dr. Reynard coughed. "If you are all now ready, shall we get on with the test?"

She flicked a switch on a central console as they lowered their goggles and tightened the straps. The last thing Mike heard before the headphones kicked in was Hennessey's voice counting down from a hundred in multiples of seven.

Four days later, the lab was full again, with the whole of Eta-11 in attendance. Zhao and Mike were sitting with Charlie, laughing at something on her phone. Behind them, Roger Anderson and Dr. Reynard were deep in debate. Agent Dee lounged in the back corner chatting to Hennessy, who was struggling to sign with a half-eaten sandwich in one hand.

They looked up as the door opened and Emma came in. Agent Zhao jumped from her chair and stood, and the others joined her, with the exception of Dee, who looked coolly from the back of the room.

"That's not necessary, guys," said Emma, blushing slightly and waving them to sit again.

As they were doing so, another man entered. He was mid-fifties, short and lean, with bushy grey hair and a thin beard. He walked

into the room as if expecting it to lunge forward and swallow him.

Charlie was the only one to recognize him, whispering to Mike, "Oh my god, do you know who -"

She was interrupted by Emma, whose voice betrayed both her discomfort with giving speeches and the feeling that she was obliged to give one. "I know you've been wondering why we've been training so hard, and I'm sorry that I haven't been able to tell you yet. The truth is, I've only just received approval from the Site Director to let you know our next mission.

"Since SCP-012 was stolen, we've had almost no clear leads. Commander - well, ex-Commander Richards has no memory of where he hid the score. The Foundation has been unable to track Dr. Pherson, or find out who his associates are. And we know so little about the anomaly itself. But we have one source of information, and I intend to pursue it."

Emma looked at the expectant faces of the MTF. Her MTF. Zhao gave her a brief smile of support.

She continued. "That's the reason for all of the training so far, and I'm afraid there's more to come. Dealing with spatial anomalies, memetic resistance, lucid dreaming - we're going to need all of that."

They had started to understand, thought Emma. Dee had come off the back wall and was sitting straight, Roger was pushing his glasses up over widened eyes, Dr. Reynard was nodding. Emma saw Mike turn to Charla in sudden realization.

"So now that we have official approval, there's someone we need to speak with. MTF Eta-11, this is Dr. Calixto Narváez. We're going to Alagadda."

Lessons from History

What can we, as a species, learn about the threat of hostile extraterrestrials from Columbus' discovery of the New World and the subsequent extermination and subjugation of its Native inhabitants? There were many factors behind the colonization of the New World, most of which are readily obvious. From those factors, we can understand what allowed European powers to overtake Native American societies, and how we can prevent hostile extraterrestrials (henceforth referred to as "HE") from doing the same to the human race.

The most apparent advantage which Europeans possessed over inhabitants of the New World was much more advanced technology. Europeans had gained gunpowder, powerful navies, propaganda, written records, and countless other inventions during the course of history. On the other side of the Atlantic, complex societies such as the Aztec and Inca empires lacked the wheel, and no way of crossing the Atlantic. Due to this technological gap, European monarchies easily and quickly crushed even the most advanced Native nations.

An equal, if not larger, technological gap would likely exist between the human race and any HEs (this, of course, assumes the HE contacts the Earth first, and not vice-versa), as interstellar transport would only be possible with thousands, if not millions of years of technological prowess over humanity. Along with spacecraft, the HEs will likely bring weaponry as of yet not conceived by the human race, medical abilities far beyond our own (to be discussed later), and other inventions we, much like the Native Americans, could not understand at the present date.

How, then, are we to respond to HE technology? In the same way many Native societies responded to European technology: adapting to it. Within several generations, the Comanche tribe of the Great Plains had become skilled on horseback, despite never having

encountered them before the arrival of settlers. Many tribes learned to use gunpowder and muskets along with traditional bows and arrows. In one notable example, the Cherokee silversmith Sequoyah developed an entire syllabary for his people based on the Roman alphabet, despite being unable to read or write.

In the same way, the best hope for humanity would be to gain, either forcefully or through negotiation, HE technology. While early usage of weaponry would be restricted to simply using the weapon until it breaks down or is destroyed, efforts would be made to reverse engineer and recreate the item. In the case of the new technology being an abstract concept (e.g. a new system of writing, new way of government), simple observation and interrogation will help us understand the technology.

While technology was a major boon to the European conquest of the New World, the largest killer of Native Americans was European disease. Millions of New World inhabitants died of illnesses such as smallpox, measles, tuberculosis and cholera. At the same time, very few Europeans died of Native American diseases. This was a result of the crowded living conditions in Europe at the time, in which many people were living very close to each other, rarely bathing, and spreading disease. Over centuries, most living in the cities developed genetic immunity to the diseases. When the first colonists reached the New World, the Native Americans were simply unprepared for such powerful, quick diseases, and suffered as a result.

Diseases, in the context of pop culture, are often viewed as the quick, easy solution to an alien invasion. One notable example is H.G. Wells' The War of the Worlds, in which bacterial infections kill off the entire invading HE force. Though it makes an excellent *deus ex machina*, bacterial infections would likely be of little danger to HEs. As it was previously mentioned, Europeans lived in much more dense, crowded cities than Native Americans, and it is just as likely that HEs would live in much more dense, crowded cities than human beings. This, coupled with several thousand to millions of extra years of development would result in far more deadly diseases to which we would have no immunity. Even if the HEs exhibited a crippling weakness to human disease, the advanced medical

technology in their possession would quickly solve the problem.

All hope, however, would not be lost in such a scenario. Just as many people today fail to receive vaccination against illnesses which are no longer common (foremost among them smallpox), it can be presumed that HEs would have failed to continue immunization efforts against diseases they considered eradicated. By recreating the disease, or at least introducing one very similar to it, a major outbreak could be triggered, much like a smallpox outbreak today. Sabotage of medical equipment and selective assassination of medical professionals would further progress of the disease.

On a final note, in the event of contact with HEs, our species will likely be viewed as "lesser", despite any attempts to prove otherwise. Evidence for such an idea is seen in the multitude of explanations given by religious and government officials to justify the extermination and enslavement of Native Americans, among them a lack of a soul, a need to be "civilized", and that the conquest was God's will. HEs will view humans on the whole in the same light, and treat our species as such. We must be prepared for this moral system, and use it to our advantage. In retaliation, we must remember that an overt attack by HEs would not be a war for hearts and minds, but for all out conquest. We must not make the same mistakes made by the Aztecs, Inca, and countless others.

Lessons Learned

On a day a few decades ago, a group of mundane mortals mistakenly thought that they could categorize the concept of knowledge. That they could contain the nexus of worlds, that the Foundation could lock up the platonic concept of a Library.

It was a learning experience, at least.

On that day, a Doctor pored over notes and maps, looking out the window of the temporary base of operations that had been set up for the incursion.

Not an invasion, not an assault. An *incursion*. That's the phrasing the Doctor preferred. Ideally it'll be more or less a scouting mission, something to gauge the relative scale of the Library.

Three groups, coming from three separate points. Triangles were meaningful shapes, right? The researchers weren't sure if they were or not. They weren't entirely sure of any of this, as a matter of fact.

Of course, only the very top of the command chain knew that. Everyone else was told that there were measured risks involved. It wasn't exactly a *lie*. Just stretching the truth.

Everybody took their stations, three entrances in three doorways in three small towns. Each in contact with the others, each planned to the minute.

The Library was as it always is. I would say it was a day like any other, if there were proper days in the Library. Or, at least, across the entire Library. Sometimes night is necessary.

The Library bustled as they always did. Sweeping, grand shelves stretching for miles, stocked with the knowledge of eternity; some towered higher than the sky, others were barely a foot stool's height.

Every so often one might stumble across a small clearing, filled with couches or tables or whatever else the Library's visitors brought from elsewhere.

Speaking of which, at any given time beings from across time and space were scattered across the stacks, each unique but also not. An unfortunate alchemist, a skittish goblin, a peculiar cat, a soulless shapeshifter, an actual alien, a literal deer, a blindfolded witch - so many different lives meeting in the nexus of knowledge.

Throughout the Library stood Doors, each unique in itself, and each a literal Door to innumerable Ways. Each Way had its own Knock, and each Knock was unique in itself. Nothing was repeated in the Library, except when it was.

There was one corner of the Library, like most others, a clearing with a few tables and desks whose origins spanned across hundreds of years. This was one of many sitting spaces, and normally wouldn't be of special note in the Library; that is, until the moment a certain Door opened.

There was a hard, fast Knock on a tall wooden door set between two shelves. It looked as if it could be set in a farmhouse or old church, dusty and worn and heavy, heavy wood. It creaked a bit before a heavy boot kicked it open, and three dozen black-clad Agents of Red team swarmed in, weapons raised. Seven hundred feet away, another door burst open much the same way with Blue team's entrance; and three hundred feet from that one, another door with Green team's entry.

A single shot was fired, and screams began to ring out.

A field commander shouted as the Door slammed shut. The Doctor called over the intercom, demanding somebody retry the Knock - in a moment the Door opened again, and it opened to a different expanse of shelves. Agents rushed in.

Unfortunately, this was a different Way, and this corner of the Library was Restricted. An unfamiliar human voice began to wail as the Door slammed shut again.

In moments the Library was in chaos. The shot was taken by a newer Agent - nobody's quite sure who exactly, it happened so quickly - who got spooked and fired at… something. The moment the shot struck a shelf, the Library exploded into motion.

There was a palpable shift in the air as the Library came to life. The group huddled close together, tranquilizers and proper shots flying in focused bursts. A small black cat vanished into thin air the moment she was noticed, and a woman that looked almost like a schoolteacher dove behind a chesterfield; a man in a long coat drew his own pistol before being gunned down by the Agents, his body falling limp but bloodless on the marble floors.

In the distance more screams rang out. Agents shouted to one another, realizing the Door behind them was gone. Someone authoritative called for them to 'find the others and regroup' - and they started off into the maze of shelves.

Then the Librarians came.

The Agents were scattered, gunfire and dozens upon dozens of voices screaming and calling out among the stacks. Occasionally gunfire rang out, and was swiftly silenced.

One of the Red navigators was in a panic, desperately trying to reopen the shut Door. Several other agents huddled close, ready to lay down suppressing fire if anything else approached; he didn't care, he just needed the damned Way to open.

There was a click and it finally swung open; the others looked back as he fell through into a hall of words, his voice perfectly silenced as old grey light poured into the Library like fumes. After several moments, an unfamiliar arm reached back out, closing the Door behind him.

They repeated the Knock over and over, each time afterward opening to a different place. A nearly solid wall of flame, an impossibly cold desert, an abandoned apartment covered in fungus;

everything seemed lost.

The Doctor called his superiors. They would be unhappy but unsurprised.

Researchers at each entry point struggled to stay on the same page, each wracking their brains, trying to figure out a way to salvage the day. The Doors refused to work properly, the Agents were divided, the commanders were silent, the phones were busy… it was a nightmare.

Back in the project HQ, the Doctor hung up the phone, expression grim and sick.

Almost a lifetime away, an Agent from Blue was in a panic, crouched between a bookcase and a ratty old armchair. She peeked out to see a tall, mouthless figure practically appear out of thin air among her colleagues. It swung a heavy brass lantern with an eerie, silent grace, taking another Agent's head clean off; it was unphased by gunfire, silently neutralizing the threat posed to the Library, like a white blood cell would neutralize a germ.

The cowering Agent squeezed her eyes shut, the sounds of carnage and gunfire ringing in her ears for a further eight seconds… before suddenly stopping. Trembling, she opened her eyes - the Library before her was immaculate, the MTF and everything else they brought gone.

Standing several feet before her was the figure, mouthless, a lantern hanging from it's hand. Or… rather, the lantern hung from one arm.

It silently stood before her, holding its hand out. The Agent took it and was gone.

The Door was shut tightly again. Agents and researchers shouted amongst themselves, trying to figure out what happened. Minutes passed before the Way burst open on its own, a small group of Agents stumbling out. They scrambled and shouted, confused,

ragged, hurt; it seemed like they had been gone for days.

Before anybody could react, one screamed, dragged back into the door before it slammed one last time, the old, grimy handle falling off.

Elsewhere, Green group was completely fragmented. One splinter made the attempt to move out and try to find the other Doors. It started with about twenty agents. Then about sixteen. Eleven. Ten. Eight… Five. Three.

Then there was only one Agent left. He began to run, the stacks growing taller, the air growing heavier, the light dimmer. It began to feel almost haunted, but not; it was the kind of feeling that you get when you know a place was once beloved, but has been silent for far too long.

He turned a corner, finding himself among towering shelves that stretched taller than anything, with books filled with forgotten stories.

Lost, he saw a towering figure atop a shelf, a regal beast with a man's face, looking down with bored curiosity. The beast smiled when the Agent laid eyes upon it, eyes filled with thirst and delight.

The Agent turned to run and ran headlong into a tall, crowned creature with a smile carved into its face. He began to weep, collapsing against the books, terrified and doomed. Somebody who couldn't be recognized said words of comfort to the lost Agent, who realized he had made a mistake.

The other strange figures watched as a Librarian climbed down, watching politely as the Agent tried to gather himself. In a moment the crowned thing scooped the Agent up like a baby, and leaned up, handing him off to the Librarian.

A pair of Agents ran, brothers chased by shapes and movement they didn't dare look at directly. They turned a corner, the first Agent bowling over a frightened child with iridescent eyes, the other jumping over; to where, they never really considered. They just

needed to escape.

They ran for a long time, longer than they realized. Eventually they realized that the books were all gone… and the world around them had changed.

Light played above them, and they looked up to see a vast *thing*, like a titanic pillar on squat legs, a cage filled with innumerable lanterns planted atop its head. Branches like antlers strung with more lights stretched from the cage, twinkling like a tree filled with stars. The living thing's many arms reached throughout the hall, the scraping of quills on paper filling the brothers' ears.

It looked down at them, and they fled.

In the end, nobody knew what happened.

Like in everything else, every single person who was part of the incursion had a different story. Some seemed similar until one read into the subtleties, others had entirely unique experiences that no one else shared. Most contradicted the others.

Recordings of the day only helped muddy the waters further. Some showed chaotic images and sounds of alien worlds, others involved people who had not even been on the trip - that is, if they went on the op at all. Or had even been born yet.

Some of those involved had vivid recollections for the rest of their lives. Some remembered nothing but entering and exiting the Doors. It was like time skipped them over when they went through the Way.

The most peculiar thing happened thirteen days later. A group stumbled through Blue team's door, dressed in the tatters of their equipment, their hair greying and their bodies scarred and decrepit. They claimed to have been trapped in the Library for decades, and only just were able to leave. They each told fantastic tales of their own, of giants who stoked fires, of fantastic lost countries, of black dogs, of breathing ideas, of things they had no words to describe.

Many still remain. Lost souls who broke the rules, they must be

punished for their transgressions. And they will, just as countless have been punished before them, and countless more will after.

It is a learning experience.

Let Me Guess, Applesauce?

The Foundation used to lock things away,
Things, this and that, which they called special.
Every object that they deemed unique enough to keep was kept
Safe and secure within their gates.
Each one with their own set of procedures, their own fates.
Each one with a set of precautions, instructions and the like,
Designed to keep them locked up tight,
And to protect them from what was normal.

I was just another object,
Hoarded in a room with no light
Until a request to the board of research was submitted by the next doctor.
They'd proctor a test or a few,
And then back into my chamber I went.
That's how most of my time was spent.

I had no concerns about it,
No complaint or qualms.
How could I feel if something was wrong,
If I'm nothing but a toaster?

The ding of a toaster sounded as the waitress approached the table. "Sir," she said, "Do you need a box for that?"

Slowly, Ralph took his eyes off of his plate and warily looked up at the thin woman.

"No," he replied.

"Are you sure?" the waitress inquired, looking slightly concerned, "I

brought out your order almost an hour ago, and you've barely touched it."

Looking down at his plate, most of his breakfast had already been eaten. Two strips of bacon, two eggs over-easy, and a short stack of pancakes, all gone. The only thing left on his plate was 2 slices of toast.

Barely touched it, Ralph thought, *that's a good one.*

"You can just throw the rest out," he responded, "There isn't really enough here for me to take home."

"I'll go get a box for that," the waitress said warmly, as if she hadn't heard him, "Just give me a moment."

As she walked away, another ding sounded. Out of the corner of his eye, Ralph saw a lanky waiter walk out of the kitchen. Slowly, he walked across the room, and gently placed down a plate on the table where another customer was seated. Ralph could hear a small exchange between them, and as the waiter walked away, the other man began eating his meal.

It was a plate full of toast.

Soon the waitress returned, holding a Styrofoam box, the check, and another plate. She set both down on the table. Sitting on the plate was a toasted slice of raisin bread, sprinkled with cinnamon.

"Don't worry," she assured him, "It's on the house."

Without another word, Ralph placed both slices in the box, paid for his meal, and exited the restaurant.

"Good morning, Mr. Brindis."

Conrad Brindis, the North American Regional Commissioner from the Coalition of International Toasters, looked up from his paperwork and smiled.

"Good morning to you too, Seth. You can put those irons down on

my desk."

Seth, Conrad's personal assistant, put the pair of clothing irons down, and sat in the chair opposite his boss. "How are you doing today, Commissioner?"

"I'm doing pretty well, you?"

"Good. Had some sourdough for breakfast."

"Huh, Well I'm jealous." Conrad reached for the irons' extension cords. "I take it Lisa made it for you?"

"Yeah, she keeps insisting on having me try all her recipes. Not that I'm complaining, she's a great cook."

"Nice." He stood up and plugged them into the wall. "Oh, did you hear about last night's vote yet?"

"The one on your bill? How'd it go?"

Conrad walked back over to the table and picked up the irons. "It went very well, Seth. Got through both houses with unanimous support. Not that I was expecting anything less."

"Yeah, I can't see why anyone would vote against it. What I'm wondering is how the heck it wasn't already on the books when you introduced it. I mean, how do we *not* have a law against throwing away toast?"

A simple appliance like myself
Might not have caused alarm to anyone,
Certainly not the Foundation.
A huge organization with so much on their hands,
Keeping abnormal things from harm,
And normality from abnormality,
Needed a reason to hold on to me.

That reason, seemingly innocuous,
Exceedingly obnoxious,
Shows how this verse's perspective is not

Seen through my lens, my objective.
I don't have a point of view.
It is but an artifact of one simple fact.
In the words you have heard,
This writer, and all others,
Always refer to me in the first person.

A mere side effect of my true properties.

Ralph wanted to tear the radio out of his car and throw it out the window.

Driving to work from the restaurant, there was a story on the local station about the new bill going through the parliament. The proposal would impose a fine on people who throw away toast.

A fine? That's the literal opposite of fine.

It was times like this that he wondered if he was the only sane person on the planet. Everywhere he went he saw thin, wiry people obsessed with eating toast. No one saw anything wrong with it. No one considered the possibility that maybe some people had been tired of the stuff for years.

His thoughts now wandered to the toast sitting in the passenger seat. Two pieces, he could hold both in one hand, but the thought of actually consuming them had become almost nauseating. Now with his luck, when he tried to throw them away, he'd be stuck paying money he didn't have.

As he pulled into the parking lot, Ralph thought about his job. He felt his mostly empty wallet in his pocket; most of the money in it had been spent on his breakfast. His pay barely covered rent and food, so he certainly couldn't afford a fine. He couldn't get rid of the toast by giving it to his coworkers either; even though they all seemed to be in love with the stuff, they would never take it off his hands.

Ralph wished that the toast would just disappear. He wished that he could make it vanish and just be done with it. He was tired of people expecting him to eat it every day, and never listening to him when he

said no. As he parked his car, Ralph directed his frustration towards the box from the restaurant.

Picking it up, he wondered if maybe, just maybe, if he thought hard enough, he could make it vanish.

Yeah, I wish.

Conrad and Seth were both laughing as they continued their conversation.

“Oh man… He honestly thought that would work?”

“Yeah.” Conrad held a piece of bread between the clothing irons. “But all he managed to toast was his bone marrow.”

“Damn, I should not be laughing at this. That just sounds horrible.”

“No, its fine, he was laughing about it too for the next week. Of course, he only lived that long, but still; he got a laugh out of it!”

“Sir, that’s terrible.” Seth clutched his sides. “Gosh, this should not be this funny.”

“Well, it wouldn’t have worked anyway.” Conrad separated the irons, dropping the fresh piece of toast on the desk. “In order to toast a slice of bread, you need direct heat. For example, I just used these irons to do it. Now, a big piece of Curium, on the other hand…”

Before he could finish, a red light began shining on his desk.

“Huh, haven’t seen one of those in a while.”

“What is that, Boss?”

“It’s just something that I need to call the chairman about. I’m going to need a few moments alone to do that. This stuff is above your security level.”

“Yeah, as if I actually have a security level. That’s a good one.”

“Hey, you’ll get promoted eventually. But seriously, why don’t you get some lunch while I call him. This shouldn’t take too long.”

“Alright Mr. Brindis. Just let me know if you need anything else.”

On one particular day,
A doctor took me away from my chamber,
To the approved testing room
For an experiment.
At the other end of the facility
Past every bend in the hall
Every room, every researcher and test subject,
There was an entrance.

A small, but important group,
Made their entrance.
While the doctor prepared, they were preparing.
He sat and stared, contemplating me,
How I was but a toaster that could only be referred to
In the first person.
And while he sat, that group of my followers
Began an attack.

Those followers who saw
What I could do, what I was,
Would reveal my vision
To the appeal of the masses.

No matter how hard he tried, Ralph just couldn’t focus on his work.

He had been sitting at his desk for over an hour now, just staring at his computer screen, unable to type his report. Occasionally, he would begin entering in a few words, but would immediately delete it moments later.

This wasn’t a major problem; the report wasn’t needed until the next board meeting, and that was still a week away. But there was a larger issue eating away at him.

Slowly, Ralph turned again towards the box from the restaurant, now sitting near the edge of the desk. Hesitating, he reached his hands towards it, and picked it up. He closed his eyes, and carefully opened it.

Opening his eyes, he was greeted with the same sight he'd seen in his car: the box was completely empty.

OK, Ralph thought, *there has to be some logical explanation for this. It probably just fell out, right?* He remembered walking out of the restaurant, how he held the box tightly, knowing that dropping it would attract someone to talk to him. With everyone obsessing over the stuff so much, someone would have noticed if he had dropped two pieces of toast in the street. It was doubtless that someone would have approached him about it.

No, I definitely dropped it. That's the only reasonable explanation. I dropped it and no one saw…

Pushing the subject out of his mind, he went back to his computer. By the end of the day, he had completed two sentences.

Seth had eaten well for lunch: two pieces of toast with jam, and some split pea soup.

As he approached Conrad's office, there was loud talking inside.

"Look, Mr. Chairman, I just don't think we need to deploy them right now. We've had these sensors malfunction before."

This was probably a conversation he wasn't supposed to hear. Talking with chairman meant that it was something of confidence, of which he was not allowed to know. Therefore, Seth started to walk away.

"We haven't had an actual reality bender in decades. Why would one pop up now?"

He stopped in his tracks. "Reality bender" wasn't a phrase he had heard before. It sounded like an imagined idea, but Seth found his curiosity to be growing. Against his better judgment, he moved

closer to the door.

“OK, alright, I understand your concern.”

“I’ll send them out after the maintenance team finishes up, but only if we get another alarm. Otherwise there just isn’t enough cause right now.”

“Even if there was one, we can afford to wait right now. With a signature that small, whoever it might be isn’t going to be vaporizing a building any time soon.”

Seth wondered if he had heard that comment correctly.

“To be blunt, sir, I’m hesitant to send them out because it’s going to cost a significant amount of money, and my constituents are going to ask questions about where that money went.”

“Thank you. I’ll call you right away if anything else happens. Bye.”

There was a click as the phone was hung up, followed by a sigh.

“I know that you’ve been standing out there. You can come in.”

Timidly, Seth slowly opened the door and poked his head inside.

“How did you know I was out there, Mr. Brindis?”

Conrad smiled, looking vaguely amused. “I didn’t. I say that every time I get off a confidential call. I figure that if someone was actually eavesdropping outside my door, saying that would make them give themselves away.”

Seth smiled sheepishly.

“Come in and close the door. You’re not in trouble.”

Seth quickly stepped inside, shutting the door behind him, and took a seat at his boss’s desk.

“Alright Seth, tell me what you heard.”

Most don’t stay around me long enough
To feel the true extent of my abilities.
The way that my effects reflect
On neglected parts of the mind,
Months must be spent.
Few have been sent to this fate,
And even fewer are lent
The skills needed for it
Not to kill them.

Talking of me in the first person
Is a trivial reaction,
Much easier to comprehend
Than my true action.
I allow people to see
A sight that starts dim,
But gradually gains light.
It’s a view so strange,
Many who see it are left deranged.

But my followers knew
That this sight was meant to be seen.
They had been nothing less
Than rightfully depressed
At the Foundation which stored me away.
And they were about to reveal,
To all of the world,
The boys and girls,
Elders and youth,
A terrific sight.

The sight of truth.

Ralph knew it was a stupid idea. It was nonsensical, absurd, and paranoid of him to be doing this. But as soon as he got back to his apartment from work, he popped a slice of bread in his toaster.

Ralph had plenty of reasons to keep a toaster. While he wasn’t fond of toast, he still very much liked pop tarts.

As soon as the now darkened slice popped out, Ralph immediately grabbed it, dropped it on the counter, and cursed in pain from burning his hand.

Yup, that's a great idea you've come up with here. Burn yourself because you want to see if you can make toast disappear with your mind. Brilliant.

Breathing deeply a few times to calm down, he gathered his thoughts, and focused his frustration on the morsel now sitting in front of him. After a moment, he closed his eyes.

I hate toast. I hate how every moron I ever come across is just so *in love with the stuff. I hate how it gets stale when you leave it out for an hour. I hate how there's always that one part of the crust that's burnt. I hate the way it tastes. I hate the way it smells. I absolutely despise the stuff.*

Ralph opened his eyes. Sitting on the counter was a now slightly cooled piece of toast, completely unaffected by his attempt.

OK, maybe it needs to be directed at this particular slice.

Ralph poked the piece gently, and then closed his eyes again.

I hate that exact slice of toast for burning my hand.

His eyes opened. The slice was still there. Ralph turned around and vented his frustration.

"Damn it," he yelled, "can't this piece of shit just go away?"

He stood there for a moment, and then with a sigh, he accepted the pointlessness of what he was doing.

Ralph turned around and looked back at the counter. It was now empty.

He blinked a few times, wondering if there was something wrong with his eyes. The toast was nowhere to be seen. He looked closer, but there was no trace. As he ran his hand over the surface, he felt only the smooth material of the counter. Not even a crumb

remained.

Ralph stayed up all night trying to repeat the effect. By sunrise, an entire loaf of bread and been toasted, and an entire loaf of bread had vanished.

“Well, you didn’t hear anything that I wouldn’t have let you know about eventually.”

“Wait, you were going to tell me about that stuff?”

“Not for another few months, but yes. You’ve been my assistant for a year and a half now, Seth. I trust you a great deal. I figured I would give you the clearance for this stuff eventually.”

“So, does this mean I’m getting an actual security clearance?”

“Now, don’t get ahead of yourself just yet. I’m still going to hold off on telling you any classified details for now. But I can tell you that there’s no need to worry about any of it at the moment. Earlier on the phone; that was just the chairman being overly cautious about something that hasn’t been an issue for years.”

“And that thing about reality bending?"

“Once again, it hasn’t been a problem for years.”

A red light appeared on Conrad’s desk.

Seth stared at the crimson signal.

“Um, Mr. Brindis…”

“Yeah, I see it.” Conrad sighed. “You know, today is just not my day.”

“Doesn’t that light mean…”

“It means that there is, apparently, a problem that shouldn’t be happening. But since it is, you and I have to deal with.”

“I thought I didn’t…”

“You do now. Effective immediately, I’m giving you Level C secure access.”

“…”

“I need to make a call, and then we’re going to deploy a team where we got the alarm from. After that, both of us are going down there. I want your help with this.”

Conrad picked up the phone on his desk, and dialed in a number.

“This is Commissioner Conrad Brindis. I need you to send me down to my office.”

My followers planned out
The entire operation
To retrieve me,
There’s no doubt, however, that it would have been
Advantageous to think further ahead
In their preparation
To deal with the fallout.

The Foundation would not take lightly
Such an attack, and the theft of what
They thought they had a right to hold.
Soon negotiations got old,
And when they refused to accept
A proposal to defuse the situation,
It was clear that an escalation
Was imminent.

Their ultimatum was clear for them to hear,
But my followers, my fellow toasters,
Would never back down.
My followers would not release me,
And the Foundation of my incarceration
Would not let me continue to be free.

If only they had known
What horrors had been released
By taking what the Foundation owned.
Even when the battle ceased,
And their enemy lay fallen,
A new day of chaos,
Was upon my followers.

Ralph was not tired. He had stayed up all night in his kitchen, but his head was spinning too much for him to even think about exhaustion. He paid little attention to the window as the sun began to rise, and even less to his alarm clock when it began to ring. All he could think about right now was trying to understand what he was doing.

None of this makes any sense! Am I just going crazy?

He checked his kitchen counter again, but he still found no evidence of any of the slices.

The question of what exactly he was supposed to do hung over his mind. Around it was a mix of emotions from confusion, to concern, to frustration.

And then Ralph decided what he was going to do.

I'm never going to eat another damned piece of toast ever again.

It was only at this point that he decided to check the time. When he looked at his clock, he saw that he was over an hour late for work.

Ralph cursed out loud, and rushed back into his room, not noticing the knock at his door. As fast as he could, he changed his clothes, went back to his kitchen to grab a pop tart, and then rushed to his door, not hearing anyone outside. As he slammed the door open, he felt himself collide with something.

Ralph heard a surprised yelp, a thump of something hitting the floor, and a muffled crack. A moment later, he saw the police officer lying on the ground.

"Holy shit!" he said as he rushed to the officer, "Sir? Officer? Are

you…”

The officer pushed Ralph away with one arm. “Get the hell away from me!” he exclaimed, “What’s wrong with you? Ram the door into a police officer after he tells you to come out of the room? Are you stupid? Well?”

“Tells you to… what?” Ralph said, puzzled, “I didn’t hear you. I’m sorry, I was in a rush, and I’m late for work right now…”

“I could throw your ass in jail right now for assaulting me," the officer replied angrily. He pulled his right arm out from under him, revealing it to be twisted painfully. “Ah! Damn it!”

Ralph got back up. “OK, uh, I can go get help,” he suggested, “I’m so sorry about this sir, I honestly didn’t hear you; I wish I had been paying attention. Don’t worry, I’ll be right back!”

With great haste, Ralph ran back into his apartment, and grabbed the telephone. He rushed to punch in an emergency number, and held the phone to his ear.

There was no dial tone.

Confused, he tried again to call for help, but got the same result. He hung up the phone and rushed back to the door, hoping to ask a neighbor for assistance.

When he got to the door, there were now several officers standing in front of him. The one he had knocked down earlier stood at the front, holding a taser in his right hand.

“What… how are you holding…” was all Ralph could say before he heard a pop, a buzzing sound, and felt his muscles spasm.

Seth sat in the back of Conrad's car as they were driven towards the area where the alarm originated.

“So, there used to be an organization that dealt with these guys?”

“More than just reality benders, Seth. The Foundation held all sorts

of things. Statues that move when you aren't looking, plays that drive the actors and audience to insanity, giant amalgamations of clockwork; they kept all kinds of things."

"But how did they get out?"

Conrad was silent for a few moments. "Do you remember learning about the Great Rebellion in school?"

"Of course I did, Mr. Brindis. That was when the CIT rose to power. I didn't just learn it in school; I had to take a test on it when I applied to get a job here."

"Ok, but do you know what we were fighting against?"

"It was drilled into my head, sir. We overthrew the oppressive old world structure and…"

"Seth, have you ever considered the fact that maybe that wasn't the whole truth?"

"…"

"That old government wasn't just some evil villain from a children's story. They stayed in power all that time because they kept the world safe. They kept the things that could have destroyed the planet several times over in check." Conrad looked out the window and frowned. "They were the ones who made sure that people who bent the world with their minds, stayed locked away."

Seth was silent for a moment, but then spoke up. "Are you saying that the organization we overthrew was the Foundation?"

Conrad sighed, and said nothing.

"Boss, why would we do something that stupid? You're telling me that this organization held things that could have killed millions, and that they kept them from hurting anyone. But then we just went and got rid off them? Why the hell would we do something that stupid?"

"Seth, they weren't a good organization…"

“I’m not saying that they were! I’m saying that it sounds like we didn’t have any backup plan to deal with all of this stuff, because I don’t know how else a guy like this is still out there.”

“Seth, we had reasons…”

“We better have some pretty damn good reasons. If it wasn’t for us making such a dumbass decision, we wouldn’t be dealing with this situation right now.”

“If we hadn’t made that decision? That’s a null point.”

Seth was silent for a few moments. “I’m sorry, I’m just really nervous about this.”

“So am I, Seth.”

Now both of them were silent.

“…Mr. Brindis?”

“Yes?”

“What exactly was the reason that we did that?”

Conrad held up the toaster in his lap. “I am.”

“You already told me about me. I get it, me being a toaster that you can only refer to in the first person, it’s weird. I don’t see why that was enough for us to do something that risky.”

“That’s not my only effect.”

“Well, what else is there?”

Conrad sighed. “I’m going to tell you what my other effect is. And when we get down to the site, I’m going to prove to you that we made the right choice. But you have to be willing to listen, OK?”

“OK”

The truth can be the most bizarre statement,

So incomprehensible
As to drive men insane.
The abatement of truth, however,
Was never proclaimed to be just.

That is what my followers
Aimed to accomplish:
To admonish those who hid
What must be known,
Even if only by a few.
My truth must be heard,
And for all who have stirred
To release it,
It will be spelled out plainly.

I told them that they were toasters.
I don't boast this fact as being
Any more complex
Then each and every next sunrise.
But such a simple thing,
When truly understood,
Can bring with it madness
To the weak and strong,
The evil and good.

And so when the Foundation failed,
And the last nail placed in their coffin,
All that remained was to capture
The strange things which had escaped.

For this, I was of use.
For when one who bends reality to their will
Is struck still by the thought,
That they are, in fact, a toaster,
This is as certain as the stars.
What they believe, manifests.

Ralph had been sitting in his kitchen, with his legs tied to a chair, sitting in front of the table, for what felt like hours. For most of that time, he listened to the muffled voices outside, trying to understand

what they were saying. He caught none of it, and was left only with his thoughts, which were in a similarly incomprehensible state.

Much to his relief, the door eventually opened, and two men walked in. His relief vanished, however, when he saw one of them carrying a toaster and a loaf of bread.

While one of the men simply stood next to the table, the other took his time placing the bread and toaster on the table in front of him. Then, still moving slowly, he grabbed a chair and sat across from Ralph.

“So,” he began, “How are you doing right now?”

Ralph decided that a scowl would best convey his current state of mind.

“I’ll take as ‘angry’ then,” the man went on, “Well, I guess that makes sense. We did kinda tie you up and lock you in your house. Heh-heh…”

Ralph was profoundly unamused by the attempt at humor.

“Ahem, right,” he continued, “So, could you just state your name?”

“Why the hell are you sick assholes keeping me here?” Ralph replied bluntly.

The man said nervously, “Um, well…”

“Is it for assaulting that police officer?” Ralph fumed, “His arm was fine. I saw him holding his taser in it right before he stunned me.”

The man was taken aback for a moment. “Well, you see…”

“Seth, let me handle this,” the other man cut in.

Seth got up from the chair, and let the other man sit down. He took a slice of the bread, put in the toaster, and said, “Could you get for me?”

“Yes, Mr. Brindis.” Seth said, and then he walked away.

Mr. Brindis began speaking. “It’s rather… interesting, what that officer told us. He said that right after you said, ‘I wish I had been paying attention’ and ran back into this apartment, his arm healed itself.”

“Well,” Ralph sputtered, “He must be crazy then. That’s not…”

“You saw what happened, and he felt what happened.” Seth handed Mr. Brindis a plate and he continued, “Cut the crap and tell me your name.”

I can’t do anything like that. I made some toast disappear, sure, but this? I don’t see how that’s possible. He must have been faking his broken arm, or maybe…

“Ahem,” Mr. Brindis said, interrupting his thoughts, “Your name?”

“…Ralph Crudam.”

“Thank you,” he said, though it may have been Seth, who now stood next to the table. “Now, Mr. Crudam, do you believe that you could perform such a feat like what I have described?”

Ralph decided to play along. “I’m not sure.”

“I think you can,” Mr. Brindis said bluntly, “And it would probably be best if you would be honest with us.”

The slice popped out of the toaster, golden brown. Mr. Brindis picked up the slice, placed it on the plate, and slid it across the table. “Hungry?” he asked.

Ralph stared at the piece for a moment, and then looked back up at the two men. He could not tell if they were kidding or not.

“Mr. Crudam?” Seth said, “Are you OK?”

Screw it, I don’t care. I’m not eating this thing. I wish that piece of toast wasn’t there.

In the blink of an eye, the toast was gone.

Seth backed away form the table, breathing heavily, with a vague look of terror on his face. The other man, however, barely flinched.

“If you guys expected me to eat that,” Ralph explained, “You’re nuts.”

“So it’s true then,” the man sighed, “You can do this sort of thing.”

“Yeah, so what?” Ralph continued, “I make toast disappear with my mind. There, I said it. Are you happy?”

The man looked at Seth, and calmly said, “Yes, I am. Alright Seth, you’ve seen enough of this. Let’s head out.”

“Yes, Mr. Brindis,” Seth replied, and they both started towards the door.

“Hey, wait,” Ralph said loudly, “You can’t just leave me here tied up!”

Neither of the men paid any attention to him as they hurried out, and slammed the door. Now Ralph was left alone with his thoughts.

His thoughts at this point were a complete mess. Every bit of information from the past day was jumbled around with lingering questions. He still didn’t know how he had made the toast vanish. He couldn’t figure out why the police had come to his house, or why they had tied him up.

And then there was the question of the officer's arm.

It was the same way with the toast. I tried to rationalize it. But it turned out that I’d actually done something that should’ve been impossible.

His stream of consciousness ran forward to one inevitable conclusion.

I do not know what I’m capable of.

In turn, he realized what he needed to do. He needed to figure out the full extent of his abilities.

Well, I guess I need to figure it out then. I should start by trying to get out of here.

Conrad and Seth walked out of the restaurant near the apartment.

“You doing alright Seth?”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“Alright. You’ve just seemed kinda tense since yesterday.”

They approached the car and opened the doors. “I know. It’s just weird to think that he could just make something vanish like that. And we were right next to him.”

Conrad put his hand on Seth’s shoulder. “Listen, we caught him early. We always do. His abilities never got strong enough to be dangerous.”

Seth sat in the back of the car and buckled in.

“If it makes you feel any better, Seth, I was also nervous in there.”

Seth looked through the back window of the car as it began to drive off. “Well, you certainly didn’t show it, boss.”

“Look, what I’m saying is that it’s OK to be nervous sometimes, especially with something like this. Just… don’t let it get to you.”

“Alright.”

The car was silent for a moment.

“Mr. Brindis is it true what you said about me?”

“Hmm?”

“You said that I made people think that they were toasters.”

“Yeah. That’s the whole reason why I’m used for these sorts of things. What a reality bender believes becomes real. And if they believe that they’re a harmless appliance, problem solved.”

“I got that, but… is the other part true?”

“What do you mean Seth?”

“You said I showed people the truth.”

“Which is?”

“You said that, in a way, we’re all toasters. Is that really true?”

Conrad sighed. “I think so. If you’re around me long enough, you’ll know.”

“Alright…” Seth was silent for a moment, then continued. “Wait, how long have you been around me?”

Conrad smiled. “Long enough to know.”

“But… isn’t that dangerous?”

“Not if you know what you’re getting into.” Conrad looked out the window. “It’s sort of… metaphysical. It’s difficult to explain. I think you’ll understand it if you’re around me long enough.”

“Boss,” He paused, “How do you know that it’s true? What if it’s just, I don’t know… just me telling you something wrong?”

“I just do.” The car pulled into the parking lot behind the apartment building. “We won a war for me, Seth. We went against a strong enemy and we didn’t win easily. I’m pretty sure that we were following me for a better reason than just talking about me in the first person all the time.”

The car parked next to the tent that technicians had set up earlier. Seth and Conrad got out of the car and went inside.

The technicians were rushing about, all looking concerned and surprised. Dozens of lights were blinking, and a loud buzzing filled the area.

Conrad simply stood at the entrance for a moment. “That can’t be good…”

One of the guards rushed over to them. “Commissioner, we just got a spike in the readings.”

Conrad stared at him with a puzzled look for a second, before approaching one of the many pieces measurement equipment that were kept inside. It was a simple analogue meter, with a graph being printed on a sheet of paper. The graph showed a spike, before abruptly dropping.

Conrad opened his mouth, but said nothing before entering a brisk walk back towards the apartment building. Seth quickly followed.

“Sir, what’s going on?”

Conrad pulled open the door and rushed into the stairwell. “That can’t be right. That can’t be right.”

“Mr. Brindis?”

They both soon reached the second floor, and ran to the apartment. Two guards remained stationed at the door.

“Open the door!”

“Mr. Brindis, what’s going on?”

The door was opened, and they both stared inside. The kitchen was clearly visible, as were the table and chairs, and the toaster and the loaf of bread.

Conrad approached closer. He looked around the room, then at the table. After a moment, he turned back to Seth.

“He got out, Seth.”

“Who got out?”

“That fucking reality bender, he got out!” He stared back at the table. “This shouldn’t have happened, this isn’t possible! He wasn’t supposed to be this strong yet!”

“…Mr. Brindis?”

Conrad dropped to his knees. “I… I… how…”

Seth walked over to the table, and looked at it carefully. Words seemed to be printed on it in some sort of ink, which already appeared to have set into the surface.

You can’t make me eat any more goddamn toast.

Seth did not even think about what this meant. He looked at Conrad, and then knelt down beside him. After a few minutes, he spoke.

“I guess this guy didn’t like toast, boss.”

Is it possible that a man
Could have so much in common
With me, a simple appliance?
Would a character and me, a toaster,
Come to being similar?

Perhaps so.
His plight, his desire to be free,
For me, it’s familiar.
When oppression reared itself
And he feared
That he would be lost,
He prevailed.
For me, the Foundation paid the cost
And for him, it was my followers.
Perhaps he may attract
A few crowds too.

He said that he tired of toast,
And maybe I also
Grow weary of the stuff.
After so long of making it
All the time,
Maybe I’d had enough.
Or at least I would
If I could
Feel such things.

But I can’t.
I’m just a toaster.

Let's Get this Show on the Road!

« **Freaks, Friends, and Fiends**| **Dread & Circuses Hub** | **A Circus Come To Not** »

In a quiet corner just outside the universe, bookshelves stretched to the heavens. Line upon line of them continued onward as far as the eye could see, and even further beyond that. From nowhere in particular, a soft light beamed down, just warm enough to be comfortable. At the same time, a gentle breeze rustled through pages, creating a soft whisper, reminding patrons that they were in a sacred place. *Tread lightly,* it said, *for this is the Wanderer's Library.*

A pleasant smell wafted through, carried by the wind. It came from a hollowed-out space in a particularly large bookshelf, which had been fashioned into a quaint little café. While patrons buzzed around it like flies, it retained the same quiet, dignified feel as the rest of the Librar-

"This place is freakin' awesome!" rang out a high pitched voice, followed by what can only be described as a 'squee'. The hyperactive young Clown spun around, taking in the scene with a smile on her face.

"Since when did the Library get an H.P Brewcraft? Can I get a *Frapaccthulhu*? Extra whipped cream, extra drizzle, extra existential horror? I can handle it, I'm a Clown," Lolly ordered as she juggled three books excitedly, before all three were calmly pulled out of the air by her companion.

"I think you've had enough sugar though," Icky smirked as she pointed at a small group of dark-robed figures sitting around a table, who were watching the pair with an intense gaze. "Remember darling, we're still on thin ice with the Library because of You-Know-Who. We need to be a bit more respectful."

Lolly noticed the mouthless docents (who enjoyed the coffee shop purely for the aroma), and stopped giggling. She put her hands behind her back and whistled, as if she hadn't been doing anything at all. The two turned back towards the counter, hoping the docents would be gone by the time they had finished their drinks.

"They give me the creeps. Or should I say…" Lolly pointed to a display case by the counter, which contained various baked goods. "The crepes!"

Icky tried to keep a straight face, but couldn't help but snicker.

Across the counter, an unamused barista tapped the cash register with a tentacle impatiently. "So it that a yay or nay on the *Frapaccthulhu*?" Lolly looked up at Icky with pleading eyes.

"Please? I'm already on a sugar rush, and if I don't get more I'm going to crash," she asked.

"Alright, one *Frapaccthulhu* with everything she said before, and a *Yog-Espressoth*, whatever size is the biggest." Icky relented.

The barista punched the order in, and uttered unknowable noises at a server, who began to pour dark liquids into non-Euclidean cups, all of which proudly displayed their Fairtrade certification.

The interior of the café was comfortingly normal, with just enough light to create a soothing atmosphere. The scents of freshly baked goods and hot coffee mixed together with bizarre and alien smells, bringing in patrons of the Library from all over the multiverse. One patron in particular, a human, cleared his throat and motioned for the pair to come over to his booth.

Lolly slid into the booth quickly, as Icky calmly took a seat next to her. The man across from them had dark hair, scruffy stubble, and an eyepatch over his left eye. He regarded the two coldly, before lifting a steaming mug of coffee to take a drink. As he did, he turned his hand, making sure to display **`a tattoo of a certain symbol`**.

"I was under the impression that we would be meeting the Captain

herself," Icky said, trying to hide her disappointment.

The man spoke in a gruff voice. "She couldn't make it. Something about wrangling a kaiju for some zoo. The usual."

"That's the *usual*? What's *exciting* for you? *I* want to wrangle a kaiju!" Lolly said. "Also, who is this guy? He's not as cute as the Captain."

The man templed his fingers, responding curtly. "Munin, of the Nautilus. Second mate to Captain Nemo."

Lolly leaned forward, scrutinizing Munin, who didn't even blink his eye. "I'm pretty sure all those names are from a book. I don't think any of those names were real. Then again, my name's not real either so I probably shouldn't be so judgey. What is your real name anyway? Is it Jeffrey? You look like a Jeffrey. It's probably Jeffery." She sat back, and whispered to Icky, "Is his real name Jeffery?"

Icky shrugged. "That's hardly any of our concern darling. Munin— or Jeffrey or whatever— is here to inform us about the locale of our next show."

Across the table, Munin nodded. He reached into his jacket, pulled out a small brochure, and slid it across the table. "I'm still not sure why you want to perform *there*, of all places. You've got a whole Earth to entertain, don't you?"

"More than one, actually."

Their drinks arrived, each bearing an image of the Dread Cthulhu in the style of the Starbucks Siren. Icky picked up the brochure with one hand as she sipped her Yog-Espressoth in the other.

"But we can't keep calling ourselves the Greatest Show in all the Worlds without pushing ourselves to new heights, now can we?"

The pictures in the brochure showed a completely alien landscape. A mess of colors and shapes, all of them bizarre and disquieting. Vague figures, like fetal animals floating in rose-colored bubbles, strange devices with wicked curves and bright colors. Icky absentmindedly ran a fingernail over the image, revealing it to be

scratch-n'-sniff. Cute.

"The Nautilus can get us there safely? I know the docents wouldn't be thrilled to see our entire Circus parading through the Library. Even Lolly's too much for them to handle on occasion."

Lolly looked up from her cup, and licked off a whipped cream mustache, "Yeah, sitting quietly isn't really my thing, which can be a problem at libraries. And Doctor's offices. And funerals. And…"

"He gets the idea, sweetie."

"I assure you, the Nautilus can go places even your Kaleidoscope can't. No world, realm, or plane is beyond our reach." Munin scratched the area around his eyepatch, briefly revealing a green light beneath it.

Lolly downed the remainder of her drink quickly. "Does this mean we're going on a road trip?"

"It will be less of a road trip than it will be a…" Munin paused as Lolly looked at him with puppy-dog eyes, and Icky raised her eyebrows expectantly. "…Yes, it's a road trip."

"Yes!" Lolly bounced in place with excitement.

Munin's expression remained as serious as it had been upon first meeting the two. "For my own curiosity's sake; how do you plan to be a Circus of the Disquieting when you're performing for people in a completely alien world?"

Icky hesitated for a moment, thinking. "I'm still working on that. But I do have an idea. Have you ever seen *The Little Mermaid*?"

Lolly's eyes lit up. "Oh, I have! I loved it when I was a kid, partially for the music and partially because all those half-naked mermaids made me feel funny for reasons I didn't understand yet,"

Icky shot her a perplexed glance, while Munin barely raised an eyebrow.

"Well I understand now, obviously."

The bow of the *Nautilus* sped through a technicolor void at a breakneck pace, propelled by jets of emerald green light expelled from the backside of the hull. Below it was a swirling ocean of lights and images of other times, places, and creatures.

"Wha'd'ya think of that view, Lollipop?" Rang out the voice of the Captain as she leaped down from the upper deck. Captain Nemo was a young woman with a proud stance. Over both of her eyes, she wore a strange band with various symbols woven into the fabric. On her head was a blood-red tricorne, signifying her status. "I'd challenge you to find a view so breathtaking as the eldritch plane before you."

"Eh, it's alright I guess." Lolly said, as she leaned over the railing on the port bow. She glanced disinterestedly at a technicolor leviathan, which breached a few meters from the ship, before turning back to the Captain. "I was expecting the **Not** to be a little more 'Mountains of Madness', you know? Iris said she was weeping blood and seeing through time after only eight minutes in here."

Icky appeared from below deck, dusting off her hands. "Everything's secured, for now at least. Manny's making sure that Eugene's taken his seasickness pills, and Bubblegum has already self-medicated herself into a stupor."

Nemo gave the pair what would have been a side-eye, if she hadn't been wearing a blindfold. "You two are sure you want to stay up here when we make the dive below the surface? I appreciate your courage, but it doesn't agree with most of you…"

"'Landlubbers'?" Icky suggested. The Captain shook her head, a sly smile on her face.

"You'll survive. But it's one hell of a sight to see." The Captain's look hardened. She barked a few orders to her crew, who were making the final preparations by tying down any loose equipment. "I haven't made a jump this far since Blackwood and I were smuggling

supplies to the refugees of Kul-Manas. Last chance to back out, you two."

Lolly sighed dramatically. "The anticipation is driving me crazy! Let's do it!"

Icky turned to the captain with an excited grin on her face. "You heard the little lady."

Nemo nodded, and motioned to Munin, who was battening a hatch. Quickly, he shifted his eyepatch to the opposing eye, revealing an eerie green glow radiating from a freshly exposed orb. He called up to the other crew members, who all quickly did the same. Finally, Nemo lifted her own blindfold, revealing two emerald orbs of her own. The air suddenly grew tense, as if lightning were about to strike.

The scene blurred around the *Nautilus*, as it slipped below the surface, and began to pick up speed. Lights and images seemed to blur together as they continued onward. Nemo held her hands in front of her, taking hold of an unseen steering wheel with an iron grip.

Lolly tried to speak, but she found herself nearly paralyzed by the sheer speed they were moving at. She gripped Icky's arm tightly, as the latter gave her a comforting look. The Captain's arms moved to and fro, making split-second decisions to adjust the trajectory of the ship, or avoid monoliths which protruded from the sea. Still, they were accelerating. Light itself seemed to be dissolving and bleeding around them—

As suddenly as it begun, it ended. The *Nautilus* slowed to its previous pace as it surfaced, and Icky and Lolly found themselves releasing a deep breath they didn't realize they had been holding. Lolly slowly turned towards Icky, her hair still frozen behind her. Silently, she mouthed 'Wow', before collapsing backwards, giggling.

Icky too was left in awe. She turned to the Captain, who had begun to pull her blindfold back down. Nemo merely smirked, and walked up to the prow of the ship. "You're still conscious. I'm impressed. We'll reach your destination shortly. As for the matter of payment…"

Icky nodded. "I have a plan in mind. According to the pamphlets, carbon is pretty rare in this world, so it's used as a currency."

"And where we come from, it isn't. What's your point?"

"They also view arranging the atoms of it into crystal latices as one of the highest forms of art, which increases it in value even more."

Nemo's eyebrows arched beneath her blindfold. "Diamonds. Clever."

The *Nautilus* neared a large whirlpool, and slowed to a stop. Icky staggered forward, clutching the railing for support. She could already see the reflection of the world they were preparing to descend into. Her eyes gleamed with a mischievious determination.

"Ladies, gentlemen, and assorted Eldritch beings of all genders and the lack thereof, give it up one more time for Charlotte and her arachnid assistants!" Icky paused, as the audience chattered excitedly.

"And now, for our final act of the evening…"

The crowd of alien beings leaned forward in their seats. The Big Top was packed to the brim with attendees. Each one appeared to be a fetal animal, floating in a bubble of deep pink liquid that stayed suspended just a few centimeters from the ground. One or two reached a long, spindly limb out to grab a stick of cotton candy, which rapidly dissolved into the liquid.

Icky signaled to Lolly, who gave her an excited thumbs up in return from offstage, indicating that everything was prepared. "As you know, we have come to you from a far away dimension. So, we have no shortage of wonders to share with you. You've seen our freaks, but now we're going to show you…"

Lolly wheeled out a small cart, covered by a deep purple tablecloth, and stopped just in front of Icky. There was an unsettling squelching noise- like balloons being rubbed together- as the aliens pressed in

once more to get a better look.

"… Something truly disquieting!" Icky whipped the cloth off of the cart, revealing a small white box, with a black tail protruding from the backside, ending in three golden points. The crowd broke out in whispers. Uncertainty, doubt, confusion.

After a moment, a smaller alien floated upwards in its seat, and called out in a shrill voice. Icky wasn't sure exactly what it was saying— the device they had been loaned by Marshall, Carter, and Dark only allowed for one-way universal translations— but the curious tone in its voice was universal enough that she understood all the same.

Icky smirked, and took off her hat. From it, she produced a cup, which was full of small orange objects. Each of them tapered to a point on one side, like an egg, which was lighter than the rest of it. Icky applied pressure to one part of the box, causing the front of it to swing open with a loud noise. She placed the cup inside, and pressed another part of the box with her finger.

There was a gasp from the crowd as the box began to emit a low hum, and the front of it lit up with an eerie yellow glow. Before long, there was a series of loud popping noises, as the orange objects began to jump wildly inside, as if they were in pain. After a minute or two, Icky opened the box again, and tiny white *things* began to fall out.

Icky beckoned to the smaller alien who had spoken out earlier, and Lolly walked into the stands to escort her down to the center of the Big Top, quietly assuring the young alien that everything would be alright. "Alright everyone, give it up for our brave volunteer! She's about to be the first to try this snack from our dimension, eaten across the world!"

Lolly took out a small paper bag, and scooped some of the snack into it, before drizzling it with an orange liquid, and covering it with a light dusting of some strange smelling powder. With a broad smile on her face, she held the bag up to the small creature before her.

Timidly, the alien stuck a limb out of its bubble, and grabbed a tiny

fistful of the white material, which was surprisingly brittle and flaky to the touch. It retracted the arm into its bubble, where the food began to quickly dissolve. The alien hummed excitedly, and did a somersault within its bubble!

As the audience looked on in excitement, Lolly popped open the door of the box again, and jumped all the way inside. The popping noise from earlier increased in volume until it was nearly deafening, and the cart fell over, leaving the white box on its back.

With a sound like an explosion, Lolly shot out like a cannonball, sending more of the snack flying in every direction, showering down on the audience like snow!

A chorus of coos and shrill excited shrieks echoed through the Big Top once again as Lolly gently floated downwards, clutching a parasol, back to the center with Icky. As the audience applauded, she let go of the parasol and backflipped onto the ground.

"And we've got more where that came from!" Lolly said, giving Icky a wink.

"A round of applause for my lovely and beloved assistance, if you would be so kind folks," Icky requested. Instead of clapping their hands, the creatures produced a rapid stream of popping air bubbles in the outer membranes to signal approbation. "Lolly my love, seeing our crowd osmosising our earthly fare makes me think that they might be interested in seeing how you and I eat."

The crowd cheered their agreement.

"I know I always like it when our oral activities have an audience," Lolly added with a naughty smile and a pause for laughter, which was only filled with confused silence.

"Lolly, we talked about this, these creatures aren't going to get any sexual references," Icky whispered to her. Lolly nodded and went to fetch the prop for the act.

"You see folks, most creatures where I'm from can't just absorb food through their outer membranes. They have to open their maws and

force sustenance down their gullets!"

This fact was met with a collective gasp of shock from the audience.

"Horrifying, I know, and we've got an exclusive demonstration set up just for you!"

The lights dimmed and the spotlight fell on Lolly, who was now holding a long, green… thing, which wrapped around her forearm like a bracelet. After holding it up for everyone to see, she placed the green object on the ground. Icky took out her hat and pulled out a large, white rabbit. It wiggled its nose in an endearing way, eliciting a few *'awws'* from the audience.

Icky crouched, allowing it to hop to the ground, where it inched towards the green thing. The mammal sniffed around it, not seeming to take much interest. Still, something felt wrong about the situation. The ground slowly began to rise, ensuring that all of the audience members would be able to see. The air was tense, as if something were holding its breath, waiting for a moment to strike…

The audience began to whisper, confused by the lack of any apparent action. One or two of the aliens began to float upwards to get a—

Moving almost too quickly to see, the green object jumped to life, ensnaring the rabbit's head in its mouth. For an instant the horrified audience thought it was going to bite the animal's head off, but instead it unhinged its own jaw in a display of pure body horror. Its head seamed to split in two, each half independently wriggling down the rabbit's body, its throat ballooning to grotesque proportions as it swallowed its victim whole.

When the ordeal was finally over the green thing's jaws closed, sealing shut as if they had never been opened at all. The green creature was once again still as a statue, the only evidence of its crime being a massive bulge working its way down its digestive track.

The audience gazed in horror as the lump worked its way down the corkscrew length of its devourer. After a moment of this, the rabbit

squirmed out of the creature's alimentary canal - disheveled but alive. In a shimmer of light, the rabbit transformed into a Clown.

"And the moral, boys and girls, is to always read your performance contracts carefully before you sign them," The Clown huffed in annoyance, marching out of the ring after being handed a towel.

"Thank you, Eugene," Icky called to him as he pushed his way through the audience, the aliens rushing to get out of his way. Lolly couldn't help but giggle as they bumped into each other, sending the smaller ones flying like inflated beach balls.

Icky picked up the green creature, where it coiled up on her hand. "Give it up for the marvelousssss, sssssspectuacular… Sssssssserpent!"

The snake turned and seemed to give her a dirty look for a second. One of its eyes flashed an emerald color, before it disappeared as a cloud of green smoke, to another round of cheers.

Icky and Lolly held hands, bowing deeply and springing back up. Icky tipped her hat, and turned as if to leave. "Alright, everyone, you've been a fantastic audience! But alas, all good— and disquieting— things must come to an end! It's time for us to bring this show to a close!"

There was a chorus of sad wails, and pulsing, sloshing noises as the aliens shook in their odd bubbles. Lolly played along, turning to Icky and giving her a tearful puppy-dog look.

"Aw, but Icky, don't we have time for just *one* other thing?"

Icky raised her hand, bringing instant silence. "Alright, I give in. I suppose we still have time for one more trick!"

On cue, a giant cylinder fell from above into the center of the Big Top, hiding Icky and Lolly from view. As it landed, there was a moment of confusion, as all the audience members could see were odd, distorted images of themselves. One or two aliens floated over to it, inspecting the odd monolith, which reflected their every move.

There was a sudden series of gasps as a new figure came into view,

prowling around the perimeter of the monolith, twice as tall as any of the aliens. It was darkly colored, covered in strange orifices and glowing eyespots. It poked its head around the ground, as if taking in its surroundings for a moment, before suddenly turning and leaping into the stands!

Panic erupted as a dark, tripodal figure was seen running through the image, and escalated as two more appeared alongside it, sending aliens flying out of the Big Top in a panic as they felt something brush against their bubbles. The first dark creature roared triumphantly, before leaping into the monolith, shattering it into a thousand pieces.

Within a few moments, the aliens had almost all fled, leaving nothing in the Big Top, save for a few small, **orange cats**, purring contentedly in the center.

About a kilometer away from where the Circus had been mere moments ago, close to a river of dark purple liquid, Icky, Lolly, and a few crew members from the Nautilus and stagehands from the Circus were loading the last shipment of equipment back onto a small boat that would make its way back to the main ship. At the back of the boat, in the Captain's Chair, Nemo eagerly dug through a satchel filled with diamonds of every shape and size, a delighted expression on her face.

Lolly sat on top of a box as it was loaded up, giggling and shaking a small snowglobe styled after the alien race they had performed for. Quietly, she whispered to herself, "Best. Road Trip. Ever."

A small snake slithered up to the scene, before glowing a bright green color, and contorting in size and shape. In a matter of seconds, Munin stood where the snake had been. He glared at Icky silently, before spitting a tuft of rabbit hair out of his mouth.

Icky chuckled and slapped him on the back. "Thanks for being such a good sport. They really enjoyed it."

Munin huffed as he climbed aboard, a palpable tension in the air around him. From her perch on top of the box, Lolly smirked and called down to him.

"Don't be such a sour face. I'm pretty sure it was harder on Eugene than it was on you!"

« **Freaks, Friends, and Fiends**| **Dread & Circuses Hub** | **A Circus Come To Not** »

Let the Games Begin

Junior Researcher Marcher was not having a good day. His favorite parking spot by the door had been taken, leaving him to drive all the way back to the end of the lot to find a space. His coffee had burned his tongue, and his pen had leaked, getting him tackled by an overzealous new agent who had heard about **SCP-505**.

Granted, running for his life from an ancient war god/murder victim gooned out on the **"ancespirits of his forewarriors"**, as he had screamed it, made the other mishaps seem almost pleasant by comparison, but that was the *only* good thing about today.

He turned a corner, and slammed into Dr. Biltmore. *Okay*, he thought as he helped her up, *maybe there are two good things about today.*

"What the hell is happening!" she screamed over the alarms.

"76-2's broken out and he has the belt!", he shouted.

"What?"

"ABLE HAS THE CHAMPIONSHIP BELT!"

"Oh, god! How many casualties?"

"About half of this wing is dead," Marcher told Biltmore as they stumbled into a nearby closet. The alarms were a bit quieter here.

"Only half?" she asked.

"It would have been more, but he stops every five minutes to throw taunts at you at the top of his voice. That's the only reason I'm still alive."

"Jesus…" she muttered. "Do you think that security-"

"Most of them were in the cafeteria when he broke out," Marcher said soberly. "Everyone in one place, it was a slaughter…"

They were silent for a few moments, the solemnity of the occasion calming even the little voice in the back of Marcher's head informing him that he was alone in a closet with the love of his life.

It was Dr. Biltmore who managed to get herself together first. "So," she said, "how do we take him down?"

Marcher stared at her. "We? Are you joking? *We* need to wait here for reinforcements."

"They won't get here fast enough," she said calmly.

"It'll be suicide!"

"If the situation out there is as bad as you say it is, then the first priority of the Task Force that gets here will be the on-site nuke, not to look for survivors," Biltmore said in the same bland, matter-of-fact tone. "It's suicide either way, unless we find another way to end this."

"And if we don't?" he demanded.

"I'm Level 3. I know the codes, too. I'd rather not die today, but I won't hesitate if that's the only option."

There was another moment of silence, this time clanging with the unheard sound of two people's minds working desperately to think of a way to not die. Marcher happened to glance into a dark corner of the closet. "Hey…" he said slowly. Biltmore turned and looked at the dusty old thing that had drawn his attention. Their eyes met.

"Not that thing," she said.

"I read the documentation. It creates a pacifistic mind, it said. It already worked on Able once."

"Did you read about what else it does?"

"The effects are supposed to be slow to develop. We can deal with

them when we're safe."

"…Fine. Who's going to distract him?"

"Not it."

"Shit."

Able worked his way down the hallway, laughing at the pathetic weaklings attempting to defy his mighty eagle heart and tiger blood as he cut them down.

"THIS WILL BE THE FIRST OF YOUR MANY DEATHS AS I CAST YOU DOWN INTO THE LAND OF BLOOD AND HELLFIRE TO JOIN MY DAMNED ARMY!" he screamed as he tore a man in two.

Then, as the crowd cheered in his eyes, a ridiculous female in a lab coat without any sequins at all dared to step out in front of him.

Dr. Biltmore looked behind Able, and saw Marcher getting into place with the **`wheelchair.`** He nodded and she nodded back. Then, trying to remember those hazy weekends with her father spent in front of the TV, back when she was four years old, she opened her mouth and shouted at Able.

"Hey, uh… Able! You can't handle the truth! That you, uh, suck at wrestling! Can you smell what I'm cooking? No, because you are Un-Able! Because… you're unable to do anything! And I had sex with Torrie last night!"

Able's face became incandescent. He pulled in a mighty breath, then *screeched* at full volume.

"*YOU SNIVELING WORM IN THE GARDEN OF THE SPEARS OF VIKINGS BROUGHT DOWN BY MY VENGEFUL GOD! I AM THE FIRST TO KNOW DEATH, AND I HAVE MADE MYSELF HER UNHOLY PRIEST. I SHALL SHARE HER DEMENTED WHISPERS OF BLOOD AND VENGEANCE WITH YOU, YOU-*" but he was cut short as Biltmore caught him in the chest and heaved him into the wheelchair.

There was silence for one perfect, frozen moment, before a wave of pure, testosterone flooded energy burst from the belt around Able's waist, and rippled across the entire Foundation.

Deep in Site-93, **a colossal machine was hard at work**. After a few hours, its latest creation rolled out of it, covered in spikes, belching flames, with a gun that was only capable of firing folding chairs.

Printed on the front, in a dainty cursive script, were the words, "Relanceur de l'enfer."

A researcher snuck into the **soup bowl's** testing room, sniffling miserably. His heart brightened, however, at the delicious smell of chicken that suddenly began to waft from the bowl. As he picked it up, ready to slurp every last drop, the liquid began to bubble and steam. He leaned closer, puzzling over the boiling chicken-noodle soup, when it exploded from the ceramic receptacle, splashing every inch of his body.

As the poor man rolled on the floor, clutching at the many heat blisters forming on his bright red skin, words formed on the inside of the bowl.

They read, "C'mon, slugger! I barely tapped you there! Be a man and let's go again!"

The machine woke, listening to a glorious song. The music called to it, singing of carnage and death and shit blowing up. It followed the song, knowing in its engine that, whatever was about to happen, it was the very reason the machine existed.

Junior Researcher Marcher woke up in the middle of a ring, wearing a black and white striped tee shirt, with a handful of red cards.

He turned, to see a beautiful, buxom woman in a black bikini with way too much spray tan holding a card that said "Round 1" on it.

Nothing out of the ordinary here, he thought as the crowd filed in.

In the center of the ring, sitting in his wheelchair, Able adjusted his tuxedo, patted his porcupine hairdo, and grabbed the microphone in his lap. He raised it to his lips, paused, and then spoke.

"Ladies and gentlemen, skips and girls… Let's. Get. Ready. To. **RRRRUUMMMMMBLLLLLLLLLLLLEEEEEE!!!**"

Let The Right One Innily

Arnold closed the door. That was number four. Four grown adults so far, without costumes, showing up at his door and asking for candy for their toothless babies. Unreal. This was in addition to the 6-7 middle schoolers that had showed up without costumes, without "trick r' treats", and without "thank yous". Arnold knew it didn't pay to chastise these losers; better to just give them the stupid candy and get them out of his face. Still, it killed him a little bit each time. He loved Halloween, and clearly these people only loved free candy. Whatever. The good kids who actually dressed up, greeted him, and used their manners, generally made it all worth it, but this year they were more sparse than usual. Heck, Arnold would have settled for more of the shy little ones who just wouldn't say anything at all, regardless of their parents' well meaning encouragement.

Ding Dong.

Arnold grabbed the candy bowl, and opened the door. Costumes. Actual, real costumes, and they looked like effort had been put into them! *What the hell were they supposed to be though?*

"Trickle-teetle-treat!" came three male voices in unison.

"Oh man, I love the costumes! Looks like you boys really put some work into those!" Arnold exclaimed. He would be generous with this trio.

"Silly moldy oldy! We are not twigs and beans! We are lady-types!" said the one on the left. It looked like some sort of large headed monster with horns, with nothing more than a potato sack running from its neck to its knees. The other two were pretty similar. Maybe they weren't as high effort as he originally thought. Arnold felt his lifted spirits sag a bit.

"Well, whatever you say. Just nice to see some real costumes tonight. You kids can take three pieces each." Arnold held out the

bowl of candy towards them.

All three of the visitors bowed their heads towards the bowl, as if to inspect the candy closer, or maybe even smell it. Then they raised their heads up again. Arnold realized they didn't have arm holes in their costumes, which would make collecting candy fairly difficult.

"Thank-a-dee-yankee Sir-Oldy, but we do not have arms for grabbing the scrum-diddlies!" the middle one explained.

"No-siree-bob-for-apples! No armsy-daisies! We usually eat the child-produce scribbles, but since it is clear as a beer that you do not have any, we will glad-happily take the tricksy!" the right one added.

"Look, kids, just take some candy or move along. It's great that you're all in character, but I've never seen whatever jap cartoon these things are from, so I don't get it." *Welp, this is it. This is the last time I hand out candy on Halloween.*

The middle one spoke again, "But Sir Oldalots! The platter-tude of the Ween is tricks OR treats! Do you achy-break the law?"

"Yes, we request a jig or the law is broken!" the left one chimed in.

"A *merry* jig," said the right one.

Arnold's face grew dark. "Are you asking me to dance for you?"

"YESSADEEDLE-DEE!" came the trio's reply.

"Get the fuck out of my yard." The door slammed.

A gaggle of elementary-aged children expressed audible disappointment as they watched the porch light of their next target turn off. They paid little attention to the odd trio that had just come from the house, even as the three of them began to skip in unison down the sidewalk.

"What is fuck?" asked the left one.

"And why do the older-boulders always want us to get it out of their

yarbles?" asked the right one.

"You two are such young-youngs. I will show you the fuck," said the middle one.

The three turned left onto Jefferson street, where very few porch lights could be seen. For whatever reason, Jefferson had not been a very Halloween-friendly street for the past few years. As they came towards Nevada avenue, a dark silhouette walked slowly out of the bushes and stood in their way. This one was different; it had arms, but its entire body was brown and velvety, with a round head like a canvas sack. A visible mouth, opened and lined with teeth could be seen, but the head had no other features. It stood silently, its mouth unmoving and seemingly incapable of expression.

"You should have come with us, lazy-daisy! We went for jigs and merriment and received much scorn!" the left one informed the newcomer.

"If you had come with, perhaps the goldy oldies would have danced for us!" the right one added.

"Yes, hello Mister Manly, I have found these two are iggy-riggy of fuck. I ate a scribble yesterday and am ready for fampling!" The middle one stepped towards the newcomer.

Something moved in the newcomer's mouth. A red tendril began to creep out between two teeth, then quickly shot out towards the middle one, and disappeared into its mouth.

"Oh is that fuck? I HAVE BEEN DOING IT SO BADDY-WRONG!" cried the left one.

"Me twosies. Whoopsy," said the right one. It coughed loudly, and regurgitated something very large onto the concrete, as the middle one and the newcomer fampled quietly.

"Oh higgeldy piggeldy poppily smock! You've birthed a big whoopsy onto the sidewalk!" sang the left one.

The thing on the sidewalk writhed and squealed. Multiple limbs pushed against the ground as it attempted to stand.

"WHAT THE HELL IS THAT?!"

The newly formed quintet all turned towards the other side of the street, and the fampling ceased. A group of three middle schoolers stood across from them, sans costumes. Their mouths hung open in shock.

"SKREEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE!"

"Oh no, the children have upset my whoopsy! They will be having the afraids now!" the right one gleefully yelled. The mess of teeth and tongues and limbs began to rush across the street towards the three witnesses, who only hesitated a moment before they began running for their lives and screaming.

"Happy Halloween guy-byes!" the left one yelled after them.

"Now I have empty nest! Am I an oldy now?" asked the right one.

Only God Can Judge Me and More

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Year 14,999,999

Here's a joke I remembered liking at some point.

A Foundation employee goes to ask the Records Department to change their name and gender. After filling out many forms and having to carefully explain to the staff what they are doing and why they are doing it for hours on end, the process is finished.

'See, that wasn't so bad!' And the clerk was right! It was a lot easier than expected, even if bureaucracy will still make the paperwork take ages to go through. 'There's just one last part of the process on your end, however. Please put on these laboratory gloves.'

'Anything to get this done and over with, sir,' the Foundation employee states. After they put on the gloves, they then are handed ***SCP-113****.*

'Once you get back to your living quarters, you are instructed to use this once every other week for two months until your forms are processed and approved. Then you may bring it back, and you are

officially all done.'

*As reluctant as the employee is, they know they just need to get through it. So they comply. For four months, they use 113, "switching" between genders constantly, undergoing what is now classified as a "**Class-Diogenes**" phenomenon, appearing visibly more androgynous. After four months, they are notified that all their forms have been approved! Now they can bring 113 back to the Records Department. With haste, they make their way back and approach the clerk!*

'Thank you very much for your patience, your name and gender changes have all gone through. One final question we need to ask before you are free to leave; have you noticed any changes with using SCP-113?'

'No sir, I can't say I have,' the employee replies. 'Why is this mandatory to use, again?'

'So you can see what living as both a male and female is like,' the clerk replies in a stuffy, bored voice. The employee is stunned!

'With all due respect, that sounds crazy. I've already spent my life trying to live as both; it's a real garbage fire.'

Cue my nervous laugh, my stomach sinking.

I'm pinned on the conveyor belt of a grand machine, overlooking the entirety of my existence. Its mouth is a howling beast with the skull of a human, full of insecurities and paranoia. "I'm struggling, I don't know what comes next, I'm doing my best, please like it, please like me," it cries out in a tinny gasp. Still it churns on, and still I get ever closer to it. Any second now, it'll pierce me, and that will be it.

When its jaws come hurtling into my body, I don't end up dead. Instead, it stops at my neck, slowly dragging its way down my body. Breathing becomes harder. Its jaws stop at my torso, snapping it off; I feel no pain.

"Talloran, why do you feel no pain?" the **Voyeur** questions. "Have

you gotten used to your pain? Do you look forward to it now?"

"I thought you were the one inflicting the pain on me!" The Voyeur circled around, burrowing itself into my corneas.

"No, I'm merely the arbiter. I only bring what was already there. Hmm… there's just no physical pain here to bring." The jaws' claws work its way up to my head now. "In much the same way as a writer is the one bringing out its' characters present in the story, so am I for your hatred to yourself. It's simply…" The jaws break off the front portion of my head. "…simply just the messenger."

The machine scoops up my brain, and though my body is limp, I still feel and sense everything around me. With its hand, it splits me apart, gently guiding both halves into its skeletal form; one for its head, and one for its crotch.

'Talloran, do you understand now, who you are?'

I am… Researcher Talloran.

'Do you know what you are?'

Human, in the loose sense of that word.

'How would you describe yourself?'

I can't.

'Why do you avoid referring to yourself in here as anything other than yourself, or Talloran?'

I guess… it's because…

'Are you a guy?'

I'm unsure. I don't know.

'Are you a girl?'

I'm unsure. I don't know.

'Do you remember how you were before you sentenced yourself?'

Yes.

Then why the lack of responses?

I'm unsure. I don't know.

I've never known, I suppose.

Have I always never really known? Or is this just a recent thing? What if it's all fake and in my head?

Wouldn't be the first thing to doubt in here, that's for sure.

"Gender's that much of a worry for me, huh." The words came out from somewhere I could recognize as being me, but I wasn't sure. They transformed into neon colors resembling **a Rorschach test**.

[[span style="color:#000000;"]]"What's my biggest fear?" The fear of not knowing. "What's my biggest concern?" That I am simply faking. "Is it so important to entrust myself and my safety to everyone around me?" Yes. "Even in a place like the **Foundation**?" Yes. Especially in the Foundation. "To be neither a man nor woman, huh, nor truly either or." Yes. "Do you think not being yourself any moment of the day is an actual problem?" Yes, because I am the root of this problem. "And not your environment?"[[/span]]

I don't think so… it's just easier to blame myself and be a sad-sack, isn't it?

But if that were true… it'd be a sad story. There's more for me out there than a sad story, isn't there?

"The machine isn't interested with feasting on you… what do you feel right now, that you can truly feel nothing in your situation here, but contemplation?" the Voyeur asked. Irritation seeped in for the first time.

"I feel… like I want to be alone and think." And so It left me alone. I spent every second contemplating, feeling myself out.

I got stronger.

2016

Talloran heads to the Records Department.

Year 15,000,000

I'm one step closer to surviving.

« **Castles 2** | **Only God Can Judge Me and More** | **The Moon Is a Dead World** » **Hub**

Letter from the North

Will you come sit with us?

It is very cold out here, and we are very lonesome. People do not visit us very often, so we do not get to see people. We like people. Please come be with us. We would really love to hear more about you. Will you not stay?

Please don't be frightened by our appearance. We did not choose to be made this way. We had no say in the matter. All we can do is stay in this form. You see? We are touching you, and nothing bad is happening at all. Stop screaming at us.

We are not taking you anyplace dangerous, we promise. It is simply a place we take all of our new friends. We will not harm you. Please stop screaming so loudly, it is upsetting. We are lifting you up now, please stop moving around so much. It's easier that way.

Why are you still afraid? The treetop view is one that is very beautiful, and not many people see it often. See the stars, and the moon? They are beautiful this time of night. We often observe them from the ground as we contemplate things. We have much time for contemplation.

We are putting you down now. See? No harm was done to you at all. Now that you trust us, will you come visit again soon? We have not seen anyone for so long. Sometimes in the absence we practice, making the gateways to the treetops. We are so very… alone, all the time now… please let us show you the stars again….

Letter of the Day

To: O5-C
From: Director, Site 19
Subject: Daily Director's Memo, / /2012

SCP- was recovered today, four days after its original escape. Agents Dash and Jack led the recovery alongside Mobile Task Force Alpha-Three "Lokie's Lollygaggers". Team casualties were moderate: Replacement members have been requested from the Personnel Office. The recovery effort caused significant collateral damage within the residential district of Canterlot's east quarter: reconstruction teams have been deployed and Class A amnesiacs have been distributed to the populace. The cover story provided to officials was that it was an accident involving a new breed of discordian parasprites. SCP- 's containment procedures have been reviewed and amended appropriately.

Elsewhere, Operation Love and Tolerance continues to be a success. Five more operatives of the Church of the Lunar Goddess have been captured this week, as well as a successful raid on a Carter-Marshall Crusader chapter house. Interrogation has been carried out by Agent Pi, and recovered materials have illuminated plans for the next three months for both groups, as well as revealing the locations of SCP- , SCP- , and SCP- .

Dr. Faust and Dr. Rare have also made significant progress with Project Periphery. If the test run is a success, we are predicting that the D-Class will be made obsolete by this upcoming spring.

However, it has come to the attention of the staff that SCP- 's containment protocols seem to be swiftly turning inadequate. Procedure FIM-MONTAUK has been modified to include [DATA EXPUNGED].

[DATA EXPUNGED].

The modifications have already been passed by Dr. Shy of the Ethics Committee, and await your approval.

With regards,

Dr. T. Sparks

Letters from Benares

The following letters were recovered from a private collection and filed as part of the additional materials relating to ***SCP-2833****.*

Benares, 12 May 1909

Dear Cousin Emily,

Greetings from the British Raj! How terribly grand that sounds. Honestly, I can hardly believe we are all so far away from home, and school, and everything normal in the world. Do write and tell me how England is getting along without us!

I shan't bore you with the details of the journey (which was tedious), especially with Eleanor's constant complaints. Mother tells me I should be more understanding, but why must I have an older sister whose only thoughts are of dresses and boys? I wish she were sensible like you.

Anyway, here we are in Benares. It is so different here - beastly hot and dusty, with flies everywhere, and it smells of mud and rotting fruit (and worse things), but everything is exciting and new. We were driven through the town, and there were men with turbans, and women in silk dresses of pink and orange and blue, and Vinod our driver stopped for a huge cow in the middle of the road. And I drank a mango lassi - have you had one? They're delicious.

We reached our new house, which is all white and wicker, and surrounded by shade trees. And blessedly cool, which will be good for mother while she

recuperates. Father says it is called the Ambassador's house, although he is only a liaison to the Maharajah. They have a Maharajah here, can you believe it?

And even better, we have our own personal guru! He's not called that, of course, he's a sadhu or something, but Eleanor and I have decided to call him Guru. He even looks the part, with a saffron robe around his waist, and bangles on his arms and white whiskers - he is ever so impressive. He met us in front of the gate and father offered him some money, but even though he looks very poor he refused and said he just wanted to bless the house, so of course we invited him in and gave him some tea. He did a very elaborate blessing, and told us it would keep the evil spirits away, and mother has said he can come back and tell us about all the strange customs here.

I am very excited about it, but everything is exciting here. I can't wait to write more and tell you.

Yours from the far reaches of the Empire,

Violet

Benares, 22 August 1909

Dear Cousin Emily,

How lovely to receive your letter, and to know that mine made it through. I am pleased to hear that you are well, and your work for the church sounds very interesting. You'll have to tell me more about it when you have time.

After weeks of tremendous thunderstorms, it is hot and dry all over again here. It makes one wonder whether the seasons ever change, or if we are all to be roasted here until our skin turns brown and cracks, like potatoes in the oven!

Oh dear, it's too awful, but that has just reminded me. Mother, Eleanor and I took a trip into the city last fortnight to see some of the sights. We even took a boat along the Ganges, which really is quite extraordinary. The river is so wide and old and slow, like an elephant wandering through the city, and full of little boats shuttling to and fro. The water is dark green, and the buildings rise up on either side, yellow and sandy-coloured. There are wide steps all the way down to the water's edge, and people everywhere - washing their clothes, bathing and even praying.

Guru came with us, of course, and he told the boatman to take us to Manikarnika Ghat. He told us that it was a very holy religious place, where the Hindus come to cremate the dead. I could smell the smoke before I saw it, along with the usual odor of the city, and another smell, almost sweet. When we came closer, there was a temple with tall spires like roundhead helmets, blackened from the smoke. On the steps to the river there were three fires burning, and people dressed in white circling around them.

We didn't go very close, but Guru told us all about the rituals. He said that the Hindus believe that the bodies are destroyed to allow the spirits to be reincarnated in another form. I told him that Christians believe in the resurrection of the body, and he laughed and said that sounded like a good idea, and maybe we should try to keep our bodies living longer in the first place. I thought he was teasing me, but he wants to teach us yoga for our health, and mother has said yes.

I asked Vinod later how to spell Manikarnika Ghat, and he gave me a strange look. And then I overheard him telling mother not to let Guru take us to places like that, and that Guru lives in a cemetery and believes strange things, but mother said it was all perfectly natural. I think Vinod said Eleanor's name too. I wonder if he is sweet on her? It would be just like her - all the boys in England

love her, so why not here?

How I long for your company instead of hers! I hope you will write and tell me how you are.

Yours faithfully,

Violet

Benares, 3 December 1909

Dear Emily,

I read your letter with great interest, especially your church excursion to the South Downs. It must have been charming there with the autumn fruits and cream teas. I really think you have the best kind of life.

Life here continues as ever. Father has found me a tutor to continue my lessons, but I'm afraid he is an astounding bore. Fortunately we have our visits from Guru to enliven us.

He has been teaching us yoga, even father when he is able. We all sit cross-legged on mats, or out under the banyan tree outside, wearing loose linens. No doubt you will be scandalised, but everything is much more informal here. I think it is to do with the heat.

I am learning more in my yoga lessons than any others. Did you know that 'yoga' means "to join" or "to attach"? It's all about letting parts of the body grow and expand, and join into each other, and new body parts opening up, like we have a third eye in the middle of our foreheads, and - sorry, I'm not explaining it very well.

Let me try again. In our first lesson, we sat down and Guru made us do deep breathing. He thought I did it very well, and he was very pleased when he learned that I am left-handed. Apparently there is a left-handed path that

he thinks everyone should follow, so I laughed and told Eleanor that I am ahead of her already.

Then we had to say a mantra, which sounds like "Ayom", but you have to say it very slowly while doing the breathing. And Guru told us all about the magical serpent that lives inside us, and you say the mantra to make it rise up through your body until it bursts out through your head and you reach something called samadhi, which I think is something like nirvana. It's quite hard to write properly about it, but it's fascinating, and it all made a lot of sense when Guru was talking.

One time, when we were doing our stretches, Guru saw mother's scar, from where the doctors had cut out the tumour. He was very upset and told us that the English doctors didn't understand what they were doing, and that he knew some medicines that would have been better. I have never seen him get angry before, but he soon apologised and said he just wanted to make sure we were as healthy as we could be.

And so I will sign off by wishing you good health too, and a happy Christmas. I have asked for a fly-swatter for Christmas to keep the ghastly things away from me!

Yours with love and best wishes,

Violet

Benares, 1 March 1910

Dear Cousin,

Thank you for your letter. You did sound a little stern with your warning about "Eastern philosophy". I know that your work at church makes you concerned about our spiritual guidance, but you needn't worry, Emily - it is all a bit of a lark, and something to pass the days here. And

Guru makes some very interesting observations - even father says so.

Yesterday he took us to visit a temple just outside of the city. Benares has twenty thousand temples, and mother, Eleanor and I have seen many of them, but Guru said that this one was different. For one thing, it was in the middle of the jungle, and the entrace was cut into the rock of the hillside. I'm surprised that Vinod even drove us out there, but he is much better-disposed to Guru lately, though some of the other servants object to his visits. Some of them have even deserted their posts - would you credit it?

But back to the temple. Inside, there was light filtering from somewhere above, but it was faint, and the chambers were dark green and shadowy. There were carvings in the stone walls, which were quite old and mysterious. Some looked like the battles from the Ramayana, with huge juggernauts and the demons from Lanka all fighting. I saw a man who looked like he had a long elephant's trunk, and I asked Guru if it was Ganesha, but he just laughed at me and told me that they didn't worship Ganesha in this temple. Some of the older carvings weren't very good - all the people looked funny, like they weren't drawn right.

We went into the main chamber, which had a hole in the ground, and I couldn't see where it stopped, it was so dark. I wanted to see if it would echo, and Guru told us all to sit and close our eyes, and we could say our mantra together.

Well I must confess, it was the queerest thing. When we said our mantra, it was as if the echoes came right back out of the pit, and the air felt like it was humming. It gave me the shivers, rather, but it was invigorating, like my body was just waking up. I'm sure that mother and Eleanor felt it too.

I wish you could have been there. But I must get to

dinner - a roast goat! Even Vinod, who used to be vegetarian, has changed his mind. Guru says that meat is meant to be eaten, and is the first step to true knowledge. He knows so many interesting things.

Yours in the quest for true knowledge,

Violet

PS - I had to show this letter to mother, so couldn't write this before. I have shocking news - Eleanor is to have a baby! Father and mother will be livid, but they don't know yet. I found Eleanor crying, and she made me promise not to tell anyone, but I'm sure I can tell you. She would not explain it, but she sounded very upset and confused. Could it be Vinod? What will father do?

Benares, 30 May 1910

Dearest Emily,

I am so delighted to hear that you are coming to visit us. I'm not sure whether this letter will reach you before you leave, but I just had to tell you. You will find us all in marvellous shape - Guru has done wonders for our health with his advice and our new diets. Honestly, you will hardly recognise me when you see me!

Even Eleanor is glowing, and would you believe she is already showing. Mother and Father were most gracious in accepting our new arrival, once they spoke with Guru. He tells us that the arrival of a new baby boy (he is certain it will be a boy) is a cause for celebration, as the cycle of reincarnation continues. Just think, Emily, another member of our family - our own flesh and blood.

When you arrive, do come straight up to the house. No need to wait for the servants to meet you, as the ones

who are still with us will be busy preparing for your arrival. It is an arrival eagerly awaited by all here. It will be awfully jolly to have you join our growing clan.

Yours avidly,

Violet

FROM: HMTELOFF-3346A BEN IND
TO: PATRIARCH LOCKE, OUR LADY OF REFORMATION, HACKNEY, LONDON

17 JUNE 1910

SITUATION AS EXPECTED FAMILY IRRECOVERABLE STOP TRAGIC HOUSEFIRE REMAINS CONFIRMED INERT INCLUDING CHILD STOP

GURU WHEREABOUTS UNKNOWN INVESTIGATION PROCEEDING STOP INDIA PRESENCE CONCERNING MAY REQUIRE MISSIONARIES SEND WORD STOP

M-F EMILY CAVANAGH

Emily Cavanagh retired from public life in 1961 and is presumed deceased. The collected belongings recovered with the correspondence above have been retained for analysis in connection with the activities of the Church of the Broken God in various British Commonwealth countries.

Letters to a Prophet

Document 16265-15719-A

Foreword: The following column was recovered after being published in a number of national newspapers (for a full list, see Document 1626-1678-B) and raising suspicion in the Foundation monitoring service due to its subject matter. When questioned, none of the editors of said newspapers could explain how this column came to be published.

Friends, readers, true believers, and other assorted assholes,

Welcome.

Welcome to what, you may ask. Well, I'll tell you. You, dear readers, are about to experience the event of a lifetime. Everything you've been through so far, every lie you were taught by your school, or your parents, or your priest, you can just forget all that garbage right now. Tonight, you see, you'll read the words… of a prophet.

FOR I AM SATURN DEER, PROPHET, MASTER OF WORDS, TEACHER OF MAN, AND CARING LOVER, AND I WILL ROCK YOUR WORLD, SON.

But first, a few letters from my loyal readers. See, I am nothing if not magnanimous in my wisdom, and lo, I am willing to answer even the most moronic of questions for your sake. You can't say I never do anything for you, now can you? Let us begin:

Dear Saturn,

I have heard of your mighty prophetic powers, and so I write to you, seeking your advice. I have been afflicted with a terrible illness, which deformed my once beautiful body into a grotesque

monstrosity, a vile parody of what it once was. Especially my nether regions, which are now tainted beyond recognition, and cannot be looked upon without risking one's sanity. This happened after I besmirched the name of the High Shaman of Trlybon, which might not have been the wisest decision in retrospect.

I beg of you, deliver me from my woes! A cure, dear prophet, is all I ask of you. That, and that you keep this missive private, else my shame will be endless.

Yours truly,

Balgorath, Knight of the Holy Order of the Most Venerable Ferret, London

Well, Balgorath, the solution for your problem is rather simple, believe it or not. You see, what you're dealing with here is a simple, if effective, Curse of the Bloated Snake. It might seem very frightening (especially under a UV light), but do not be alarmed. All you need to do is to…remove your Seventh Seal while listening to the music of the Spheres, just as they perfectly align themselves under the Sign of Aphrodite. But Saturn, you may ask, how will I know the right time? Well, have no fear, for I just so happen to possess a recorded version of exactly the type you require, and shall be more than happy to deliver it to you.

For only fourteen easy payments of 19.95$, plus taxes, plus shipment.

Dear Mr. Deer,

A friend of mine went to one of your seminars, and she was really impressed with that you said. I don't usually do this, but I've been feeling really lost these last couple of months, and I figured some advice from someone like you might be the thing I needed to get myself back on track. I'm an artist, you see, what some people call an anartist, but I don't think I'm very good. I've been hanging out with this group lately, and there's this guy there, Tony. He's amazing at everything: he looks like an underwear modal, has charisma practically pouring out of him, he's smart, successful, and his art… man, his art just comes to life. Literally. Not to mention the women.

Seeing him, I've been feeling really inadequate. I mean, the best I ever did was that flaming tower of goat skulls, and hardly anyone even noticed that. What should I do?

Nathan,

BackdoorSoHo, New York

Nathan, my lad, you're looking at this from entirely the wrong perspective. You should be glad you're a pathetic, worthless loser whose failure as an artist is only rivaled by his utter incompetence with women. You see, people like Tony and me, successful, competent people, we have so much responsibility on our shoulders; we have an image to maintain, a reputation, friends to keep happy. People expect us to do great things. You? People know you'll never amount to anything. Being a waste of space and oxygen like you is the ultimate form of freedom, my friend! I mean, you could kill yourself right now, just stick a gun in your mouth and blow your fucking brains out, and no one would even care! How liberating!

Truly, you are fortunate.

Seriously though, no one would care. Not even a little bit.

Seriously, Saturn?

Don't you ever learn? Look, Saturn, every time you try this whole prophet spiel, you end up dead. This is the fifth time in the last two hundred years alone. How about you just retire to Fiji or something, so we can skip over the whole "killing you for your crimes against humanity" thing? It's all more trouble than it's worth, for both you and us. Or you could duke it out with the guys who like burning things. Again.

Think about it,

MA

Bitch, please. I'm not afraid of you, your tinderbox of a husband, or you merry band of multicultural prudes. You say you stopped me before? Well, fact is, I'm still here now, aren't I, spreading the good word to all willing, those smart enough to think outside of the boxes

you put around their heads. Threaten me? Do you lift? I seriously doubt you even lift.

Horns,

Me heard you have horns. Me need horns for charms and hat. You give me horns, give me stars, me don't bash you on head with rock. Me could bash you on head with rock if you into that sort of thing, me not judge, but me prefers to use diplomacy. Me gentleman. Got monocle, got hat, need horns, said before. Me need someone to distinguish me from other big guy, phony with swords. Me far better looking anyway, got classic movie charms. Similar names, people get confused.

Give your horns, me and you no problem. If not, rocks.

Gable

Wrong Saturn Deer there, buddy. You're looking for the four-legged furry bloke that hangs around that gas giant over there. Easy mistake to make, I understand.

God, where do I find those guys?

Prophet,

I come to you with a proposal. You do not know me, but I believe we share common goals. You have been trapped in this cycle for a long, long time, and it has left you a jaded shadow of what you used to be. Where you once led legions of followers down uncertain paths, now you scam and insult the tiny handful of fools still willing to listen to you. Soon, they too will be gone. I can help. I know of your… unique talents, and I can put them to good use. I am very good at that, trust me. With my resources and your skills, we could become something…more.

We shall talk,

D

Um. Er. Let me get back to you on that, eh? It's not like I don't appreciate the offer, it's just that I'm kinda doing this open letter

column thing right now, and I don't think this is the place to discuss this. I wish I could stop, but we both know that's not the way things work. Also, say hi to your sister for me. She'll know why. "Don't know him" my ass.

Alright, folks, that's all the time we have today. I know I promised to dispense some of my ultimate wisdom, but unfortunately those mouth breathers with the letters took all the space I had. But, tune in next time, and I shall show you such marvels and wonders, even my sexual prowess shall almost pale in comparison. Or, you could order the DVDs, a thirteen-disk Collector's Edition, for only 49.99$. Whatever rocks your boat.

Till next time, I was Saturn Deer, and I bid ye adieu.

Letters to a Prophet #2: Scry Harder

Warning: The following document contains an Et-Class Textual Anomaly (Threat Level-Minor)

Document 16265-15719-B

After Foundation efforts to track and contain the creator of Document 16265-15719-A proved unsuccessful, resources were shifted to the monitoring of newspapers distributed nationally in order to enable effective containment of any future columns from the same origin. Four weeks after the publication of Document 16265-15719-A, a new column appeared (henceforth 16265-15719-B), and was successfully contained prior to wide-scale distribution. However, a number of copies of the document appeared on various internet news outlets the following day. Following the publication of this column, Mobile Task Force Omega-27 ("Bad Deer Hunting") has been tasked with the location and containment of its author.

Hello once again, dearest readers. It is I, Saturn Deer.

Now, let's get right to it this time, no mucking about, eh? First, we'll-

Wait a minute.

What do you *mean* you have no idea who I am?

Oh **god dammit!**

Let me guess, you didn't read my introductory column, did you? Fucking figures. I go to all that trouble, have a big flashy intro bit with huge bold letters and everything, and you assholes just go 'herpy derp, I wonder who won the big game last night?' and go read the sports instead. Yeah, I'm talking to you, guy with marinara sauce on his t-shirt. Yeah, you too, blondy. Well, I'll be damned if I'm going to waste space and energy doing that shit again, just for you morons to

lose interest and run into traffic or whatever you people do. No, I have a better idea…

Look at the nice kitty. Now squint at the cute kitty, just a bit. Now, pet the lovely kitty. That's a good reader.

If you're reading this on a computer, that means click it, stupid.

All caught up? Yes? Good. Bloody ingrates. On to the letters:

Greetings.

This one was instructed by Production to contact Saturn Deer. Proved simple, given attracting factors. Publicity a non-issue. This one will issue an inquiry:

Model 4950, domestic metal light source, new series, high hopes by Production, Sales, Management. Contains additional features beyond mundane model; activated by thought, stores thought, enables thought on additional spectrum, improves virility. Issues; thought-activation faulty, producing unpredictable side effects- cerebral tumors in adult males, extra limbic growth in adult females, unstable reality altercations in children. Effects constant, device unstable, requires optimization. Problem Resolution unable to find a solution, this one issued Advisory Command. Assistance requested from Saturn Deer, proven useful in the past, adequate compensation promised.

Factory Drone #654397, Problem Resolution Hive

Factory Drone #654397? Are you by any chance related to Factory Drone #578805? He's in Sales, I think. I tell you, that guy could party like no one I've ever met, and that's saying something coming from me. Man, there was that one night we went to the club dressed as a salt-and-pepper set, and he just railed every single-

Er, probably irrelevant. As to your problem, I think you're approaching it from the wrong direction. You see, all you need to do is adjust your parameters; what does "unpredictable" mean anyway? If it causes tumors 100% of the time, that's damn predictable as far as I'm concerned. Sure, the customer might not be all that happy

about that huge growth in his head, or his now Code-Greenifed kid, but that's not your problem anymore, now is it? After all, who the hell is he going to tell, what with that tumor pressing all over his language center and his kid turning the house into bees? It's a problem that solves itself.

You're welcome. Oh, and you better not try and pay me with those CDs again. I appreciated the thought, but those things wrecked hell on my productivity.

Deer, you sly old dog!

I can't fucking believe it! You're alive! You were telling the truth all along. Man, this is just hilarious. Oh, you must not remember who I am. It's me, the executioner! You know, from Argentina? Me and my mates caught you preaching your bullshit in one of our control sectors? C'mon, you gotta remember that! I was the big guy in the cameo gear and the nipple pincers. Pretty sure I removed your toe nails at some point. We all thought you were just full of crap about that whole reincarnation thing, but looks like you were legit all along. Guess that we should have saved all those bits we took off you, could have been useful. Oh well, no use crying over spilled bone marrow, I suppose.

So, how the fuck are you doing, mate? I know we didn't exactly meet under idle circumstances, but I felt we made a connection back there, in between all that torture, that is. I thought what you said about the whole prophet business sounded real profound, and no mistake. Give me a call sometime, eh? We'll go out for drinks, talk some business, maybe I can kill you again, for old time's sake? Ahaha, I crack myself up! Just like we did with your ribs!

Oh, would you mind keeping this quiet? Not sure my superiors would appreciate me talking to an ex-corpse and all. You know how they get. Just to be safe, I ain't signing this one. Knowing you, you'll pick this shit up no matter where I am anyway. You just love seeing your own name, don't you?

Oh, perish the thought! Me, snitching on my great friend **Operative Pedro Gonzales**? Never! To even suggest that I would on turn you, **Operative Pedro Gonzales, Chaos Insurgency, Liquidation**

Squad 9, currently stationed in Buenos Aires, Dockside, Warehouse 56, let alone turn you over to your superiors or any other faction who might be interested your horribly painful interrogation, is frankly insulting. Oh, and no hard feelings about the whole torture business, no worries.

To the foreign fugitive Saturn Deer,

This is your last chance to hand yourself in for the crimes you have committed against the Senate, the Republic and the People of Rome. By law and country, I find you guilty of:

- *Collaborating with the enemies of the Republic in a time of war*
- *Sacrilegiously taking the name of Saturn as your own*
- *Spreading false rumors and vile propaganda, besmirching the Republic's name*
- *Tempering with the lawful conduct of the election of magistrates, and seeking to sabotage the sanctity of the cursus honorum*
- *Conducting experiments in the fields of chemistry, biology and physics without licence or membership in the Alexylva University*
- *Impersonating an Augur and delivering false and worrisome prophecies*
- *Handling a Gladius-Class submarine while intoxicated*
- *Seducing the daughters of the Republic with lewd suggestions*
- *Publicly befouling the statue of the Consul Publius Cornelius Scipio Aemilianus*
- *Indecent exposure (as part of the aforementioned incident)*

These are not your only crimes, for those are beyond numbering, and beyond forgiveness. You are a blight, a vile blemish on the face of the Republic, but by the name of Clementia we are willing to give you your life if you confess to them and show honest repentance for what you have done. Submit yourself to our judgement, and you may live in exile. Stay hidden, and you will be hanged on the Field of Mars. Our experts from the University assured us that it is likely you will be able to see this message, for we invoked your full name.

By the will of the Senate and the People of Rome, I am Preator

Gaius Paullus Varro

Oh no, not this again. You'd think that with a name like Saturn Deer, people wouldn't mistake me for someone else every five minutes. You reached the wrong Saturn, mate, or rather the right Saturn but from the wrong universe. Guess your University 'experts' could use some more time working on their quantum physics, and maybe a bit less time reading shit in animal guts. I mean, I might be into the whole reincarnation thing, but even I'm not old enough to have personally insulted the Roman Republic. My other-universe counterpart does sound like a totally rad dude though, so I think I'll take the liberty of replying in his name:

Pedicabo ego vos, buddy.

Oh, and screw your allcaps shit as well. I might be a dick, but even I'm not enough of one to make my readers suffer through a whole letter written like that. Next!

To the receiver of this letter,

If you do not forward this letter to ten other people before the moon passes the third ring, and add a naked picture of yourself if your'e attractive, you will be inflicted with a terrible curse! Your eyes will rot in your head, your ears will be forever sealed with wax, your tongue will be replaced with silly putty, your nostrils stuffed with Peanut M&Ms, and your pubic hair accosted by vultures. Heed my warning, for I am the great Saturn Deer, and my wrath is both swift and terrible!

Huh. My old chain letter. Completely forgot about that one. Well, I better get to it then. Now where did I put that camera…

Hello again, Mr. Deer

Let me start by saying how much I appreciate you posting my letters in your column and answering them. I know my problems are small and banal, and you taking the time to try and help means the world to me.

I'm writing again because this last week has been a bit strange. I

was never the most popular guy at work, but it seems like my coworkers been ignoring me more than usual lately. It's probably nothing, but it still bothers me. My new neighbors on the other hand have been real friendly, maybe a bit too much so. They keep checking on me, asking if I'm okay, if I need anything. I hope they don't think I'm crazy or lonely something, and are just trying to be nice about it. Though, to be honest, I am lonely. That's nothing new though. So, to finally get to the point, I wanted to ask if you could recommend me some self-help books. I'm trying to work on myself a bit, and I figured you'd be the best person to ask about this sort of thing. Oh, and that recipe for rice squares was great, by the way.

Thanks again,

Zachery Knor

Oh, hey there Zachery. Looks like my latest attempt didn't do anything either. Guess I shouldn't be surprised. Look, I'm going to tell you what I told you the last five times you wrote to me. Well, the last two times, since the first three were just me basically telling you to go fuck yourself. You don't have a job or a home anymore. Hell, you don't even have a name. Your coworkers have been ignoring you because they're not really there. You are held in a facility where people who don't have your best interests in heart are monitoring you 24/7. Those neighbors of yours? You're just a number to them. The saddest thing is, it's not even their fault. It's yours. The only thing keeping you in this situation are your own abilities, and there's nothing anyone can do to change that. I felt so sorry for you I actually tried to help, and it's beyond me. I can honestly say that it pains me to admit this, but there's no hope for you. You can't change, not ever.

Oh, and I'm glad you liked that rice squares recipe, it was my mom's.

Well… that got real fucking depressing real fast. Damn.

I was going to share some of my grand visions with you, my dearest readers, but that last letter kinda took the fun out of it. Instead, let me leave you with something else, for now. A window. Give it a touch, don't be shy.

Clicking never stopped being a thing, by the way.

Now, I have no idea where this is going to take you. It might be somewhere you never visited before, or someplace really familiar. It might be terrifying, or heartwarming, or beautiful. Wherever it goes, just keep an open mind about it- you might find out something about yourself that never occurred to you before. Even if you don't, it could be fun. Go on, take a trip, and tell them Saturn Deer sent you.

I get a percentage for that.

I was Saturn Deer, and I bid ye adieu.

Letting it go

April 13th 2011

I had just gotten back from a trip to the library when I spotted them.

Your average person would just think it's a bunch of cops casing the area. A mix of uniformed and plainclothes ones running around. The higher ups in suits bossing around the grunts as they ran around, firearms open and ready for use. But I could see the signs. There wasn't any logo on any of them. Normal cops have a logos, whatever department they work for emblazoned on their badges. These guys had generic police badges.

There was also the way they moved, a normal cop when locking down an area was looking for a perp. Someone needed to be caught, who might shoot them. These guys, however, were moving like they were looking for something more dangerous. Like a guy who could make you explode with their mind, yeah I could see the signs. These guys were Foundation.

Part of me just wanted to roll my eyes and walk away. I hadn't been involved in three years. Just let them do their jobs, I had quit for a reason. But, you know, that damnable curiosity that had made me such a good agent back then still itched at me.

In the end curiosity won out, and I approached the place. Of course, one of the uniformed guys spotted me. I kept walking as he approached, barely giving him a glance.

"Excuse me." He said, "I'm afraid that we can't let you through."

I shrugged it off, "How goes the search Agent?" I said with a slight commanding tone.

"Err…" The agent stared at me for a moment, not really sure how to react.

"Well? We got ourselves some potentially dangerous anomaly out there and you're wasting your time chatting me up? I guess the search is going well then."

"Err, no Ma'am…" The poor kid said, clearly taken aback.

"Well then get back to work!" I snapped, and the fake cop nodded meekly and ran off to go find his own ass or something.

Now that one of them had chatted me up and let me go, the rest of them just assumed I belonged. Pretty easy, you know? It's actually pretty funny. Like all agents, when I started I was given a primer on covert field work. Lesson one was *'Act like you belong and most won't question you.'* Every agent gets that lesson, and yet it still works!

The area cordoned off was a pretty big park, agents were running through the place. Hiking around and shouting orders. I saw forensics guys taking samples and a few field scientists making some obscure measurements. Now let's see, I bet the science guys will be talking about whatever things here…

"Allison?"

Shit.

I turned around and give the guy saying my name a big smile. "Well hey, how's things Jackie?"

Jackson Garcia had his arms folded as he gives me that ever so familiar look. The one he often gave me when I dragged him into doing something dumb and we got reprimanded afterwards. "What the hell are you doing here Allison?"

"Nobody here has told me to leave." I answered honestly, giving him my best innocent little girl smile.

Jackie, of course, was one of the plainclothes guys. "Allison, you know full well that civilians are restricted from Foundation recovery points."

"Yeah yeah." I said, "Are you going to take me in? Interrogate me?

Hell, maybe this'll be the last straw that convinces the higher ups I'm worth the cost of amnesiacs."

Jackie rolled his eyes, "You're not worth the trouble really."

Right, we knew how it'd go. I'd tell my story about being Ex-Foundation and just a little curious about whatever thing they're catching here. Show my credentials and reaffirm I have no interest in exposing some crazy skip to the world or setting free whatever Dark God is being sealed forever this week or whatever. Then they'd let me go, maybe ask for some advice if whatever they're hunting I knew about.

I mean, I'm sure a lot of you guys have heard that working for the Foundation means You're There Forever. But that really isn't true, once I decided it wasn't for me I simply turned in my papers, let my contract run out, and was let go with the knowledge that as long as I didn't blab anything they'd leave me alone. Well I'm not really interested in blabbing. Instead I've been enjoying the hilariously generous retirement packages. Seriously they give you so much for a mere five years work because being a field agent means there's a risk of something biting your head off, and I worked for eleven!

"So how's the family?" I asked.

He gave me a look saying 'Really?' before naturally answering, "Mom's been pestering me, trying to get me to go to church more often, and set me up on some dates."

"Isn't God locked up?"

"I doubt 343 is actually God, Allison."

I shrugged, "Well, tell her I said hi next time you talk to her."

"Right, fine. She did like you, after all." Jackie said.

"So," I changed the subject, "What exactly attracted you guys here?"

"You really think I'm going to tell you?" He said.

"Well you haven't thrown me out yet, so I figure you still like me

enough to talk to me, and if you answer then I can leave you alone with my curiosity sated."

Jackie let out another long sigh, he's always been bad at saying no to people. "Fine. We got reports about impossible animals in the town."

"Like?"

"Unicorn Tigers, birds the size of a bear, that sort of thing." He said.

"So what, a tiger with a unicorn horn on its head?"

"Basically."

"So why not send in Animal Control?" I asked.

"Two reasons. First, the animals leave no physical trace. A bright blue elephant stomped through streets and didn't leave a footprint. They can get caught on film, but there's no other evidence they exist once they vanish." Jackie reached into his pocket, pulling out a printed out photo, "Second, we caught this on film."

I took the picture, there were two things in it. The first was the titular Unicorn Tiger, exactly as I imagined it. The second… was a girl, around twelve from the looks of it, petting the thing.

"So," I said, "You think girl's the one responsible for the animals."

"Yeah." He said, "At the very least she's a person of interest."

There was a silence between us before I sighed and folded the picture back up.

"Ally…" Jackie started saying before I shoved the picture back into his hands.

"No no, it's fine." I said, "I get it. Secure, Contain Protect, right?"

"Yeah, it's not always the greatest job." He said.

"So, thanks Jackie." I said, my smile coming back. "I guess I'll leave

you to your search now. Good luck in finding it." I waved to him, walking further into the park.

The girl was obviously in the park, the Foundation had probably already locked down the rest of the place. As I walked around her parents were being questioned, asked if anything strange was going on with her daughter.

They'd spring the cost of amnesiacs for **them,** of course. Give them some job at "Sane & Profitable Functions" or something, let them move out of state and while they forget they ever had a daughter.

Still, I had to admit, this girl was pretty good, if she was able to hide here with dozens of agents on the look out for her.

So animals appear, but they don't effect anything.

The little girl can interact with them…

My mind was putting together the pieces, I knew that there was no way there weren't others thinking about it.

She's around things that don't actually exist.

If I was a little girl with strange powers trying to hide, where would I go? There's no way they weren't combing everywhere. The perimeters of the park no doubt have motion sensors around, and I highly doubt she has any means of bypassing them.

Well, unless she's a Type Green, but if that's the case we'd better hope she doesn't figure that out any time soon.

Agents were looking under every rock and bush. I heard some scientists considering just digging the park up. See if she had some mole dig a hole or something.

Honestly, I bet Jackie's already figuring it out, so I'd better hurry.

If you want to hide from them, you need to do it in plain sight. Some port-a-potties had been set up for the agents. They're pretty big and comfy, you know, for giant plastic septic tanks. There are three of them, I opened one, looked inside, opened the next, peeked in, and

opened the last one.

From the looks of it, my theory was right. I opened up the second one and step in. The inside was completely mundane, a small box with a toilet and hand sanitizer dispenser. Completely unremarkable, no?

Except the inside this particular stall was slightly smaller then the other two.

I reached out to the left wall, there's nothing there normally, and as I thought, my hand passed through it to touch the real wall.

The illusion vanished, and the little girl everyone was looking for was staring up at me. Wide eyed with fear.

"Hi there, my name's Ally, what's yours?"

The girl swallowed, "Uh uh uh…"

"I'm not going to hurt you." I knelt down to her level, "We can talk here for as long as you want."

She noticed right away I don't have any uniform or suit on, just a long sleeved shirt and jeans, no sign of a gun or anything. "Larissa." She finally answered quietly.

"Hi Larissa." I said, giving my best smile. "So, you can make these things appear, right?" She nodded, "So all the animals are from your imagination?" Another nod. "Can you tell me how long you've been able to do this?"

"Uh, well, I've always had imaginary friends…" She mumbled, embarrassed of such a normal kid thing. "Then one day people started to be able to see them. Then I found out I could make anything appear by imagining it."

"But they're not real." I said, "You're the only one who can interact with them."

"Yeah. It's still fun though." She said. A perfectly normal kid, who likes animals and has an active imagination.

"But a bunch of scary guys are now looking for you." I said.

"Did I do something wrong?" She asked me.

"No, you didn't. You just did something different. And there are people in the world who don't want different things running around."

"Why?"

I adjusted myself to sit next to her, "Why? Well, part of it is that a lot of the 'different' stuff is dangerous. Like, horrible monsters. So in some way you could say that they're protecting everyone."

"I'm not dangerous." She said.

"Yeah, I know." I said, "But they think you are. Anybody that's different then a 'normal' person is considered dangerous."

She looked up at me, "So what are they going to do if they catch me?"

"They'll lock you up for the rest of your life." I answered, "They've probably already gotten your parents, you don't really have a home to return to anymore, I bet."

We sat in silence for a few minutes, Larissa doing her best not to cry. Yeah, this is enough, I have to act now. Standing up and stretching my limbs, I held down a hand to her, "So, Larissa, do you want some help?"

She looked at my hand, her confusion evident, "What can you do? I can't hide from them anywhere else."

"Then we'll go somewhere else then, where they can't reach." I said. It may not be possible to get out of the park normally, but I haven't been involved with this insane hidden world for fourteen years for nothing.

"How?"

"You're not the only special one." I said with a grin, "I may not have anything like your ability, but I've learned some things."

After another seconds consideration, she took my hand, and we shook on it.

"Perfect." I said, pulling her up. Now we were both standing in this crowded stall. Letting her go, I pulled my card out of my pocket. Holding out my other arm, I rolled up my sleeve. Preparations complete, I ran the card against my arm, cutting it.

Larissa's eyes widened in surprise, she didn't really get what I was doing. That's OK, it's complicated.

You see, Doors exist in a lot of places. But it's possible to make your own temporary one. Granted it comes at a cost, but it was one I was willing and able to pay. Really, the worst part of this would be the smug look on Henry's face when he learned I actually had a use for some of his hippy bullshit.

Dipping my finger into my cut, I scribbled some words onto the door of the stall. I waited a minute, and pushed open the door. Larissa's eyes widened in surprise as she saw what was beyond it. No longer was there a park leading out, instead there was a vast Library.

"Head in there and wait for me, read a few books if you'd like." I said, "I'll go check up on you in a bit."

"Uh…" She looked nervously at the expanse of shelves beyond the door.

"Go!" I pushed her through the door, just before the ritual faded, and I shut the door again.

It took a minute to wash off my blood and make sure my cut was hidden by the sleeve. With that done I opened the door to the stall, now leading back into the park. Sure enough, Jackie was right there.

"Allison?" He said, "What are you still doing here?"

"Well, isn't it obvious?" I said, "This is a toilet, right?"

"Yeah, it is…" Jackie pushed me out of the way, stepping into the stall. He looked around, even ran his hand against the walls, "Oh, damn." He muttered, stepping out again.

"What were you doing?" I said.

"Well, I had thought she might be hiding in here. I think she doesn't make anything at all, just conjures up illusions… does that make sense?" He asked.

"As much as anything." I said with a shrug.

"Anyways, after thinking about that I figured that the best place to hide would be someplace enclosed, that people aren't going to pay much attention to."

"So you thought she'd hide in the toilet?" I said.

"Yeah, but she isn't here." He said, "I guess she's hiding somewhere else then."

"Could be anywhere, if she really can make illusions." I said.

"Basically." He groaned, "We really are going to have to tear apart this place."

"Well, good luck with that." I said with a wave, "See you later Jackie."

"Yeah, I guess. See you later too Ally." He waved back, before going back to thinking about his search. I myself just walked away, I didn't have any reason to be here at all.

Really, I need to get my curiosity under control.

Leviathan

Kevin was patrolling the fifth floor hallway when he heard the noise. It wasn't unusual to hear yelling - a lot of the apartments were section 8, and a lot of the rest were college students, so he'd hear all sorts of stuff happening late at night. But this was coming from the south stairway, and it didn't sound like an argument or a party. Just loud grunts, and clattering, and a deep voice saying *fuck* a lot. He frowned at his watch. More than five hours left.

He was still new; if this was serious, it would be his first time. Most of the security thought their uniforms made them look badass, but he always felt ridiculous in his, and they wouldn't even let him have pepper spray. *Whatever*, he thought, and pushed the door open.

Somehow, the first thing he saw was the guy. He was tall, with sweatpants and an old T-shirt hanging off his frame. He looked exhausted and sweaty. He was wielding a huge stick - no, a spear. And then, after noticing that the guy was actually pointing the spear at something, only then did he see the tentacles.

They were as thick as a man's torso, a cluster of them filling the entire stairwell and suggesting more beneath. Unmistakably those of an octopus, but far larger (and, he would later realize, far too numerous). They wriggled along the walls, floor, and in the air, like probing fingertips. Whenever one got too far up onto the landing, the guy would slash at them, driving them back; whenever he came near the stairs, they tried lazily to snare him, forcing him to dance away. It looked like they'd been at it for hours.

"What are you doing?" Kevin finally managed.

"Holding… it… back," the guy spat between spear thrusts.

A moment passed.

"What is it?" Kevin tried again.

“It’s an octopus, man. I don’t know what it wants here, but shit, what was I supposed to do? Go back to bed after I saw it?”

“How long has this been going on?” Kevin took a step back, toward the hallway door.

“Every night for, I don’t know, like five years now. It goes away at dawn.”

“Five *years?*”

“Five years. I haven’t—“ he jabbed downward, yanking his foot out of reach. “I haven’t really made much progress.” He stepped back, tapping the wall with the spear, taking a break as the tentacles followed the sound. “I don’t know what it wants,” he whispered, conspiratorially, “but we obviously can’t let it happen.”

Kevin swallowed. “Why us? Why doesn’t anyone else know about this?”

The guy frowned. “I think, mostly, they just use the elevator.”

Kevin eyed the wandering tentacles. They tried to grab at the guy whenever he got too close, but other than that seemed content just to poke around. “Where do they go?” he asked.

“You know, once or twice, I tried to go around the other side and come up from underneath,” the guy said. “I went up the stairs to where its head should be, and you know what I found?”

“Wh—“

“More tentacles, my friend. More. Fucking. Tentacles.” The guy stepped abruptly into the creature’s path, swinging his spear. It recoiled, then sent two arms tumbling in his direction. He grit his teeth, raised the spear, and grinned.

Kevin backed slowly out the door. He looked down at his radio. For a moment he stood, considering, but in the end he left it in his belt. He resumed his patrol. He still had five hours left. He made a mental note: next time he ended up on third shift, he’d stick to the north stairs.

Interlude: An Exhibition

Found in 2012, as part of the Library-curated exhibition:

"Standing on the Shoulders of the Phoenix: Discovery and Rediscovery in Post-Millenial ReCreationist Anart"

Michael Petrakovich
Canadian, 1976-2043

Every Day Is Wednesday
2003-04
Blood, sweat, and fears on canvas;
Oils on juniper wood.
Donated to the Library by the artist.

The first piece produced by M. Petrakovich following his abandonment of the "shock and destroy" tactics of the art collective "Are We Cool Yet?", *Every Day Is Wednesday* is an important and breathtaking viewpoint into the artist's struggles to redefine himself as a member of the ReCreationist school of anart rather than as a Pseudo-Deconstructionist.

The references to the traditional style of surrealism are most pronounced in the usage of inks composed of blood samples from Picasso, Dalí, and Masson, combined with sweat from the artist himself. Petrakovich's use of synaesthetic effects is given full freedom here, with gustatory-tactile and auditory-proprioceptive responses most often reported. Also note the unique use of ocher and crimson in order to provoke the sensation of drunkenness, a cognitive effect Petrakovich used to great effect in later pieces.

The secondary and more infamous effect has been described by the artist as "fuck copyright" and consists of

any indirect representations, including photography, video feed, hand-drawn sketches, clairvoyance, astral projection, and scrying, to only produce an altered copy of this descriptive plaque with the majority of the text replaced by the following phrase: "Suck it bitches. You got to see to believe."

Library Lifeline

It turned out that finding a book containing the location of a single cave against the backdrop of the entirety of the multiverse was not an easy task. Rows upon shelves upon sections upon floors upon wings of books loomed around Nobody as he searched for a book in a bookstack.

Wandering through the sections, air filter still in hand for some reason, was a painfully nostalgic experience for Nobody. Painful in the sense that the nostalgia-induced memories were not strictly his.

Finnegan sat at one of the many tables within his branch of the Wanderer's Library. Flanking either side were rows upon rows of empty tables further flanked by equally empty chairs. His only company was ***Joaquín Pablo Izquierdo de San Felipe*** *in the form of his autobiography titled* Heisenberg Shit*, his only conversation a one-sided debate by Grant Kirkhope. He was in his own little bubble, where he was… well, perhaps not quite fully happy, but certainly content.*

Said bubble was popped by a blonde individual moving into the one seat, among thousands, that was directly opposite of him. Well, one to the right of directly opposite of him. Regardless it made his stomach coil.

Finnegan examined them from over the rim of his reading material. He couldn't quite pin whether they were male or female. They had the sort of childish face that stood straight in the center of the scale and grinned. Their hair was cut at about chin length, but that didn't mean much nowadays. They weren't paying any attention, as they were already engrossed in their own book.

Finnegan returned to his reading and that was that. Several hours later he closed the book and departed for his apartment without either of them speaking a word.

Nobody whacked himself in the temple and the memory jarred out of place. Through the haze of recollection he had apparently found his way to a small section detailing various paranormal phenomena within Armenia. He grabbed several volumes detailing geographical oddities and piled them onto the filter, stumbling over to a table and setting it all down.

After several trips he shoved the books off the filter and moved it to the floor. He situated himself in one of the chairs, using the filter as a footrest. Choosing a book at random, he cracked it open to the index and felt something explode in his head. His vision stretched and tore, a fuzzy scene visible through corrupted film of his surroundings. The last shred of his surroundings snapped with an inaudible-

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The following night he returned to his usual reading place to find that the blonde had amassed a small tower of books on the table. They were nose-deep in a thick book titled The Hypostasis of the Archons, or a History of **Sarkicism** as related by Sage Sabaos the Blind. *As much as he preferred to read alone, he wasn't about to give up his spot. The blonde offered Finnegan a small glance when he sat down, their eyes ringed black from lack of sleep. They blinked dumbly and then went back to reading.*

Several hours passed, Finnegan poring over a single volume while his pseudo-companion skimmed through several. Eventually their stack was exhausted and they looked to Finnegan, taking in what he was reading. They said something, but Finnegan only saw the raised eyebrow and the moving lips.

He paused his music. "Sorry, what?"

"Are you an anartist?" They pointed to his book.

Finnegan considered lying. It would have been fairly easy, anartists across the ages had uncovered many unique ways to go about doing things and if all else failed he could simply claim to be a history buff. But the earnest tone and the hopeful look on their face made it difficult to deny them this small respite.

"I am. Mostly sound stuff," he said, marking his place. Then out of automatic courtesy rather than curiosity he asked, "What about you?"

"Sculpting, but I use a bunch of stuff. Clay, metal, bone. Did glass once."

The mention of glass sparked his curiosity. "You know how to blow glass?"

"Nah, it was a bunch of individual glass pieces I got from a friend. I just put it all together. Was a miniature glass house, heheh."

The spark fizzled slightly, but he pressed on. "Ah. I worked with glass once. It was a modified glassblowing technique that basically let you blow it out of sound."

"How'd that work out?"

"Poorly."

They barked out a laugh, and he chuckled. They picked up one of their books back up and cracked it back open, and after a moment Finnegan did the same. After another hour of silence Finnegan yawned and pushed back his chair.

"Night," he yawned.

"Night," they replied, only glancing up from the page.

This time he was walking down a staircase. Behind him was the pile of books he had amassed, still waiting on the table. Errant scraps of information floated through his senses. His own footsteps despite standing still, the faint rustle of pages.

Taking deep breaths and massaging his temples, Nobody ascended the stairs. He paused at the platform, leaning against the railing, before slouching over to the table. After crumpling into his chair he held his head in his hands and panted.

It had to be the Library. All around Nobody were sights and sounds

that played a vital role in some of Finnegan's strongest memories. But he had no choice, the Library was the only place to find the place he was looking for. So rather than flee he cracked open a book and began to read.

Deep inside, Finnegan stood up from the chair inside his cocoon and began to Wander.

The night after that, Finnegan hoisted a bag of food from ***Red Bear Bob's Food Truck*** *onto the table with as big a thud as he could. The blonde awoke with a jolt.*

"Wazzit?" they mumbled, hair in their face.

"Bob's," he replied, lifting a meal out of the bag and sliding it over the table. He grabbed his own meal and sat down. "Hurry up, it'll get cold."

"You know what that stuff does to you, right?"

"Yup." He pulled a small plastic card from his pocket. "Got the cure right here."

They nearly choked from how hard they shoved the food into their mouth.

"So," Finnegan said before he took his first bite. "I'm Finnegan."

A single finger rose as they chewed and swallowed. When it was lowered they replied, "Name's Aldon."

That did not particularly help in the gender department.

"What's keeping you here, Aldon?"

Rather than reply they took another particularly large bite.

Finnegan took his first bite and relished it deeply as something told him this was the best thing he would ever eat. The next bite was in his mouth before the first was gone. He swallowed and reached for a napkin, his gaze chancing upon the yellow card. The madness

quelled.

Even then, Aldon continued to stuff their face. When they put the burger down for a moment Finnegan held up the card. Their face screwed up in confusion while they chewed, eventually settling into an uncomfortable grimace when their mouth was empty.

"It's not so much anything keeping me," they eventually said. "I just have nowhere to go."

"Hmm."

Finnegan took another bite, and Aldon followed. The two of them finished their respective meals and wiped their mouths of the resulting carnage when it was over. Their eyes lingered on the card before their gazes met.

"Would you like to have somewhere to go?" he eventually asked.

He watched conflict tear across their face for several seconds. They seemed to try saying something several times, only to grit their teeth and think some more. Eventually they took a deep breath and let out an even deeper sigh.

"I could use a place to stay the night, yeah."

"Fffuck."

Sweat poured down FinNobody's face. Nobody's face. Not Finnegan's. Finnegan didn't exist anymore. He was nothing but a pile of memories sitting in the recycle bin that was Nobody's mind. It was just a matter of discovering how to empty it.

Slowly, Nobody lifted his hand. Practiced opening and closing it. It felt like he was watching it happen from behind his eyes, just sitting in cramped headspace and craning his neck to get a better view. His head felt heavy at its core, but as a whole it felt light and foggy.

Focusing on the book before him, he carefully analyzed a variety of geographical anomalies. Page after tortured page he flitted through the tome, feeling something pressing at the back of his head like the

barrel of a gun.

Then he found it.

An entry on a **cave**, burrowed somewhere near Mount Aragats. At its heart, a curator of sorts. A teacher, and a knowledge seeker. And Nobody had a sizable chunk of memories sitting in his head he'd just love to donate.

« Killing Knowledge | Hub | Mental Mazes »

Life and Death

One minute.

He feels himself growing. It hurts, but he can take it. The real pain hasn't even started yet, anyways. He knows this pain all too well, he has felt it every time someone turns that key. He looks around, with glassy young eyes. These doctors, they don't know what pain is. They would leave him alone if they knew what it was like.

Five minutes.

It really hurts now. He can feel bones moving, setting themselves into place. He feels muscles contracting, then expanding again. The growth spurts are definitely the worst part. He struggles to stand, hoping that he can get both legs the same length long enough to prop himself up. Stranger things have happened.

Ten minutes.

The bones are really cracking now, growing at the most accelerated pace of the cycle. The growths spurts happen quickly and randomly. Hair grows on his face, and all around him there are doctors, taking notes. He feels humiliated by their presence, and the pain. It is the worst here. The pain is unbearable. And death is so very far away…

Twenty minutes.

Every bone in his body aches. He can't even think through this pain. He just curls into a ball and whispers to himself that it will be over soon, and that the pain won't last forever. He doesn't believe it. These doctors, with their clipboards, they would never let him be free. They would just keep turning the key, every day, to see if something new could happen. But it never would.

Thirty minutes.

The pain is less now, and the growing has almost stopped. But now came the part he dreaded the most. he watched his body slowly accrue wrinkles, his flesh become soft and round. Getting old was the hardest part, because he had to watch himself die.

Forty minutes.

The decay was happening faster now. He could remember back when he was at the *other* place, they would laugh at him here. They called him names and sipped scotch while he slowly died in front of them. They were monsters. The doctors were monsters too, but at least they kept their judgements to themselves. He winced as warts started growing in.

Fifty minutes.

He could feel the end coming, it would be over soon. He watched as his hair fell out, followed by his teeth. He had never gotten to wear dentures, so gums were all he got. Didn't matter. Even if he experienced a lifetime of hunger, they wouldn't feed him. All they ever did was watch.

Sixty minutes.

Closer now. He felt death approaching, and he was grateful. Soon he could return to rest, untroubled by this pain. His body was a mass of wrinkles now, with age spots and moles dotting his chest. His eyes were cloudy, and he couldn't hear the scientists now. Not like they had ever spoken a word to him anyways.

Seventy-five minutes.

It would be over soon. He could feel his body starting to break away. It was all over. Once more, the ordeal was over.
Ashes to ashes, dust to dust

Containment's A Beach

Charles Panthe looked over the Site-78 proposal one more time. All the paperwork was in order. It had all the right signatures (except for his). Hell, the proposal almost made it sound stupid that the Foundation hadn't built this thing years ago. But it still felt so… so wrong.

"You're serious about this?" Panthe asked the man sitting in front of his desk.

"Does Oh-Four's signature look like a joke?" Dr. Hedler replied.

"No, but… a site on the beach?"

"A Foundation site for aquatic anomalies, specifically those that require large amount of—"

"Of sea water yeah, I read it. Aren't the Canary Islands a prime tourist trap?"

"Actually, not on all of the islands. Lobos is largely uninhabited, and we have good relations with Spain so we will have little trouble building it."

"And you've got a portion of the budget dedicated to 'leisure'!"

"While I agree it isn't the most descriptive term, that budget generally gets used for the break room, as well as psychological and emotional habilitation. Like the dogs that we rent on Wednesdays to improve D-Class morale, and stress relief for staff. I believe it's part of your Site-17 budget."

"Um… why yes I suppose it is…" Pathe hadn't actually read the full budget for his site in ages. He just checked that the R&D, security, and emergency funds were reasonable, and then signed. Kind of assumed the accountants had worked everything else out. He had

also forgotten about the dogs. He quickly added the event to his calendar.

“But this will be a regular site like any other. Just in a more pleasant climate than most.”

“Ok… I mean Oh-Four already signed off. This is really just a formality at this point.”

And Charles Panthe signed off on the document.

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597 Days Later

“But shouldn’t that have been accounted for in the construction of the habitat?”

“We thought we had, but it turns out SCP-4591’s corrosive properties were stronger than we anticipated. It might’ve been aided by the salt in the water as well.”

“That doesn’t excuse the fact that currently, there are at least a hundred acid sardines swimming around the Mediterranean, and we have no clue where they are. Not to mention the air shark that got relocated there, and like fourteen other anomalies that those concrete walls were holding in.”

“Actually, the sardines have probably reached the Atlantic by now.”

“You’re not helping your case.”

“Right, right.” It hadn’t even been two years, and Site-78 opened, and the funding was already being pulled. Everything had been running smoothly, until a group of anomalous sardines destroyed the reinforced concrete walls used throughout Site-78. The holes had formed in their chamber a month into containment, before testing was complete.

“And now you’re asking for extra budget not just for repairs, but also for underwater robots to survey the site for destruction?”

“Well we considered giving personnel diving training and equipment,

but realized that aquatic drones would be more cost eff—“

“Just stop it, Hedler. You’re a smart guy, you gave this a real shot. But it’s time to face the facts. Your containment beach had a containment breach. I’m not signing for additional budget when we can just build oversized fish tanks like we always have.”

"I, um… ok. I understand. Thank you for your time." Dr. Hedler picked up his new proposal and started toward the door.

Panthe stood up and shouted after him, "Hey, it's Wednesday! The dogs should still be outside."

Life in the Multiverse

"Portal's stabilized. You're good to go. Say hi to 507 if you see him." The operator of the portal chuckled at his joke.

Trevor Bailey stepped through the portal to F-601432-Gamma; he emerged in the equivalent Site 87 on the other side, run by the Manna, Siskel, Parker, and Cooper Charitable Trust. The MSCPCT had decided that it was going to use anomalous artifacts for the good of the people, but it couldn't do it alone; while Foundation policy was to secure, contain and protect in this universe, the MSCPCT was "Save, Provide and Create for a better world."

In this universe, citrus was inedible (Vitamin C was a toxin if ingested) and instead used as a cheap biofuel; however, citrus had largely gone extinct in the 70's, and was now heavily regulated by the Brazilian government, who refused to export to the USA. The MSCPCT would give some petroleum in exchange for a large shipment of Florida orange juice.

All Trevor could think about was how nobody in this universe ever caught scurvy.

Tom Bailey stepped into the shadows of the evening sun, onto a prairie, in a brand new world. The difference here was quite obvious: all flora around him was shades of red as opposed to green. Also, there appeared to be elephants in the distance, co-existing with what seemed to be American Bison. Birds as big as jet liners circled overhead harmlessly; they ate only the mega-insectiods that flew with them. It was raining, and a balmy 70 degrees. He'd be camping here for the next 24 hours, taking soil and plant samples, and even collecting fauna, if he could. "Excellent."

Tom loved worlds like this. It always made him feel like a kid again, going into worlds that seemed almost imaginary. Maybe that's what this universe, and several others were: imaginary. Just pictures

drawn by a kid on a rainy day, and put up on a fridge. The universe, in a crayon drawing.

Tristan Bailey looked outside at the New York skyline. It wasn't his New York, of course; the Twin Towers were still standing, but the Chrysler Building was gone from sight. Two of Earth's moons were visible beyond the WTC; the third would be rising in about an hour, and the fourth wouldn't be seen until morning.

He always felt uneasy on urban assignments; he was meant only to observe, and observing he was, at an anart exhibition in the MoMA. Or rather, about half a mile *above* the MoMA; the centerpiece of this gallery was *Temptation,* a giant piece of lodestone suspended above New York. It came complete with a ledge to (bungee) jump off of.

"And now, to begin our journey through the world of Larts Dimpossible, the Curator of the Museum of Modern Art, Alfons Hitler!" Tristan almost spat out his drink at that, and suddenly remembered that there had only been *one* World War in this universe.

This night was going to be interesting.

As far as Trevor was concerned, A-2190-Omega could go fuck itself.

A-2190-Omega had swapped time zones, and in addition to that, the Earth spun the wrong direction. He had to wake up at 1:00 AM to go to a meeting at 1:00 PM in this universe's Site 87. The coffee was unbearably sweet, the energy drinks were bitter, and they had destroyed their ozone layer, so natural light was a no-no.

Trevor envied his brothers; the most he got to see was the inside of other universe's SCP sites, while Tom got to go exploring, and Tristan? Tristan could do what he wanted for the sake of research. He had even taken over Trevor's duties as a diplomat once.

"Mr. Bailey, if you are going to sleep, then please go to the dormitory in your native universe." The room let out a cackle. Trevor sighed;

why was it that in every universe, people with blue skin were absolute dickheads?

"Anything eventful, Doctor Bailey?"

"It's fascinating! In this universe, the English language developed a word that rhymes with both purple *and* orange! I've written it down…"

"We'll run it by memetics before sending it to linguistics. Anything else?"

"Well, the First President of the United States was hermaphroditic. So there's that."

> **Bailout:** So, that's how Booth would've killed Lincoln.
> **Herstri0nix:** bullshit.
> **sirsolmanhandyman:** why would Booth even want to kill Lincoln? Booth was an abolitionist.
> **snickeringsnicket:** that's the biggest load of bullshit i've heard since the time westmarkhero suggested a world without Batman comics would've exploded due to Bill Finger becoming a nuclear scientist or something
> **MarvelRoxDCSux:** DC RIPPED OFF BILL FINGER!
> MarvelRoxDCSux has been booted from #historitdidnthappen by Herstri0nix (freaking 10-year-old)
> **snickeringsnicket:** still, i did like the bit where you talked about people being surprised about the ending to the movie lincoln in your scenario

Tristan rolled his eyes and sighed. For the sake of "research", he'd joined a historical speculation chatroom in this universe, and he was severely regretting it. Still, it was educational, if painful; the First Moon Landing occurred in 1962, for one, but they didn't go public until 1970.

> **Bailout:** Fine, that was a bit speculative, but how about this: The Hindenburg caught fire.
> **Herstri0nix:** I'm listening…

Tom took off his breathing apparatus as he joined his brothers in Tristan's quarters. "I was just in a universe where the air was pure ethanol, but doesn't ignite." He grinned. "I got someone in chemistry making a liquor out of it as we speak. Assuming the lab animals don't die, we'll have trans-universal hooch by the weekend."

Tristan let out a snort. "I was in the universe you found last month, F-90241-Phi; as it turns out, Isaac Newton figured out a way to convert lead into platinum. It involves a *Hell* of a lot of radiation, and as a result, cancer is the number one cause of death in the world."

Trevor sighed. "I got sucked into negotiations with the Republic of Australia-Hungary."

Tom blinked. "Don't you mean *Austria?*"

"No. Australia. As in kangaroos, Steve Irwin, G'day mate… they wanted to trade a plant that grew fucking *Vegemite* for the introduction of the hazelnut to their ecosystem." He sighed. "Sometimes, I don't know if we have the best job in the world, or the worst."

"Think of it this way, Trev." Tristan said. "Within the next few months, you'll get to have a nice, cozy office at Site 19 instead of working in the backwoods town of Backwoods."

Trevor snorted. "I hope you enjoy having my old position, bro. You'll be stuck here with Tom Bombadill." He smirked at Tom, who threw a small, metal canteen at his head in response.

The mountaintop was the only piece of land he could see for miles. And he was on top of it.

It was warm, and pleasant. The sun overhead was red, but not a red giant, it was just the way the atmosphere was coloring it. Perfectly breathable oxygen, just dyed a different shade. Tom looked around the air on the mountaintop, taking pictures of the aether around him. He didn't care if this was just a Floater world; he always found the floaters to be 12 times more fascinating than any Hub or Branch

world.

Circling around the mountaintop were large creatures, resembling saw-toothed fish. They were big enough that you could fly a zeppelin into their mouths and not come out the other end for a week. He took as many pictures of those as he could and let out a contented sigh once he ran out of space on his camera.

"Dr. Bailey? Come back through. We're going to close the portal in 10 minutes."

"Just a little longer, if you don't mind."

"I'm sorry, but negotiations cannot continue between our universes, as your universe is about four times normal Earth gravity over here. Either you come here, or no dice."

"Then I guess it's no dice." The other side cut off connection, and Trevor sighed with relief. Of course, he could have just used an exoskeleton, but that made signing papers so much more difficult than it needed to be.

Tristan rubbed his hair and looked through the stable window into the other universe. "Wait… so, in this reality, Earth is a gas giant?"

Tom nodded, looking through the portal. "Solid core, though. Pressure's not too high, and gravity's normal; you can walk on the surface without getting crushed, theoretically."

"How big *is* this core?"

"About a Kilometer across."

"Talk about a short horizon."

"Yeah."

"Any life?"

"No, there isn't. Just a Floater, I'm afraid."

"…you want to explore it anyway, don't you?"

"Does a cat eat mice?"

"Hello, my name is Trevor Bailey. I am speaking to you through a telepathic communicator developed by the SCP Foundation…"

Trevor looked around the entry to the other Site 87, where several green-skinned humans looked at him in confusion. "The what CP Foundation?"

"Esss Cee-"

The head of the person closest to Trevor suddenly exploded. He jumped back through the portal, and closed it behind him, spattered in blood.

"What the *hell* kind of a universe is it when people don't evolve the ability to comprehend the letter "S"?!"

"Wait… animals evolved alongside humans. How does that work?"

"Honestly, if you're not an evolutionary biologist, or at the very least a geneticist, it's very hard to explain." The talking coyote was not the most bizarre thing that Tristan Bailey had ever seen; it wasn't even in the top ten. The fact that it walked on its hind legs maybe put it in the top 50, the opposable thumbs in the top 30. It was the labcoat it was wearing that pushed it into the top 20. "Suffice to say, there may have been some inter-species breeding at some point."

Tristan closed his eyes and grimaced. "Ew." The coyote simply snorted and muttered something about racism.

"Gravity appears to be non-existent in this universe," Tom said into a tape recorder. "However, the very fact that I am recording this indicates that other forces, such as magnetism and the strong and weak forces, do exist."

"Although," Tom said, looking down at the world below him (if the

word "below" even applied here), "It is troubling to wonder how this planet continues to orbit the sun without any gravity, let alone how the sun *formed* without gravity."

Trevor sighed and drummed his fingers against the desk, watching the two-headed being sitting across from him. "You seem troubled," They said through the translator. "Is everything amicable with the current situation?"

"I'd just like to take a break, is all."

"A break may be taken once our business is concluded." Trevor groaned a bit, and looked to the side. There was actually a window in this office, for once, and it looked out onto a desert. The sky was blue, but a much darker shade than it was back home- the kind of blue you would see in a boy's bedroom. Also, there were three smaller suns outside. Rubbing his eyes, Tristan managed to tear himself away from the sight.

"Back to business, then. Scrap silicon in exchange for access to your lithium mines…"

The three Baileys stepped out of the presentation hall, laughing to themselves. "Dad was a real jackass, wasn't he?"

Tom and Trev's pockets started shaking simultaneously. With a puzzled look, they took out their quintuple-encrypted smartphones, undid the codes, and frowned.

"E-mail. From the top…" Tom opened his, and his jaw dropped. "Dr. Thomas Bailey, you are to report to Antarctic Site 1483 for reassignment, effective… tomorrow! What?!"

"I got the same thing! Except I'm being re-assigned to 19!" Trevor stared at his phone, his eyes wide. Tom almost looked like he was going to cry.

"Antarctic… that's the Keter-class sites. Jesus…"

Tristan smiled weakly. "Guess this means we won't be able to do the

"three of me from different universes" gag anymore, eh?"

Tom stepped onto the plane to Antarctica, wondering what he had done to deserve this. Reassignment to the coldest place on Earth. He'd probably be stuck with Edison, cleaning a Keter's cage or something.

With a despondent look on his face, he finally worked up the courage to read the dossier he had gotten regarding SCP-1483. He frowned at the first line of the description; how could an entire *continent* be a SCP?

As he read the file, a smile started to grow. It looked like the explorer would have a brand new land to visit, now.

|**Hub**|

Life Itself

"Hey, can I show you something? Don't worry, I promise it won't be gross. It's hard to explain. You're just going to have to follow me."

"Oh, good, you caught up! Listen to me. I'm going to open the barn doors and whatever you do, don't close your eyes. Not even for a split second. You can't even blink. I won't be able to live with myself if you do. Do you understand? I won't open the door unless you promise not to close your eyes… Good. Be ready."

"Real spacious in here, isn't it? The thing I want to show you is right behind that pillar. Why are you afraid? Is it really that scary looking? I think it looks really nice."

"Why? Ah… I guess I can't blame you for not knowing. I might as well explain what I mean. Remember when I made you promise not to close you eyes? I showed Jamison this thing a few days ago. Well… Let's just say that thanks to him, I know not to even blink around it. It snapped his neck. He died. My cousin died."

"Of course you thought he broke his neck. I was the one who had to make it look like an accident. Do you really believe that my aunt would believe me for a second if I told her that a magic statue-man did it. I don't want to go to jail for something I didn't do, and you'd do the same in my shoes!"

"We're getting sidetracked. I was terrified when I watched Jamison die, I was. Call me crazy, but the longer I thought about that day, the more I came to appreciate that thing. I went back here and it was still there. I realized at that moment that it was the greatest work of art ever. Think of that statue as life itself. Look at its face. Look at the colors that are on there. It looks creepy, but at the same time it looks kind of nice. Similar to how life is generally pretty good, but has lots of bad stuff in it."

"To look away from this is to reject life itself. You think it's creepy

and you want to stop looking at it, just like you think that life is unfair and cruel and you don't want to be in it anymore. It's genius! Sometimes in order to win at life, you just need to look it right in the eye."

"What do you mean you don't understand? Do I need to spell it out for you? This fucking thing startled me the first time I saw it in the barn. I don't even know how it got there. Same thing for life. I didn't ask to be born, and neither did you. We just happened to start existing when our moms gave birth to us."

"Life comes at you fast. About as fast as this thing does when nobody's looking at it. It's not pleasant. It's not supposed to be. It is what it is. It's up to you to make your own conclusions about the thing like I did. Just like life. Isn't that what the best art is supposed to do?"

"Just look at it! If you look at the statue head-on, then you defeated it. If you look at life, you've defeated it. It makes you appreciate how… beautiful it all is when it can be taken away in the literal blink of the eye. Can I not make that any more clear? Not seeing the thing in front of us is no different than the two of us committing suicide right here right now! I don't care if I'm rambling at this point! I've figured this thing out, so I've got life figured out! I'm trying to help you see that for yourself."

"That's all I wanted to share. You want to stay? Well don't forget to close the barn doors on the way out."

Life Lessons, or You Aren't Getting Younger Every Day

1st Lesson

When you were quite a good deal younger, one of the bluebottle flies which came into the house in the summer and beat themselves against the windows got into your room. You caught it and held it in your hands before letting it go to fly away again. You hoped it would stay and be your friend but it didn't, even though you could still hear its occasional taps against the glass. As children your age were wont to do, you sulked at the slight and rolled over and stuffed your hands in your ears.

You found its body a few days later, curled up in the well of your windowsill, only a few inches away from the little hole in the screen that would have let it go free. Even though some part of you knew that's not what happened, you feel guilty about the fly dying, like you were the one who killed it and not a hot sun and no food or water or air.

You could have had a little funeral, but you couldn't reach the fly in the well of the window. When you asked your mother to get it out for you, and explained why, she scolded you and said that flies were dirty. When you were older still, you learned that the fly would have died in a matter of days, anyway.

That's just how flies were.

2nd Lesson

You're older now, in school, and you've just hit back for the first time in your life. Despite all the years of reading books with spunky protagonists learning to stand up for themselves, you do not in fact feel vindicated. The blood on her face from her nose and the split lip makes you feel a little ill. Instead of crowing in joy you burst into tears and try to kneel beside her, so you can push the sleeve of your shirt into her face and make it stop.

She recoils and shoves you so hard into the dirt you hit your face on a rock and knock out one of your milk teeth, and then you're both crying. There's a humming in your head from pain and dizziness at seeing blood and perhaps a bit of indignation.

It sounds a little like a bluebottle, beating itself against the window.

3rd Lesson

You never do finish school – you have to drop out so you can take care of your mum. You're old enough to do that when she gets sick, and there's nobody else around to help her, so you do. For a while in between hospital trips and holding a vomit pan and looking up palliative care and the success rates of double mastectomies, you try to study out of your old textbooks. It's a hectic mishmash of biology and calculus and history where you can actually get past World War 2, forgetting which problem you were on by the time you come back from holding the bedpan.

It doesn't work, but you keep on trying until she's dying. Then you give up. You give up on a lot of things while you're sitting in that bed, watching her try to breathe. There's an impulse welling up in you to take the pillow and shove it over her face, just to stop that horrible rattling noise. You almost do it once, twice, then three times.

You don't, and she takes an extra five days after the doctor said she would to die, five days of piss and shit and blood and sobbing until they drug her so deep she doesn't even remember your name. Who needs to be careful with morphine when you're going to die anyway? She asks, eyes wide and earnest in her last lucid moment. After she's gone, you go out and sit on the curb of the hospital and cry so hard you give yourself a nosebleed.

Then with the coppery taste still filling your mouth, old pennies and missing teeth, you go to take care of your mother's dead body.

4th Lesson

You are older still, although not by too much, and you have the man who almost hit you with his car to thank for that. He thought you were a particularly soggy clump of rubbish in the gutter. Instead you

turned out to be an mostly incoherent drunk. He still scooped you up and got you home and had absolutely nothing to do with what happened next.

The man who showed up on your doorstep with his polite smile and offered you a job as a janitor was so normal you can't remember his face. He could have been everyone you'd ever seen in a background before, a crowd shot in a television show or someone going by you in a busy street.

Mr. Jones?

Mr. Smith?

Does it matter?

He laughs and waves your question away when you ask him who the fuck would want someone as a janitor so bad that they'd be willing to send someone else out to a front door. I oversee all D-Class personnel requisitions, he replies. It doesn't matter. But the pay is good, and you can drink on your off days all you want. You'd be living on-site, but the Foundation treats those well who treat it well.

You turn and look back over your shoulder, considering the grimy hallway still soaked in muck from when you stumbled in last night. You consider the itchy corporate branded work shirt you're wearing, the one that always creeps up under your armpits. You consider the pounding hangover you've got, and the way something about the man's horribly normal face suggests that saying no might not be an option. You think good and long and hard about your life and how you're living it now.

Okay, you say. Okay.

And you try not to think of your mother.

Graduation Day

You are much much older, and your knees are sore, although that's the last of your worries on any given day. You don't even have time to consider all the different ways you've ever see people die, and to

be honest, it didn't even matter anymore. Blood and shit because they blinked, alright, whatever. It was the kind of hyperviolence you saw on movies and television and wasn't it easier to just keep your head down and mop?

You don't get to know half of the things that go on here, at Site-19. You're not a scientist in a white labcoat, you're the person who scrubs up the piss from the tile when a junior researcher sees something he wasn't prepared for. You're definitely not one of the skips kept behind locked doors- that's what all the people like you call them, skips. There's one of your fellow D-Class who keeps calling them scips, like what you do to a drink you want to savor, and he gets screamed down with derision in the mess hall every night. They're horrible, wonderful things and if you and everyone else here didn't do your part to keep them contained the whole world might end.

(That's what they call an XK. You listen more than you probably should.)

You've lasted longer than most. Is it because they want you alive? Is it luck? Who the fuck knows? It doesn't matter to you. You're just living here.

But in a way, being confined has given you an appreciation for the smaller things. You get three fucking meals a day (of Soylent Green-esque pap that you're not entirely sure isn't made of people, because wouldn't that be fitting) and a place to rest (small, steel-frame, in a room full of snoring assholes) and your job isn't too hard. (Mopping. Sometimes it's piss, sometimes blood, sometimes it's chunks of what used to be a member of those fancy on site task forces before a skip got them. Still better than working at Burger King.)

You've finally found a place. Not your place, it's a little too hostile for that, but it's a place with room for you in it and that's good enough.

You roll over and with the little metal screw you took from the mop, you scratch a line on the wall. It's the best way you've found to keep up with the time of the year, and the overseers don't seem to mind it. You scratch another line on the wall. You've gotten one year older,

give or take. You're not dead yet.

Happy Birthday.

End.

Life's a Show

Hmmm. Hmmm, hmm hmmm. Hmmm… Hmm hmm hmm. Hmm hm hm hmmmmm. Hm hm hm hmmmmm. Hm hm hm *hmmmmm* hmm hm hmmmmm hm hm *hmmmmmmm*. Da da… da ta da ta da dada da, a toddily da, a toddily dee, a toodily toddily a doppity da! A ta ta taa… A taa taa taaaaa… Hmm. Uh, hmm…

…

…Bear necessities, those simple bear necessities… uh… Window, to the tulips, by the garden, by the willow tree… In a land of pure imagination, you'll be… uh… I was born a unicorn, something something, unicorns are people too! A da da da, a ta da ta daddily da, ya pa teedah bah doodily do…

…

Golly gee whiz, being dead is boring. I thought, uh, that it'd just… *poof*. Gone. No more thoughts. This is different. This is super weird and not cool and I kind of maybe don't like it. Umm…

…

There she comes, now in veil… she's walking down the aisle… so close, now she winks, I recognise that smile… a spider and I, a fly with white gloved hands, wait! Something's amiss, but this wedding has been planned…

I'm gonna miss listening to music.

How does she know that you love her? How does she know that she's yours? How does she know that you love her? How does she know that you love her? How does she know that you really, really, truly, love her? How does she know that you

love her? How do you show that you love her? How does she know that you really, really, truly, love her?

Whoops, sorry! I'm loud…

Sunshine, on my shoulders, makes me happy… sunshine, in my eyes can make me cry —

Okay, where am I? No, seriously, I am clearly not dead. I'd be super dead by now, I'd know if I was dead. This is not dead. I may have never been dead before, so I am not the expert on the matter, but *this* is most *certainly* not dead. I am very alive. Look! Those are my fingers. Hey! Those are my toes! That's my face, there's my chest, here's my hair — all my mentionables and unmentionables are where they should be, so I am not dead. Decidedly so. Good. We have that figured out. Step one to the puzzle, figure out if you're not dead. Check. Not dead. Did it. Good. Step two.

…

Uh, step *two*. Step two, where is Brainy? Brainy is… purgatory! Step one, is Brainy dead? Checkmark. Yes, Brainy is dead. Step two, where is Brainy? Check, yes — I mean, uh, yes Brainy is… somewhere, Brainy's in purgatory! Awaiting judgement! Oh gracious gods, lords above, please bestow upon me your heavenly judgement, help me atone for my sins and reward me for my good deeds, I have always… worshiped you…?

…

Step one, is Brainy dead? No. Step two, where is Brainy? Unsure. Step two point five, is there a god? No. Should there be? No. Not in purgatory. Start again. Step one, is Brainy dead? Unsure. Step two, where is Brainy? Brainy is in a place that is so empty it's not even dark anymore. It's *just* nothing. Only Brainy exists, and he's bored out of his mind, and really concerned. Where is Brainy? The world may never — !

Wait.

Summon… let there… give me a… lollipop! Woah! And another one! And another one, and another one, and another one! Mmm, *kiwi watermelon*. Mmm mmm *mmm*. Step one, is Brainy dead? Check, *heck* no! Brainy is, in fact, enjoying some great lollipops right now! Step two, where is Brainy? Oh I am so glad you asked, you handsome young fellow, you see… Brainy is in his Headspace! My very own Headspace! Step three, how did Brainy get here? Simple! Backup plan! I *forgot* about this. Plan B! Of course Brainy wouldn't fail, Brainy *never* fails. Instead of fails, Brainy prevails! And his rhamms *neva* get stale, uh, unless he does! Bi… bi… bicycle! Shimmy to the right, *unh*, shimmy to the left, *unh*, shimmy to the shimmy to the shimmy to the left again! Yeah!

What would Brainy be, without a Plan B? Brainy wouldn't be so Brainy, would he? Whenever he dies, he does what he please — because Brainy is named Brainy for a reason, ya see? With glorious speed Brainy does conceive that if he dies in the future he will need a release, so he builds himself a body out of spare parts he found and now he still can strut his stuff all around the town! *Unh*! That's right! Give me a… big *house*. Ooo! And a kiddy pool! And a landscape — think *The Lorax*. That's it! Give me a good song! Oh, Headspace, this couldn't be…? Oh my god, you know me like the back of your hand! *Idiot Song* by *Idiot Flesh*. Admittedly a guilty pleasure, but I have been a little indulgent as of late.

I completely forgot about this. What did I call this project way back when? It was something cliche, I remember that much. Oh, yeah. The Lazarus Model. Tee emm. Trademark Brainy. Brainy did this. I did this while working side by side with people who didn't know how to shut stall doors in the bathroom. Brainy is King! Brainy is King! King Harding, master of the Headspace! Give me a Ferris wheel, and a roller coaster, and a space ship, and a… friend.

Oh, hello, Thomas Timothy Thompson.

"Brainy?"

That's me!

"Where are we?"

We're in my Headspace, 3T! There are two possibilities right now: you are dreaming and I'm really talking with you, or you're awake at this very moment and what I am seeing is a figment of my imagination. Isn't that cool?

"Brainy, aww, you didn't have to bring me out here! This is so good of you. I didn't even know you had a Headspace. How much did it cost?"

Nothing, I made it myself.

"That's cool. That's the coolest cool thing I've ever had the privilege of calling cool. You're *really* good, Brainy."

Oh I know. Don't need to tell me twice.

"You have no sense of humbleness."

And proud of it — look, 3T? The thing about this, is, uh, you're not gonna like this, but I'm… dead.

"Dead?"

Yeap! Super dead. Took the gun to my head, and uh… *Bang*. Pretty 100% certain I'm dead.

"Oh my god!"

I know it sounds bad now, but I was in a pretty bad place. I'm better now. Being dead and all. Thing is, I'm not really dead. In fact, I have a new body. I look the same, but I took the liberty of clearing out a few cosmetic issues, you know?

"Why did you go and do that?!"

Shush, 3T, you're not letting me get to the good part. See, I'm in my Headspace, and my body isn't really… *real*. Right now. I *only* exist in my Headspace. Isn't that cool?

"Why did you k-k-k-"

K-k-k-kablammo my head right open? You'll find out, look, you are

really interrupting my thought process, you *know* I think better when I'm talking, so please shush and hush alright? My Headspace, right? Usually the exit is where I'm dreaming from. But I ain't dreaming. That means the exit doesn't really… *know* where to exist. For anyone but me, that'd be a bad thing, because you'd never be able to get out. But I'm not anyone but me, 3T, I'm *me*! I'm Brainy Brian! I've stumbled a few times as of late, but I am flying with adrenaline, and I have backup plans on backup plans on backup plans. I am… oh gosh I've been a bit mean, haven't I? I'm sorry. I was just so excited. I start losing all my sense of social workings when I get all excited like that.

Anyways, the point that I am trying to make is that nobody will believe that this dream happened. Brainy couldn't possibly have a Headspace, you aren't going to get to management with the news of this dream before the news gets there normally that I've kicked the hay. They'll think you've either made it up or had it because of the stress of losing a friend.

But believe me, 3T, I am not gone, and this is not the last time we will meet. Continue with business as per usual, make your toys and make them well like you always have, I have more hugs to give and kisses to share and I love *you*, Thomas. We will reunite. Wait patiently. I have a plan. I can't go back to Wondertainment — like I would want to. I've always been meant to perform, and that's just what I plan on doing, Thomas. I plan on living life to the fullest and going out and experiencing the world. Next time you see me, I'll be on stage. I love you like a brother. You know that.

Happy trails. Smooches. Bye!

Thomas Timothy Thompson awoke with a start. The world was never dark in Wonder World!™, but it was dim and hard to make things out. His bed teetered and tottered this way and that as it rode down the Sleep with the Fishes™ creek. He was in a long tunnel, and soft glowing caricatures of cartoon sheep glowed and blurred as

they frolicked silently on the walls. 3T turned over and let his left arm dangle into the water, feeling a bed of moss and Sugar Weeds™ on the bottom of the canal. He picked one and began to chew on it — it was at once bitter and sweet, tasting faintly of some strand of persimmon. He tried to make sense of his dream. He wondered if it really was a dream, or if it was what Brainy had said. He wondered what could have driven Brainy to sh… sh… he couldn't even bare to think the word, the whole ordeal was a terribly alien concept to the innocent mind of 3T. He floated out of the tunnel, and saw the cityscape. The place glowed with faint pinks and blues. For a city, it had a very minimal nightlife — everyone had a bedtime and followed it religiously.

3T sat up, and let himself be perplexed. He knew it was bad, but it just seemed to be getting worse. At the next convenient stop, Thomas crawled out of bed and onto the shore of the ride. He stretched and yawned, and guessed the time was something close to be midnight. He went to the lockers by the entrance and got his clothes out (the lockers had no locks, because of course nobody would steal; that would be indecent of them). He didn't bother to put them on, though. Still in his pajamas dotted with T's, which were a gift from Battery a year or so back, he strolled down the big grassy hill and past the Wonder World!™ suburbs' Lifesize Gingerbread Houses™. There were no cars to fill the streets, though bumper cars lay abandoned at every street corner, so he walked in the middle of the road. He had never been up this late. It was an odd feeling, but he simply couldn't fall back asleep. Not in a mood like this. He passed down all the candy stores, toy shops, Ferris wheels, mini marts (you sent tiny mouse people in to retrieve your goods for you), roller coasters (the Flying Fire™ in particular), and some other various rides. He walked by big curvy hotels and small pudgy motels, big fancy restaurants, small dingy diners, and the Multiverse's Biggest Ball Pit™. It really was, by the way. With the light outside so dim, all colors were muted and gave the place a lonely look. 3T had never seen the world so empty before. The pink and blue glowing orbs ((I Wish I May I Wish I Might Wish Upon the) Bright Night Lights™) floating above the city cast only the most basic of light over the buildings. No logos of anything could be made, no real concrete details. Everything was only shapes and impressions. 3T had never thought he could feel that Wonder World!

™ was so foreign to him, but his whole perspective felt strange. Thomas felt odd. He needed grounding.

Finally, he arrived at an apartment complex. He walked through the door and into the small lit up lobby area. He stared down the buttons by the elevator — Billy the Magical Bean, Sammich, Marvelous Marvin, Elepant, and Percy Pinwheel. He clicked and held the very last button, and began to speak softly into it.

"Pinwheel? I'm in a bad place. It's me, Thomas. I need a friend."

3T stepped back, and waited for a response. His leg bounced, and his clothes hung over his arms jingled softly. Nothing. Thomas approached again, and held the button again, and then he spoke again.

"I know you're a light sleeper. Are the fans too loud? I want some company. Please."

3T stepped away once more, and sat on the bench next to the lift. If nothing else, he could sleep here, he thought. Maybe use his clothes as blankets. That would have been nice enough. He drooped under his own weight, and began to nod off before the elevator dinged. The doors opened and beckoned him inside. 3T sauntered into the tiny room, and the doors closed. The machine whirred to life (though fairly silently), and took him up to the topmost floor. The doors opened, and he heard all at once the sound of tens of fans all going off at once. Myriads of pinwheels were strewn all about the room, spinning at incredible speeds and creating a soft flapping hum. Percy appeared from behind a corner, wearing only a bathrobe and holding a plate with two cups of tea.

"Chamomile?" Thomas asked in a croaky voice, red eyed and cheeks sunken.

"Dream Catcher Chamomile, tee emm."

3T took it, and sipped on it. It was already drinking temperature, just like any Wondertainment tea. He knew that Pinwheel only kept this in stock because he liked it. Percy was a greater fan of Pillow Pecker Peppermint™, which 3T knew must have been what she

was drinking. Her apartment always smelled like peppermint. She wouldn't have been a Candy Catalyst without her pervasive peppermint smell. She sat down on the couch and patted the seat next to her. He sat with her, and they sipped on their tea in the dark. Only the sound of wind and pinwheels was present. They enjoyed each others warmth and company, and drank in silence. After they were done, Pinwheel opened her arms, and 3T clambered on top of her and used her right breast as a pillow. She wrapped around him, and he closed his eyes. She smelled wonderful. 3T began to frown, and shivered. She played with his hair and rubbed his back, nuzzling into his forehead and kissing him there. Thomas hugged her tight and nuzzled back at her, into her chest. Engulfed in warmth and comfort, he spoke.

"I don't think this world is a happy place."

They shifted and curled around each other even more, sharing emotions wordlessly through strokes and pats and squeezes. She knew just what to do with him. Sometimes, 3T thought, Percy knew him better than he did. He pulled away only enough to look into her eyes, which he could only make out in the darkness as two sparkling stars in the corners of her pupils.

"I want to leave."

"Where do you want to go?"

"…I don't know."

They breathed each other's breaths, felt each other's heat, and loved each other's company. They were two links in a chain, unbreakable and stronger together. Pinwheel and Thomas fell asleep and awoke the next day, bombarded with the news that Brainy had been wiped from the earth, and they decided to call in sick.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, please welcome to the ring our naughtily nautical naked Nereid: Nixie!"

The bright red curtains pulled back and revealed a large glass dunk tank, swimming with piranhas of neon pink and greens. High above the tank sat a mermaid, clad in naught but three seafoam bracelets, on a wide sky blue diving board with her back to the audience. Many an "ooo" and "ahh" emanated from the audience, along with a couple nervous squeaks at the harrowing series of events that were sure to play out within the next few moments.

"Not to worry folks, Nixie's an expert at evading serious and terrifying problems. I would know, we used to date."

She turned, waved, and winked, and then pulled herself backwards off of the plank and gracefully into the open air. Her rainbow fins shimmered and glistened as she spun and pulled off three full back flips before diving into the water with not so much as a "sploosh". As soon as her first fingers had touched the water, the glowing ravenous fish had been magnetized to her position, creating a swift moving flesh eating light show that danced within the confines of the tank. Nixie didn't stay underwater for more than a split second before she had lunged out into the open air above once again without a single scratch. She repeated this trick several times in quick succession, adding minute flourishes and tricks into her every swivel and curve. Almost imperceptibly the cartoonishly curvaceous Ringmaster had shimmied onto the edge of the diving board above and dropped a large red ball that threatened to disturb the perfectly contained dunk pool. Before it could grace the surface of the water with its presence, Nixie batted it perfectly back from where it came with her tail. The spectacle also tossed a small crowd of neon piranhas into the air, which threatened front seat audience members into fits of frightful tremors. Thankfully, they fell harmlessly onto a small pit of wooden spikes that surrounded the tank, making shish kebabs that stage hands quickly picked up and began to cook.

After the ball was effortlessly kept from its downward descent by increasingly spectacular motions, it was sent flying up to the woman on the board. The Ringmaster's violet eyes followed the ball as it rose above her only for a girl to pop out from under her top hat and burst the ball with a pin. After the loud noise that followed and the

confetti that broke out, something else began to fall. Out of the popped ball a long black eel, highlighted with color changing lines down its side and on its fins, coiled and twisted and hissed (eels hissed?) before splashing into the dunk tank. Nixie, looking thoroughly confused and frightened, collided with the frilly oily serpent in mid air and fell back into the tank with a *slap* sound. The audience let loose short, wondrous, concerned gasps. The piranhas seemed to swarm on a single spot in the tank, and shimmers of the golden fins of the eel were caught at glances in the spots between the hungry school of fish. For a full four seconds, nothing seemed to happen. The crowd was held in horrendous shaking and horror as they perceived themselves to be witnessing a horrible carnival accident. Suddenly, the piranhas began to circle, yet didn't seem to swim — soon, the whole tank was spinning, and the water threatened to spill over the sides. Nixie shot out of the very center of it, shaking a few fish off of her tail effortlessly onto the shish kebabs below. She returned to the whirlpool and swam in circles, leaping out while the eel followed her like an iridescent shadow. The crowd cheered and hooted and hollered, throwing their voices at Nixie in glad celebration and relieved ecstasy. Suddenly, however, Nixie looked concerned once more.

Something distracted her from the uproarious applause and the tricks and sports. The eel had given up chase, and the piranhas had all gravitated to a dark spot in the water, and — by god, was the water turning red? A hand with sharp nails, covered in bites, scratches, and blood, shook itself out of the water and tried desperately to hang onto something. Nixie acted on instinct and dove towards the figure, the crowd continuing unknowingly in their obnoxious loud approval. She swam towards the fish feast and pulled the eel off of the being's neck, chucking it out of the water and up and over onto the skewers. The thing twitched and flailed before succumbing to the spiny wooden death. Soon enough, something else sputtered out of the water. Nixie, carrying the man with piranhas flying off of them, flopped disgracefully onto the side of the stage, where she feverishly pulled fish off of (or more likely out of) the man in an orange and black pinstripe suit.

The curtains closed on the emergency, and Nixie heard the Ringmaster trying to control the crowd in their confusion. She called

for Dr. Tinkles while two stage hands came and picked the man out of her arms. The man, soaked in his own blood and pricked with teeth that had broken off of the fish, coughed and wheezed and yelled.

"*I'm so sorry! I'm so so sorry! I didn't mean to interrupt your show! You were great! You were -*" hack "*- so great, keep it up! Ow, HOLY jimminy cricket! Gosh diddly CHRISTMAS! I'm really, so — AUGH — sorry, fudge! Fiddlesticks, barnacles, CREPE on a STICK and call me SUNDAY, GET ME TO A MEDIC!*"

The man moaned and writhed as they brought him out of the tent and off into the circus. Nixie pulled herself further off stage and into the wings and clambered onto a chair. The bastard had ruined her act. What the hell kind of asshole just goes and appears in your tank like that? What kind of idiot teleports himself into an aquarium of hungry flesh eating fish? A speed walking Man with an Upside-Down Face appeared from behind a corner, furrowed brow (though it really came off as more of a furrowed chin) and all, inquisitive as ever.

"What just happened?"

Nixie took another couple deep breaths, glaring at Manny and attempting to regain her composure.

"Nothing good."

Nixie grabbed a fish kebab and crunched on the colourfully crispy characiforme.

« Be Strange or Be Forgotten|Dread & Circuses Hub|...And I'm the Star! »

Life's Cold

I look into the metallic reflection of myself in the elevator door. I see it every day. Or just about, since sometimes work keeps me on base for days on end. Smooth polished steel. You can see your reflection in it, with the bright white glow of the single light above me. In front of me, the door and the two buttons. Up. Down. This one only leads to two spots. To my left, a side of the elevator. To my right, Doctor MacCarrick.

He was one of the new guys, but somehow, he'd just gotten a research assistantship working with **Oh-Three-Five**. A nasty little bugger, from the file I read. I had fifty bucks saying he didn't last the week. Sort of sick, I know, but we bet on odd things down here.

I give my cheeks a soft slap to get some color in them and wake myself up, then notice MacCarrick staring at me in the reflection in the metal.

"…Yes, MacCarrick?"

"Nothing, Dr. Iceberg."

"Just Ice," I said. I kept hoping it would catch on, but it never did. He didn't get a chance to respond before the elevator door opens, and we were herded out by the security staff on hand. I was motioned out into a short hall, nodding briefly to MacCarrick as he went in the opposite direction. I regretted it, but it was already too late.

The trip down seemed longer that usual, but it might have just been the company. Don't get close to people you've got money on. Never ends well.

We already passed clearance up top side, so a lot of the hustle and bustle down here was just for show. In spite of that, I knew full well that the security cameras were hidden, watching, and checking us. Facial structure scans, retinal analysis, or anything that seemed off.

One thing wrong, and a security team would be in the room in seconds to deal with things. I've seen it happen. Not to me, thankfully, but still. They're efficient. Very, very efficient. And the Insurgency had yet to master plastic surgery, it seemed.

As I walked forward, I eyed the rather nice reception desk. I wasn't sure who it was actually there for, since we didn't take visitors, but I assumed that all sites had one. Tradition, maybe? Or a leftover from another time. Sitting behind it, typing away at her keyboard, was Break.

Her codename never made sense to me. I just don't see it. Breaking intruders upon the rocks? Breaking fingers? I dunno. But then, you have other people whose callsigns didn't make sense either. Djoric? What was up with that? Or Bright? Whatever. Not like it mattered. What *did* matter, though, was…

"Hello there, Break." I put on my charming smile. Set my briefcase down. Lean onto her desk.

She sighs before responding, eyes not straying from her computer. "Hello, Dr. Iceberg."

"And how are you today, lovely?"

"Good. Must you do this?"

"Do what, Breaky?" I use my pet name for her. She loves that.

"Don't call me that."

"Oh, come on. I know you love it." She loved it. "I was wondering if you might be doing anything this week. Like, say, Friday?"

"No."

"Oh really, now," I started. "Then maybe we cou—"

"No," she said. "I was answering your next question first. No, I'm not going out with you. I'm going to be washing my hair from now until eternity, Berg."

Ugh. I hated it when she called me Berg.

She turned her face from the screen at last, looking up at me with a blank expression that I knew belied her true affections.

"Go to work."

"Okay, okay, fine, fine… Maybe next week, then." My smiled slipped from charming to nervous, and I picked up my suitcase and headed down the administrative hallway toward the east wing.

I wasn't sure if she knew she was in ear shot when I heard her mumbled "Not likely." But I knew this all too well. Honestly, I sometimes wonder if I may be as bad with women as Clef. Then I just tell myself that even I'm not that bad. I hope. I wonder if maybe the issue lay with her, but I decided that she'd warm up to me sooner or later.

My office was placed fairly deep in the bedrock. Well, less that and more they gave me one back here. Considering how much time I'm stuck back here from week to week, it was no wonder I thought of it as home more so than the apartment at the nearby living facilities. The nice thing is that I'm still in walking distance to the break room, and since it's Monday, a break seems like a good way to get things started.

I head out down the shocking clean hallways. I'm always surprised by how nicely kept they are, especially since I never see a cleaning crew. They must be here at odd hours. Maybe a secret fleet of Roombas.

I pass by researchers, of course. There's a ton of us down here. Some, I know; others, I don't. The lucky ones have been here for a while. The unlucky ones? They're fifty dollars. Yeah, yeah. I'm sick. But the guy who runs the betting is the same guy who comes up with the cover stories for their families. Hah! He pockets ten percent, then tells them how a crane fell or a beam collapsed or something. They never hear about how someone was dissolved or unexisted or some shit. Its hard, though, coming up with excuses when there's no body. You gotta respect the man.

I head down the corridor past the Level One and Two offices. Shiny nameplates hanging on the doors with nice, generic names. The lucky kids who only know about the Safes or maybe a Euclid. Must be nice. Past that, I take a left past the minimum security wing. Some safe class skips. Dozens of guards, but they all know me. And they know if I made it in, that I'm cleared. No one pays me attention except the new guys, who stiffen when I walk by. They'll get over that, eventually. Or maybe they won't. The ones that don't live the longest.

And… break room. Finally. I pick up the scent of muffins, then the sound of her voice—in that order. She might have brought the muffins for everyone, if I was lucky, but chances were…

I rounded the corner, and there she sat. Agatha Rights. Doctor Agatha Rights, I had to remember. Five foot four, built to adore, knockout and snore. Damn. And she was eating the last muffin from a plate. Damnit. So, no treat. Maybe I can get something else.

"Well, well, well. Hello, Rights." Charming smile again. Let's roll.

She turns around and smiles. A happy grin, as usual. An oddity down here. Somehow, she managed to avoid the really horrible stuff. Likely to keep from causing a problem. I mean, not that’s she’s terrible at things, she’s just… motherly with the staff.

"Hey, Berg! Want a muffin?" I hated how fast that one seemed to be spreading.

"That isn't the last one?"

She looked at the muffin. Then the plate. Then me.

"…Maybe."

"No thanks. But make some cookies, and you know I'll take some." I smiled a bit more.

"Oh, fine." She placed the empty tray on the counter. She'd bring them in tomorrow.

"So… got any terrible paperwork buildup you need taken care of?"

Might be nice to help her work through things. Give me a few nice hours before I had to drudge through my own.

"Oh, not right now, sweetie. I can handle some things. Besides, the administration has threatened to reassign me to **one-thirty** if they don't actually see me write a report on my own, for once. Puts a small damper on my plans."

"Ah, well. Too bad. Well, you know where my office is if you change your mind."

"Oh, trust me, I do…" She smiled. "And just out of curiosity, if I make cookies, what kind do you want?"

Score.

"Double chocolate chip. It's my favorite."

She grinned. "Good, mine too."

"See you later, sweetie pie."

She waved goodbye, and I headed to the coffee pot. I'd hate to see her go, but I'm still not entirely sure why she's still a researcher here. I guess because people like her, or she would have been terminated a while ago. Maybe they keep a few people with tender hearts around to keep the rest of us sane. Maybe.

It's a short walk back to my office, and I spend most of it drinking my coffee from a styrofoam cup. I got out my keycard, then noticed the nameplate on the door. Someone had covered up the 'Ice' in my name. I sighed, trying to wipe it off with my sleeve, but it didn't budge. I'd have to submit a work request, and when it wasn't vital… They'd get to it 'sooner or later.'

There was a large stack of files next to the door. Another round of paperwork to slough through. Everyday. Well, at least it was relatively safe down here. Unless my inbox had become anomalous.

I sat down at my computer, shaking the mouse to wake it up, then checking my email. Only two alerts, one last night, and one… Hell, fifteen minutes ago? I checked it, and felt a sudden creeping

sensation lurching up my neck when I saw the number. 035. And the list of deceased included two Class-D's and…

"Yes!"

The rush of elation at reading MacCarrick's name was immediately dampened by a sudden twisting in my gut. Fuck. The nod had been too much, I guessed… I sighed, closing my eyes for a moment, then turned and grabbed the top file off the stack, opening it and proceeding to enter the data.

Maybe Rights would bring the cookies tomorrow.

Life Saver

Disclaimer:

This is (more or less) a story related to me by a friend a few months ago. He's ok now, if that helps. Not sure if it's really all that creepy…but it's weird as all hell.

I was on the roof about two weeks ago, with the full intention of ending my life. My girlfriend of three years had broken up with me, after cheating on me for six months. What's more, she might have given me a STD from that little encounter. I was unemployed, and my meager savings was not going to cover much of anything next week. And to top it off, most of my friends were not in the area, and my immediate family was still rather pissed at me for my decision to start work rather then attempt an associates degree.

So, yes, I was not seeing a lot of good reasons to keep going. I sat on the ledge, swinging my feet in to space off the top of my fourteen floor apartment building, feeling that giddy, self-destructive tingle in my feet that I always get when I'm near a steep drop-off. It was cold, and I could see a few cars slipping along the dark streets…oddly, I worried for a second I would hit one on the way down, and thereby go from tragic suicide to an asshole. I was laughing at how dumb that was to worry about when I heard the guy behind me say “The hell you doing?”

I whipped around, kind of wobbling for a second, and saw some big guy in a blue suit smoking a cigarette. He had dark hair, was really pale…I hadn't seen him on the way up, and didn't really remember hearing the door open or shut…then again, my mind was kinda elsewhere. He gestured to me, saying “you gonna jump or something?”

“uh…I mean…yeah, I guess. Are…you like a cop or something?” I felt stupid asking, but he had that weird aura of authority I always associate with cops. That's all I needed, to get arrested.

He kinda chuckled, taking a deep drag. “Naw, just up for the view. Got nobody to live for, nothing to stick around for?”

I sighed, and gave him a nutshell of what was going on. It felt somewhat good to tell someone, but at the same time it made me feel like a even bigger loser.

He laughed at me. More of a chuckle, but still, it seemed kinda misplaced for the situation. He lit a new cigarette off his old one, and nodded at me.

“Ok kiddo, that's pretty bad…but let me make you a deal. You go ahead and jump, and you'll get loose of all this. However, as soon as I finish my smoke, I'm going to go downstairs and wait for you to hit. Before anyone else gets there, I'm going to steal your wallet, and I'm going to use your driver's license to look up who you are. I'm going to hack in to your social networking stuff, and find everyone who you have loved or has ever loved you, and I'm going to hurt them for a while, then kill them.”

I just stared, somehow positive I'd just hallucinated that somehow. I didn't even speak, just stared at this psycho.

“I'm going to kidnap some, and torture them out in the woods for hours before I gut them and leave them for the wolves. I'm going to shoot others in their cars, letting them roll on in the wreckage as they try to figure out why their lungs won't expand anymore. I will butcher loved ones, class mates, every friend you've known.” He didn't even sound excited while he said this, like he was telling me the time.

“W-what the fuck is wrong with you? You can't….you can't do that, you fucking psycho!” I was shaking, and not at ALL from the cold. This guy…I mean, I didn't know him from anyone, it was possible…It was insane, but this guy had a…weird aura around him. As I watched him, I didn't for one second think he was telling a lie.

“The hell do you care? You're going to be dead. You're opting out of giving a shit about the world, you don't get to bitch about what happens after you leave.” He just kept staring at me with this blank expression.

I freaked out. I jumped back on the roof and just ran like hell for my apartment. I called the cops, saying some guy had been on the roof, threatened my life. When they showed up, he was long gone. Nobody in the apartment knew him, I'd never seen him before or since. I ended up not getting a STD and managed to find a (shitty) job at the local grocery store, but I did have to move to a much smaller apartment. Still not really over my girlfriend, but it will take time.

I still think about that night, now and then. It was just so incredibly odd, I don't think I'll ever really forget it. I have no idea if the guy was bullshitting, but I really don't think he was. It looks so dumb on paper, but if you could have seen him…heard him…you wouldn't really question it either. How sick of a person do you have to be, to save them from suicide by threatening them with something so horrible they don't dare leave the world unsupervised. Every time I see a unsolved, horrific murder on the news, I wonder.

People ask me what I think happened that night. I tell them I think the devil saved my life.

Light-Dependent Reactions

Excerpts from Interview Log E-46693-12
October 4, 2014 12:57 PM

Interviewer: Geoff C. Taggart, [DATA REDACTED]
Subject: Dr. Chelsea Elliott, researcher (plant specialist)

Taggart: Good afternoon, Dr. Elliott. Please close the door.

(Silence.)

Elliott: Um. Excuse me, but have we met?

Taggart: Please close the door. *(Pause. Elliott closes the door.)* Thank you. Do have a seat. I'm Geoff Taggart, from Reclassification.

Elliott: Reclass? I'm sorry, I don't —

Taggart: Doctor, you've been briefed on us.

Elliott: Well, yes, but no one here is anomalous. Erin, Thom, and I all cleared quarantine months ago.

Taggart: And you must know why we think that assessment was premature.

(Silence.)

You're not eating, Doctor. The usual post-quarantine surveillance showed us that. Those sunlamps you're buying, too — seasonal-affective disorder doesn't come on that fast. We're not sure how the poisoning incidents relate, though. I was hoping you could clear that up for us.

Elliott: What makes you think I'd —

Taggart: I'm authorized to waive the usual disciplinary actions for failure to report, provided you come clean now.

(Silence.)

Elliott: All right. *(smiles ruefully)* I suppose I don't exactly have a choice, at this stage.

Taggart: Thank you. I understand this all began with the events of **`Incident E-31181-A`**, in February of last year?

Elliott: Yes. I was consulting for [MTF] Theta-Four at the time. Three of us — Erin Moynahan, Thom Saint-Jacques, and I — had been detached to investigate a suspected new anomaly. Everything went fine until I tried to use my hand lens…

"Geiger, check… chem sweep, check… humes, check." Agent Erin Moynahan came to the end of her list and nodded across to her teammates. "I'm calling it stable. We're good to go in."

Chelsea Elliott grinned and bounced a little on the toes of her boots. "Great! Thom, you ready?"

The third member of their little team nodded back at her. *"Après-vous."*

Together, they struck out into the abandoned and echoing warehouse. Elliott's eyes darted over the floor as they walked, eager for detail. Weathered concrete was none of their specialty; nor was architecture, though they *had* noticed the huge skylight running the length of the peaked ceiling. The rare February sunshine took on a subtle cast as it poured through, some hint of color Elliott couldn't identify. She'd ask about it later.

Now, she homed straight in on the site they'd tagged from the door — a weary scruff of vegetation, struggling up out of the cracked

concrete. It wasn't much, floristically speaking: a few goldenrod stems, some ragged tufts of Kentucky bluegrass, and a dried-up stick that had probably been a silver-maple sapling for two or three years before it kicked the bucket. None of it would've warranted a second glance, if it hadn't been for the weird sheen on the leaves.

She dropped to one knee beside the goldenrods, pulling on a pair of rubber gloves. Not only were they alive and vigorous in the winter chill, they were *blue* in ways Chelsea's understanding of *Solidago* biochemistry couldn't account for. When she reached out to examine one of the leaves, it tilted against the sunlight and shimmered in oily seafoam-green.

Chelsea grinned and bent closer. "Oh, this is *weird."* She pulled out her hand lens, plucking a leaf from the goldenrod and lifting it close to see —

Through the lens, nothing but a blaze of lethal light.

> **Elliott:** I'm told I was conscious most of the way to Medical, but I don't actually remember much.

"Holy shit! *What — Backup!"* The crackle of a radio. *"Get Nu-Thirty in here* now! *We have a new anomaly, and Elliott's down —"*

She was on fire, the alien sun searing through her face, nothing left in her eyes but unnameable colors —

"— I've got her, just move —"

— the world was a rock tumbler, spinning, hurling her against a sky full of stone — it tasted like ice olives acid — a hook in her belly, pulling her inside-out —

"— it's moving! Jensen, get the — Jensen! *Fuck! Someone get the —"*

— a boulder on her chest and more falling on her, blow after blow, why did they — what did she do? —

"— get us out of here! — seizing again — think they're growing —"

— just make it *stop* —

"— Just go!"

Taggart: And when did you wake completely?

Elliott: They kept me in an induced coma for two weeks at Medical, dealing with the kidney failure. I didn't wake up until they stopped the sedation.

Taggart: And that was when you became aware of your condition?

Elliott: Yeah. E-31181 really did a number on me.

When she finally woke, they assured her that she would be fine. The light from that anomalous sun-thing had done some damage, but she would recover. They'd taken care of the sunburn while she was under. Her vision was mostly back, and if the colors were still dizzyingly strange, that would clear up too. The seizures hadn't done her any serious harm, and her kidneys were well on the way back to full function. Now, the skin, that might take a little longer to fade…

She lay in the hospital bed, staring at her hands — too-smooth skin the color of pin-cherry bark, mottled with salamander spots in rich teal and feathered all over with tiny bits of chaff like the scales on a sword fern's fiddlehead — and swallowed the laughter trying to claw its way out of her throat.

Before she could even sit up, she was asking for her hand lens back.

Taggart: So your first reaction was curiosity.

Elliott: My *first* reaction was "if I start laughing now, I'm never going to stop."

Taggart: Oh?

Elliott: It was either get curious or break down entirely.

Taggart: I see. We have the records from your actual quarantine period, of course… After you were released, how long did it take you to discover the anomaly?

Elliott: Just a few days.

Eight weeks.

Eight weeks of quarantine, made bearable only by curiosity, a huge e-book library, and a long string of notebooks. Eight weeks of trying to explore her own altered biology and coming up short, again and again, against the limits of the quarantine itself; eight weeks of frustration and never being able to compare notes with her doctors; eight weeks of explaining to herself, over and over again, why the restrictions were necessary. Eight weeks of watching and waiting, half-afraid she wouldn't recover at all, even if Thom and Erin *were* fine now. Eight weeks of terrible food, though at least she was never actually hungry, what with her leafy additions providing most of her calorie needs. When her skin finally started turning pink again and shedding its little leaflets, six and a half weeks in, she'd wanted to faint with relief.

She'd gone into quarantine in the dead of winter; she came out in early spring. After eight weeks of bare walls and fluorescent light, walking in shirtsleeves under the April sun made her absolutely giddy. There were a lot of loose ends to sort out at home, but she still took the first possible opportunity for a walk in the woods. She still had a lot of phone calls to make, but she could walk and talk at the same time.

Her cell phone rang as she slipped through the woodlot understory, dodging bare branches. "Hi, Blaire? — Yeah, hi! Good, I'm good! I'm *home*. — Yeah, all back to normal. They kept me a few extra days to make sure. How've *you* been?"

She stepped carefully around a patch of cutleaf toothwort. "Oh,

good. How's Pip doing? Has she given you any trouble?" Blaire usually took in Chelsea's cat, Pip, when the botanist traveled in summer; it didn't usually last for two months straight, though.

At her friend's answer, Chelsea let out a relieved sigh. "Oh, good. Good. Can I come and pick her up when you get home today? I — Yeah. Thanks so much."

They chatted for a few minutes longer, Chelsea meanwhile moving through the burgeoning woods. The elms had gone to seed already, but she greeted the bloodroot and rue-anemone by name. Something inside her began to settle quietly back into place.

"Yeah, I missed you too." She grinned into the phone, knowing Blaire would hear it in her voice. "Lunch Thursday? — Sounds great. — See you soon!"

They hung up. She paused by a maple sapling, running careful fingers over the soft new leaves nosing out of their buds, before dialing the next number.

"Hey, Jorge, how've you been?" Mayapples on the hillside.

"Sophia! Hi! I owe you a danish." Sharp-lobed hepatica among the rocks.

"Kyle? Yeah, I'm back." A grove full of speckled trout-lilies.

By the time she'd finished her calls, she was brimming with the simple, heady joys of spring and freedom. There was more to do back at home, but she could spare a little longer, couldn't she?

There — a patch of lesser-celandine, bathed in sunlight. She stretched out on the soft, glossy leaves. Just half an hour, just to bask…

* * *

She stirred, blinking sleepily. How long had it been? The sun was still warm on her face, and she lifted a hand to shade her drowsy eyes; with the other, she felt beside her for her bag.

Under her searching fingers, the leaves went *crunch.*

She sat up, looked around, and *stared.* The ground around and under her, a meter or more out from where she'd lain, was coated in hoarfrost — a hair-thin coat of sparkling white crystals, impossibly failing to melt in the balmy air. The stuff even clung to her bare arms. It was only slightly cool to the touch, no different from the grass itself, and it crunched between her fingers like fine sand.

Her eyes narrowed. Not sand. A memory surfaced: baking Christmas cookies, rolling little balls of dough in cinnamon and…

"Sugar," she murmured.

The crystal shape was right, from what she could see through her hand lens. It dissolved almost instantly in a drop of water from the bottle in her purse, and the residue left her fingers faintly sticky. No scent… Hesitantly, she put a single grain on the tip of her tongue.

"…Definitely sugar."

She looked down at the leaves, all around, up at the sky. Her first real sunshine of the year, just after she'd *stopped* photosynthesizing, and suddenly there was sugar all over the place?

Despite the balmy April air, she shivered.

Taggart: That sounds conspicuous. I'd expect surveillance to have showed it if you were literally sugar-coating every chair you sat in.

Elliott: Well, it wasn't being deposited very fast — even in direct sunlight, it took a good twenty minutes to build up to anything noticeable. And it's light-dependent, of course, so I can stop most of it just by wearing long sleeves and turtlenecks. Still, I didn't want to bring even that into a lab. Contaminate every sample in the fridge, just by standing near it… *(snorts)* I might have had to turn myself in right then, if I hadn't figured out how to control it.

Taggart: And how do you do that?

Elliott: Oh, um… *(Pause.)*

I… *(Pause.)* You just… *(Pause.)*

… I actually have no idea how to describe it. The process. Technique. Thing. *(gestures vaguely)* I'd probably have to study meditation, just for the vocabulary. Or reread *Dune.* All I can really say is that I learned to keep it in.

Taggart: I see.

Elliott: Soon after that, I realized I didn't need to eat anymore. I'd dealt with that sort of thing during quarantine — you just don't get hungry, as long as you get enough light — and the experience was basically the same. No supernumerary scales this time, though. *(Absently:)* I still don't know what I'm using for chloroplasts.

Taggart: Was your fasting deliberate, then?

Elliott: *(spreads her hands)* Sometimes. Sometimes I'd just forget to eat. More often as summer came in. I took supplements in the beginning, to make up for what amounted to a diet of straight sugar.

Taggart: Why the past tense?

Elliott: Well… it's *not* just a diet of straight sugar.

Taggart: I see. *(pause)* Go on.

Elliott: *(takes a breath)* As it turns out, I can basically make any vascular-plant metabolite that I've had in my system. Skin contact, inhalation, ingestion, all fair game, and it doesn't take much. I'm on either a balanced vegetarian diet or a healthy photosynthate intake for a plant of about my mass, I'm not sure which.

Taggart: If I understand correctly —

Elliott: Yeah, if it comes from a plant, I can probably crank it out. Just get me a sample first.

Taggart: *(pauses)* Does that include aconite?

Elliott: That was how I learned I could do it in the first place.

"Oh, hey, the *Aconitum*'s flowering."

"Sorry, what?"

"The monkshood." Chelsea nodded towards the five-foot-tall potted plant that stretched a proud spike of hooded violet flowers towards the peak of the greenhouse roof. The young man at her heels showed no sign of recognition. "Wolfsbane? Lovely plant, neat history and chemistry, not too hard to grow. Toxic as all get-out, though."

Her visitor — Niels — blinked. "And you keep it out here? No containment?"

"It's not really dangerous unless you eat it, and anyone who comes through here has enough sense not to do *that."* Chelsea smirked, ruffling one hand through the starburst leaves. "Well, that or get an awful lot of the sap on your skin. I got a few big drops on my hands once — gave me heart palpitations for an hour, but that was it."

"Only heart palpitations?" Niels boggled at her.

"It's not as bad as it sounds."

"Sounds unpleasant enough." He eyed the plant with mistrust. "What's it like if you actually do eat it?"

"Nausea at first, plus the heart palpitations." Chelsea straightened up cheerfully. "Burning in the abdomen. Then tingly numbness, weakness, and worse arrhythmias. Ends in paralysis and death, if you let it get that far."

"Sounds nasty."

"Eh, it's just self-defense." It was still making her stomach roil a little. Odd. Toxicology didn't usually bother her, not in the abstract. "Besides, anything's useful in the right context. This one's only in here because Nathan's group is using it in an antidote. We think it'll be half the key to **`CCR syndrome`**." Pseudaconitine was the active ingredient, she remembered — not a big molecule, but it had an intriguingly multi-ringed structure. She could almost picture how the plant would synthesize it…

Her stomach turned again, and she swallowed. *I hope that's not the pasta.* "Anyway, the colony I wanted you to see is over here."

They struck back out across the greenhouse, weaving between tables full of carefully-labeled experimental flats. They'd almost found their destination when Chelsea's stomach spasmed outright: she doubled up halfway and reflexively clapped a hand to her mouth.

"Whoa! Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I should —" Again. She swallowed back the acid, which only set off a fiery complaint in her belly. "Maybe not. I'm never letting Kyle choose lunch again." *This almost feels like —*

Nausea. Burning in the abdomen. She stopped dead, just in time to feel her heart skip a beat.

"Oh God." She turned back the way they'd come, one arm wrapped around her middle. "How is this even — *augh!"*

Niels was on the phone to Medical before her knees hit the floor.

Elliott: I'd given myself a sublethal dose, it turned out, but only just. Lucky for me, everyone assumed I'd actually handled [Researcher] Nathan [Fisk]'s *Aconitum* and somehow poisoned myself that way.

Taggart: If the only plant involved hadn't been so carefully monitored, we might have thought the same

thing.

Elliott: It's a little insulting, really. I know full well how to handle these things safely.

Taggart: So you'd rather be insulted than contained.

Elliott: *(pauses)* Wouldn't you?

Taggart: Hmm. *(pages through a dossier)*

(Silence.)

I believe that will be all, then, Dr. Elliott. *(begins putting papers back in briefcase)* Unless there's any other information you'd like to volunteer? Any dimensions to your anomaly that we haven't covered?

Elliott: Not that I'm aware of. Yet. I suppose I'll keep you posted. *(pauses)* May I… well, I know it's not the usual practice, but perhaps as a final professional courtesy…

Taggart: Yes?

Elliott: May I see my proposed containment procedures?

Taggart: *(pauses, surprised)* You're not going into containment, Doctor.

Elliott: What?

Taggart: Your condition is classified 5/2108/E-46693. You technically aren't cleared to know about any of it, but this is something of an unusual case. Since you don't appear to be an immediate danger to yourself or others, my orders are to take your deposition and let you continue your work. You *aren't* a danger to yourself or others, are you?

Elliott: Well, no, not with the metabolites under control — but I, I don't understand.

Taggart: You're a valued Foundation researcher, Dr. Elliott —

Elliott: That's not —

Taggart: — and in *this particular case,* the Council has decided not to remove you from your position unless and until it becomes necessary. I'll add this interview to the information on review, and you'll be notified of their conclusion in due time. In the meantime, please, carry on.

Do remember that this entire phenomenon is classified, though. You're not to discuss it with anyone, and if you must refer to it at all, use its designation. E-46693.

Elliott: Standard opsec, yes — but —

Taggart: Try to eat more, too. Some of your colleagues are getting concerned, and that's a security risk. *(closes briefcase, stands)* I'll schedule another meeting with you once the Council has decided what to do with your case.

Elliott: Of course —

Taggart: Thank you for your time, Doctor. Enjoy the rest of your day.

END LOG

March 31st, 2015
1:04 PM

Chelsea Elliott finishes reading and looks up, numb with dread, at the man called Taggart. "Yes, I remember," she manages.

"Good." His calm smile doesn't so much as flicker. She'd forgotten just how disconcerting the man can be. "Is there anything you would like to add? Anything that's arisen in the meantime?"

She shakes her head. "It hasn't — hasn't much changed. I've been suppressing it, mostly."

"Hmm. Is that perfume you're wearing, then?"

Damn his nose. She closes her eyes. "*Santalum spicatum* and *Rosa damascena*, wood and flower volatiles respectively." Distantly she marvels at how level her voice still is. "My colleagues have quite enjoyed my new essential-oil hobby. No one — no one's had any reason to think I'm not distilling them at home. Besides, spending photosynthate this way leaves me hungry enough to eat."

The silence stretches out, pulling Chelsea's nerves with it. She shifts in her seat and sets the interview log down, too delicately, on the edge of her desk. (It's the wrong side of her desk again. This man must *enjoy* displacing her to her own visitor's chair.) Finally she can't hold her tongue any longer: "Have they decided, then?"

He gives a noncommittal hum, twirling the delicate stem of her string-of-pearls vine around his forefinger. "You could say that. Ultimately, though, it'll be your choice."

Her flash of irritable skepticism surprises her, but she manages to restrain the snort. "My choice?" she asks, forcing her tone to stay polite. "What are my options, exactly?"

The corner of his mouth ticks upward. "On the one hand, you may elect to go into containment. Your conditions will be humane, of course, but you'll be an SCP object, designated and treated accordingly."

A lead brick presses down on her lungs. She's seen fragments of the containment procedures they'd apply. Imprisoned for life, never again seeing the sun — she can't. She *can't.*

"Or?" She forces it out on a whisper.

Instead of replying immediately, he pushes a neatly-bound dossier across the desk towards her. She opens it and begins to read.

"Have a look. Command is prepared to retain you in your current position, on condition that you accept reassignment to this project."

This is…

This is insane. This is brilliant. She'd have given her right arm to be part of this, once upon a time.

This is no choice at all.

She looks up at him over the dossier and nods. "I'll do it."

His smile deepens, and he extends a steady hand for her to shake. "We were hoping you'd say that.

"Welcome to **MTF Alpha-Nine**."

...Like a Russian Racehorse

Agent Strelnikov sat in his office, reading the latest reports on the recent round of tests on SCP-682. Nothing unusual. A few (actually, not so few) D-Class deaths, and a near-escape by that damned lizard.

Typical.

As he finished reading the section on the proposed use of other Keter SCP's when he heard a single *THUD* on his door. It was too hard to be a knock, but too light to be an attempt at entry. If nobody wanted to see him, and nobody was trying to kill him, what was it?

As usual, he answered the door with a loaded Makarov. Nobody stood outside the threshold. But there *was* a note stuck to his door by a small length of duct tape. Raising an eyebrow, he took the single sheet of 8.5" x 11" paper.

What he read made his eyes go wide. Wide with a burning, intense hatred, easily enough to scare even the most threatening SCP.

Dear Agent Strelnikov: Exactly one mile north from the site 19 entrance is a cache of exactly 144 bottles of Rodnik Gold Vodka. In case you don't know (which I highly doubt), this is some of the most expensive, authentic Russian Vodka on Earth. Do not use a vehicle to get to it. Do not use an SCP to get to it. I'm watching. You MUST get there on foot. If you DO violate these rules, I will detonate the entire cache using ten whole pounds of C4. Oh, and there's a time limit: 4 minutes from the ***very second*** *you set foot outside of this facility… or KABOOM. No vodka for you. Happy April Fool's day.*

Wasting not a second, he snatched his Soviet-era military uniform hat, placed it atop his head, and raced to the main entrance of site 19. He knew that those in Olympic-athlete condition could run a 4-minute mile, and while he was certainly in great shape, he was no olympic athlete. But, knowing what was at stake… he ran as a man

on some abominable mixture between cocaine and meth.

Rushing straight through the exit's security checkpoint, he drew a small amount of fire, but was sprinting at such speeds, that the guards barely had time to aim. He burst out of the site, the image of a 4-minute countdown glaring in his mind.

tick-toc

He dashed through the area, going in a nearly impossible straight line. A straight line north.

tick-toc

Two minutes, twenty-eight seconds. He felt it. He pressed on.

tic-toc

One minute, four seconds. He felt his legs beginning to succumb to the pain of lactic acid production from the lack of oxygen.

But the prize was in sight. A crate with the word 'RODNIK' emblazoned on the side. On top was a relatively small object with a timer on it.

tic-toc

Sixteen seconds. Only a 120-foot sprint lay between him and his prize.

He was going to make it! He was going to-

Boom.

"No." thought the man.

"No! I followed the rules of bullshit! Son of bitch, what did I do wrong?"

He began to sob…

"What… did… I… do… ***WRONG!?!?***"

Then, Dmitri Arkadeyevich Strelnikov fell headlong, unconscious from the massive effort of his mad dash.

Two figures watched from a distance through a pair of high-powered spotting scopes.

"You have done… well enough." said the first, in a deep, purposefully strained voice.

"I got the job done *right*." said the other, a hooded man, a hint of anger in his voice. "Don't tell me that like it didn't go as planned."

"You shouldn't speak to your superiors that way. It could get you terminated."

"That's bullshit, and you know it. As strict as Foundation regulations are, I refuse to accept that even the lowest non-D-class personnel are *that* expendable."

"Perhaps you're right… perhaps you aren't. Either way, we have the results we needed to see. Strelnikov can be easily manipulated into acts of greater-than-normal feats of human physical prowess with the promise of valuable alcohol."

There was a short pause.

"…particularly vodka."

"I don't understand why you needed an experiment to know any of this. It's pretty much Foundation-wide knowledge."

"Perhaps. But did you *really* think that he could do this? A mile in under four minutes is nearing super-human."

"…to tell you the truth? No. Now I have one question for you."

"Shoot."

"…why did you detonate the cache before he got to it?"

"It was empty. He would have died of pure disappointment, most

likely, if he found he put in that much effort for nothing but an empty crate. He's probably extremely disappointed as is, but if he knew there was nothing in the first place…"

"You O5's are sick bastards."

"It's pretty much a pre-requisite for the job."

The hooded man began to walk away.

"Don't forget…" called the O5, "…speaking of this to anyone other than an O5 is grounds for termination."

The hooded man simply got into a black car, and drove away.

The O5 smiled, and walked over to a seemingly-innocuous boulder.

"I'm alone.", the now-female voice called. The rock shimmered, and disappeared, the holographic projecting device recognizing the shut-off command. In its place was a crate marked 'RODNIK'.

"Ah, yes." cooed the O5. "And now, for some time to myself, alone with my ill-gotten gains. They don't pay us enough for this damn job…" she complained, using a crowbar to pry the top of the crate open. "We're administers for one of the most powerful shadow-organizations to ever exist, and what do we get paid? A measly-"

"You are not alone." came a rough, thickly-accented voice. "You are *dead*."

That O5 never reported in to the Foundation the next day.

Nor the next day. Nor the next day. Or even the day after that. In fact, she was never heard from again.

After a month of searching, the other O5's decided that the Foundation's resources were best spent elsewhere. A new O5 was chosen, and things resumed, more or less, as usual.

Nobody asked Agent Strelnikov where he got the massive crate of Vodka that day.

Like Clockwork

“So how do we do this?” Harken asked, stubbing a cigarette into the growing pile on the console ashtray.

Kramer looked around inside the car that had been their mobile home the last few weeks. Not overly flashy to begin with, the interior been rendered a wreck by Harken's chain smoking, snacking, and general disregard for property. Perfect camouflage yes, but even with her olfactory senses dialed all the way down, it still stank of smoke, sweat and nervous tension.

“You still in there, cupcake?” he asked, tapping on her nose. Almost before he'd touched her, five scalpel-sharp blades sprung from her thin fingers, the lethal hand poised a hair's breadth from Harken's eyes. He pulled his hand back with a smirk, more amused then afraid. “At least you're still with us. So how are we doing this?”

She ignored him, turning to look at the “Open Hands Outreach Center” across the street. A combined thrift store and community outreach center, it was also a cover for one of the largest Church of The Broken God communities in the midwest, with an extensive underground network of rooms and tunnels stretching far and deep. She absently cycled to infrared, watching the vague heat-ghosts wander through the building.

"We are not doing anything. You are supporting.”

“Oh to hell with that, you can't smash up a church all by-”

“YOU can't hit the broad side of a barn with a shotgun, and you have all the physical combat skills of toast.”

He huffed, throwing up his hands. It was cheap, childish, and absolutely true.

“There's a vent beside the air conditioner that leads to the main

chamber. I can dislocate my ribs, arms and legs, and slip down almost on top of them." She smiled with predatory satisfaction.

He cringed, looking at her sidelong. "Jesus, do it the hard way, why don't you?"

"It's the quickest way in. I can't just crash the front door, and waiting for the bishop to come out and wander into a bullet could take weeks. Quick in, quick out, no time for anyone to really realize we're here… it's sneaky. I thought you'd be pleased." She grinned at him, radiating the sweetness of a cat with a bloody muzzle.

Harken stared at her, eyes half-lidded, mouth a grim line. "You're full of shit, you know that, right?"

"My, what ever do you mean, Agent Harken?" Kramer was practically purring now, her voice tinged with a nearly seductive anticipation that had nothing to do with sex.

"You just want to watch everyone run in terror."

She smiled, stepping out of the car with a wink. "See you after work, sweety," she giggled, winking a eye cycling between green, yellow and white, striding across the street with a exaggerated wiggle of her thin hips.

Harken smouldered in impotent, frustrated fury, managing to light two cigarettes backwards before letting it go.

The brothers walked down the hall slowly, heads bowed, the dull beat of the machinery deep below them like the warm pulse of a mother's heart. The two men stepped in time to the throb, letting it fill their Broken bodies, the richness of the Silent Voice tugging deep inside. Their reverie was so deep, so profound, they didn't hear the wall grate open, the soft sound of scraping flesh as it oozed from the confined space.

Brother Cam looked up at a sudden noise, his meditation broken by what sounded like a…a chirp, or a squeal. He looked, then suddenly turned more, searching, trying to find Brother Han. He'd been right

there, walking beside him. Brother Cam heard another noise, like a soft tap, and he leaned in to the semi-dark hall, trying to place the sound.

A thick metal hook tore his skull open like a rusty can.

The bishop Bronzon could feel the devotion like a wind on his face. The sanctuary was filled, every body singing in time to the Great Machine well below them. Since the hated heretics had been silenced, the Church had swollen with faith, initiates, and the most sacred of relics, shards of The Broken itself. He raised his face to the sooty ceiling, lifting his own voice with the throng, feeling the touch of The Broken firmly, for the first time in years.

He watched the steam and smoke rise from the vents in the floor, the very Breath of God itself, the taste as hot and coppery as blood. Several brothers and sisters had torn open their robes, exposing their flesh to the fumes, letting them soak inside and out. Others had already swooned, shivering in ecstacy at the feel of the heavy hand of The Broken on their soul. Bronzon felt a thrill of excitement coursing through his body, both from admiration of their burgeoning faith and the more earthly admiration of their young, supple flesh.

He was still admiring them when the screaming started.

It started from the back, a sudden flurry of activity, spreading like a wave of panic. Soon everyone had recoiled from the door, some still chanting mindlessly, carried by the crush of humanity.

A demon stood in the doorway. The jaws hung wide, a mass of jagged death lining them. One hand ended in a spray of glistening points, the other in a smooth, hellish hook. The eyes crackled with a green glow, mouth frozen in a too-wide grin. It glistened with blood like a second skin.

Bronzon froze for a moment, paralyzed by fear, replaying every sin, every indulgence he'd taken. He looked in to those glowing eyes, and knew for one shining second, with all that he was, that his time had come. He broke free almost instantly, hitting the button below the podium to summon security and unlocking the hidden panic

room behind the wall hanging.

Even in those few seconds, people had started dying. The demon slashed and carved like a living meat grinder, limbs and organs falling like leaves to the ground. Brave, strong men, Crusaders in training, threw their fellows before them to spare themselves a few more seconds, the whole mass pushing away like panicked cattle. Really, that's what they were, in the end. The loss would hurt for a time… but cattle could always be replaced.

Bronzon shook his head sadly, turning away from the carnage. It was only when he tried to open the panic room, and found it locked, that he felt that fear again, bright and sweet, like biting on a rotten tooth.

The screaming had died down, just a few wheezing, bubbling hisses, the odd flapping or brushing sound as some ruined limb tried to drag its dying body away. Bronzon was almost physically unable to turn around, the weight of what he knew was behind him freezing his muscles. He finally did, with great effort, keeping his eyes well away from the floor, still wincing at the sprays of blood and gore coating the walls.

The demon stood a few feet away, barely breathing heavy. Her eyes were wide and glistening, blood running around them like tears.

“W… who sent you? I deserve that much,” he stammered.

She tilted her head like a bird of prey, staring for a few seconds. “The Foundation. We know about your friends. What you did. What you want to do.”

He sighed, nodding his head, absently noting the banging against the locked chapel door… security. Finally arrived to help. Far too late to help.

He held his arms open, closing his eyes. “Send me on to The Broken. My faith may have waned, but I know The Broken waits to make me whole.”

“You talk like I'm about to kill you, bishop. You are mistaken. I have

no intention of making you a martyr. My intention is to make you a heretic."

His eyes snapped open, a dark glimmer of idea emerging from a nightmare shadow. “No… no, you can't… ”

“Let me tell you what will happen. The security men will break in. They will find this room filled with the dead. They will find the room covered in blasphemous symbols. And they will find you, one of the priests of your mechanical God…"

"No! You can't!" Bronzon repeated.

"… covered in the blood of the faithful… having sacrificed… having slaughtered… the followers of The Broken for the glory of The Grey.”

He hisses, teeth bared at the very mention of that twisted sect's “god”.

“Blasphemy! They would never…”

“Oh, but they will believe… it says so right here, on this note that will be left on the podium, detailing the ritual you were performing. Too bad you had to remove your own hands, tongue and eyes as part of the ritual… I'm sure the other faithful would love to interrogate you before your body is torn to pieces and burned, excommunicated from your mechanical god.” She smiled wider, teeth chattering in excitement as she raised her slaughtering hands. “Oh well.”

The last sound his tongue made was a whimper, his last sight her dripping, blood-soaked hair.

The sun was going down when she stepped out from the alley, the outreach center closed up and dark nearly three hours before their normal closing. Agent Kramer looked a little rumpled, perhaps a bit dirty even, but still very presentable. She refused to feel her soreness, or reflect on the hard scrubbing she'd had to do after a short break-in at a nearby home. Whoever lived there would have a nasty shock when they went to use the tub…hopefully they'd just

assume it was some kind of plumbing back-up.

Agent Harken sat in the driver's seat, a small hill of cigarette butts on the street next to the car door, topped with three or four empty crumpled packets. He sat up, a red-tinged twist of tissue paper jutting from one nostril, as he saw Kramer crossing the street. Kramer laughed, leaning into the open window, brushing at a small dried patch of blood on her hand, one of many she'd probably missed.

“The hell happened to you?”

“I fell asleep in the back. Some kid tried to take our stereo. I don't know who was more surprised, him or me.”

“Wow.”

He shook his head, tossing the tissue in to the road as she walked around the car. “Hey, don't worry about me, the hell happened in there?”

“Don't worry about it.”

“Can you think of any reason why I saw two guys come out of the building throwing up?”

“No.”

Harken sighed, starting the car and pulling out, rolling slow as the last gasp of sun dipped out of sight. “So, everything went ok?”

“Yes," Kramer said, her face settled back into its usual expressionless mask. "Like clockwork.”

...Like Clockwork

« I'll Try Living Like This | Not everything that goes around comes back around, you know. »
Hub

This is a story with no endings. There is no closure, nor resolution. It is only a story of evolution and expectations. As the author grows, as the characters grow, as the readership grows, so too does the story and its lasting meaning.

In every conceivable way, that is the best ending possible.

Year 2,999,765

Talloran dragged their dissected body across the world, finding bits and pieces that were torn off after they had broken everything. Once again, it was a deafening nothing, with only the parts of them in this space. It was to be expected. By this point, nothing was worse than something. At least here, they had some company; a burnt left pinky here, a loose nose there, a fragile rib somewhere else… really, each of the body parts more of an actual being than Talloran could claim to be now. Nah. They earned the right to be a human being by this point.

Limb by limb and bone by bone, James Ari Talloran clumsily sewed it all back together, with nothing more to work with than cloth and nails. They were a hideous, revolting mess, but they were at least taking form.

In the vast none, they found the final body part they needed lying a few hundred meters away from the right eye; their tongue. Of course.

It had taken days to work up the mental fortitude to put their tongue back in, and practice not to gag to death every time an attempt was made. After months, it was able to be accomplished. It was a skill that they had hoped was only applicable in this fucked up Hell, and not in the real world. As if anything like this could even work in the real world. That was one point in favor of the real world.

Exhausted, the shambling body that is Talloran collapsed, and dreamed. They dreamed of nothing, a different kind of nothing, one full of brightness and possibilities. It was a nice reprieve. There was just… so little to do, and yet it was a new form of torture. If they didn't do something, anything, this would be their true eternity. Damned to be bored to death. Isolated from everyone, even themself. That may be the worst of it all. Action had to be taken. So they decided to do the thing they were best at doing.

They waited. They waited and planned out every possibility, hoping they wouldn't need to keep being recollected. It was the only thing to hope for, now.

Year 2,999,766

But it had happened again.

Year 3,000,002

And again.

Year 3,000,044

And again.

Year 3,002,093

The joke was on That **`Fucker`**, though. Talloran could wait as long as needed be.

March 5, 2017

1:20 P.M.

Talloran and Yamada lounged outside, free from the frantic monotony of the day. Considering the hour-long break given to them, it was put to surprisingly effective use.

As the coin tumbled in the air, ascending to the peak of its arc, Talloran picked up an end of the tablecloth, Yamada watching with keen interest. The plates and mugs moved a minuscule amount, and Talloran caught their breath; it was off by a single millimeter. Yamada caught on and applied the pressure.

"If you mess this up, I won't pay for it." Talloran nodded in response. They knew exactly what to do. No sweat. As the coin reached its peak, they pulled the cloth out from underneath all the tableware, and everything shifted a few more millimeters. "Ooh."

The coin fell. They both held their breath now.

It bounced off of the edge of her mug.

"Oooooh."

It landed cleanly in her cool coffee.

"Ooooooooh! You did it!"

"Hah, I sure did. What side did the coin land on?" Yamada looked in the mug at their request, and frowned. They grinned. "Lemme see that ten." She sighed, moving to rummage through her purse, looking for enough ones to hand them.

"It's nice that you were this stoked about doing your trick! But I have to know; how did you do it?" She dramatically pulled the dollar bills out of her purse and waved them in Talloran's face, faux-hypnotizing him. "The audience must know how you pulled it off!" They snapped the money out of her hands and put it in their pockets, setting the cloth back up. It would be bad to just be lazy after all.

"A magician never reveals her secrets." The way they said it, it was clear how much they were enjoying spouting bullshit. "But yeah, like. It was a thing I was looking forward to all day so I'm glad I got to actually pull that one off. You don't mind if I —"

"Nah." She bit into the burger and stuck her other hand out. "What's your plans for the rest of the day? I want to organize a group dinner for the end of the month with our colleagues to start forming tighter relationships. Also to suck up a bit." Talloran gave her a cigarette and lighter. She put down the burger and nimbly twirled around her fingers and over her hands, her art form coming to life. It amused both of them, and for a simple parlor trick, she pulled it off with enough flair, even when doing it real casually.

"Well, I uh, am interviewing some new anomaly they just brought to our site. They haven't even given me the details yet. I just know it's Keter, they wouldn't have told me otherwise."

"Above your level, or they just didn't tell you?"

"Maybe both, who knows."

"So that's going to be your whole night? At least tell me you have tomorrow!" Yamada stops twirling the lighter around, opens the cap and lights it, letting the cigarette come to a halt as it dangles over the flame. "I really want to get this to happen, you know." The cigarette is lit, and Talloran takes it.

"Thanks."

"Of course." She goes back to eating her burger.

"I'll see if I can get tomorrow to work, but I can't promise that. If this project is as secret as it is, then I probably might be busy for a bit. Maybe tomorrow over lunch, as opposed to after work. Who do you wanna get dinner with anyhow?" They started to take a drag.

"There's Professor Hannah, as well as Researchers Gomez, Walker, and Kirby." Yamada sounded excited, but Talloran felt a bit more apprehensive. Senior staff always came off as intimidating, and they heard stories about Walker.

"I'll. Yeah. I'll see what I can do."

"Thank you! Can you do me a favor as well, when we finish?"

"Huh?"

"Can you head over to the Shark Punching Center and buy me more pillow cases? I won't have the time to go get some, since I work right after this until night." She did work some of the longest shifts of anyone at Site-118; to have the energy to plan group dinners was unreal.

"Sure, sure. I'll have time to do so after my interviews with the uh, whatever anomaly they want me to talk to. I'll get it done!"

"What a relief! Any extra you buy you can keep, girl." They both smiled. The wind flew softly above.

Year 3,002,111

All Talloran had to do now was simply will their body into their own control, and it'd come back. Simple as that. They finally were able to wrest control, be the master of their own limited domain. Still it was dark, and there was nothing but themself, so they did the only thing that could be done.

Lie and wait.

The first step to self-control was to reclaim their surroundings for their own. Most of the time in the nothing was spent in fear, a rotting mind slowly doubting itself. Now, with the limiter off, they could use the space to their advantage.

Their body healed.

They broke the floor below, glass embedded into their skin.

Perfect.

Talloran closed their eyes and waited, dreaming again. This is how

their years would be spent; practicing and drifting into the dreams within the dreams.

January 5, 2017

9:30 A.M.

"DRAVEN, SLOW DOWN!" The car was doing donuts in the parking lot at a ridiculous speed, and though Talloran found an intense thrill in it, Draven's antics involving thrills could get worrying, especially when they involved cars. "IT'S BEEN ALMOST TEN MINUTES AND I'M FEELING SICK!" Draven immediately slammed his foot on the brakes and almost sent the both of them flying.

"Shit. Sorry bun. I got uh, lost in the moment there."

"It's fine. You really do have to be more careful about that, but your face when you get excited is just —" *head kiss* "the —" *cheek kiss* "best!" *lip kiss* Draven returned the favor.

It was nice to get some time like this before Talloran had to move. Touch conveyed so much more to the both of them than words or even looks ever could.

"We have to go to the airport to drop you off in a few minutes don't we."

"Yeah."

"I just want you to stay. Maybe we can both move, even." Draven said it, knowing full well that it'd never be the case. Rarely does the Foundation relocate couples to the same site unless they work in the same fields. And Talloran always understood that they'd never be able to keep up with Draven's task force work.

Silence passed between them. They sat in the car for 20 minutes, a whole ten minutes longer than they should have stayed in the lot.

"Hey, bun."

"Yeah?"

"My father… he wrote this before he died. And he, he wanted me to give this to you in case we ever moved sites. I don't know what possessed him but. Yeah." Draven took out a manila envelope and placed it in Talloran's lap. "So, whenever you get on the plane, read it. I don't even know what's in it."

"An oddly specific thing for your dad to do. Alright hun, I will."

"I just don't want you to like, think he was weird for —"

"It's okay, I get it."

"I don't want you to think *I'm* weird for him being —"

"No, I understand. Tell me more on the way to the airport, we're almost 25 minutes past when we should have gone."

"Oh fuck!" Draven immediately yelled as he took his head off of Talloran's shoulders, turned on the car, and immediately rushed to the airport, going as fast as he (legally) could.

2:30 P.M.

Talloran allows themself to cry for the first time that day.

December 4, 2017

Sunset: quick question
Friend: ?
Sunset: unrelated to hearthstone
Sunset: if i write characters thats trans and gay is it bad form to kill one off
Friend: mmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm
Sunset: i understand the social context and issues behind it but
Friend: i dont think it counts as a bury your gays trope if like literally all of the other gays stay alive
Sunset: i mean i am writin a series about someone who will inevitably die, or at least seem to
Sunset: and theyre trans
Sunset: but i write a lot of other trans characters
Sunset: i feel guilty, i guess, but also it should be fine right
Sunset: did i fuck up though by even goin down this path
Friend: "Additionally, the problem isn't merely that gay characters are killed off: the problem is the tendency that gay characters are killed off in a story full of mostly straight characters, or when the characters are killed off because they are gay."
Friend: from tvtropes, the bible of trope
Sunset: i dont wanna be part of the problem
Friend: i don't think you're being part of the problem
Sunset: is it weirder if the character is an allegory for myself
Sunset: (i mean im a little fine now im just asking)
Friend: no, in fact its even more acceptable then imo
Friend: exploring thoughts n shit
Friend: im not sure if i can even explain it that well tbh.

Year 3,003,998

Talloran opens their eyes. The perfect sight has revealed itself to them.

It didn't even have time to speak before Talloran rose and brought a cord around the both of their necks. Intense pain shot up through Talloran; enough for twelve people. And it was worth every bit.

"Y-You, do you know what you are trying to —" The cord got pulled tighter, and they both gagged.

"S… F-Fuck you. I… shit. I'm, gah, I'm gonna end m-my life and erase you with me, you — ugh, you Fucker. T-The first time I tried, I only thought to end myself. But now I have you."

"Talloran, do you understand what you are doing?" It screamed in agony, attempting to wrest itself free from the grip.

"Yes, I absolutely do." Talloran pulled harder, and It stepped through the cord, its form sliced almost wholly and cleanly open. "You're just some… shitty part of me. I'm fueling your shit. Might as well kill two shits with one cord."

The scene shifted drastically, and The Being shambled over to them, pus and brain matter draining by the gallons. They were in Draven's Site-17 apartment, rotting and growing unidentifiable organisms. All the photographs on the wall were replaced with pictures of Talloran's parents, seagulls, and guns.

"I have had no intent to let myself die along with you… let alone you kill me. Your attempt didn't work. Do you understand yet, the position —"

"Do you understand this, that, fuck." Talloran leaned back against the moss and worked their way to the refrigerator, arriving after a minute of adrenaline keeping them up. When their legs gave way, they collapsed inside of the fridge which had long since stopped working. Food and drinks spilled everywhere, and their blood got on everything.

"I don't understand shit, my guy. If I did, I wouldn't have been in this position. Fuck. Dumbass." They rummaged through the fridge, or what was remaining of it, before finding years-old milk. "I'm not an action hero. I'm not that impressive. What am I, however many kilograms overweight? Who remembers anymore. I can barely think or see right now. The only thing I understand right now is how bad of a spot we both are right now."

Talloran chugged the carton, trying not to give into its taste. Rancid. Vile. Another thing they hoped not to have to worry about in the real world. The milk crawled its way down their throat, as a variety of sensations overtook every sense they had. It was wretched; it was a state they truly had never felt before in any point in time. Gradually, they could feel their body shutting down to protect itself. It was a new era.

“I — gggh,” they couldn’t even finish the sentence before turning over, clutching their body and crying. Oh, how they wish they could puke right now. They had nothing left to puke up. All they could do now was speak at a snail’s pace. “I — I, I can’t hear you. You self-absorbed Fucker. N-N-Nothing you have done or could do matches the… the shit I put myself through. Don’t you.. don’t you understand?” Talloran could only laugh and dry-heave as they reached for a disintegrated apple, taking the least tangible bite of it that one possibly still could by that point. They swallowed. Filthy.

"I can't, can't physically see it, but I know. I know what look you have on your face now. Yeah. That's right. The rules of this place shifted. I… I don't have to kill you. I just have to make my will stronger than yours." Talloran cackled, hacking up phlegm and blood. The body was continuing to shut down, and they never felt more powerful or more in control.

"W-What was the plan? To poison my mind of my boyfriend? O-Of my family? My dad was abusive b-but not as much as other parents my friends had. Of seagulls?" They coughed up a laugh. "Death was never something I was scared of. Not as long as it was by my own hands." The grin on their face expressed far beyond what a normal person's grin does, as they took the cord in their hands.

"See you in Hell." And they pulled and pulled and pulled. There was

mild resistance, but it didn't take long before the world shattered around them.

December 9, 2017

One of every 100 or more nights have dreams that aren't nightmares. Tonight was one of those nights.

Sunset awoke in a place of nothingness. Only stairs leading up or down. She headed down. Down is traditionally more scary, but up was always a more frightening prospect to her. You leave the Earth's safety, and unlike down, there's not even a theoretical limit to up. You have to trust that whatever is up won't hurt you. So she walked. She descended flight after flight, with no end in sight; only down to go.

Eventually, down started to become up, and she froze on a platform in the cardinal middle of it all when a dream guardian called to her.

"Jump."

You don't defy the dream guardians. So she jumped straight up, and fell down.

She landed on an escalator moving right and the same guardian spoke behind her again.

"I won't show you my face. You have problems looking at the guardians. Why do you feel lost?"

She didn't know how to respond.

"Is it your writing? Here, let's look." In a flash, she reached out and touched a screen parallel to where the escalator moved. She saw her characters, lined up on a conveyor belt to be tossed into their own special incinerator. "Is this what you expect to be? Don't worry. Things will work out if you simply let them. When you daydream again and forget about time around you, help will arrive if you're in need of it. I can assure you when you wake up, this nightmare of yours will cease to be one."

The guardian spoke more about… something. She didn't remember what it was. About her writing, it had to be. Guardians existed in and out of the dreamspace's internal logic; they simply kept it in order.

"Are you actually a guardian?"

"Do you doubt me?"

She looked back. Her eyes went blurry and she threw up.

Now she woke up. No puke on the bed (as usual).

It was the best sleep she had gotten in a long time.

March 5, 2017

9:43 P.M.

Talloran arrived at Cell-902 in the Keter wing. Four armed guards stood outside of it. Talloran swallowed. There weren't normally this many guards surrounding a cell, especially for Site-118, one of the more relaxed sites for containing Euclid and Keter objects.

"U-Uh, anything I can do for you? I was told that Researcher Walker would be informing me of —"

"Change of plans. We're here to provide you with backup." What a loaded statement. At least this guard was willing to speak. The

others remained stone-faced.

"Me?"

"These are the questions you'll be asking SCP-3999. You are only to introduce yourself on-record with your last name. Any deviations from these questions must be both minor and related to the other questions on said list. If at any point the anomaly acts, you will most likely not know. We will be on hand to provide extraction and question you about its abilities." The same guard handed Talloran the list of questions. "Mr. Walker and his crew will be watching from a close distance, but the anomaly will not answer questions unless directly interviewed." One of the other guards pressed a button, and the cell door unlocked. "You may step inside and begin the interview."

"W-Wait, what does it even look like?" No one responded. "I. Okay, fine. I'll do it. At least tell me how prompt you'll be able to respond if shit goes south."

"19 seconds in the most optimal circumstances, 47 in the worst."

That didn't help soothe their mind.

Interviewed: SCP-3999

Interviewer: Researcher James Ari Talloran

<Begin Log, 21.46.32>

Researcher Talloran: This is Researcher Talloran. I am here to do an introductory interview with SCP-3999. Hello, 3999.

SCP-3999: [SYSTEM ERROR: DATA CORRUPTED. PLEASE SEE A NETWORK ADMINISTRATOR FOR MORE DETAILS]

Talloran: When you were captured by Mobile Task Force Omega-8, you had just finished depositing the bodies of **[SYSTEM ERROR: DATA CORRUPTED.**

PLEASE SEE A NETWORK ADMINISTRATOR FOR MORE DETAILS]

SCP-3999: [SYSTEM ERROR: DATA CORRUPTED. PLEASE SEE A NETWORK ADMINISTRATOR FOR MORE DETAILS]

Talloran: Right. Is it also correct to state that you took the form of his mother as well?

SCP-3999: [SYSTEM ERROR: DATA CORRUPTED. PLEASE SEE A NETWORK ADMINISTRATOR FOR MORE DETAILS]

Talloran: …where did you come from again?

SCP-3999: [SYSTEM ERROR: DATA CORRUPTED. PLEASE SEE A NETWORK ADMINISTRATOR FOR MORE DETAILS]

SCP-3999: [SYSTEM ERROR: DATA CORRUPTED. PLEASE SEE A NETWORK ADMINISTRATOR FOR MORE DETAILS]

Talloran: But when you were found, what you had stated to the task force that you originated off the shore of California. Yet the location you give indicates Queens, New York. What accounts for this discrepancy?

SCP-3999: [SYSTEM ERROR: DATA CORRUPTED. PLEASE SEE A NETWORK ADMINISTRATOR FOR MORE DETAILS]

Talloran: Excuse me?

SCP-3999: [SYSTEM ERROR: DATA CORRUPTED. PLEASE SEE A NETWORK ADMINISTRATOR FOR MORE DETAILS]

Talloran: I know that it used to have concerts, yes, but —

SCP-3999: [SYSTEM ERROR: DATA CORRUPTED. PLEASE SEE A NETWORK ADMINISTRATOR FOR MORE DETAILS]

Talloran: Security, you're needed right —

SCP-3999: That won't be nessecary.

Talloran: What?

SCP-3999: Welcome.

Talloran: Oh, I see. I saw then and now at once. Your uh, your mindgames.

SCP-3999: You don't remember, do you? Anything I said in that interview.

Talloran: No, but I can guess enough of it. Why bring that up now anyway?

SCP-3999: I've been keeping track. It's the year 3,003,999. You put me here. I don't know why, but this is your world. You created your own space in mine. I'm done. All I wanted was to understand a bit more of you. But I couldn't.

Talloran: Right… right. This is, I guess… it. I will kill us both, and this terror ends. There's no more of any of it. No more me, no more you, and the Foundation and the world moves on. I just don't know why you wanted this to happen to me. All of this. You… you goddamned asshole. Why?

SCP-3999: Of all I have become a parasite to, you have… the most.

Talloran: The most what?

SCP-3999: Yourself.

Talloran: Please. Stop with this cryptic riddle shit. I'm so tired of this. We both know what will happen. That's why I brought us back to this cell. So just tell me. What do I have the most of?

SCP-3999: I already told you. It is the truth. You have the most of yourself. That was what I needed.

Talloran: …oh. So it's just like that voice said.

SCP-3999: You had enough to make yourself more… more of a thing than anyone else in the time I've roamed existence.

Talloran: Were you XK then? ZK?

SCP-3999: The Foundation's classifications don't mean much to me. All that matters to you is that I wanted to keep you around for a long time. Clearly, I underestimated you and you overestimated me.

Talloran: Yeah. I guess so.

SCP-3999: Do you understand now, Talloran? Where the end of this road lies? There's only one way to end this. I'd keep this going, but your will is stronger than anything I have.

Foreword: Researcher Talloran gets up from their chair and pushes the table aside, proceeding to wrap their hands around SCP-3999 and "choke" it. Talloran indicates signs of asphyxiation as well, indicating that they are able to feel the effects of the choking as well. After 50 seconds of struggling, well past the point where passing out would occur, Talloran closes their eyes and walks into the cell's wall, where Talloran and SCP-3999 exit and fall into the world's abyss. After another two minutes of this occurring, with neither party moving or changing, everything breaks.

James,

First you take up the heart of my boy, and now you move sites? Just like that!? Hah! Give me a break kid. Not even my friend, **the Devil himself**, could do such a cruel thing to his flings.

But no, you're too good. Too fucking good. Draven… he's been happier than I can remember ever since you showed up in his life. This Foundation shit was worth it if I got to see my boy love you. But if you're getting this, then you're clearly moving, and I don't know why but if it's your fault and you broke his heart, I'll possess 682 and get you in its stomach.

I'm too drunk to write much, and yet I'm writing this so carefully. Just know how much of a shit I give about you for me to do that. It's a little bit. When I'm dead, you should have been taking care of him, but now that you're moving, it's your responsibility more than ever. Don't let him fucking take care of you. Don't be a pussy, James. Sorry, and happy whatever day it is.

BK

December 15, 2017

10:19 P.M.

Alarms rang at 10:20 P.M. when a hole as wide as a containment cell and twice as deep as the height of one appeared out of nowhere at Site-118, with a barely-breathing body found at the bottom of it, clutching several pages of SCP Foundation documentation. It took medical staff seven minutes to get to them and hook them up to medical equipment; any longer and the body would have most likely been dead moments later.

One of the doctors on the scene was Hikari Yamada, the first responder. Pulling the body out of the hole with the help of staff members on the scene, it wasn't immediately evident who it was. Dirt and debris covered the face and body, and the amount of blood and wounds made them look like garbage. It wasn't until she put them on a stretcher, ran them to the Medical Wing, wiping the assorted mess off of their face, and further cleaned the body in preparation for emergency treatment that she came to the nauseating realization that it was Researcher James Ari Talloran, who had gone missing 285 days ago out of thin air.

10:47 P.M.

Draven Kondraki took an emergency flight to Site-118.

11:58 P.M.

> To: Wei Zhong (pcs.811s|gnohzw#pcs.811s|gnohzw)
> From: Maria Jones (pcs.asiar|60senojm#pcs.asiar|60senojm)
> Subject: RE: 3999

Greetings Director Zhong,

There has been no SCP assigned to the 3999 slot since RAISA formed, and it is 99.998% likely for this to also be true in the history of the Foundation. With a margin of error of "too insignificant to matter". Send copies of those documents over to RAISA as soon as you can. Thank you.

Maria Jones

Director, Recordkeeping And Information Security Administration

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December 17, 2017

8:37 P.M.

Draven Kondraki and the rest of Talloran's friends received confirmation that they were stable.

December 22, 2017

4:13 P.M.

"It's fine hun, I promise." Talloran visibly ached and winced even slightly moving in the hospital bed, but they were alive. They were alive and that was all that mattered.

"Do you remember anything that happened? You were gone for so long, for G-d's sake, we were going to declare you legally dead in a couple months, and, and —"

"No, I don't uh. Remember. I was gone and then I was just. Here again." Talloran had to lie. What was happening now… it wasn't trustworthy anyway. No, it'd be a very long time for it to be trustworthy to any degree. Maybe it'd take a whole eleven months before their spine snapped in half and the façade was broken. Maybe Draven's empathy was fake. Draven could be fake.

Talloran looked to the right, and saw Yamada talking to other doctors outside the room. Maybe they were all fake. What else could explain this? Millions of years being gutted, and then peace? There's no such thing as peace. There possibly couldn't have —

"That's a relief. I'm so glad you're back bun, fuck. I don't even care about what happened for now. Maybe not ever. I don't know. You're mine again, and if you leave, I'm going to neutralize the son of a bitch stealing you."

Their heart fluttered as Draven gently draped his arms around their body. It hurt, but it was a relief. To feel this specific kind of hurt at the gentle touch of another… if it was all made up, if this was just another delusion, why not enjoy it? At least Talloran can claim to have won the battle of the minds at one point.

"I just have to make sure. You're… y-you're still Draven, right? Draven Kondraki, son of Benjamin Kondraki? Jewish, bisexual, snores horridly?" Draven looked at them curiously, as if the very notion of questioning was absurd.

"The snoring's improved. You're right otherwise. Are you o—"

"Yeah… I guess so. Just shaken up is all. Please hug me and keep telling me about what I missed in the last number of months. Tell me the world's gotten better."

James Ari Talloran continued to cling onto life. For now, they won. And that was all that mattered.

December 15, 2017

Sunset got to talk with her therapist about almost nothing in particular for an entire hour. But the "almost nothing" was pretty productive at least.

It was about writing. Lots of it. How writing helped; how it soothed

the soul; how it got her through tough times. She even thought to mention the SCP Foundation, and got her therapist to read the Wikipedia article on it.

Why did writing help so much? After all, simply getting out your emotions isn't enough to fully help, or address the core problems. So why was it so important?

It's… it's a way to put succinctly emotions and experiences that can't be described in a straight manner. How can she describe the way in which a waterfall makes her feel, except to say that 'As Jaine fell from the waterfall towards Earth, she became the ruler of the world'? Or, when trying to describe the way trauma impacted her, wouldn't it be easier to say 'Every time Derek tip-toed out into the world, he was living the lives of three different, incomplete people at once'?

It's not so much the process of writing itself as how it can be conveyed and interpreted. That's part of the fun after all. You write for yourself and see how you yourself takes it, and if you so dare, share it with the world and see how they take it. It's the ultimate form of self-expression, in her opinion, arguably more than even music-making itself.

When Talloran first came into her life after all, it was just a character in a very long and confusing narrative about the mental toll an author was facing. And soon, that shifted, and Talloran now became the ever-present star of her immediate life, a way to accurately nail the troubles she herself had burdened. For her, it was unanimously easier than simply talking about it. Fiction is more true than reality in many ways.

"I'll find the time to read some pages on this site before we have our next appointment together."

Maybe she was accomplishing something, if only one step at a time. Though it all should have came together the day before… ah well. No one would mind a late delivery if the product was high-quality. *At least, I guess so*, she thought.

December 17, 2017

She hit save.

« I'll Try Living Like This | I'll see you all down the road. Until next time. » Hub

Internal Departments

This article is not considered official and/or canon

The Foundation's successful operation depends primarily on dividing responsibilities between various departments. Some of the Foundation's departments are listed in this document. For the sake of efficiency, all departments are closely coordinated.

FoldUnfold

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- **Administrative Department**
- **Department of External Affairs (DEA)**
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Administrative Department

The Administrative department is headed by the O5 Command. It directs the Foundation's actions on all levels. This department includes all communication nodes and command centers; every such node and center has a standby for failure redundancy. The jurisdiction of AD also include whole Foundation's financial operations, like disposition of funds, accountancy, budget

planning etc. Due to the importance of this department, loyalty checks are more frequent here than anywhere else. The record-keeping office also belongs to this department.

Department of External Affairs (DEA)

DEA is responsible for a wide spectrum of operations: planting disinformation, eliminating traces of SCP (both objects and the Foundation's) activity, D-class personnel enlistment, and recruiting new employees from military and civil institutions. The DEA is responsible for concealing the activity of Foundation agents and facilities in populated areas. DEA is essentially the front line of the Foundation as it filters all potential employees and is responsible for maintaining high standards among recruited personnel - this can also be called HR.

Engineering and Technical Service Department

E&TS is responsible for technical maintenance and everyday services of all facilities and equipment in active Foundation use. This department is responsible for design and construction of new facilities and routes of communication as well as repair and maintenance. E&TS department is divided into several sub-departments based on

clearance levels and appropriations; employees with higher clearance levels design and build Keter-class containment chambers and work with strategically important facilities.

Ethics Committee

Ethics Committee is a small independent department responsible for reviewing containment procedures and checking conducted experiments for excessive waste or inappropriate use of Class D employees and other resources. The Committee's existence is thought to be a poor joke by some, but it plays a significant role in the Foundation's operation and is quite influential.

Intelligence Agency

The Intelligence Agency is tasked with searching, tracking, and capturing uncontained SCP objects and gathering intelligence on hostile groups of interest. Undercover IA cells exist in every major populated area and disguised as civilian objects and institutions. Intelligence agents are usually recruited from various defense and law enforcement agencies and special services of the world.

Internal Security Department

ISD is a concealed "foundation within the Foundation", a secret police force responsible for

filtering traitors as well as operational and information security risks among the Foundation's ranks. The department is strictly hierarchical, adhering to stringently defined multi-stage investigative protocol. Potential ISD agents must have a perfect service record and a length of Foundation service of more than a year. Usually, every ISD agent keeps his "official" position in order to provide his command a first-hand account of everything happening in a given department. The very existence of ISD is usually presented as a myth. The "official" responsibility of ISD is investigation and interrogation of captured GOI agents, although that part of ISD officially belongs to Security Department for the purpose of secrecy.

Logistics Department

Logistics Department is responsible for transferring natural, financial and human resources between Foundation facilities. Transportation is conducted using automotive, water, railroad, aerial, space, and other transport. There is a complicated system for assigning transportation priorities and importance classes; SCP objects and resources necessary to contain them usually get top priority. Disposing of arising

hindrances during shipments is also a top-priority action.

Manufacturing Department

Manufacturing Department is responsible for fulfilling any material requests that can arise during capture, containment, or any other Foundation process. Manufacturing Department has several Sites and Zones wholly devoted to constructing a wide profile of custom-made or mass-produced items. Designing and manufacturing is often done on-site for security reasons. For the same reasons, neither the manufacturing staff nor the design documents ever leave the facility's limits. These are usually stocked with modern equipment and are heavily guarded.

Medical Department

The Foundation's Medical Department is responsible for keeping employees in good health. Due to the nature of Foundation work, medics often encounter difficult to treat and highly unusual instances of wounds, trauma, infections, and disorders. Because of this, the MD adheres to exceptionally high personnel standards. Some Foundation medics specialize in secondary areas of treatment expertise such as memetic influences, psychological trauma, and so on.

Mobile Task Forces

The Foundation's line of work requires a large number of highly specialized professionals. This is usually related to anomalies that require much effort and an unorthodox approach for containment. To address this, Mobile Task Forces are formed. MTFs are teams of varying size that specialize in specific roles or respond to specific situations. Every group has a name consisting of a Greek letter and a number; clarification prefixes and/or call signs may be employed in some cases. More information may be found at the **`Overview for Mobile Task Forces`**.

Scientific Department

Efficient scientific work is the cornerstone of the Foundation's existence and operation. The Scientific department is responsible for studying all contained and new SCP objects, developing countermeasures for containment breach events and designing various devices and medicinal products to be produced by the Manufacturing Department. ScD employees are recruited from among the best and most promising scientists in various fields.

Security Department

This department is responsible for providing security and protection

for all Foundation facilities and objects, regardless of their priority. SD employees are trained to counteract containment breach events, intrusions, sabotage, natural disasters, and other emergencies. Newcomers to this service usually undergo general training before being assigned to an object or site. Special training for working with a given object is performed on-site after assignment.	

Little Hurley Lost in Meatspace

Splat! Splat!

Whe… whe… where is mommypult?

Splat!

Daddypult! Where are you? It's so strange here.

Where did the walking thing go? It was so nice to me. Why was there a large bang?

Splat!

What was that big light mommypult? It took you and daddypult away.

Splat!

But don't worry mommypult and daddypult I will still splat just like you taught me to even if the things here to splat are strange.

Splat!

All the other inanimatals here don't move. It's so strange here mommypult.

Splat! Splat! Splat!

Help me daddypult there are walking things chasing me! They are too big for little me to splat.

It's dark in here mommypult. I'm scared of the dark.

I can't move daddypult. I'm all tied up.

I can't go to sleep without a story daddypult.

Where am I?

Yay! Things to splat!

Splat! Splat! Splat! Splat! Splat! Splat! Splat!

Did you see me splat all those things daddypult? Are you proud of your little babypult?

I can't see the sky anymore mommypult where did it go what happened to it is it missing like you are?

I'm tied up in the dark again daddypult where are you?

Yay! More things to splat!

Splat! Splat! Splat! Splat!

Please don't put me in the dark again walking things please don't what did I do wrong? I splatted those things for you I'll be good I promise do you know where daddypult and mommypult are?

No please it's dark in here.

Please.

I'll be good

I promise

Yay! If I splat these for you will you take me to daddypult and mommypult I want to see them will you please?

Splat! Splat! Splat! Splat! Splat! Splat!

No please not the dark again.

Please no.

Its dark.

Walking things?

Please let me out.

Please.

When will you let me out again? You left me in the dark walking things for so long.

I want my mommypult!

Please.

Little Lost Skip

Dr. Andrea Segerstrom had stopped trying to control the nervous picking at her flaking, peeling nails. They'd always been soft and prone to splitting even when left alone. And in this situation her polished, tasteful French manicure had become a ragged mess. Nigel detested her ruined nails and the snags in his precious sweaters that followed them.

Then again, it was on Nigel's account that she was nervously ruining her manicure to begin with. *I'd probably stop greying if I just divorced him already,* she thought in anguish. Out loud she said, "But you don't *know* it's him."

"No we don't, ma'am," said the agent sympathetically. Andrea had already forgotten his name. He was a hulking giant of a man with a paradoxically cherubic face. "We don't know *who's* been compromised. That's why you're here, Doctor. We were hoping you could straighten this out."

"But I'm Nigel's *wife*. Aren't they concerned the emotional connection might affect my judgment?"

"Are you?"

"Every good psychiatrist recognizes they may be influenced by emotion and never even realize it."

"Dr. Segerstrom, you were the obvious choice. What with your work on SCP-1536…"

"I only directly researched subjects exposed to SCP-1536 and the long-term effects of SCP-1563 exposure. Yes, I used 1536 as a case study for Human-Impersonating Anomalies, but 1536 was hardly sophisticated."

The sweet-faced agent flipped through her file. "It says here your

work on HIAs is seminal to the field. Who else could we call in?"

Andrea sighed before peeling off what was left of her right pinky nail. "Fine. Give me the relevant facts."

"At 0300 today, Area-29 experienced a massive containment breach due to an attack by the Chaos Insurgency. After all the other breached anomalies had been secured at 0430, it came to Area command's attention that SCP-378 was still at large. The entire Area has been placed under quarantine. Nobody comes in or out until we get this sorted out."

"So we have an entire Area's worth of personnel, one of which might have been compromised?"

"Not exactly. We were able to clear all but five personnel before our brain scanning equipment was compromised."

Andrea leaned forward. "Wait. If this site is under quarantine, why am I here?"

The agent sighed. "We don't have any medical personnel to spare. So if we get new scanners, they'll have to send all the technicians and doctors to operate it, and someone's going to have to get close enough to SCP-378's host to run the risk of being killed. And I'm sure you're aware that's how SCP-378 breached containment the first time. Or we could send the closest expert in detecting non-human anomalies and have you interview the five personnel being contained. They deemed the latter to be lower-risk."

Andrea leaned back in her seat. "Alright. Let me go over everything SCP-378 has ever communicated to us. After that, I'll speak to the five in quarantine."

The agent handed her a depressingly thin file folder. "Good luck," he said before leaving the debriefing room.

Agent Brenner. Agent Tom Brenner is his name, Andrea thought pointlessly before going to work.

Five different quarantine rooms. Five different windows, five different

microphones. But only four humans in those five rooms. *Can't hurt to start with the basics*. Andrea couldn't help humming to herself as she interviewed the unlucky five.

Quarantined Subject One appears to be Dr. Erik Vanderhausen, Nordic male, forty years old. Blond hair, blue eyes, 2.1 meters tall. Senior Researcher, Microbiology, assigned to SCP-378. Married to Aimee Vanderhausen for fifteen years with two children, Sigrid, ten, and Adrian, two. He displays all the classic symptoms of shock. Visible pallor and sweat, and breaks into tears while reciting the names of his children.

"I just want to see my kids again. I can't be locked up forever, I have to tell my wife I'm sorry I fucked up the garden, she loves that thing, you know? I'm not SCP-378, please let me go!"

"Dr. Vanderhausen, I will ask you to remain calm. The Foundation hates false positives as much as it hates false negatives. If you are uncompromised you will return to your family unharmed."

One of these things is not like the other ones…

Quarantined Subject Two appears to be Tessa McAvoy, Scottish female, twenty-nine years old. Auburn hair, hazel eyes, 1.63 meters tall. Clerical Personnel, Clearance Level 1. Daughter of Sarah and John McAvoy and visits them frequently at their home in Arizona. Is notably calmer than the other four.

"Sorry Doc, you know these guys don't tell me anything. Men, huh? Between us girls, what's going on? So, the gas leak got fixed, right?"

"Sorry Ms. McAvoy, I can't comment on ongoing situations, but I can tell you I'm here to straighten things out. I'm just going to ask you some questions about your family."

"Don't you guys have that on file or something?"

"We just want to test your mental wellness in the wake of this event. Now if you could provide us with your date and location of birth, your immediate family members…"

"Fire away, Doc."

One of these things just doesn't belong…

Quarantined Subject Three appears to be Britney Howard, American female, twenty-eight years old. Light brown hair, light brown eyes, 1.51 meters tall. Clerical Personnel, Clearance Level 1. Is on friendly terms with Tessa McAvoy. Lives with her boyfriend of one year, Bradley Weston. Is nervous but not panicked.

"Look Dr. Segerstrom, I know you guys are working with some dangerous stuff and I'm kinda freaked out. It's not like I thought bioweapons research would be a walk in the park but I didn't sign up for this, you know?"

"I understand your concern. Your safety is our top priority."

"Did…did one of your samples get loose or something? I don't have cholera or some shit like that do I?"

"I can't comment on security breaches, but I am here to ask you some basic questions to gauge your emotional response to these events…"

Can you tell which thing is not like the others…

Quarantined Subject Four is Dr. Cheng-Gong Li, Chinese male, thirty-two years old. Black hair, dark brown eyes, 1.70 meters tall. Research Assistant to Dr. Vanderhausen. Engaged to Chan-Juan Wen, a biochemist at Area 19. Is belligerent and loudly insists on being released from quarantine.

"I don't understand! My name is Cheng-Gong Li, I was born in Hainan Province, I met my fiance Chan-Juan at Johns Hopkins and we're getting married three months from now. I'm not SCP-378, let me go!"

"If you're aware of SCP-378 then you know that it is a very sophisticated HIA and has access to the host's memories. I do not yet know whether or not you are really Dr. Li."

"This is ridiculous! Are you just going to keep us here until the host dies and the damn worm bursts out of the poor bastard's skull?"

"Please remain calm, Dr. Li."

"Don't you *dare* tell me to remain calm! I'm a Foundation researcher! I'll be *dead* by the time you incompetent fucks find 378! Let! Me! Out!"

By the time I finish this song?

Quarantine Subject Five is Dr. Nigel Segerstrom, Caucasian male, thirty-six years old. Medium brown hair, blue eyes, 1.83 meters tall. Clinical psychiatrist specializing in memetic hazards. Married to Dr. Andrea Segerstrom, Foundation psychiatrist specializing in the detection of human-mimicking anomalies. Is, like Ms. McAvoy, unusually calm and rational.

"Hi, Peach."

Andrea retained her professional demeanor while inwardly flinching at the pet name. "Hello, Dr. Segerstrom. As you're aware, there has been a containment breach of SCP-378. We would like to ask you some basic questions now."

Five's faint smile flickered out. "I'm sorry, Andrea. I really shouldn't have called you that. I suppose I was hoping the nickname would convince you it was me, but SCP-378 can't be rooted out with cheap gimmicks like that."

"Let's stick to the questions, Dr. Segerstrom."

"Of course, Doctor."

The rest of the interview was uneventful until QS-Five said plaintively, "I have an idea to catch 378."

Andrea shot him a guarded look. "Do you?"

Five sighed. "That's the thing. I don't know it'll be of any use to you, coming from me. You'll have to figure it out yourself. Not that I'm worried, of course." Five leaned back and smiled dreamily. "You always were the first one to find the best solution. I'll be out of here in no time."

Andrea suddenly felt that she would forget how to cry if she didn't do so soon. "Well, Doctor, that ends our chat. We will continue to interview you and the other quarantined personnel."

"Alright. I'll see you then."

As Andrea stood and turned to the exit, QS-Five called. "Andrea! Wait!" She turned.

Five was standing out of his chair, face pressed against the protective glass. "I was wrong. It won't work. I have no idea how to identify 378. It's all on you, Peach."

Andrea nodded perfunctorily. "Thank you, Dr. Segerstrom." She was very proud of herself for managing to keep the tears in until she was alone in her room.

Dr. Matthew Inglewood was not particularly thrilled to see Andrea. As Area 19's resident psychiatrist, he felt somewhat shafted by the decision to call her in. He was thus rather eager to prove himself. "Far be it from me to question your methods, but isn't it a bit unnecessary to apply Tier One PiDHIA? SCP-378 is a fairly sophisticated Human Impersonating Anomaly. It's passed Tier One since it was contained."

"The Protocols for the Detection of Human-Impersonating Anomalies are meant to be applied sequentially. And 378 is hardly infallible. Perhaps its access to host memories is imperfect."

"Is it?"

"Not that we can tell. But at least now we know that."

"So we apply Tiers Two through Four?"

"Did that."

Dr. Inglewood looked furious. "That's it then. The second we get a surgical machine down there, we open up their skulls. To hell with it."

"That might not be necessary." Andrea stood up, closing the yellowed paperback she was reading. "PiDHIA focuses on things the original person would know that the imitator would not. SCP-378 clearly has access to all the person's memories and personality traits. It's spoken about using the science of other planets to seed space. Its intelligence has given it quite a nasty little superiority complex."

"So?"

"I have an idea. Get me your resident mathematician," Andrea ordered as she tossed the book at Inglewood.

Inglewood seethed as he flipped over the paperback. It was a beat-up copy of *I, Robot*. He threw Asimov's beloved work in the corner of the room as he reflected this was a lose-lose situation for him. If Dr. Segerstrom failed, he was stuck with a bodysnatcher and if she succeeded, well, *she succeeded*.

"Dr. Vanderhausen, we have finished the first round of testing. This second round tests higher level logical reasoning. We are hoping that SCP-378 does not have access to this part of the human brain."

"Wait, what? I haven't been working on 378 long but that doesn't sound right."

"We have this protocol in place for a reason, Dr. Vanderhausen. You may take as long as you like. It's a simple test. Just do the best you can."

"Hah! No pressure, right? God, and to think I thought the A-levels were terrifying…"

Did you guess which thing was not like the others?

"Ms. McAvoy, we need to test if this recent emotional trauma has impaired your reasoning. If that is the case, we will make psychiatric care available to you. Please complete this test to the best of your ability. You have all the time you need."

"Uh, okay. I was really bad at math in high school though."

"That's fine. This test is like the LSAT in that it doesn't test prior knowledge, but reasoning ability. It shouldn't be difficult."

"Okay, Doc. For science, I guess."

Did you guess which just doesn't belong?

"Ms. Howard, we are concerned that this recent breach of security may have affected you negatively. Studies have shown that intellectual ability can be drastically harmed by emotional trauma. We're asking everyone to take this simple assessment of logical reasoning skills to gauge your mental health. It requires no prior knowledge and is not timed."

"Oh, okay. And when I'm done?"

"Slip it into this drawer and await further instructions."

"Whatever you say, Doctor."

If you guessed that this one is not like the others

"Dr. Li, this is the second round of our protocols to determine 378's host. We believe 378 exposure curtails high reasoning abilities at the expense of an increased recall of the host's memories and behavior. This assessment will gauge your math and logic abilities. Take all the time you need."

"The hell I will. This thing looks like the Rosetta Stone."

"Please don't be discouraged. This is a basic assessment and doesn't rely on prior knowledge."

"All right. I'll take it, and I'll show you. Not only will I prove I'm clean, I'll blow the damn thing out of the water."

Then you're absolutely…

"Dr. Segerstrom, in accordance with protocol, we are administering a basic test of logical reasoning skills. This assessment requires no prior knowledge and is not timed. It is our belief that SCP-378 may be able to access so much host information at the expense of higher

brain functions. This assessment will help us make a decision."

"Oh, Andrea, you know I'm horrible with tests."

"Please complete the test to the best of your ability."

"Alright. Just promise me I won't be terminated for not having 378 as an excuse for failing."

Andrea paused. "I promise." She meant "I love you", and they both knew it.

The next time Inglewood encountered Andrea, it appeared his ill mood had spread to the wiry man with the mussed hair beside her. He was going through the stack of tests with a ruler, carefully scanning each line. "Ah! It's so *obvious* when it's written like that! Do you know how *infuriating* this is?"

"What?" asked Inglewood. He had a vague feeling that the frazzled looking gentleman was irritated by something completely different than the woman with them.

"Hello, Matthew! I believe we've solved your little problem here. I'm sure you know Dr. Steven Penderbrook. He's a brilliant man."

"I don't *feel* very brilliant right now, Dr. Segerstrom," Dr. Penderbrook mumbled, nose deep in his papers.

"And how, may I ask, did you accomplish that?" asked Inglewood with a remarkably tiny amount of resentment in his voice.

"Why, we already established that SCP-378 knows at least as much about humans as we know about humans. So how do we differentiate the normal humans from a cosmic parasite?"

"How?"

"By finding the something *no human knows*, but SCP-378 does." Dr. Penderbrook handed Andrea a sheaf of papers. "We know SCP-378 thinks very highly of itself and wouldn't pass up an opportunity to show off, especially when it thinks that passing as a human depends

on it." She handed Dr. Inglewood ten pages of small, cramped handwriting. "Here's the question in pictoral form. You don't even have to know English to understand what you have to do. All you have to do is prove that every even number starting with 4 is the sum of two prime numbers."

"That's it?"

Dr. Penderbrook laughed bitterly. "That's it? Of course that's it! Except it's not *it*. That simple little statement is the Goldbach Conjecture. It's 260 years old and no one has proved it until now." Penderbrook waved the sheaf of papers in Inglewood's face. "Every mathematician in here's checked this out and it's perfect. There are *lemmas* in here no one's ever heard of."

"Excuse me?"

Dr. Penderbrook ran his fingers through his hair, somehow managing to make it look less unkempt. "Not only has this proof *never been seen by a human*, some of the mini-proofs that prove the proof have never been seen by a human. And yet all of us can tell it's sound," he said with the slow, careful air of someone being forced to explain something to an idiot.

Andrea chimed in gleefully. "Something no human on earth knows, but a correct answer known to be correct when we see it. Something that doesn't necessarily require foreknowledge, so 378 couldn't plumb its host's brain and know it doesn't know it."

"Well, our doctors are the best of the best. Maybe they felt the pressure and came up with it."

Dr. Penderbrook took on a frighteningly murderous expression for a man who seemed so mild. Andrea simply replied, "Well, the doctors are biologists and a medical doctor, the latter of which I assure you has a terminal terror of proofs. And that doesn't matter anyway," she continued as she delivered her coup de grace, "for I highly doubt that a clerical worker with a Bachelor's in Communications could pound out this masterpiece in five hours."

Inglewood sank into his chair. "So it's over then?"

Andrea smiled. "It's over. Now, if you'll excuse me, I need to talk to a psychiatrist. Know any good ones around here?"

Andrea was told it was a marvelous re-establishment of containment. They were planning to encase the body of Britney Howard in tungsten, but they had barely reached the sealing room when SCP-378 became wise to the plan. Five agents were severely wounded, but Agent Tom Brennan received a Foundation Star and a bionic leg for managing to encase the rampaging corpse in its metal chamber. Andrea was offered the chance to watch the mayhem, but declined, remembering the innocent-looking light brown eyes.

"I have to hand it to you, honey. Your plan was way better than mine," said Nigel.

"You know, you never did tell me what your plan was."

"Hell, I don't even remember it, that's how bad it was."

"You need to stop getting wrapped up in these situations. I can't always be there to save your sorry ass," teased Andrea.

"You know that was the plan all along, right? Trapped you into marrying me and now you're obligated to save me from bodysnatching hell worms."

Andrea kissed Nigel on the cheek. "Well, at least you've made one decent plan in your life."

Little Ones

The room's dark. Oh, I'm sure there's some light on in here, some brief glint of afternoon sun through the cellar window or some long-gone child's twinkling discarded toy. But for me, the room's dark. It's warm and dark, and there are cobwebs stuck to my shawl. No one else has been down here in a while. I sit on a wooden rocking chair that doesn't rock anymore.

My fingers move frantically. They carry needle and thread like a pianist playing his symphony. My fingers dance and spin as the yarn and cloth are woven together, forming cute shapes. Pulling stuffing from my belly, I fill the figures. I put love in every stitch. I sew runes and rhymes into the cotton fluff inside. I place buttons where the eyes should go. I put on bows and ribbons, little wool sweaters and felt shoes. The little ones awaken.

Some of them can move on their own. Some of them can't move until I attach their flexible limbs. Some of them will never move perfectly, and that's okay. Each of them is what they're meant to be. None of them can talk, at least none yet, and that's okay too. I haven't figured the talking out yet. Maybe I'll learn a new stitch for that in the coming months. It must be in high demand out there.

The little ones need love and closeness. There's all levels of intimacy and protection with the little ones. Some are right next to your dreams. Some are right under your skin. Some are right around the corner. Some are just *right*. Well, they're all right, if you look at it in that way. But I don't look at it in any way.

Eventually the little ones leave. They always do, and that's fine with me. Sometimes they crawl or skitter out. Sometimes they walk, sometimes they stroll or run or tumble or flutter. I give each one a tag, a note or message, to help they who finds the little ones take care of them. They're not *my* little ones once they've left the needles. They're *the* little ones.

I just keep on making the little ones, even after all the old little ones have left. It's life knit large, so to speak. The room's dark and warm and the little ones dance about. They explore the storage cellar, the children's museum upstairs, and the world out there. But I don't leave. I stay behind and knit. The Blind Babushka stays behind and knits.

Little SCP-507 Lost

> *I…I don't understand…*
> *Why…why is it that they're everywhere?*
> *Every place, everywhere, every fucking world…They're always there.*
> *Why?*

"Hi Mum! I'm back home from school!" Jimmy said as he walked through the front door.
"Hi Darling! Just so you know your friends Sullivan and Jameson are already here." replied his Mum.
'Great!' thought Jimmy, that means he could play 'Foundation', the game they always played together. Jimmy walked into the living room and greeted Sullivan and Jameson.

"Doctor Bright." he said to Sullivan in a serious tone.
"Doctor James." he said to Jameson in the same serious tone.
"Doctor Gears." They both replied in an equally serious tone.
Jimmy smiled. They always played Foundation well.
"I take it you're here to see SCP-846?" Jimmy asked them.
"That's right we are. There are a few more tests we would like to run." replied Sullivan.
"In that case I'm going to have to see your security clearance."
Sullivan and Jameson took out their identifications. Square pieces of paper with the names 'Dr. Bright' and 'Dr. James' respectively as well as The Foundation's secret symbol (Jameson's Dad had them laminated).
"Very good gentlemen. Now if you'll follow me."

Jimmy took them into his room and from underneath his bed he took out an old shoe-box. On the box Jimmy has written in big letters with a red felt-tip pen 'SCP-846' as well as the super-secret symbol.
The symbol had one thick circle, three arrows pointing inwards and another circle-like shape around the edges. Jimmy never told the other two that the symbol always gave him the creeps when he

looked at it.
"Is the containment door closed?" He asked Sullivan.
"I'll secure it now Doctor Gears." Sullivan replied as he went to shut the bedroom door.

Once it was shut, Jimmy opened the shoebox and took out what was inside. It was a small robot that called itself 'Robo-Dude'. There was also a controller for it with an 'On/Off' switch, a 'Speak' button and a small microphone. Jimmy flipped the switch to 'On'.
"GREETINGS ROBO-PAL. HOW MAY ROBO-DUDE ASSIST YOU TODAY?" the voice of Robo-Dude was a dull, grating sound.
Jimmy turned to Sullivan and started to say "Dr. Bright, what tests did you want to ru-" He paused, noticing a stranger standing in the doorway.
"Who… who are you?" Jimmy asked the stranger in a shaky voice.
"That's… not important right now, what do you call that… thing?"
The stranger had an odd accent.
"We call it SCP-846, but who are you?"
The stranger opened his mouth to reply, but all of a sudden he disappeared.

> *Sometimes…they're children…*
> *Most times…they're adults…*
> *But always…ALWAYS…*
> *They look at me as if I'm…diseased…*

It was raining as Robert drove home from work. He never liked the rain. He never really liked his job either, just some boring desk-job for an insurance firm. Working in a cramped cubicle for hours on end, constantly typing on a computer. It was monotonous work but at least it paid the bills.
Robert pulled into his driveway and quickly made his way inside. He trudged upstairs, taking off his jacket as he did so and headed straight for his bedroom. His house was tiny, a living/dining room, a small kitchen (not enough room for a washing machine of course), a hallway, a bathroom and one bedroom. He took his lab coat out of his wardrobe and smiled. This was how he could actually get through each working day.
Donning the lab-coat he switched to his alter-ego Alto Clef. Doctor of The Foundation.

On his way to the basement he engaged a conversation with a tattered lampshade.
"Ah, Doctor Kondraki. Good to see you on your feet after that little fiasco the other week."
Despite the lampshade being inanimate it responded with:
"Yeah, I'm not quite sure how he managed to do that."
Alto Clef went into his basement and approached the safe sitting on the table.
The safe wasn't very big, and on it Alto Clef had carefully engraved 'SCP-101' onto it as well as the symbol that he had come up with. It consisted of a circular object surrounding three inward pointing arrows and a thick circle in the middle. The usual shiver went up Alto Clef's back when he saw the symbol.

Unlocking the safe (the combination was 24-17-11) he took out a leathery bag and placed it on the table.
He opened it and inside was a row of razor-sharp teeth and a spongey tongue.
There was a sudden 'thump' from above him and the sound of someone, or something, moving around the house.
Alto Clef quickly grabbed his handgun from a nearby cabinet and checked to see if it was loaded.

It was.

He cautiously edged up the stairs out of the basement with his finger on the trigger when suddenly a dark shape was standing in the doorway.
"I don't know who you are but… you better get out of my house right now!" Alto Clef demanded with as much assertion as he could muster. Although he couldn't stop his voice from shaking.
"I just…" the other man began "…I just want to see what you have."
"Who… Who are you?" Alto Clef blurted out.
"No time for that, I have to see it." The other man quickly pushed past Alto Clef and began moving towards the safe of SCP-101.
"Stop!" Alto Clef yelled out in desperation. "Or I'll shoot!"
The man stopped suddenly and slowly turned to face Alto Clef.
"I-" the man began but was cut off from the gunshot.
The man looked down at the blood coming out his chest and vanished completely.

He shot me…HE SHOT ME!
I'm…going to die from one of these places…
But as long as I… make sense of all this…
Then I won't mind…

Containment cell.
Rush of air.
Forest.
Always happens like that.
Now where am I?
Where are they?
I see…
Ruins.

"Sir, the sensors have picked up movement outside."
"How large?"
"Human sized. Showed up out of nowhere."
Commandant Strelnikov narrowed his eyes.
"Send out a platoon of Ascension Guard to retrieve whoever it is. Secure and Contain."
"At once. Contain and Protect."

Commandant Strelnikov left the Central Command and made his way through Bunker #19 towards his office.
Once there, he began writing a report on the day's events.
16 minutes later he received a message on his terminal to proceed to Interrogation Chamber F.
'That must be the Ascension Guard back with whoever it was from Outside.' Strelnikov thought to himself.
He got up, left his office and made his way towards Interrogation Room F.

Outside, Commandant Strelnikov met Inquisitor Dodridge, the leader of the Ascension Guard that was sent out to retrieve the Outsider.
"Secure and Contain." Dodridge saluted.
"Contain and Protect." Strelnikov replied. "I trust the Outsider wasn't too difficult to apprehend?"
"He was not your eminence; in fact he gave himself up willingly. He also lacks the brand of the Blessed and bears no tribal markings."
"Noted."

Commandant Strelnikov entered the Interrogation Chamber and looked across the table at the Outsider.
He was dressed in clothing of Pre-Incident design. Strelnikov remembered they were called t-shirts, jeans and trainers. Remarkably they looked new and undamaged despite the Incident happening several decades ago.
Strelnikov sat down on the chair opposite the Outsider.

"Commandant Strelnikov presiding, interrogating an Outsider brought into Bunker #19 by a platoon of Ascension Guard led by Inquisitor Dodridge."
Everything said in the Interrogation Chamber was recorded by a machine located in the adjacent room that was separated by a one-sided mirror.
"At 1:04pm the Outsider triggered sensors located in sector 5b."
Commandant Strelnikov went through the basic procedures an Interrogation.
Now looking up at the Outsider, Strelnikov properly began the Interrogation.
"Now, Outsider. What is your name?"
The Outsider was looking at the one-way mirror.
"You… have people on the other side of there don't you? Watching us." The Outsider's voice was very shaky.
Strelnikov glanced at the one-way mirror. Clearly this wasn't going to be an ordinary Interrogation.
"I'm the one asking the questions here," he said in a stern voice "Now tell us what your name is."
The Outsider finally looked at Strelnikov, and the Commandant could see the madness in his eyes common with Exposure.
"My… name… doesn't matter." The Outsider said before blurting out "You can call me Guy."
"Very well, Guy. Now tell us what tribe you are from."
"T… Tribe?"
"Don't play games with me outsider!" Strelnikov nearly shouted as he lost his temper. "Tell me what tribe you are from!"
"I… don't come from any tribe…"
"LIAR!" Strelnikov *was* shouting now. "The only way you filth can survive is by banding together and huddling close for warmth! Any loner in the Outside dies from starvation or from one of the Blighted Anomalies." Strelnikov stood up, towering above the Outsider who

cowered before him.
"You WILL tell us what tribe you are from! You WILL tell us what you are doing here! And there is NOTHING you can do about it!"
He sat back down and with a growl demanded "Begin."

The Outsider sat there impassively.
"Did you hear what I said Outsider?" Strelnikov yelled. "Answer me!"
"Oh I heard you." The Outsider's voice had change dramatically, gone was any hint of fear. It had been replaced by a voice that seemed to suck all warmth out of the room with every word.
"I heard you alright." The Outsider continued. "But what makes you think that one such as me will ever answer to one as feeble as you?"
The Outsider looked up; the look of madness was still in his eyes.
"W… what are you?" Strelnikov stammered, he knew that this was something other than a Blighted Anomaly.
The Outsider grinned.
"I am… something else."
The Outsider began to laugh.
In one quick movement, Commandant Strelnikov gathered his wits, stood upright, drew his firearm and pointed it at… nothing.
The Outsider had vanished completely.
Strelnikov cleared his throat.
"Interrogation concluded, The Outsider being interrogated was somehow able to disappear. It is to be suspected that the Outsider was a Blighted Anomaly or was in possession of one. The Decontamination crew that processed the Outsider will be reviewed for dereliction of duty." He said, finishing the Interrogation.
The Judicators would not be happy.

I'm the only one who knows…
I'm the only one who understands…
I'm the only one who can figure all this out…
The Doctors of my world…they think they're so clever…
But… they know nothing…NOTHING…
And I can never tell them…about the others…
They wouldn't…believe me…
They think they're the only ones…
But they're not…
My…world's Foundation still only has 191 SCPs in containment…

There are more out there…
In other…places…

Live Now. Tomorrow, We Die.

It's time to let him go. The way he kissed, smiled, and smelled. You have to let it go. The way his hands felt on your waist, the way he said your name, you have to let it go.

Because that's who he was, not who he is.

Kit had never been the same after the first amnestic.

It was fair to say Gabriel has felt as lousy as shit doing it, too – inviting the cute, dark-haired man on another date and slipping it into his 'purple rain' cocktail with practised ease.

But, then again, he didn't expect to fall in love.

He considered it part of his mission – make the man who saw too much, forget.

Make him forget. Make him forget with your wit and charm. Make him forget with your tongue in his mouth. Make him forget with a spiked drink. Leave… in the morning.

His interaction with Kit should have ended there. He shouldn't have been around to see the amnestic trigger off sudden mood swings and confused, overwhelming emotions. **`The Amnestic Orientation manual`** hadn't covered this. Maybe this happened to everyone they drugged and dumped. Maybe they all became broken and clinging to the sides of sanity.

But he had fallen for Kit hard and fast. He had fallen for the way he self-consciously adjusted his hair when he was flustered, fallen for the way he breathed Gabriel's name in what eventually became their bed, even fallen for the fact that Kit was never quite normal.

He wanted so much to bring it up as a matter of ethics. Disclose exactly how fucked up Kit had become since that evening. But that

would mean disclosing their relationship, and that would only have cause for trouble. Gabriel had worked hard to get where he was, and he wasn't sure he was ready to give up the position for something as unimportant as the truth.

More often than not, Kit was already in his house when he got home. He had asked how, the first time, startled and on-edge, and Kit had just flashed a lockpick set at him and whispered the word 'Easily'. Gabriel had gently swapped the kit for a key, and Kit would claim the window ledge overlooking the garden as his spot. It was as easy as taking in a stray.

He came home once, already calling out a greeting, to find dismal graffiti sprayed across the living room wall.

Live now. Tomorrow, we die.

It struck a nerve with him, considering his line of work, and considering how cheaply Kit had been treating life. He found Kit spaced out on his spot, a folding knife resting limply in his lap. Kit wouldn't show him what he had done. Simply, he threw the knife across the room, and it embedded itself in the wall next to the nihilistic words.

Gabriel frowned at him. He'd been brought up to believe that there were certain things one didn't do in a house, and target practice was one of them.

Kit just smiled and Gabriel's heart skipped a beat. Kit moved close to him, next to his ear, breath soft and warm.

"I won," He purred, and kissed him fiercely.

Live now. Tomorrow we die.

There was that fierce side that Gabriel loved. The side that would greet him with excitement, enthusiasm, and it translated into the bedroom, although Gabriel knew it had extended beyond a good fuck when he found himself in the pale moonlight, staring down at Kit as he slept, making sure he kept breathing, because it was the only time he could be confident the young man was alive and safe. It

was becoming a fight, day after day, to know that Kit would be in his home when he got back, that he wouldn't be arrested for a scuffle or sectioned for his madness, or dead on a slab somewhere.

So when he came home to a hole in one of the drywalls and blood staining the paint, he couldn't help just to be glad that this had happened here. Kit was overwhelmed in the centre of the living room, holding out his knife towards Gabriel like he was a stranger. It took time to coax it from him and ease it from his grip, and even then Kit stayed on edge like the terrified stray he was.

When Kit finally let him get close, Gabriel held his hands until the bleeding stopped; his fingers grazed the sore knuckles until Kit whined and pulled away. Then he got out the first aid kit and methodically cleaned each one, kissing the top joints of each finger after every sting that caused Kit to squirm on the kitchen chair.

"We'll be okay, baby," he confided into Kit's hair when they found themselves embracing, Kit trembling from fatigue and pure emotion. "I promise. I'll be here for you. I'll suffer with you. Cry when you cry. Laugh when you laugh, just please… try to laugh more. Please try to…"

Be with me. Don't go to the place I can't go, when your eyes glaze and you won't even talk. I would do anything to fix you. Fix this.

Maybe it's not about trying to fix something broken.

Maybe it's about starting over and creating something better.

« **Loskon in the Making** | **Hub** | **Twenty Minutes** »

Living in the Limelight

> *I believe it was Shakespeare who said "All the world's indeed a stage, and we are merely players, performers and portrayers, each another's audience outside the gilded cage."*
>
> *He was half-right.*
>
> *-Except from* **The Coolest War: Memories of a Critic***, by Anonymous*

The symphony hall was packed to capacity for what promised to be the event of the season. Ushers lead men in tuxedos and women in evening gowns down dimly lit walkways to their seats, the twinkling of hundreds of tiny lights on the chandeliers overhead illuminating the elaborate architecture. The city's finest conversed in their box seats, the elite and the middle class sat out front to see and be seen, and in the galleries even the less fortunate of the city had put on their Sunday finest and turned out. A hush fell over the assembled multitudes as the Conductor stepped onto the stage, empty save but for his podium. The audience rose in respect as the thirty-ish impresario in impeccable white tie took his position upstage, bowing once to the crowd to signal that they could sit. The Conductor turned to the podium, where his sheet music and baton lay at the ready. He opened the book to the first movement of tonight's performance, looked straight ahead at the empty space before him, lifted his baton, and the performance began.

A sense of shock and wonder rippled through the crowd as the first bars of the overture rung out - aggressive, powerful, demanding attention. A brief pause allowed the crowd to compose themselves - there was no band on stage, there were no speakers anywhere to carry the sound, and yet, as sure as they could hear their own breathing, they heard music. Before they had too long to ponder it, the second bar hit them, at first just the horns, then came the violins, the bass section, oboes, flutes, timpani, and the sound of an entire

orchestra filled the hall and echoed from front to back. The Conductor kept time and signaled the invisible, imaginary band with his baton, sweat dripping down his brow as he struggled to ensure that the cellists were in tune and the xylophonist wasn't coming in too early. He gave them a five-minute preview, in music, of what he hoped would be his magnum opus - the history of creation itself - and as the final strings of the overture gave way to the lone drum representing the heartbeat of the last man alive (or perhaps the first), he prepared himself for the part he had not yet performed before an audience. The Moog synthesizer kicked in as the Conductor grabbed the podium with his free hand, twisted it around 90 degrees counterclockwise, turned himself sideways to face the crowd on the left and the fictional orchestra on his right, and picked up the second baton.

With a quivering hand, the Conductor raised his second baton towards the audience, and flicked it like a magic wand, the Moog providing a sting to punctuate the flick. Nothing. The violins quivered along with his hand as he tried the flick again - still nothing. The Theremins kicked in on the third try, and with a third flick - and the sound of the gong - the chandelier hanging above the floor seats vanished, leaving only a hundred flickering bits of light in midair. The crowd gasped and applauded politely, but the Conductor only raised a finger to his lips, a "Shhhhhhh!" provided by the electric guitarist's Vocoder, as he carried on. Continuing to direct the orchestra with the baton in his right hand, he now stared upward at the flickering lights, pointing at one with his baton and nudging it slightly to the left. He pointed at another and moved it up somewhat, then another which he directed to fly around in a circle. Before long, the points of light were flying every which way around the hall, up and down, front to back, swinging in grand arcs over the balcony or zig-zagging or orbiting the head of a particularly confused old woman in the front row. The orchestra carried on in a regimented cacophony, dozens of leitmotifs representing the different lights as they swirled around, joyful, playful, ever in flux, one minute a minuet as two lights seemed to dance around each another, another anticipatory as one slowly wiggled its way up from the floor to the top of the hall, triumphant as it swirled about above all the other lights - and then a crashing sense of betrayal as it swung down, collided straight into another light, and the light broke apart and was snuffed out,

accentuated with the sound of the cannon.

Silence fell, and the hundred lights stopped their play and gathered in a circle around the attacker. The string soloists called out in confusion and mourning. Why? How? What has happened? The time for wonderment was short lived, as from the back another light swooped down and smashed into another extinguishing it, then a third, then a fourth. The gathered lights panicked and grew a bright blue, huddling together at first in fear, and then some of their own launching outward to defend themselves against the yellow-red aggressors. The machine gunners kept time, the bassoons sounded the march, and the accordionist wailed - it was war.

Few in the crowd took the time to look at the Conductor as the war raged on above them. Had they, they would have seen the sweat dripping from his brow, his hair soaking wet from it, his hands wildly flailing in both directions at once as his mind focused on keeping both his imaginary productions in sync. The orchestra rose to a crescendo as the room grew dimmer, more and more of the once-so-innocent lights vanishing into the darkness, and the last handful of blue lights gathered together in a ball, their attackers orbiting around them like a giant molecule of some unimaginable element, diving in and out in an attempt to penetrate the defense. A single chord that the Conductor had hoped would sound like the one from *A Day In the Life* sounded out from the entire band in unison as all the attackers swooped in at once and the entire concert hall erupted in a blinding flash of white light. The lone drumbeat returned as the light faded, and the crowd could see that the ceiling of the concert hall had been dematerialized entirely - and beyond it, there stood nothing but a sky full of millions of stars.

The Conductor set his batons down as the drumming stopped, turned to face the audience, and gave a short bow. The crowd applauded thunderously, some of them rapt with joy, others with tears running down their faces, all of them looking forward to the second movement. The Conductor cleared his throat and snapped his fingers, and in an instant the performance was over. The roar of the crowd ceased as the men and women disappeared back into the ether from which they came, and the walls fell in until the concert hall was once again the rehearsal space of the West Soho

Performing Arts Center.

"Well, there you have it," the Conductor said to the two actual humans remaining of his audience of thousands. "Concerto No. 3 for Reality Warper, 1st Movement. 'The Fall of Heaven'. What do you think?" The bespectacled middle-aged man in a Grateful Dead t-shirt, his long graying hair tied back in a ponytail, gave a tentative nod of agreement.

"Well, you put half your audience to sleep," the Critic said as he gestured to the ten-year-old boy who'd nodded off next to him, "but I was a Phillistine at his age too. The lighting effects are a little amateurish, and the score could use more Steinman and less ELP, but your work with the audience has improved by leaps and bounds. I swear I recognized my old drill sergeant sitting two rows behind us."

"Thank you," the Conductor said. "I'm planning on elaborating more on the visual effects in the second movement. We haven't even gotten to the creation of man yet, after all. It ought to be ready by the next time you're in town if you'll have time to see it."

"I look forward to it, Mr. Chesapeake," the Critic responded as he stood up and headed for the door. "Keep working on this and by '84 you'll be ready to make a big splash. Leave the sheet music on my desk and I'll have some more detailed notes for you by the weekend. Oh, and see if we can do the next session earlier in the day so your son can stay awake through the whole thing. I'm sure he's got an artist's soul buried in there somewhere."

Local Legends

Let me tell you about the Goatman, children.

Baby Bone Bridge, Sloth's Pit, Wisconsin.

The old stone bridge is decrepit, nearly falling apart. The only people who come out here nowadays are foolish urban explorers, hunters, or spooks from Site 87. Ever since the dam was built in the 1940s, no water flows under the bridge. It is an excellent place for creatures to hide.

The Goatman hides under this bridge, cursing and chewing on a horror magazine. His hourglass-shaped pupils looked in the general direction of Sloth's Pit. "There's never anything about me anymore. It's all "Slenderman" this or "Paperboy" that or "Jeff The Killer strikes again!" He groaned. "I miss the old days."

And what do you know of the old days, eh, Capricorn? You weren't even there when Sloth's manor sank into the ground! A low, humming voice sounded around the Goatman. This sarcastic presence was known as the Sloth's Pit Hum, but it had several other names; the Chippewa Indian tribe called it "The Whispers of The Earth". The Goatman preferred to call it "Humbug". He particularly enjoyed that word, even if Humbug didn't.

"I would tell you to bite me, Humbug, but you're not corporeal. So just… go away." The Goatman took out an old corncob pipe and began smoking it; nasty habit, but hey, if you're immortal, you can afford to screw up your body.

You hear what they did to Sinning Jessie? asked the Hum. *Calling her Singing Jessie now. They're trying to make her kid-friendly.*

The Goatman nearly spat out his pipe. "How the Hell can you make a tale about a prostitute cutting off men's penises and literally eating

them *kid-friendly?*"

Better her than us, eh? You're being kept around by cryptozoology nuts. The Hum chuckled. *And me? The Plastic Fanatics still haven't explained what I am, and hopefully never will.*

"Well, I ain't gonna tell 'em, Humbug. I don't want to be locked up in some white room where they take away my pipe." He looked at the old corncob pipe and sighed wistfully.

Anyway, Goatboy, thought you ought to know there are some teens camping in the woods tonight. Guess what they're up to?

The Goatman's ears perked up at this; he almost seemed interested. "Ghost stories, premarital sex and underage drinking?"

Just stories and sex, actually. The fat kid couldn't get any booze; the bitch at the gas station saw right through his fake ID. The Hum almost sounded like it was grinning. *Well? C'mon, Capricorn. For old time's sake?*

"Bah," said the Goatman, standing up and grinning. "Fine. But there had better be s'mores! I love those things."

I wonder what they taste like.

> Once, there was a young couple who became pregnant out of wedlock. Ashamed, their families cast them out of their houses, and forced them to live in the streets. Their punishment did not end here, however. For their sin, Satan himself brought one of his generals out of the depths of Hell to punish the two: he took the form of a tall, handsome stranger, who looked like anyone else… except for his cloven hooves. This, children, was the Goatman.

The four unwary campers did, indeed, have s'mores. The camping party was made up of two buxom high-school girls, Jessica and Catherine; one fat man, Johnny, who they brought along despite his

failure to get the booze; and one very, *very* lucky man, Tyler. Or at least… he would be lucky before the end of the night.

"Okay, so." Tyler grinned at the three others with him. "It's starting to get dark. You know what that means, right?" He threw open his arms. "Ghost stories!" Johnny looked at his bag, which had all three volumes of *Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark* in it; hopefully, none of them had read those too carefully.

"I… I'll go first, I guess." He reached to his bag, and suddenly turned his head sharply; he could've sworn he heard somebody whisper a single word next to his ear.

That word was *Goatman*.

Johnny remembered an article he had read for Journalism class about a half-man, half-goat creature supposedly from hell, and instead of telling the tale of "Wait 'til Martin Comes" again, he started weaving a thread about the hellish Goatman.

> First, the Goatman found the husband, and lured him out to an unnamed bridge in the woods under the pretense of giving him a loan of money. The husband accepted, and the Goatman showed its true form, a demonic creature with glowing red eyes, gigantic horns, and of course, the head of a goat. The Goatman tore out his throat and threw him in the riverbed, which he then nailed the husband to by his hands, feet, and scrotum.

Behind a thicket of bushes, the Goatman grinned. "Oooh, I love it when they think I'm a demon; it makes me look so neat!" Indeed, as he spoke, his eyes turned a glowing shade of red, his horns grew curlier, and his teeth grew sharper.

The Hum muttered something about him being "horny"; the Goatman ignored it, watching the campfire. "Um, Humbug?"

Yes?

"Thanks for helping me with this. It's been a while since I've been scaring… forgot how fun it was."

Don't thank me until you've actually made them shit their pants. Oooh, he's getting to the climax!

> The Goatman then finds the grieving widow, and tells her he's seen the husband. He leads her out to the bridge, and shows her the corpse in the water. Overcome with grief, she falls to her knees and sobs uncontrollably, while the Goatman briefly consoles her. "There, there," he says. "You'll be joining him soon."
>
> He then throws her off the bridge, and she drowns in the river.

Johnny was enjoying this far too much. Cate and Jess were staring at him wide-eyed, and he was pretty sure Tyler was just eating the s'more as a way to keep his mouth full and prevent himself from screaming. Finally, he reached the end. "And then… as she stood at the edge of the bridge… the Goatman jumped out and said-"

"**Why, hello my pretty,**" said a baritone voice from the woods. "**Welcome Home.**"

The foursome screamed, and turned at the sight of… a guy in a rather unimpressive Goatman costume. The eyes were good, but the horns were way too much; the fur was way too clean for something that had supposedly lived out in the woods. And what kind of fucking goat had teeth like that?

Instead of running away and screaming, they all laughed, except for Johnny. The Goatman blinked.

"What on Earth is so funny? Run! Run for your lives!" He raised up his arms and made a pathetic attempt at roaring, causing them to just laugh more.

"Oh god, Johnny! You should've had him get a better costume!"

Jessica elbowed him in his fat and laughed. "If you were going to try and scare us, at least have him look real!"

Johnny simply stared dumbstruck. He hadn't thought to tell the Goatman's story until he had come out here; there was no time to arrange a prank like this. Which meant…

"Um, guys? I… I didn't tell anyone to come out here…" Johnny looked at the Goatman's teeth with widening eyes; the rest of the campers fell silent. Johnny screamed broke off into a sprint as best he could, running as far away from the camp as possible before collapsing.

The rest of the campers stared at the Goatman, who cleared his throat, put in his pipe, and said "**Boo.**"

The campers were back in their truck and had driven away within 2 minutes of this, leaving all of their supplies behind. Laughing, the Goatman picked up a discarded s'more and bit into it; it was a good night.

> Finally, the Goatman recovers the wife from the river, and tears open her womb, recovering the still-living fetus. He raises it as his own, and it lives on as another Goatman. Never a Goatwoman, but a Goatman always.

The Goatman walked back to the bridge, smoking his pipe and looking around mournfully. Long ago, he had been king of this forest, like his father before him and his grandfather before his father. He had struck fear into those who were having a child out of wedlock, and had been the main reason all feared the woods.

Now, people weren't afraid to get pregnant anymore. There were condoms and abortions and Planned Parenthood, and none feared him. If they told stories about him at all, it was him as an axe-wielding lunatic or a cryptozoological freak, not something to be truly feared.

Are you all right, Capricorn? the Hum inquired. *You seem*

somewhat… distracted.

"I'm getting old, Humbug," moaned the Goatman as he leaned against an aging pine. "Going on 80 years now… I'm stagnating."

There, there, Capricorn, said the Hum. *Stories will still be told about you.*

"Derivative stories, yes. But the original tale is lost." Goatman lit up his pipe again. "Why can't I be like one of these new terrors? These… 'creepypastas'? They're what scare people now. Short snippets, transported around electronically, not long, winding threads spun around the fireplace."

Capricorn, (the Goatman hated that nickname) *Those children you scared will be spreading your tale throughout the town. Even if they are not believed, you will be known. Is that not enough?*

The Goatman sniffed, standing up straight. "I suppose it is. For now."

The Goatman walked off towards the bridge, guided only by the light of the moon and the stars.

FOUNDATION STANDARD ORIENTATION MANUAL :

--- LOCKDOWN PROCEDURES ---

Revision 3.9 [Site-81]. Electronic copy.

Submitted to Foundation Records Database. Archived File.

All field personnel and Foundation staff have been issued a clearance-specific copy of this manual as of 15/03/17. Do not copy or re-distribute.

UTILISATION:

The purpose of this documentation is to inform personnel of basic procedures during an on-site lockdown following a compromise of security or containment. Advanced

copies, including re-containment protocol manuals, may be accessed by requesting such from your immediate supervisor.

Refer to this manual as your most reliable source. Lockdown procedures must be fast in order to achieve effectiveness, utilising speed as an advantage over the adversary threat. Misunderstanding basic regulations can endanger everyone you work with. Due to this, site administration requires all personnel to be familiar with this manual.

DISTRIBUTION:

Unless directed otherwise, staff are reminded that the content of this manual is strictly classified, and remains site-specific in context. Distribution across sites is a Type-3a offence. Exchange/viewing of copies provided to separate personnel is also prohibited.

Staff suspecting a breach of this regulation are to contact administration immediately.

LOCKDOWN PROCEDURES

Over the years we have come to accept that an entirely secure facility, equally protected from both internal and external forces, is an impossible equilibrium to correctly achieve. This is why lockdowns are an integrated part of our Foundation system. Entering a mindset in which a goal of absolute control exists is a futile effort. It is important to consider that there is always more that can turn out wrong than right. Not relying on procedures such as these would be a complete denial of the wrong. The

Foundation is built upon grounds of acceptance, not ignorance. Don't be ignorant.

- Dr. Sawer, Head of Site Safety and Containment Regulations Board.

OVERVIEW

A lockdown is defined as a varying emergency procedure in response to a containment breach or loss of security. Lockdowns are requested using LID (Lockdown Intensity Degree) codes, and issued from automated O4 systems. Once evaluated, lockdowns are classified using Lockdown Degrees, which provides pre-created guidance on the appropriate response, such as AMTF (Armed Mobile Task Force) units and Automated Response Initiatives (ARIs), commissioned when appropriate to suppress the apparent threat.

BACKGROUND

Lockdowns first became official standard regulations following the 1931/03/12 containment breach, and multiple on-site accidents resulting in the severe loss of Foundation personnel, material, and vital assets. Since then, the Foundation has made substantial efforts to re-integrate a more secure, reliable and dependable methods of repressing internal instability among sites. Some of the first MTFs (Mobile Task Forces), such as Epsilon-11, were commissioned to advance against the increasing number of contained anomalous objects across the Foundation.

For a number of years, over the period known as the "deep waters", the Foundation was prone to regular breaches and loss of vital assets, due to **`influencing opposing factions`**, falling containment standards and disobedience of Foundation personnel, including the creation of the **`Chaos Insurgency`** in 1928, where the

lowering ethics of the Foundation provoked a unit to go A.W.O.L and re-form as an extremely hostile splinter-group. The response to containment breaches was eventually re-considered and altered by the O5 council in 1935.

Following the containment of multiple Keter-class anomalies in the 1980s, containment breach severity and frequency increased dramatically throughout certain Foundation facilities. New Armed Mobile Task Forces (AMTFs), such as Nu-7 and Eta-5, were founded with the goal of assisting in re-containment and repression of these new threats. Contemporary material science had not developed to a point that would allow for the effective economical containment of these entities. However, as technology advanced, the threats posed by these anomalies and the period known as the "reptile scares" were eventually mitigated by the mid-1990s.

One of the most recent periods involving a Foundation-wide lowering in containment safety involved the infamous **"two-naught-seven strikes"** throughout 2015, in which eighteen sites were attacked by the autonomously fast, possessive and senselessly lethal entity known as subject two-naught-seven, presumed to have been created by the Chaos Insurgency (CI) in 2011 as an uncontained and un-coordinated biological weapon against the Foundation. The strikes were most effective because they were governed by a complete lack of knowledge regarding a spontaneous attack, the loss of vital security MTF teams, and multiple encounters with civilian populations - attempting to expose Foundation secrecy. Subject two-naught-seven was last observed on the 8th September 2017 in a disused metro station, after assaulting 5 separate MTF divisions and subsequently disappearing under an approaching train.

O4 COMMAND SYSTEMS

Originally, lockdowns were ordered manually by the O5

council, as a response to a distress call triggered from a select facility. Following the scale of the Foundation expansion, registration and commission of any lockdown is now controlled by electronic systems, known as the O4.

Following the alert of a breach warning, the O4 will request authorisation from the O5 council. After 3 minutes of no response, the system will request authorisation from administration staff. If no valid response is received within 1 minute, the system will request authorisation from any foreign site. If no responses are confirmed after 4 minutes, the system will enter "light lockdown", sealing all doors, ventilation, utilities and power from the outside. If no response from any of the aforementioned sources if given within 20 minutes following, the site will be presumed lost or unrecoverable, and will as default trigger the automatic destruction of the site, through nuclear warheads (RED-600) or kinetic energy devices (BLACK-5). This process can be cancelled at any point by appropriate outside sources, but not by on-site staff to prevent corrupted intervention.

LOCKDOWN INTENSITY DEGREE

A Lockdown Intensity Degree (LID), refers to three values; a numerical and alphabetical character, and a set of specialised coordinates, indicating in total the precise and readable condition of an apparent site-lockdown. This designation code system is most effective when requesting the support of a **`re-containment MTF`** or other body unaware of the current situation. Incidents have occurred in the past involving a failure to understand the situation due to an extensive/unreadable description, leading to the creation of the LID system as an effective replacement, utilising speed and response time to maximise capability of an external MTF unit.

DECIPHERING

Deciphering a LID is short and simple. An example would be "3/A*/921-3-81". The first numerical value refers to the approximated number of un-contained anomalous objects, or other hostile combatants involved in the breach; the alphabetical value indicating the "intensity grade" [A, B, C, D]; and the string of integers specifying the affected areas and coordinates.

INTENSITY GRADE:

"Intensity grade" is considered one of the most vague aspects of the LID system, and is more appropriately utilised as a one-character description of the current intensity of the breach. "Grade-A" often is issued to illustrate a maximum-class priority, involving the possible escape of several Keter-class SCP objects, a substantial threat to public exposure, a requirement of the on-site nuclear devices to be detonated, or the complete loss of the facility. "Grade-D" may involve a minimal threat, with few Safe/Euclid SCP objects uncontained, or the loss of several escaped **D-Class personnel**.

On occasion, a LID code may be issued with an intensity grade followed by a unique character. "Grade A*", "Grade A+" or "Grade A-" each refer to an "evaluated" threat. "A+" is often used to warn of an escaped Large-Scale Aggressor (Such as **SCP-682**), suggesting a response of a heavily-armed battalion-strength MTF such as Eta-5 or Nu-7. "A-" refers to a possible threat of public exposure including loss of Foundation secrecy, advising for an MTF response such as **MTF-Gamma-5**. "A*" involves a dimensional or incorporeal threat, requesting support from a group advanced and specialised MTFs including **MTF-Zeta-9**, **MTF-Epsilon-11** or **MTF-Lambda-5**. In more complex incidents, multiple supporting-symbols can be used to provide further additional information at once.

"UNCONTAINED" UNIT:

The "uncontained unit" (first value) is not always accurate at indicating the quantity of hostile combatants. The value is likely to change continually on a ratio dependant on the "intensity grade", and issues an approximated, not definite number.

A high uncontained unit is also not necessarily a substantial threat. Many SCP objects are incapable of self-movement, but the value should be utilised as an affective measurement or "scale" of the breach, providing the estimated requirements/time to re-contain all escaped SCP objects.

AFFECTED AREAS:

The final unit, a string of integers specifying the affected areas is readable following the order: units, compounds, site. An example consists of "921-3-81". The first integer specifies the quantity of affected units, in this case, being 921 affected units. The second integer indicates the number of affected compounds, being 3. The final number states the site of interest, being **`Site-81`**. In total, the affected areas would read as "921 units affected in 3 compounds on Site-81". This system is considerably faster than providing specific coordinates, and has already been in usage since the first re-containment MTF units.

LOCKDOWN CLASSIFICATIONS

Lockdowns happen in a multitude of ways, and there are an even larger multitude of things you need to consider as a response. Categorising stops people panicking, and conveys a clear description much faster and more effective than a conversation.

- Dr. Hayward, Retired Head of Site Safety Board.

A lockdown is further assessed once MTF response teams arrive, and given a specific Lockdown classification, including a more complete description. A lockdown classification has multiple purposes, setting the definite priority of the lockdown on a scale, selecting specific MTFs, authorising ARIs (Automated Response Initiatives)[1], and providing confirmation regarding code of conduct to the Ethics Committee. Lockdown classifications are set into 9 "categories", labeled by characters taken from the Ancient Greek Language. This system is used universally across sites.

CATEGORY: Γ-Gamma:

Category Γ-Gamma is the lowest priority of lockdown degree, used as a vague category to define a memetic[2], infohazardous[3] or cognitohazardous[4] threat, one standard on-site staff are unable to currently suppress without foreign intervention.

The response to Category Γ-Gamma limits to small-scale unarmed MTF responses, such as **`MTF-Eta-10`** ("See No Evil") or **`MTF-Eta-11`** ("Savage Beasts"). Staff involved in a Category Γ-Gamma are to be aware of potentially compromised staff, and refrain from intervention with personnel targeted by memetic/ obsessive effects. For prevention of memetic agents indirectly escaping the site, GRAY-17 will take appropriate actions to contain select units and block all auditory and visual communication methods to the outside that exhibit cognitohazardous properties.

CATEGORY: δ-Delta:

Category δ-Delta is a frequent category of lockdown often associated with a small-scale containment breach; including several escaped sentient[5]/hazardous anomalous objects, such as an intelligent threat, or one capable of organised resistance. This may also include a minor site raid from a hostile faction, or the escape of

multiple D-Class assailants.

Response rates to Category δ-Delta will be given priority over Category Γ-Gamma. More sizeable AMTFs will also be allocated to suppress Category δ-Delta lockdowns, the most active in the last years being **MTF-Epsilon-11** ("Nine-Tailed-Fox"). The ARI, GRAY-17[6], will also allocate a noticeably greater enforcement of its capabilities, however refrain from closure of ventilation or entrance gate mechanics until the threat is further evaluated.

CATEGORY: Θ-Theta:

Category Θ-Theta breaches may refer to a threat derived from a bio-hazardous[7], infectious, or other contamination source[8]. These may include highly-infectious microorganisms[9], biological weapons, or anomalous self-sustaining reactions[10] capable of dramatically increasing in severity unless immediately countered.

The standard listed MTF allocated to suppress Category Θ-Theta lockdowns remains **MTF-Beta-7** ("Maz Hatters"). GRAY-17 will lock entrance gates, block ventilation and sewage systems, close select units and cut power lines/other utilities to prevent spread of airborne hazardous substances. In the case of an anomalous pandemic, MTF divisions will act rapidly in the containment and liquidation of areas affected by such anomalies. Surviving staff will be quarantined and examined for possible contamination. Incidents involving a catastrophic self-sustaining reaction are to be contained with maximum efficiency to prevent further spread into an "unrecoverable" situation.

CATEGORY: I-Iota:

Category I-Iota lockdowns define the parameters in which a Large-Scale Aggressor (LSA) such as **SCP-2059**, may escape containment and pose a

substantial threat to the site.

Responses for Category I-Iota lockdowns are of upper priority and almost all available battalion-strength AMTFs can be allocated at any time, such as **MTF-Nu-7** ("Hammer Down") and **MTF-Eta-5** ("Jaeger Bombers"). **MTF-Gamma-5** ("Red Herrings") may also be dispatched to liquidate incidents involving possible public exposure/ sightings. I-Iota lockdowns are frequent and well-planned as a recurring threat from SCP-682. ARIs, such as RED-600, possess official control to detonate the Alpha warheads above the site following a "cold-zero" containment breach. Class-B priorities have the magnitude to on occasion result in substantial loss of personnel and vital assets.

CATEGORY: ρ-Rho:

Category ρ-Rho lockdowns are the given response to the escape of a NTT (Non-Terminable Threat) such as **SCP-096**. A NNT is defined as a threat that, given the circumstances or present resources, is unable to be terminated by response teams during the incident, or are otherwise invulnerable to any form of attack.

Category ρ-Rho lockdowns are severe and require immediate response from a specialised re-containment AMTF, such as MTF-Epsilon-11 ("Nine-Tailed-Fox") or MTF-Sigma-23 ("Backup Required"). Techniques used to deal with Category ρ-Rho breaches do not always originate from direct force, and often require luring, bating, or otherwise inducing the threat into a docile state before capture and movement back to a secure location.

CATEGORY: Y-Upsilon:

Class Y-Upsilon lockdowns indicate the assault of a highly-organised major assimilation-force.

Responses will include battalion-force AMTFs, such as

MTF-Nu-7 ("Hammer Down"). Defensive ARIs, such as AMBER-710, AMBER-22 and GREEN-888, with be indiscriminately deployed during the holding of the site. Should the site be lost, BLACK-5 will request for total destruction of the immediate vicinity surrounding the affected facilities.

Chaos Insurgency and **Serpent's Hand** raids are among the most frequent, and staff are reminded that most attacks from smaller organisations such as these will originate from within the site as a false member of staff. Personnel are most familiar with this form of raid.

Should larger organisations mount a hostile attack, such as the **GOC (Global Occult Coalition)**, responses will include battalion-force AMTFs, such as MTF-Nu-7 ("Hammer Down"). Defensive ARIs, such as AMBER-710, AMBER-22 and GREEN-888, with be indiscriminately deployed during the holding of the site. Should the site be lost, BLACK-5 will request for total destruction of the immediate vicinity surrounding the affected facilities. Large-scale raids will most likely originate from outside the site.

CATEGORY: Φ-Phi:

Class Φ-Phi is used to designate a lockdown involving a dimensional threat, including a spatial or temporal alteration[11], continuity error[12], incorporeal objects[13], trans-dimensional entities[14], or objects capable of breaking fundamental natural laws and processes.

Lockdowns categorised as "Φ-Phi" are of upper-priority. Listed AMTFs include **MTF-Zeta-9** ("Mole Rats"), **MTF-Lambda-5** ("White Rabbits") and **MTF-Mu-13** ("Ghostbusters"). Category Φ-Phi lockdowns are often unpredictable, and require both planning and appropriate field-knowledge. Due to the irregularity and at time irrationality, Φ-Phi lockdowns are extremely vague and MTFs are advised to make substantial preparations. To

assist, MAGENTA-33 will automatically "lock dimensions" to limit the effects of incorporeal or dimensional threats.

CATEGORY: Ψ-Psi:

Category Ψ-Psi lockdowns have only been submitted on three occasions. Once to deal with a CI[15] assimilation force, second to prevent the 08/06 leakage, and third during the infamous 03/12 breach. In order to define a Category Ψ-Psi lockdown, the threat must be of a level capable of fatally exposing, or entirely eradicating the Foundation organisation.

Parameters of guidance regarding a Category Ψ-Psi lockdown have been entirely classified, and remains a subject of the O5 council, however staff can expect that the detonation of the Alpha warheads and the granting of the BLACK-5 protocol. Yes, a significant threat to all personnel will occur during a Category Ψ-Psi lockdown, but the council stresses the severity that the situation must pertain before the granting of the BLACK-5 protocol and subsequent loss.

CATEGORY: Ω-Omega

A Category Ω-Omega lockdown is mostly undefined, a protocol given to highest members of the O5 Council during a situation of extreme crisis, detailing the response to a XK or ZK class end-of-the-world scenario.

It is still disputed whether any member of the Foundation entirely understands the directives of a Category Ω-Omega lockdown, or if the class exists at all.

AUTOMATED RESPONSE INITIATIVES

Automated Response Initiatives (ARIs) are mechanised systems providing a specific counter-measure against a

suspected breach.

Deployment of an ARI will be applied regarding the Lockdown Degree issued to the breach. The higher the degree, the more prevalent the ARI.

RED-600:

RED-600 is the initiative program responsible for the manually-confirmed detonation of the on-site Alpha warheads located (in cases of subterranean sites) on the surface of the facility. RED-600 is authorised only in high-threat situations exceeding Class-B, being an effective method of terminating all life directly above, while protecting most sites with underground blast-shielding and remaining mostly intact after deployment.

BLACK-5:

BLACK-5 is authorised only by O5 council members, following the issue of a Class-A Lockdown Degree. BLACK-5 is issued partial control in the immediate and autonomous detonation of the Omega kinetic warheads[16] located underneath the main facility. [Further information regarding the BLACK-5 protocol has been removed as of 03/11/ by the O5 council and Ethics committee. Requesting access to this removed information can be attained through contact of your immediate supervisor.]

AMBER-22:

AMBER-22, or the Visual And Light Impairment System, is a program applying sensual impairment, such as strobe lights and high-pitch audio to disorientate and repress hostile combatants. AMBER-22 is most often utilised when facing external threats such as raids from hostile factions, or entities responding to a standard human sensual environment.

AMBER-710:

AMBER-710 is a site-specific program responsible for utilising allocated electrostatic tesla-gates, electrocuting or stunning entities or objects moving at an irregular pace not similar to human movement. On a number of occasions, AMBER-710 has resulted in the stunning of staff suffering from movement problems, disabilities, or other impairments causing a significant variation in movement speed. Due to this, AMBER-710 has gained an infamous reputation, and has been moved to requiring at minimum of a Class-C Lockdown Degree to prevent further unnecessary casualties. Disabled staff are continually reminded to ask a site administrator to close the tesla gates before proceeding through an active one.

GRAY-17:

GRAY-17 has control over the closure/lockdown of all door, utility and ventilation system, and in direct connection with the O4 system for maximum response time. GRAY-17 can be authorised on any grade higher than Class-E, and will automatically close select units, compounds and sites to varying intensities dependant on the Lockdown Degree, including site gates, sewage systems, power lines, radio connection and issue Protocol 15-A on all data banks, causing most to enter deep-storage. GRAY-17 is effective due to the rate at which it can respond to a breach, and is one of the most essential response initiatives for any site.

GREEN-888:

GREEN-888 represents a further infamous response initiative (a common subject of the Ethics Committee) is in direct and full control over the release of gaseous agents into compounds affected by containment breaches. The GREEN-888 program utilises multiple agents, including sedatives, reversible-paralytics, nerve agents, vesicants and intoxicants. Separate agents are utilised for specific Lockdown Degrees and in varying states of emergency, or to combat specific evaluated

threats. The most frequently applied are reversible-paralytics, allowing retrieval staff but not entire elimination of the threat. Areas flushed with vesicants or intoxicants are designed for repression, while nerve agents are used for direct and lethal results.

MAGENTA-33:

MAGENTA-33, or the Reality Initiative, controls the "reality anchors" influencing the hume level[17] within sites containing trans-dimensional objects. These "reality anchors" essentially combine dimensions, "locking" dimensional entities into the same dimensional space as site guards and MTFs, limiting the effects of objects including **SCP-106**.

EVACUATION

Evacuation of a site is the practice in which staff will withdraw from affected facilities following a lockdown. Evacuations will proceed within the "Evacuation Phase", the period in which threats are still mostly developing, and have not yet pertained an intensity requiring the closure of the evacuation shelters.

GUIDANCE

Staff involved in any lockdown are to seek evacuation as their highest priority. Detailed evacuation plans and prints can be found in Administration and Security. Smaller plans are also present in each compound. These will direct staff towards the nearest evacuation shelter.

Armed site security staff will also assist in the evacuation process, and divide a team for each affected compound. Teams will accompany personnel to evacuation shelters, and attempt to repress developing threats until MTF units arrive. Staff are advised to follow security teams.

Evacuation shelters can be closed manually if the threat reaches a substantial level, or otherwise given a timeout-lock for 2-3 minutes. Speed and arrival time is critical. Personnel not inside an evacuation shelter before closure are no longer a priority of security, and are handed to the responsibility of MTF units entering the facility. Staff in this situation are advised to hide and not retaliate against threats, or intervene in any way with a struggle or death of another member of staff. Self-preservation is required above the safety of others. Do not startle, distract or expose MTF teams.

Once inside evacuation shelters staff will be registered. Personnel unaccounted for will be added to a staff list for MTF units to retrieve and recover. Staff are reminded that they in the eyes of MTF units are of second priority. A list will also be sent to MTF teams of contained SCP objects and assets within the site that may or may not be an active threat.

Extraction of personnel will commence once all threats have been neutralised or re-contained. Personnel will be examined and quarantined for further evaluation until they are safe from possible contagions, memetic/ obsessive effects or post-traumatic stress.

RECOVERY

The recovery operation can last extended periods of time depending upon the extent of damage or public exposure. Recovery includes the restoration of the site, application of amnestics, re-containment of anomalous objects, registration of staff, evaluation of causes, and liquidation of events.

EVALUATED CAUSES

Causes of breaches and subsequent lockdowns can be categorised into the following classes:

- Failure of automated systems, such as gate mechanics, specialised containment systems, or data corruption.
- Infiltration or incursion from a hostile **Group of Interest, (GOI)**. Members of the Serpent's Hand and Chaos Insurgency utilise this method of attack with terrorising effect.
- Disloyalties, unawareness, misjudgements or general faults of containment staff.
- Underestimated scale of threat and needs for containment of a specific object.
- Uncontainable anomalous objects.
- Direct assault or raids from a foreign force.
- Memetic/obsessive effects or manipulation of staff. This may include actions forced-upon staff members without consent.

Investigation teams will utilise electronic logs, security footage and witnesses among many methods to identify the cause.

INVOLVED PERSONNEL

Personnel involved in the recovery and liquidation operation following a breach are classified into specific teams, each identifiable by a select symbol. This symbol accounts for both colour-blind and visually-impaired staff, and will be found on the uniform of the personnel of interest.

MTF/AMTF units are identifiable from the triple-red lines symbol. Their role in the recovery process is in securing the facility from hostile combatants/anomalous objects, and in the evacuation of surviving staff members. Most MTF teams are armed, and those heavily-armed with military-grade vehicles and specialised weaponry known as AMTFs. MTF teams will only participate in the immediate response and recovery period after a lockdown.

Registration teams are identifiable from the blue ring symbol. Members are responsible for the accounting of surviving staff, lost assets, neutralised anomalous objects, and personnel mortalities/casualties.

Liquidation teams are the backbone of the recovery operation, identifiable from the yellow cross symbol. Members specialise into multiple sub-teams and roles, including application of amnestics on public exposure, clearance of destroyed facilities, treatment of injured personnel, and evaluation of the total damage.

Object-movement teams are identifiable for the orange dash symbol, responsible for the re-containment and movement of anomalous objects, and often work in-turn with MTF units and other field personnel/agents to secure and evaluate the threat. These teams will be present for the early part of the recovery operation.

Investigation teams are not widely recognised and often hide their role for security measures, but are most commonly attributed to a green triangle symbol, and are involved in the evaluation of events leading up to the lockdown, and the ultimate cause. Investigation teams utilise security footage, electronic logs and witnesses (among many methods) to identify the aforementioned.

RE-CONTAINMENT PROTOCOLS

[THIS SECTION IS ADDRESSED TO OBJECT-MOVEMENT TEAMS ONLY.]

Re-containment protocols are the methods object-movement teams should follow in order to obtain secure hold over a specific anomalous object. Each threat will have unique re-containment protocols, and the same method will not apply to all.

Large Scale Aggressors (LSAs) are some of the most fundamentally challenging objects to successfully acquire and re-contain with minimal loss. Multiple encounters

with SCP-682 suggest the most effective method of securing is through distraction and luring. LSAs are known to rarely reach a docile state, and may have to be surrounded and forcibly constrained by multiple battalion-strength AMTFs once lured into an appropriate location for acquisition. LSAs may reach a critical level of public exposure, and require considerate re-directing away from a nearby civilian population. Evaluation and exploitation of the threat is critical. Sedatives, depending upon availability, are also a viable option. In almost all cases, total neutralisation of the threat should always be considered.

Dimensional threats are those that may involve a spatial or temporal alteration, space-time rupture, trans-dimensional entities, incorporeal objects, separate dimensional existences, or objects primarily un-constricted by natural laws and processes. Methods of securing include luring, such as the practice used on SCP-106, or reality-anchorage; the process in which reality anchors will merge dimensions, reducing, removing or halting the effects of a trans-dimensional entity, and merging the spatial existence of general dimensional anomalies. Dimensional threats are more often than not lost during a breach if not immediately prioritised, and at times are expendable. These threats are seen as being a damaging combination of complexity and severity, and require extensive background knowledge before intervening.

Non-Terminable Threats (NTTs) are defined by an inability to be terminated, and as such neutralisation is never an appropriate option. Escapes involving NTTs are complicated and require extensive evaluation before action while still accounting for maximum speed of response. Breaches involving that of SCP-096, suggest a docile state can be achieved if effectively dealt with. Converting a NTT into a docile state allows for a fast and clean acquisition. Methods include sedation, allowing the entity to achieve purpose (with relative consideration, if a

purpose is required at all), manipulation, hypnosis, or other object-specific actions.

Memetic, infohazardous or cognitohazardous threats often meet the requirements for a well-evaluated and assessed plan of action with little account for response speed. Memetic objects may need handling from sensually-inept personnel invulnerable to the danger of viewing, hearing, or touching. By definition, these effects can spread if not well-contained and isolated from site staff unaware of the object. Mediums of transferring these memetic effects into a civilian population must also be removed where necessary and well-considered beforehand.

Contamination sources must be acted upon swiftly and resourcefully. Most teams will divide into separate roles, preventing the spreading of the contagion while also suppressing the initial source. These may include re-animated organisms, self-sustaining reactions, contagious/harmful entities or objects, anomalous infectious diseases, sources of anomalous toxins, carcinogens, ionised radiation, biological weapons or fungal species. Appropriate hazardous-materials suits should be worn corresponding with the apparent threat(s). Although the role of MTFs is in suppression and isolation of the source and affected areas from civilian populations, quarantining of contagious persons and re-containment of the initial source is a responsibility of the object-movement teams. Threats such as these must be dealt with through exact meticulous and remorseless action in remaining ahead of the risks involved.

END OF MATERIAL

Footnotes
1. See Automated Response Initiatives below.
2. Concept of self-replicating information.
3. Information that may harm those with the very knowing of it.
4. Visual threat that may harm those upon seeing.
5. Sensually-aware. Do not confuse with sapient. Includes examples such asSCP-1913andSCP-1048.
6. See Automated Response Initiatives below.
7. SeeSCP-2075,SCP-1100,SCP-2870.
8. SeeSCP-059.
9. SeeSCP-008,SCP-020,SCP-1121.
10. SeeSCP-2102.
11. Alteration spatially (in space) or temporally (in time).
12. SeeSCP-196.
13. Objects not composed of matter, or having no material existence.
14. SeeSCP-675
15. Chaos Insurgency
16. Suspected kinetic-energy weapon, utilising the conversion of kinetic force into thermal force to devastating capabilities.
17. Measure of "reality" in any given spatial area.

Locks

The first time I came home to an unlocked door, I figured I'd just forgotten to lock it when I went to work. I've done that before.

This morning, I made sure to lock it - jiggled the knob a few times just in case - and thought nothing of it until I returned.

I combed the house. Nothing was out of place, no murderers stashed in my closet, no valuables missing. I slept fitfully that night, hugging a baseball bat to myself. When I woke up, I found conditions to be the same as before: there was absolutely nothing unusual.

That night I slept with the bat again. In the morning, I poked through every nook and cranny of every room in my house. Nothing. I locked my door and left for work. And when I got home, it was unlocked. This continued for weeks.

As weeks turned into months I became used to the state of my door; even got to appreciate it. I liked that if I stayed out late, I didn't have to fumble for my keys in the dark.

One night, when I returned home, my door was locked. After a good deal of messing about with my keys, I finally managed to unlock it and go inside. I clicked on the light - then I spotted the tiny writing on my wall.

"you need me."

Personal Log of Agent AA

Personal Log of: Agent A A , Mobile Task Force Omega-7, "Pandora's Box."

Date: October 10,

I shoulda taken the blue pill.

When Dr. told me that he had an opening for a doctoral research assistant with a high-level government agency, I thought he meant the CIA or NSA or something. I never expected… well, this.

This job is a nightmare. I haven't seen my family in months. I sleep down the hall from a field agent who has a giant gear sticking out of his neck after a bad run-in with some nano-agent. Thirty minutes ago, a guy ran in and told me to grab a mop: someone decided to feed the seven-legged dog a bit of cheese, and the stink is horrific. Sometimes I wonder whether I'm dead and in hell.

No, hell would be too sane compared to this madness.

At least I don't have to deal directly with any of the SCPs: my job is monitoring staff on site for signs of fatigue and PTSD, and I'm telling you, that's a full-time job. When your nine-to-five is trying to keep Things That Should Not Be from getting out and killing everyone with some mind-bending bizarro power, you tend to get a bit edgy. Had a patient the other day tried to put a knife through the back of his own hand: he'd been working around some thing that apparently gets into your bloodstream and eats you from the inside. He'd been getting less than four hours of sleep a night, and apparently got so messed up he got hallucinations, started thinking he'd been infected even though he checked out clean. Had to knock him out and keep him strapped to a bed overnight while he finally got some rest. Then he jumped back in and went back to his job like nothing happened.

Insane.

It's better than what has to do, though. He's trying to build a psychological profile of some freak bastard who apparently can't die and can make swords out of thin air. Yeah, just like that. Seriously, what is with this place? It's like some sort of insane story dreamed up by a fevered madman. My god.

Gonna try and get some sleep now. Hopefully I'll manage to do so without those freaky rolling eye things running in and staring at me all night.

Date: October 11,

So I walk in this morning, and Dr. Franks tells me that is dead, and now I'm in charge of his project. Joy.

Spent the day going over the file on this **SCP-076**. My god, it's worse than I thought. This guy is not only a complete psychopath, he's got all the powers of some freakish adolescent fantasy. How the hell am I supposed to analyze someone who doesn't like to be analyzed and can kill an elephant with his bare hands?

This is gonna take a little finessing. I've got an idea, though.

I met Josie the Half-Cat today. I petted her and she rubbed up against my leg. Weirdest feeling having a cat rub hindquarters that aren't there against your shin.

Date: October 12,

My idea worked. TOO well.

I thought I'd gain some rapport with 076 by chatting with him over a game or something, something to break the ice. As a warrior type, I thought he might enjoy a board game, something that needs strategy. I chose Stratego, since I've never been a fan of chess, and I've never really enjoyed Go or checkers. He seemed amiable enough, although he kept staring at me hard the whole time I was explaining the rules.

Tried to break the ice and get him to talk more about himself between turns. Didn't work. He was totally engrossed in the game, trying to break apart my strategy. After a while, he got me doing it too. I'd intended to let him win, but about nine turns in, I realized that he was using a really simple tactic: he'd taken his Marshal and was using it to beat down everything by itself, carving a giant swath of destruction in my ranks. I managed to lure him into attacking my Bomb, blew up his Marshal. He then sent his Miners in to take out my Flag, but it wasn't there: I'd used the Bombs as a lure to draw him away from my left, where my Scouts and Miners were. His Flag wasn't too hard to find, and then my Scout ran in and captured it for the win, behind a screen of Miners who disabled his Bombs.

He got really quiet, and I thought he was going to get mad, but then he smiled. "Congratulations," he said, shaking my hand (my fingers still hurt even two hours later). "You are in."

"In what?"

"Task Force Omega-7. You defeated me in a battle of wits and honor, and now you are one of my chosen elite."

That wasn't what I'd planned at all. "I hadn't intended to join your group. I'm a scholar, not a warrior."

"Now you are both." He clapped my shoulder so hard it bruised and walked away.

I tried to get out of it with the section chief. He refused to allow it. "You've got a perfect chance to do a psych profile on Seventy Six," he said. "You'll be around him day and night. A perfect chance for long-term observation."

So ummmm… yeah. Tomorrow I'm checking in for basic training with a bunch of freaks and maniacs who hang around with a completely indestructable killing machine and go straight into the most dangerous situations the Foundation encounters with the intent of kicking its ass. Me, a desk jockey geek with a Masters in Psychology. I guess I could transfer out, but given SCP-076's history of behavior around people he considers weak, that might be career suicide. Or even actual suicide.

I'm so gonna die.

Date: October 27,

I'm not dead yet.

My first day of training, however, I wished I was. I shoulda known something was wrong when I showed up and saw about guys (and a few girls) standing around wearing tiny shorts and tank tops: none of them seemed to have an ounce of fat on their bodies, and a couple looked like they could beat the fuck out of Arnold Schwartze… shwan… the Governator… in a no-holds barred brawl. And that's when I show up with my slight beer belly and wire-frame glasses and milquetoast smile, and everyone turns and looks at me like I'm something rather nasty that the dog just did on the carpet.

Seventy Six started them off with a five mile run, ran along next to the group… I should say jogged along… hitting the slowest guy with a rattan stick the whole time to encourage him to run faster. I've still got the welts. By the time it was over, I was nearly passed out on my feet, and then Seventy Six started having us do pushups and pullups and other exercises that I'm convinced were originally developed by the Spanish Inquisition to deal with particularly stubborn heretics.

So I went to bed hurting in places I didn't know I hurt, but if I thought that was pain, I was in for a treat. The next day, Seventy Six started me on some Israeli martial art called "Krav Maga," which I'm convinced is Hebrew for "Kill the Fucking Goyim," no matter what Wikipedia tells me. The highlight of that day's training was running the fuck away after B decided to pick up a fucking ROCK and chase me with it. I think I actually pissed myself.

The next day was actually worse.

This is the first chance I've had to write in my diary for a long time: I've just been too exhausted to do more than pass out every chance I get. But Seventy Six told me to take the weekend off. I slept the first thirty hours of it, and god, was it worth it.

He tells me that tomorrow is my final exam. I don't know what that's gonna be like. I'm not looking forward to it at all.

Date: October 28,

I wash and I wash, but I can't seem to get it out.

Seventy Six met me alone outside the testing chamber. I was a bit surprised to find any of the members of Omega Seven weren't there. "The last test you take alone," Seventy Six said.

He walked me into the room, and there was a guy tied to a chair: Class D Personnel from the looks of his jumpsuit. The entire room was very clean. Tiled floor, tiled walls, sprinklers in the ceiling, a big drain in the center. There was a tray of surgical instruments next to him.

"Pick up one of the blades, any one," Seventy Six told me, "and start cutting."

I started cutting the ropes. Seventy Six hit me in the face. "No. Start CUTTING."

I dropped the scalpel. "I can't."

He reached into his shadows and pulled out… it was long, and it had a lot of hooks and saw edges and ripping blades to it, whatever it was. "You will. Or I will tire of this entertainment and find some elsewhere. Probably by killing as many of your people as possible, saving you for last, so that you will see them all die."

I didn't answer. He looked at me for a long long while. Then he went to the door.

I think I screamed when I grabbed the knife and stabbed it into the guy. I'm pretty sure I did, because I tasted pennies, which means I'm pretty sure that some of the poor bastard's blood got in my mouth… Seventy Six smiled at that and turned around. "Good," he said. "Now use the hook to pull out his eyes."

… I don't think I can say any more, but… he screamed the whole

time, and by the time it was done, I was gone. Stupid of me, I should have seen it coming. Break down my defenses, make me pliable to commands, classic example of mental reprogramming. I learned this in freshman year at for crying out loud, but I fell for it.

He didn't seem pleased. He told me that I needed to get used to killing. He told me to go down to the labs every day, choose a cat or a monkey or a dog - no rats or mice - and kill one every day. Vivisect it alive. Really let myself feel the blood spurt. Said I needed to put aside my weaknesses. Learn to become harder. Stronger.

A monster, that's what he wants me to become. A sociopath. Just like him. No empathy, no guilt, no feelings other than fear and anger. A monster.

I won't let him beat me.

Date: October 31,

Happy Halloween.

I was in the lab doing a live dissection of a rhesus monkey when B knocked on the door. "Meet up in the deployment bay in fifteen," she said. "We've got a mission."

I gave the screaming monkey a lethal injection of adrenaline into its heart: it wasn't hard, given the fact that I'd already cracked the ribcage and laid the organ open. B seemed a bit sympathetic as she waited for me to wash the blood off my apron. "We've got an active SCP somewhere in the area," she said. "Seems dormant, but Command believes it could go active at any moment. Keter-class."

"What's our cover story?" I asked.

"We don't need one," she said, tossing me a towel. "It's Halloween."

The others were suited up by the time I reached the staging area, and we really did look like freaks. The Hostile Environment Protective Isolation Suits (HEPIS) are designed to give you complete protection from all threats biological, chemical, and to also

do a decent job against telepathic and mundane threats as well. In addition to the standard kevlar weave and biohazard suits, they contain a Telekill Alloy lined helmet and [DATA EXPUNGED]. End result is it makes you look like a super-soldier out of some videogame, all bulked up and scary-looking with a giant gun that M F wouldn't mind using against some L . Seventy Six just wore his usual outfit, of course, which was scary enough.

That was the first time I met Iris, too: She was the only other one who wasn't wearing a uniform, was in fact dressed up like a video game character (whom I later found out was J from " ") She had this big camera around her neck and she was wearing a very sensible leather jacket and pants. When I saw her, she was arranging some polaroid pictures in various pockets around her vest and pants. "In case I need them" she said.

We piled into two vans and drove down to . Fun times. A lot of young people standing around wearing fancy costumes and generally having a great time in a giant three-block outdoor party. We got a lot of attention, and even posed for a few pictures *[REVIEWER'S NOTE: Upon Covert insertion and review of photographs, it has been determined that no essential data has leaked. Termination order for civilian bystanders cancelled]*. We moved fast, though: our guy on-site was waiting for us, and Seventy Six looked like he was going to snap and kill some poor drunk valley-girl dressed up like L C who wouldn't stop trying to hit on the tall, brooding, strong goth guy with the realistic-looking prop sword.

The target was in the sewers underneath the party: SCP operatives had managed to trap it in a section of the tunnels, but eventually it was going to make a break for it. We met up with our guy on-site, who was guarding the only exit door. Two operatives set up claymore mines while Iris snapped a picture of the trigger mechanisms. "If it tries to open the door without me reaching through the photo and flipping the switches, it'll blow itself up," she said, sliding the photo into a waterproof bag and slipping it safely into a breast pocket.

Seventy-Six led one team, the other two were led by W and K . Iris and I were with Seventy Six in the "Special Elements"

squad. I stuck close to Seventy-Six before Iris waved me back. "Don't get too close," she said, making a gesture like swinging a sword. "Sometimes, he swings without checking his blood circle first." I took a couple of steps back after that.

Seventy Six seemed to change the moment we went into the danger area: he leaned forward, like a panther, sniffing the air and smiling as he ran a finger along the slick, moldy brick wall. I wasn't so happy. I was in a big, bulky suit that cut down my vision to the sides and back, hearing the sound of my own breathing and the pounding of my own heart. The flashlight didn't light up the darkness enough, and my night vision didn't help either: just made things even spookier with its grainy green appearance.

So when it grabbed me by the neck and dragged me down into the sewage, all I could really do was scream a lot. My helmet was sealed, and I had my own O2 supply that kicked in the moment I got dragged under, so I wasn't in danger of drowning. Choking, yes, the thing's tentacles were grabbing me around the neck and squeezing the life out of me. I had barely enough time to pull the trigger of my gun, feel nothing go off, and realize that I'd forgotten to take it off safety before I blacked out.

I came to in the van, surrounded by a bunch of guys who were looking really tired and beat-up. There was something huge covered in a tarp and strapped down by bungie cords in the middle of the vehicle, something that looked like a cross between a squid, a bicycle, and an MC Escher painting. Seventy Six was nowhere to be found. "What happened?" I managed to croak out.

"You got grabbed," W said. "Able killed it. He's still down there supervising the burning of the eggs and looking for more of them."

"I guess I screwed up, huh?"

"Nah, you did fine." He put a cigarette between my lips and lit it with his zippo. "You lived. That's all we can really ask out of a first-timer."

Cleaning my suit afterwards was a pain: they look kinda like space suits, but they don't put elimination tubes in them, and my bowels did what bowels will do when you get the shit scared out of you

(Note to self: consider wearing Depends the next time I go into the field). Seventy Six didn't say a word to me afterwards. No one did. But everyone's thinking it: what the hell am I doing in this group? I'm not a soldier. I can't shoot, I can't fight, all I can do is write stupid papers trying to psychoanalyze that which can't be analyzed by mere psychology.

So what the hell am I doing here?

Date: November 19,

Killed three cats today in the lab. The process seems to be getting easier, which kinda scares me: the screaming and mewling doesn't bother me as much as it used to. Maybe I should try burning them alive, next time. Trying to make myself feel something. Revulsion. Fear. Anger. Self-Loathing. Anything's better than just… emptiness.

We did a mission in a quiet little town today. Mining town outside . By the time we got there, though, about half the town was infected: they all had these things growing out of their eye sockets that made them look like they were weeping blood. We tried shooting them, but they just regenerated the damaged parts. We tried using fire, but it just seemed to make the stuff grow faster, made the infected people explode with the force of a hand grenade, scattering spores all over the place: that's how we lost Y . Tried a few other things: [DATA EXPUNGED] We eventually switched tactics after L rolled a VX grenade into an infected house: she'd confused it for an incendiary, as it turned out, but it worked. The nerve gas seemed to react to the infection somehow, kill it cleanly, but it also killed the host as well, made them violently reject the infected body parts: heart, eyes, lungs, liver.

Able ordered a resupply and regroup. We traded our incendiaries for nerve gas bombs, kind of like roach foggers. The procedure was to cover the buildings with plastic isolation sheets to seal them up, toss in a half-dozen bombs, wait about an hour for the stuff to really permeate, then move in and mop up the leftovers as needed. At least half the casualties were clearly uninfected: civilians who'd holed up in their rooms and apartments waiting to be rescued.

The elementary school was the worst. There was this one teacher who'd barricaded the doors against the infected, had kept her kindergarten class blissfully ignorant and safe, playing games and listening to music while the monsters roamed around outside. I saw her through the second-story window as I started setting up the covers: she met my eyes, and the look on her face told me she knew what was gonna happen next. I saw her tell her class something, I couldn't tell what, then she walked away from the window.

I was the first one through that door. There were a dozen five-year olds laying on their little beds, blissfully sleeping: the nerve gas had killed them cleanly and instantly while they napped. The teacher was seated at her desk, sitting upright with her head bowed as if she were just taking a rest. She had a mug in her hand, said something like "World's Greatest Teacher," had a crayon-style drawing of a little girl hugging an older lady in a blue dress. There were tears in her eyes. Could have been condensation from the nerve gas.

There was an infected on the roof: the gas must not have permeated high enough to completely kill him. He was hacking up his lungs and twitching a bit, but he wasn't dead, could still walk, and he lunged towards me as I moved towards him. I think he might have been a janitor, he was wearing a blue jumpsuit, and his left wrist had a compound fracture with the bone sticking out. I shot him in the head. Then I kicked the hell out of him with my steel-toed boot. His eye fell out after the fifth kick, so I stomped on it. It popped like a grape.

We were all really quiet coming back, except Able. Seventy Six was his usual cheerful self (sarcasm sarcasm). The rest of us… well, we're just soldiers, not monsters. Wiping out the town had to be done, and an airstrike would have had too much risk of letting the gas fly downwind, hit and kill another ten thousand poor souls. Explosives could have set off a giant chain reaction, spread spores all across half the continent. We did what needed to be done, but we're not required to feel good about it.

B came into the lab a few minutes ago just as I'd started cremating the remains. She looked tired. Asked me if I couldn't sleep either. I realized it was almost 2am. She offered to stay up with me in my room. As soon as I wash the blood off my hands, I

might take her up on that.

Date: November 24,

Happy Thanksgiving! Back when I lived in the Real World, the most annoying thing about Turkey Day was hearing my dad demand that we all say at least one thing we were thankful for this year. Well. I've got a few things to be thankful for. I'm thankful that I'm not dead. I'm thankful that the world didn't end. I'm thankful that Able didn't decide to kill us all and use our skins to make drum heads. I'm thankful that no one decided to expose the Slime from Hell to any dead bodies. And mostly, I'm thankful for B , the most wonderful girl in the world, who can not only [DATA EXPUNGED], but can also cook a damn fine turkey.

Bit of a small Thanksgiving, though. Able and Squad One had to deploy at the last minute and were out in the field chasing some giant rust monster that apparently was rampaging around this sugar factory, so it was mostly just me, B , Iris, and whoever else wanted to drop by for a real Thanksgiving dinner instead of the mass-produced stuff the cafeteria prepared. I Went around the facility asking if anyone else wanted to drop by and get some turkey. Gathered up a few folks along the way, then headed over to Dr. Franks' office to see if my old boss wanted some food too.

He was chatting with a rather nice looking guy: possibly Indian or Arabic, was going over the newest field reports from our Mobile Task forces. The guy was just listening and nodding the whole time, stroking the tattoo on his forehead. I asked him if he wanted to come too. "That's fine," he said, smiling. "We'll be busy for a while. If you would like, however, please bring me a turkey leg later."

"That's a good idea," Dr. Franks said. "And save me a plate. I'll drop by to pick it up once we're finished."

Figured the guy was busy, so after dinner, I made two plates with all the fixings, headed over to Dr. Franks' office. As I got closer, though, I started noticing something funny: the cornbread stuffing was starting to smell bad. By the time I got outside the door, it had rotted through so badly that the mold was starting to spread to the meat as

well. I dropped the plates and yelled in surprise, and almost hit the "Containment Breach" alarm, before the door opened and the stranger walked out.

"Oh, hell," he sighed. "Not again."

So that's how I first met Cain. Decent guy, even if he isn't much of a gardener. Turns out he was just in town for the day to help Dr. Franks back up some files. "It's best if I'm not around here when Able comes back," he said, before he headed back into the helicopter a few hours later. Then he gave me a funny look. "When the time comes," he said, "Don't hesitate. Do what you must. I'll be fine." I'm really not sure what that's supposed to mean.

Note to self: Whatever brand cranberry sauce is, it's apparently not made of cranberries: the stuff didn't break down one bit around Cain. Remind me to choose a different brand next year.

Date: November 19,

No, the date is not a typo. Yes, it is four days before my last entry. Damn temporal SCPs.

I'm spending the next four days in confinement with the rest of my team to make sure that we don't accidentally pollute the timeline. I'm arguing with the security staff that it would be okay to let us out because, you know, time being an infinite loop and all, if I was going to meet with my past self, I would have done it anyway, and the fact that I didn't means that I'm not gonna. They tell me that the fact that I don't remember ever meeting my future self means that I'm gonna stay in confinement, so there's no point arguing about it. Is it too much to ask for just to get a moment's walk out in the sunlight? The damn padded walls are starting to move in on me.

I don't like this one bit.

The mission was a success, relatively speaking, I guess. We went into the facility with isolation suits on, to retrieve the artifact. Joint mission with MTF , " ." They took the lead, given that they've had more experience underground than we have. We were

just there to lay down the pressure once they met up with the artifact.

We lost Squad three two minutes later: the members of that squad just suddenly up and died of old age within three minutes of coming into contact with the artifact's holder. Squad two managed to get out a distress signal before dying. Able closed in on the target shortly afterwards: weirdest thing, watching other people growing old and dying around him while he just kept aging away, hair growing longer, fingernails growing longer, but his body just not aging at all…

<DATA EXPUNGED> had him pinned down under an I-beam, but couldn't reach the artifact because his arm was cut off, and he needed the other one to pin down the monster. I was the closest. Popped open my emergency dose of double-oh six and downed it in one go before running in.

My hand instantly withered the moment I touched the item. I screamed a bit as the insulation suit rotted around me, but managed to yank it away from Abel and the Morphophage and toss it into the Box. B slammed the lid shut and hit the locks, and the entire thing <DATA EXPUNGED>

So yeah, that's how we wound up here four days before we left. I managed to convince them to let me keep my journal, since it's not really gonna have too many temporal effects once I leave. Also convinced them to issue my past self an emergency ration of double-oh six before he goes. I'm sure he'll be confused about why he needs it. I sure was.

Iris seems… I dunno. She's not doing well recently. I'm thinking the stress of the job might be getting to her. Being one of the youngest members of the team can't be easy.

Date: ,

B came into the room today and told me that she's been given TDY away from Omega-7. "Something bad happened to ," she said. "I've been asked to talk to her."

. That would be SCP- . [DATA EXPUNGED]

Anyway, B was a before she transferred to Omega-7, so I guess they figured she was a good person to talk to . She didn't think so. "I've never been raped before, A ," she pointed out. "How am I supposed to talk to someone who has?"

"Just… listen. Don't let her blame herself. Let her know no one blames her. And don't let her depersonalize. She might be suffering from some post-traumatic stress. I can find a pamphlet for you on that."

"How the hell do you know all this stuff?"

"I was a psych before I was a soldier, remember? This used to be my job."

"Oh yeah," she said, smiling. "I forget that sometimes."

"I do too," I said.

Date: ,

Retrieval Mission. Dr. Dantensen let Iris out for some reason. They've got the good doctor in solitary. How could he be so stupid…

Date: ,

Retrieval Mission a success. I'm listing it as, "Recovered under pain of death from SCP-173." That'll sound good on the report.

We caught up to Iris at the airport, waiting for a flight home. She burst into tears the moment she saw B and I approaching. "Can't you guys just leave me alone?"

<DATA EXPUNGED> put the gun to my head and handed her the polaroid of the internal workings. "You can stop me from killing myself," I said. "All you have to do is reach into the photo and pull out the firing pin."

"You wouldn't dare," she whispered.

"I managed to bring a loaded handgun through airport security, I can and will. And if you can still do what you can do, you won't let me die, because you're too good of a person to let that happen."

I pulled the trigger, and there was a click. She was standing there with the polaroid in one hand and the firing pin in the other. Then she fell down and started crying.

I let B take care of the rest. My job was do

DATE: ,

They're all dead.

V . N . L J . All of them, they're dead.

Hang on, getting a call from command.

Transcript of Communications between Field Command Mobile Task Force Omega 7 and Foundation Transport Learjet 223

Agent AA: "Field."

Command: "Command here. Let me patch you in to Able."

Agent AA: "My god…"

SCP-076: "I still have a jaw to chew you out with. What is the status on the infestation?"

Agent AA: "The… the colony is in flight over . It's going after … oh god, if it gets ahold of that much silicon, then…"

SCP-076: "I am handing over command to you."

Agent AA: "… what?"

SCP-076: "You're in charge. I have already let Squire know. You'll <DATA EXPUNGED>."

Agent AA: "I don't… I don't understand. There have to be better agents…"

SCP-076: "Better warriors. But warriors won't stop this now. I need a general. I knew you were my general when you bested me in a game of war. You must best this enemy now. Mind, not muscle, will win. Think!"

Agent AA: "Think… wait. I have an idea. It's a marshal, but it doesn't have any other troops. I just need to lead it into a bomb…"

<TRANSMISSION ENDS>

Official Citation

Let it be known on this date, Agent A A (Mobile Task Force Omega-7, "Pandora's Box"), while in extreme personal danger to life and limb, did personally engage a Keter-level SCP for the purposes of completing a retrieval operation. Although grievously injured during the attack, which resulted in the death of Agent Beatrice Maddox, Agent A ' actions allowed ***SCP-073*** *to come into attack range of SCP- , which was at the time rampaging through Foundation Facilities. Upon engaging the enemy, did <DATA EXPUNGED>*

DATE: ,

able came by today. he heard abouyt b. it was hard goingn to the funeral. buyt we've all lost friends.

it's hard typing with no hands and no fingers. n i'm still getting used to the mouth wand. sime tomes i mmiss keys. it's my jourmnal. so i don'rt really give a ashiut.

i took a shard to my head too. one piece went into my skull. they say that it hirt part of my brain. mnty sense of empathy might be gone.

whatever thar means./

i watched the footaghe of the team dying.; nirt was weird. ni thought i'd feel it more but it was like watching cats being dissected. jusat more guts and blood.

i hear they have a machine that makes you mbetter., i think i'll give it a trey.

Permission for Agent A A to undergo enhancement by **SCP-212** - GRANTED

- O5-

Log Ends: For further information, please see **SCP-784-ARC**

Log of Anomalous Ducks

Note: Following Incident F-19 and the recovery of **SCP-1356**, Research Sector-09 was charged the evaluation and containment of resultant anomalies. Testing is ongoing, as relevant subjects are still being retrieved. Those items which display anomalous characteristics of a disruptive or exceptional nature, but not to a degree which merits further study or containment, are catalogued in this document.

Unless otherwise specified, effects have only been observed to apply to subjects in physical contact with the object. Status of "missing" most likely indicates that item is in personnel possession. Newly identified items should be catalogued accordingly.

Duck Description: Object has the appearance of a duck wearing a sheet, similar to a simplistic Halloween ghost costume. Duck has been observed to float 5-7cm above solid and liquid surfaces.
Notes: *Attempts to weight the object down result in duck phasing through solid materials.*
Status: Stored

Duck Description: Object is a tri-colored rubber duck with the coloration and scent of a popular Halloween candy. Subjects in close proximity to the duck express a strong desire to taste it.
Notes: *Taste described as "disappointing".*
Status: Stored

Duck Description: Object appears to be a duck holding a small saxophone, which it has been observed to "play" at random intervals — emitting a single, drawn-out note followed by a series of melodically unrelated notes.
Notes: *Sounds produced by duck are significantly shriller than those*

produced by a traditional saxophone.
Status: Destroyed

Duck Description: Item appears to convince any individual holding it that it is a duck made of solid gold, despite appearance suggesting spray-painted PVC surface. Materials tests inconclusive.
Notes: *See Incident Report M -4*
Status: Destroyed

Duck Description: Generic rubber duck design with the addition of a fuzzy green hat. Any subject holding this object perceives every living organism in their line of sight to be wearing a similar fuzzy green hat.
Notes: *Effects so far observed in humans, insects, animals of known and unknown species, organic SCPs, and several species of plant and fungi*
Status: Missing

Duck Description: Duck-shaped object affects the romantic feelings of human subject holding it. Subjects will be convinced the object is a "love charm", and persist in this belief regardless of any arising evidence to the contrary.
Notes: *Status as cognitohazard pending review.*
Status: Missing Stored

Duck Description: Identical to non-anomalous rubber ducks in design and composition— however, when left unattended in a room, item always appears in a location different from where it was originally placed.
Note: *Reports of uneasiness in the presence of this anomaly may warrant further testing. Duck's whereabouts should be promptly reported.*
Status: Missing

Duck Description: While duck does not appear to possess any

clinically significant healing or painkilling properties, if held by a subject suffering from minor or significant injury, subject will subsequently find injured areas covered with a proportionate number of band-aids, regardless of the nature of the wound.
Notes: *Item is available to all personnel for use, provided it is eventually returned to Room 204 first aid kit.*
Status: Stored

Duck Description: Despite its prolonged exposure to sunlight and seawater, object emits strong scent described by researchers as "artificial blueberry". PVC composition contains no trace of any chemical sufficient to produce this scent.
Notes: *Personnel have reported that close proximity of the object notably affects the taste of food and beverages.*
Status: Stored

Duck Description: Object is sun-bleached in the manner of other, non-anomalous ducks, but with a pattern of zebra stripes that appeared after retrieval. Any subject holding the item will exhibit a similar pattern of stripes on any white clothing they are wearing; markings usually fade after a 24 hour period.
Notes: *Object's whereabouts are proving easily detectable.*
Status: Missing (*see note*)

Duck Description: Appears to be patterned after London landmark "Big Ben". When placed in a room with any analog clock, clock will promptly align with GMT London time. On the hour, object emits a bell tone via unknown mechanism; volume of this bell tone has been informally estimated to be "as loud as the real thing".
Notes: *Security footage dated to 3/11, 4:12 am, reveals that object was destroyed by personnel; no official reprimand pending.*
Status: Destroyed

Duck Description: When held by male subject, duck will be invariably described by the individual as strikingly similar to a female of subject's acquaintance. Subjects have been frequently observed

to fixate on determining "who it looks like" for prolonged intervals, and seem unable to resolve this question of identity.
Notes: *Object has no observable effect on female personnel.*
Status: Stored

Duck Description: There does not appear to be anything anomalous about this duck.
Notes: *Object influences the perceptions of any subject holding it and any persons speaking to the affected subject. Object in fact appears to be a flamingo.*
Status: Stored

Duck Description: Object has the appearance of a generic duck dressed as a clown. Subject holding the duck will respond to any verbal statement or question directed towards them with uncontrollable laughter.
Notes: *Effect seems to apply regardless of the emotional or social appropriateness of this response.*
Status: Stored

Duck Description: [DATA EXPUNGED] See image.

Notes: *Context or content of duck unknown.*
Status: Missing

Log Of Anomalous Items: For those objects that are not quite an SCP but are still abnormal in some way. Feel free to add to it, but be aware that it is regularly pruned.

Foreword: The SCP Foundation has discovered a substantial number of items which are simply too useless to merit further attention. This document lists those items which have prompted some curiosity. It may be used as a resource should knowledge of these items become useful or necessary in the future.
– Dr. , Head of Research, Site

Note: *Please add new entries to the bottom of the list, not the middle or the top.*

Item Description: An unbreakable lamp.
Date of Recovery: - -
Location of Recovery: ,
Current Status: Kept in Dr. Rights' office in Site- .
Notes: This was one of the first items categorized as "Anomalous" and denied full SCP classification, due to lack of value in further research and little need for special containment.

Item Description: A penny which, when flipped, will always land "heads up".
Date of Recovery: - -
Location of Recovery: ,
Current Status: Shipped off to permanent storage.
Notes: Can't believe that none of the researchers kept this to win bets with.

Item Description: An ordinary brand number 2 pencil, which will balance easily on its tip for hours at a time.
Date of Recovery: - -
Location of Recovery: ,
Current Status: Incinerated.
Notes: I'm not even sure why this was an anomaly. Maybe it just had

a very flat tip.
Notice: Destroying anomalous items without appropriate permission is a major violation of Foundation policy. See that this does not occur again. - Site Director .

Item Description: A painting (possibly a landscape, records are unclear) that gave a mild case of diaphragmatic spasms, or hiccups, to anyone who saw it.
Date of Recovery: - -
Location of Recovery: ,
Current Status: Incinerated.
*Notes: This would obviously be a pain to work with, but shouldn't they have at least **tried** to see how it worked?*
Notice: Destroying anomalous items without appropriate permission is a major violation of Foundation policy. See that this does not occur again. - Site Director .

Item Description: Normal garden slugs, whose trail has the exact same chemical composition and taste as commercial-brand ranch dressing. They also appear to reproduce by binary fission every week.
Date of Recovery: - -
Location of Recovery: ,
Current Status: In animal containment. Excess entities incinerated.

Item Description: A small rock that emits a bright white light from an unknown source. Otherwise unremarkable.
Date of Recovery: - -
Location of Recovery: ,
Current Status: Currently in the possession of Dr. Light.
Notes: No radiation, no life signs, nothing. If nothing else, it's a reminder of the inexplicable nature of the universe.

Item Description: A 1964 Smith & Wesson .44 Magnum Revolver. When any ammunition is fired from the third chamber, an unidentified male voice will shout "Nice shot!"
Date of Recovery: 09-03-
Location of Recovery: Wichita, Kansas, USA
Current Status: In storage at Site 19's vintage weapons depository.
Notes: Perfectly serviceable and well-maintained aside from the anomaly. Accuracy or even proficiency with the firearm is not

required for the anomaly to function. Voice sounds whether or not the shot is, in fact, "nice".

Item Description: A wire clothes hanger. Only long-sleeve, blue, men's dress shirts with collar sizes between 15.5" and 16.5" can successfully be hung upon it. All other clothing articles simply drop off to the floor when hanger is employed.
Date of Recovery: 09-15-
Location of Recovery: Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada
Current Status: In storage.

Item Description: A nuclear snow globe. When shaken, instead of falling snow, it shows a miniature-scale nuclear explosion. It emits no radiation, sound, or force, and the explosion pattern changes every shake. Aftereffects such as radioactive snow and black rain have been observed. At random intervals, the snow globe will contain a small shed, car, or truck, which reacts to the explosion.
Date of Recovery: - -
Location of Recovery: Sokrovenno, Russia
Current Status: In storage.

Item Description: A squirrel which constantly moved much slower than normal, even when jumping or falling, similar to "slow-motion" video footage.
Date of Recovery: - -
Location of Recovery: Family Campgrounds,
Current Status: In animal containment.

Item Description: A cheap plastic ping-pong ball, that would change from red to green twice daily.
Date of Recovery: - -20
Location of Recovery: , California, US
Current Status: Located under a locker in Storage Room 19-553B. Maintenance team required to extract object.

Item Description: A white cowboy hat. Any person wearing is compelled to whoop and box dance uncontrollably.
Date of Recovery: - -20
Location of Recovery: , Texas
Current Status: Kept in a scantly used test chamber and brought out during staff birthday parties.

Item Description: Six-sided dice that can occasionally land on a seven.
Date of Recovery: - -19
Location of Recovery: Gaming Society in , Maryland
Current Status: Being used for research by Dr. McCallum.
Notes: Research my @!$. He's just using the damned thing to cheat on his sneak attack damage. - Dr. Morgan

Item Description: C -C branded and stylized cola glass. Any liquid drunk from glass reported to taste like P brand cola.
Date of Recovery: - -
Location of Recovery: Site-19
Current Status: Destroyed after being dropped by canteen worker .

Item Description: A .500 sidearm that discharges all loaded cartridges as if they were blanks.
Date of Recovery: - -
Location of Recovery: ,
Current Status: In storage.

Item Description: Glass paperweight which constantly floats exactly seven (7) centimeters above any given surface.
Date of Recovery: - -
Location of Recovery: Funeral Home in ,
Current Status: Shattered in bizarre acapella accident. Dr. McCallum is currently being questioned.

Item Description: A drinking glass that visually appears to be able to hold a pint (568 ml) of fluid, but overflows when more than 35 ml is poured into it.
Date of Recovery: - -1998
Location of Recovery: , Illinois
Current Status: In storage.

Item Description: A series of pornographic VHS tapes that, when rewound, would continually change actors, sets, and methods of coitus. All appear to relate to actual filmed movies, though the quality is low.
Date of Recovery: - -19
Location of Recovery: Hackensack, New Jersey

Current Status: Missing, presumed lost. Recently recovered from the possession of Dr. . In storage.

Item Description: A 76-centimeter-tall statue of a clown. In room where it was placed, a giggling sound would be noted whenever lights were turned off.
Date of Recovery: 05-16-200
Location of Recovery: , Germany
Current Status: Shot approximately 15 times with a 9mm sidearm by Agent . Agent reprimanded. No anomalous properties recorded in the remains.

Item Description: An adult male capybara (*Hydrochoerus hydrochaeris*) several thousand miles away from the natural habitat for its species, with bright blue and green fur.
Date of Recovery: - -20
Location of Recovery: , Wisconsin
Current Status: Identified as lost exotic pet with -brand hair dye. Returned to owner; class-A amnestic administered; recovery agent reprimanded.

Item Description: An HB pencil which cannot be used to write, and only draws photorealistic images of Jimi Hendrix eating various foods.
Date of Recovery: - -1979
Location of Recovery: , Liechtenstein
Current Status: Accidentally snapped during testing (1993); portions of pencil did not retain anomalous properties, and were subsequently incinerated.

Item Description: A 24000-carat diamond, cut in the size and shape of a common construction brick.
Date of Recovery: - -197
Location of Recovery: , South Africa
Current Status: In storage pending identification of source.

Item Description: A white cotton-and-polyester t-shirt bearing the words 'SCP: SECURE CONTAIN PROTECT" on the front, and a crude but recognizable cartoon of **SCP-173** on the back, with the caption "SCP-173: DON'T BLINK". Aside from the security breach it represents, the item has no anomalous properties.

Date of Recovery: - -20
Location of Recovery: Thrift Store, New York City, New York
Current Status: In storage.

Item Description: A wedding invitation which, every six hours, becomes a *different* wedding invitation. Thus far, all invitations have been for weddings on dates between 5 and 15 years in the past, and have involved persons not found to exist.
Date of Recovery: - -20
Location of Recovery: Bookshop, , Wales
Current Status: In use as one-time pad generator.

Item Description: 16-month day planner (September 2009 to December 2010) manufactured by the company which will duplicate anything written into it across all other units. This only works for date/time entries that have not yet come to pass.
Date of Recovery: - -2010
Location of Recovery: Office Supplies, , Florida
Current Status: 17 units in Foundation possession; unknown number remain in circulation (estimated at). Research personnel are monitoring new entries in an effort to locate remaining copies.

Item Description: An Ikea-brand wall clock which seems to disappear and reappear once every second.
Date of Recovery: - -19
Location of Recovery: , Scotland.
Current Status: Disappeared at 1124 hours GMT on - -19 . Item never materialised, presumed irretrievable.

Item Description: A rubber-and-metal flyswatter which, when used to kill an invertebrate, causes the user to burst into tears.
Date of Recovery: - -19
Location of Recovery: Free Clinic, , Suriname
Current Status: In storage.

Item Description: A spear that, when thrown, pierces the heart of the nearest humanoid and extends several spikes from its blade afterward. Agents are to note that "the nearest humanoid" is typically the person who threw it.
Date of Recovery: - -
Location of Recovery: , Ireland

Current Status: In storage.

Item Description: A Risk set that has a variable number of pieces, appearing and disappearing as needed on the board. Sounds of battle are produced by the dice when rolled on hard surfaces rather than the expected clattering.
Date of Recovery: - -
Location of Recovery: , Oregon
Current Status: Available in Area 43 break room for recreation.

Item Description: A piece of vine charcoal that causes "Someone help me! I'm trapped in the charcoal!" to be written every several seconds whenever used for writing or drawing.
Date of Recovery: - -
Location of Recovery: , Scotland
Current Status: In storage.

Item Description: A bottle of bootleg perfume, which attracts cats in a 1 km radius when used. Discovered after a gathering of over 4,000 cats caused a traffic jam in downtown .
Date of Recovery: - -
Location of Recovery: ,
Current Status: Stored in an airtight container, Low-Value Item Storage, Site- .

Item Description: An upright piano. If a human touched any of the piano keys, the human became irresistibly compelled to play the piano and sing popular Broadway show tunes, for a period of three hours or until the player was incapacitated. It is to be noted that the item did not provide musical talent, knowledge of tunes, knowledge of lyrics, or the ability to sing on-key.
Date of Recovery: 04-28-200
Location of Recovery: Recreation center at Foundation Site 33. Piano had been at that site for several years but its unusual properties did not manifest until Incident [DATA EXPUNGED].
Current Status: Disassembled by sledgehammer during containment breach; resulting detritus incinerated. Residual ashes evidenced no unusual properties.

Item Description: A #2 pencil that, when used, causes the writer to

unknowingly make spelling errors. Spelling errors can be corrected using the pencil.
Date of Recovery: 06- -20
Location of Recovery: Site 19 supply cabinet
Current Status: Accidentally destroyed. Materials demonstrated no unusual properties
Notes: Are you sure the person who reported this wasn't just really bad at spelling?

Item Description: A white plastic "halo", which will shine and float when above anybody who has not committed any of the 7 deadly sins. Will glow red when placed above anyone else.
Date of Recovery: - -
Location of Recovery: ,
Current Status: Melted itself down after being placed above Dr. 's head.

Item Description: Dollar bills-ranging from $1 to $20-that scream loudly when placed next to foreign currency.
Date of Recovery: - -19
Location of Recovery: Bank, ,
Current Status: Shredded in paper shredder; strips showed no anomalous properties.

Item Description: A snow globe containing an 11-second time loop of a snowman murdering a bystander with an axe.
Date of Recovery: 12-25-20
Location of Recovery: Ski Resort, , USA
Current Status: On Research Assistant Goldsheiner's desk, for aesthetic purposes.

Item Description: A -brand bobblehead that, when bobbled, causes the user's head to bobble with it. Can create neck injuries if bobbled too hard.
Date of Recovery: - -19
Location of Recovery: Seattle, Washington
Current Status: On Dr. Roget's office desk In Dr. Roget's office safe.

Item Description: An early 19th century cannon of Russian manufacture. Cannon will prime, load and fire blanks (with no visible

source of powder) if the finale of Tchaikovsky's *1812 Overture* is played within audible range of the artillery piece. The timing of the shots is slightly off and inconsistent with the music.
Date of Recovery: - -
Location of Recovery: Napoleonic Wars exhibit, Museum, .
Current Status: Maintained as a lawn ornament in the staff garden at Site 12. Tchaikovsky's *1812 Overture* added to Site Blacklist of restricted materials.

Item Description: A glass dinner plate, 11 inches across. When organic material is placed on the plate, it begins to secrete digestive enzymes (mainly proteases and cellulases) which produce foul-tasting waste products and an unpleasant appearance in food.
Date of Recovery: - -20
Location of Recovery: Site 19 cafeteria, discovered by Junior Researcher , who initially believed the kitchen staff were attempting to poison him.
Current Status: Currently under investigation by Dr. .

Item Description: A white coffee mug that, at 3:00 AM local time, will replace all fruit juices in its interior with grapefruit juice.
Date of Recovery: - -20
Location of Recovery: , Minnesota
Current Status: In the possession of Research Assistant Jacobs. In storage.
Notes: Effect has consistently failed to manifest after RA Jacobs filled the item with grapefruit juice nineteen days after recovery.

Item Description: A pair of cordless headphones that constantly play songs by The Beatles despite the lack of a music or energy source.
Date of Recovery: - -
Location of Recovery: concert, California, United States
Current Status: In storage.

Item Description: A ballpoint pen. Decimal points in numbers written with the pen will periodically move for the next 314 days.
Date of Recovery: 11-03-20
Location of Recovery: Accounting department at Site-11.
Current Status: Stored in Low-Value Item Wing of Storage Site-23.

Item Description: A computer file with the name "~DFFF1C.tmp". The file has a negative filesize of -2 bytes; its presence on a storage medium increases the space available. Copies of the file retain this property, but editing the file changes its size to 0 bytes.
Date of Recovery: 05-21-20
Location of Recovery: Dr. 's home computer
Current Status: Stored in Dr. 's computer, with several backups on portable media.

Item Description: A three-sided die; no matter how it is observed, subjects will report that it definitely has three sides, despite this being physically impossible.
Date of Recovery: - -20
Location of Recovery: A tabletop gaming convention in [REDACTED].
Current Status: Sliced in half, yielded two one-sided dice.

Item Description: An adjustable-height stainless steel floor fan of unknown make and manufacture. The fan will only function when exposed to music written by an artist or artists that no persons within hearing range have knowledge of.
Date of Recovery: - -1997
Location of Recovery: Jacksonville, Florida
Current Status: In storage.

Item Description: A pound cake that emits the sound of a young girl laughing when being cut.
Date of Recovery: - -2012
Location of Recovery: 's Bakery Shop in Wyoming
Current Status: Kept in cold storage at Site-17

Item Description: A slate sculpture of a human hand and a section of forearm, standing approximately 0.5m tall and weighing 50kg. The object's orientation cannot be changed and acts as a perfect compass - the thumb always points due magnetic north.
Date of Recovery: - -2012
Location of Recovery: Raid on a Marshall, Carter & Dark Ltd. warehouse in London, UK.
Current Status: Staff gardens at Sector-25.
Notes: Accompanying recovered documentation indicates that MC&D was having difficulty finding a buyer for the object.

Item Description: A 235-kg -brand moped. When traveling at speeds in excess of 30 km/h, it displays inertial qualities consistent with an object of significantly higher mass, generally between 350 and 600 kg, depending on speed.
Date of Recovery: - -1999
Location of Recovery: , Germany
Current Status: In storage

Item Description: A large whiteboard. Should a subject write a problem on the white board, it will immediately begin to form a chart organizing the information pertinent to that problem. The object will then form connections between the information and attempt to come up with a solution. However, it will also write comments regarding the subject's intellect and physical appearance. These are almost always derogatory.
Date of Recovery: - -
Location of Recovery: , Texas
Current Status: In storage.

Item Description: A Nokia 1208 cell phone with exactly 2 bars of reception at all times, regardless of location, situation, or condition of the phone. Other functions do not differ from normal cell phones.
Date of Recovery: - -
Location of Recovery: village, Astrakhan district, found in possession of [DATA REDACTED]
Current Status: In storage.

Item Description: A purple stress ball that when squeezed causes the person to become contemplative about their recent successes and failures in life.
Date of Recovery: - -
Location of Recovery: In the office drawer of a psychiatrist by the name of Dr. P Laymond.
Current Status: Torn to shreds by a loose pet corgi. Reconstruction is under consideration.
Notes: Is this thing even necessary? Why did we even take it in the first place? Why did Rachel dump me last night? WHY??? – Agent R

Item Description: A Basset Hound capable of limited human-like speech - only vocalization is the word "dude", in various accents and

tones of voice.
Date of Recovery: - -
Location of Recovery: , California
Current Status: Held in Site 33 kennels.

Item Description: A skee-ball arcade game dating to the late 1930s. Whenever 850 or more points are scored in a single frame, the ticket dispenser releases that number of live cockroaches.
Date of Recovery: - -1943
Location of Recovery: & Sons Games, Coney Island, New York
Current Status: In containment.

Item Description: A key that can unlock the door to any empty, unmonitored room, but with the side effect of a skeleton of a random small mammal appearing inside the room and falling out the door as it is opened.
Date of Recovery: - -2006
Location of Recovery: , London
Current Status: In containment.

Item Description: A treadmill that will suddenly increase the speed to the maximum (15km/h) whenever stopped before the pre-programmed session is over. Unplugging the machine gave the same result.
Date of Recovery: - -2012
Location of Recovery: Health Center, Seoul, Korea
Current Status: On - -2012 object was found to be broken, and it was revealed that many agents had used it for exercise since its containment. After the repair, object did not display anomalous properties any longer, and thus relocated to Foundation health center.

Item Description: A generic baseball cap that can only be worn 'properly'. Any attempts to wear it sideways or backwards cause it to forcibly remove itself from the wearer's head.
Date of Recovery: - -20
Location of Recovery: , New York
Current Status: In storage.

Item Description: A single copy of the book *The Principles of*

Knitting. When the chapter detailing various problems encountered while knitting is read, the user experiences these problems the next time they attempt to knit. Problems extend to types of knitting not otherwise possible in three dimensions, leading to widespread tangling.
Date of Recovery: - -2012
Location of Recovery: Baltimore, MD, USA
Current Status: In storage.

Item Description: A shipment of 350 pre-packaged loaves of sliced potato bread consisting only of end slices. Viewing the bread causes disorientation and vestibular dysfunction.
Date of Recovery: - -2010
Location of Recovery: Salt Lake City, UT, USA
Current Status: Shredded during containment breach. Shreds only caused slight ringing in ears in 11% of test subjects. Remains in storage.

Item Description: A VHS recording of the 1992 vice-presidential debates, in which Vice President Dan Quayle appears to have been replaced with a brown quail (*Coturnix ypsilophora*), which displays normal avian behavior on the recording. Behavior of the other subjects on the tape is unaltered. Forensic video analysis has not revealed any evidence of editing.
Date of Recovery: 11-17-2012
Location of Recovery: Ft. Lauderdale, Florida
Current Status: In Dr. Q 's office.

Item Description: A yellow "rubber ducky" bath toy. When a subject explains in detail a practical problem to the item as though it were a living anthropomorphic duck, they will feel that they have a better understanding of said problem, and are often immediately able to come up with a solution.
Date of Recovery: - -199
Location of Recovery: , CA, USA.
Current Status: In display at Site-17's Office Block, for use by all personnel.

Item Description: A swan goose (*Anser cygnoides*) which extinguishes fires around it in a radius of 32.444 meters. Effect expands to 101 meters on the night of the first quarter moon.

Date of Recovery: - -
Location of Recovery: Altai, Mongolia
Current Status: In animal containment.

Item Description: A hardcover book that, when read, makes everything a person touches feel like a certain designated texture, depending on the page read.
Date of Recovery: - -
Location of Recovery: Cartersville, Georgia
Current Status: In the desk of Dr. Raye.
Note - I like the fluffy kitten page. - Dr. Raye

Item Description: Ten (10) glass sculptures of Queen Angelfish (*Holacanthus ciliaris*) that animate when placed in water. Sculptures require all the needs of a regular fish, except oxygen.
Date of Recovery: - -
Location of Recovery: , Ireland
Current Status: Kept in the aquarium in the 2nd floor break room at Site-17.

Item Description: A china statuette of British cartoon characters *Wallace and Gromit* that, upon observation, causes the observer to have a mild craving for cheese.
Date of Recovery: - -
Location of Recovery: Recovered with SCP- in a raid on a Marshall, Carter and Dark auction.
Current Status: In storage.

Item Description: A set of chess pieces carved from white and pink marble. When used to play a game (rather than normal handling), the pieces transform into humanoid figures in the shapes of individuals important to the players. The king's knight is always in the shape of the player, regardless of gender.
Date of Recovery: 04-26-19
Location of Recovery: Found abandoned on a public chessboard in Central Park, New York City, NY, USA.
Current Status: In storage.

Item Description: 32 printed copies of John Cage's *4'33"*. When performed by any number of musicians, the sound of a euphonium practicing various atonal music pieces can be heard softly

emanating from each copy.
Date of Recovery: - -20
Location of Recovery: Band room of High School, located in Oahu, HI.
Current Status: In storage.

Item Description: A replica of a human skull made out of gelatin. Item has not been shown to decay as per standard gelatin. Item plays music every October 31st. All music has been confirmed to be identical to that played by the band at their annual concert at the Zoo.
Date of Recovery: - - 11
Location of Recovery: Zoo Amphitheater.
Current Status: On the desk of Dr. .
Notes: I would feel a little bad about this, but the concert is free anyway. -Dr. .

Aitem Deskripshun: A dikshunnarree that alturs ennee tekst deskraibing it too rezembul the langwej's fonetik form, tho nawt in ennee rekognaizd format.
Dayt uv Rekuvurree: - -20
Lokayshun uv Rekuvurree: Shikago, Illinoy, Yoo-Es-Ay
Kurrent Status: In a standurd kontaynment lokkur at Sait-59.

Item Description: A bronze statue of a mermaid. Causes kleptomaniacal compulsions in mammalian subjects continually exposed to it.
Date of Recovery: 06-30-1967
Location of Recovery: ,
Current Status: Replaced with a replica. Original in storage.

Beskrivning av föremål:

Item Description: The word [REDACTED], a 9-letter imaginary word which is defined as "the opposite of a sieve." The definition is known as soon as the word is read or heard. Only one written instance of the word exists at any given time; the previous instance is erased when the new instance is written, although the word transfers at roughly 1808 km/s. The word reportedly feels natural and fluid to pronounce, and so may potentially be easy for unknown independent parties to create and write down. It is otherwise

mundane.
Date of Recovery: - -20
Location of Recovery: Word Generation And Verification Subroutines, Site-18 Data Banks
Current Status: Written on a piece of paper stored at Site-19. In the event that an unknown independent party writes the word, one of several researchers will be on call to write the word down again.

Item Description: A tiara constructed from living specimens of mushroom and other non-invasive fungus. Placing the tiara on a human subject's head causes the subject to become gyroscopically stabilized from the waist up. No matter the effort, the subject will become unable to move their body from the waist up out of a perfectly vertical position.
Date of Recovery: - -1919
Location of Recovery: Copenhagen, Denmark
Current Status: In storage.

Item Description: A traditional Brazilian berimbau of typical construction and materials. When held by a human subject, and the stick is raised to strike the string, the subject immediately displays an instinctive knowledge of how to play basic traditional rhythms. Further exposure does not seem to result in further knowledge gain, but the resultant basic knowledge remains with the subject after exposure.
Date of Recovery: - -20
Location of Recovery: Salto, Brazil
Current Status: In storage.
Note: Until it is determined conclusively that the item has no cognitohazardous capabilities, handling and testing is restricted to D-Class subjects.

Item Description: A 129-character string. Entering it on the password field of an online service will allow log-in no matter what the original password was; only known exception is the word "password".
Date of Recovery: - -201
Location of Recovery: Lagos, Nigeria
Current Status: Archived. Research on encryption and network structures resistant to effect underway.

Item Description: A blue stress ball. When squeezed, holder becomes infuriated, and when thrown, will bounce back and hit the thrower's head.
Date of Recovery: - -19
Location of Recovery: Psychiatrics,
Current Status: In storage.

Item Description: A standard brand deck of cards that, when used to play any card game, appear 'backwards', showing all other players the card's face, while only showing the card's holder the back of said card.
Date of Recovery: - -20
Location of Recovery: , Nevada, United States.
Current Status: In storage at Site Recreation Lounge.

Item Description: A credit card of an unknown black material. Purchases made with the card via magnetic stripe readers are retroactively debited from Banco de Mexico's account number . , in October of 1993.
Date of Recovery: - -20
Location of Recovery: Secret chamber in the Great Pyramid of Giza, Cairo, Egypt
Current Status: In storage.

Item Description: A red 1994 Toyota Camry whose radio could only play Men Without Hats' "Safety Dance" regardless of station, whether a cassette tape had been inserted, and even after the radio itself had been replaced 3 times.
Date of Recovery: - -200
Location of Recovery: Atlanta, Georgia
Current Status: Crushed and melted down during an unusual containment breach. Residual slag showed no anomalous properties.

Item Description: A high-tech typewriter that produces a cognitohazardous effect on every person trying to formulate a description for said object. Despite being a typewriter, it is always described as a typewriter, with various properties, containment places and such replaced with analogous typewriter-related properties. However, the verb "to shoot" and its cognates are not affected. Attempts to photograph the object are hindered by mental

influence, and any attempts to draw or paint the object result in a drawing of a typewriter.
Date of Recovery: - -
Location of Recovery: An abandoned printing device research base that belonged to a defunct group of interest called [REDACTED].
Current Status: In storage in Site printing devices room. An effort to produce copies of the typewriter is underway.
Notes: This typewriter is great! Easy to shoot, very accurate, good shooting distance, lightweight, supports different key sets and has a 60 cartridge tray. The typing mechanism is detachable, .45ACP and 5.56 versions are available. Most likely, the anomalous effect was developed in order to hinder intelligence efforts. - Agent Cora.

Item Description: A wooden toy rifle designed to shoot rubber bands using a gear. Rubber bands accelerate to 1/540 the speed of light upon leaving the barrel of the rifle.
Date of Recovery: 10-15-2010
Location of Recovery: Mount Vernon, Virginia
Current Status: In anomalous weapons containment.

Item Description: A computer that cannot connect to any network when networking is enabled, but can attain a connection to the internet of exactly 161.24 kbps anywhere, regardless of the speed of light and other physical limitations.
Date of Recovery: - -2011
Location of Recovery: , Portugal
Current Status: Currently used to maintain communications with .

Item Description: A glass statue of a non-Euclidian structure. Glass fragments of a statue, originally composing a non-Euclidian structure.
Date of Recovery: - -2013
Location of Recovery: ,
Current Status: In storage
Notes: It was broken when I found it. - Agent Green

Item Description: A drawing of a dog that, when viewed by an illiterate individual, teaches them how to read and write Latvian.
Date of Recovery: - -

Location of Recovery: ,
Current Status: In Level 1 Document Storage at Site- .

Item Description: A Christmas tree that is impossible to disassemble
Date of Recovery: 25-12-2013
Location of Recovery: Original location unknown, secondary location is near the entrance tunnel to Site-14.
Current Status: In Site-14 break room as a decoration for Christmas.

Item Description: One coaster. When placed on any horizontal surface, it leaves a circular water stain 6.3 cm in diameter. Stains left by this object have proven to be extremely difficult to remove.
Date of Recovery: 09-18-1995
Location of Recovery: Brewery, Gatlinburg, TN
Current Status: Accidentally destroyed under unknown circumstances.

Item Description: A Mark XIX (19) Israel Military Industries Desert Eagle on 50. Action Express with Picatinny rail. When held, it displays an ammo counter in the bottom right corner of the wielder's peripheral vision, and, when fired, displays a point value based on the target hit, in base 5 numeration.
Date of Recovery - -
Location of Recovery: , Florida, U.S.A.
Current Status: Stored in Site-19 Low value storage unit.
Notes: It sounds cool, but the ammo counter is hard to focus on, which distracts you when you're trying to fire it, and it's nearly useless since you can barely make out the numbers. The scoring system has to be worked out on paper, and there's no easy way of recording the numbers when you have to decode your score every time you shoot. Keep this thing far away from the usable weapons. - Agent Harrelson

Item Description: A pack of brand chewing gum containing six (6) pieces of chewed gum. When chewed, they will revert to 'un-chewed' form. Re-chewed pieces do not possess this property.
Date of Recovery: - -
Location of Recovery: , Canada
Current Status: In storage in Site- .

Notes: How did we figure out it did that? - Dr.

Item Description: A tambourine that, when shaken, produces the sounds of a guitar. Staff claim to greatly enjoy it.
Date of Recovery: - -
Location of Recovery: , England
Current Status: Held in the Site-19 break room.

Item Description: A pair of baby blue boxing gloves. If the boxing gloves are used to punch an infant in the jaw, the new-born will grow all of its adult teeth within the following 24 hours.
Date of Recovery: 08-10-20
Location Recovery: Glasgow, Scotland
Current Status: Stored in Site-17 containment locker.

Item Description: A Roman mosaic assembled in the 4th century CE depicting a creature resembling a Stegosaurus. Outside its anachronism, it is not otherwise anomalous.
Date of Recovery: - -
Location of Recovery: Villa Romana del Casale, Sicily, Italy.
Current Status: In display at Site-77's Historical Anomalies Wing.

Item Description: A wooden pan flute. When played, an unidentified male voice will tell music-related puns in the player's first language.
Date of Recovery: - -1991
Location of Recovery: Music Shop, Salonica, Greece.
Current Status: In storage.

Item Description: A red brand automobile. The automobile is reported to leave a trail of flames in areas it passes. It is also able to speed up to kilometers per hour.
Date of Recovery: - -
Location of Recovery: family's garage
Current Status: Last seen driven by Dr. Gerald. Presumed destroyed.

Item Description: A black top hat. When worn, any sounds made by the person wearing it is replaced by an unidentified male voice saying an onomatopoeic word based on the sound (for instance, the sound of sneezing will be replaced by the word "sneeze").

Date of Recovery: - -
Location of Recovery: ,
Current Status: In storage.

Item Description: A tin can labelled "WORMS" in white paint. Opening the lid reveals another lid directly underneath. Analysis has resulted in the conclusion that there may be a theoretically infinite sequence of lids.
Date of Recovery: - -
Location of Recovery: , West Virginia
Current Status: In anomalous item containment locker.

Item Description: A carton of -brand cigarettes. Upon smoking, subjects can only communicate through operatic vocals, with an effect lasting from 8 to 15 minutes.
Date of Recovery: - -2004
Location of Recovery: Phoenix, Arizona
Current Status: A number were consumed a month after recovery by the Site-22 staff. Remainder in storage.
Notes: These were a lot of fun. Someone should put them in the break room vending machines if the Foundation comes across a reliable source. - Agent

Item Description: A red 2011 Alfa Romeo 159. Upon sitting in the driver's seat, the driver spontaneously forgets how to use a stick-shift transmission. They regain this knowledge upon stepping out of the car. (It should also be noted that this car *has* a stick-shift transmission.)
Date of Recovery: - -20
Location of Recovery: , Poland
Current Status: In storage; awaiting repairs due to a burnt-out clutch.

Item Description: A black-and-white picture of a flock of sheep that causes any human within a five (5)-meter radius to feel as if they are being watched.
Date of Recovery: - -
Location of Recovery:
Current Status: In storage.

Item Description: A Triumph Adler TA-1600 brand computer. When

activated all peripherals are turned into aged Abbaye de Belloc cheese.
Date of Recovery: 11- -2012
Location of Recovery: Algonquin College, Canada
Current Status: Stored in Site- break room.
Notice: I shouldn't have to say this, but since it keeps happening: staff are advised not to connect peripherals to the computer unless they intend to turn said peripherals into cheese. - Supervisor White

Item Description: A finger painting of a 7 centimeter square inside of a 3 centimeter circle.
Date of Recovery: 12-02-20
Location of Recovery: Christian Addler Elementary School
Current Status: Undergoing testing
Note: I know the ruler doesn't lie, but my brain just doesn't want to believe it. Guess we're doing something right. - Agent Morris

Item Description: A severed saltwater crocodile (*Crocodylus porosus*) head, which doesn't experience decomposition or corrosion. When touched or handled physically, the head animates and bites its handler, then returns to its inactive state. Object also regenerates almost instantaneously when damaged.
Date of Recovery: - -2014
Location of Recovery: Las Vegas, Nevada
Current Status: In frozen storage.

Item Description: A blue M&M's candy, which, when set on a flat surface, begins to spin, accelerating in speed until it reaches a rate of approximately 65 rev/s, at which point it instantly freezes in place until picked up and set back down.
Date of Recovery: 02-24-2014
Location of Recovery: Cedar Springs, Colorado, USA
Current Status: Consumed by Dr.

Item Description: A newly opened, 14-ounce glass bottle of brand ketchup. Contents of bottle deemed impossible to extract, despite vigorous smacking and shaking.
Date of Recovery: 04-15-20
Location of Recovery: San Juan, Mexico
Current Status: Shattered during an unauthorized extraction attempt in Site-22 cafeteria. Despite severe fragmentation, contents

remained irretrievable from bottle. Broken shards and remains moved to standard storage locker at Site-59.

Item Description: A glass mirror that reflects images across its surface approximately 3.86 seconds more slowly than conventional mirrors, resulting in a significant 'lag' in the observed reflection.
Date of Recovery: - -
Location of Recovery: , Ukraine
Current Status: Undergoing testing at Site-73. Studies indicate that there is no observable change in the rate at which photons are reflected by the mirror.

Item Description: A toy rocket made out of an unknown polymer which can exceed speeds needed to escape the earth's gravity. It caught the interest of the Foundation and was tested.
Date of Recovery: - -
Location of Recovery: / Border
Current Status: Currently located in the thermosphere in Earth's Orbit.

Item Description: Bootleg VHS copy of Swedish movie " of " (19). All characters change gender and ethnicity randomly on each viewing.
Date of Recovery: - -
Location of Recovery: , Guam
Current Status: Site-19 break room. Currently in storage.
Notes: Bad acting, boring plot.

Item Description: A small brand FM radio, estimated to be years old. When powered and set to any frequency, the radio will play a random song popular among teenagers during the activator's pubescent years. This song will always involve romantic relations and is described as remarkably apposite to the activator's current relationship status in 95% of cases. When activated by somebody not in a romantic relationship, the radio will play an inexpertly recorded cover of Harry Nilsson single "One," sung dramatically off-key by an unidentified pubescent male accompanied by a series of atonal electric piano notes.
Date of Recovery: - -1986
Location of Recovery: High School, , Illinois
Current Status: Lost following testing by Researcher .

Item Description: A bag of - brand marshmallows. When a marshmallow is consumed by an individual, their head becomes engulfed in blue flames. Subjects always report a lack of noticeable change in spite of heat readings exceeding 100°C.
Date of Recovery: - -2014
Location of Recovery: , Scotland
Current Status: Remaining samples were placed in storage.

Item Description: A pair of ravens (*Corvus corax*) who will sing the folk song known as *twa corbies* on some but not all occasions when someone dies within an approximately one kilometre radius.
Date of Recovery: 06-27-1989
Location of Recovery: , British Isles
Current Status: Held in a standard aviary.

Item Description: One pair of brand headphones that can only be described as the opposite of what they are.
Date of Recovery: - -20
Location of Recovery: , Canada
Current Status: In storage at Site- .
Notes: Don't think into it too much. - Dr.

Item Description: A yellow brandless notebook. Every page contains multiple hand drawn rainbows. The words "KYLE, AGE SIX" are visible on the item's cover. All written text regarding said notebook will alter its colour in order to follow the pattern of the colours of the rainbows contained in the notebook. The drawings do not follow the pattern of real rainbows.
Date of Recovery: - -
Sussex, UK
Current Status: In storage at Site-98.

Item Description: An iron ball bearing (radius: 2cm) which completely lacks ferromagnetic properties, even in the presence of strong magnetic fields (tested up to 8 Tesla). It is the only known instance of an *anipole*, that is, a magnet with *no* poles (as opposed to hypothetical monopoles). Discovered while searching for low-background steel for use in radiation-sensitive experiments; it was noted for anomalously low levels of trace radioactive elements. Subsequent analysis revealed that it is composed entirely of pure iron.

Date of Recovery: - -200
Location of Recovery: Factory in Alaska, US.
Current Status: Held in Site-11 storage in radiation-shielding unit to preserve purity.

Item Description: A standard 'Monopoly' board game that, when played, will invariably incite an argument between the players that will ultimately lead to the cessation or annulment of their marriage, partnership, friendship or whatever other form their relationship took.
Date of Recovery: 07-03-2001
Location of Recovery: family yard sale, Illinois, US.
Current Status: Site-19 storage.

Item Description: Seven booster packs of the popular "Magic: The Gathering" trading card game. Opening of any of the packs will lead to an unidentified male voice saying "Ha! Nerd!" The voice appears to be located a distance away from the opener of the pack.
Date of Recovery: -13-20
Location of Recovery: & Comics
Current Status: Only five boosters remain. Currently stored in the Site 23 Storage Room.

Item Description: A 2 m. by 1 m. glass oblong that acts as a portable window to a parallel universe. Reverse side is an unidentified opaque material which has resisted all efforts to damage it thus far. Currently, the point of divergence between universes is unknown, but does not appear to have altered any aspect of Earth. Glass is functionally a mirror.
Date of Recovery: -03-19
Location of Recovery: , England
Current Status: Marked and used in Site- changing rooms Removed to storage following reinstitution of Protocol ANTI-AN105/76 "Containment First," on September 6, 2009.

Item Description: A 17g lump of Plasticine which, when viewed by more than one person, is unanimously agreed to be too much Plasticine. Mechanism for perpetuation of this worldview is currently unknown. No anomalous effects if viewed by only one person.
Date of Recovery: -12-20
Location of Recovery: , - - , England
Current Status: Kept in a small plastic bag in the Break Room of

Site .

Item Description: A pillow that audibly complains about itself. Complaints thus far have been softness (of which the pillow stated it was "too hard" and "too soft" at different times), material of the pillow, the material inside the pillow, and how much it talks about itself. While it has been noted that the pillow is sentient and is able to respond to personnel, the only thing it has discussed is itself.
Date of Recovery: -14-20
Location of Recovery: Soft Co.
Current Status: Site 35 Storage Room

Item Description: A chicken nugget that does not age or go stale. When a piece of the object is has been bitten off, the nugget will regenerate the area that has been bitten. Cutting pieces off of the object do not regenerate. It seems as though the "main" part of the nugget will regenerate with pieces cut off to show no anomalous properties.
Date of Recovery: 12-31-2013
Location of Recovery: , Connecticut.
Current Status: Stored in freezer at Site-48.
Notes: Maybe we could use this as infinite ration during shortage of food. - Dr. Smith

Item Description: A white oak tree (*Quercus alba*) that, when viewed by a subject, is invariably described as being "ironic". Affected subjects are incapable or unwilling to explain further.
Date of Recovery: 05-21-2011
Location of Recovery: , Canada
Current Status: In storage.

Item Description: A 1 m tall, solid gold flamingo statue that animates whenever a blue moon occurs. When animated, it attempts to fly through the ceiling only to crash into it. It will keep doing so until either restrained, or the morning after the blue moon ends.
Date of Recovery: 05-16-
Location of Recovery: Zoo, US
Current Status: In storage.

Item Description: A toilet paper roll with the words "Jimmyz

Teeliscop and Anty-scop" written on it with a red marker and various star stickers dotted around it. When viewing through one side, the roll will act as a telescope, however, when viewed from the other side it act as the opposite.
Date of Recovery: 06-12-
Location of Recovery: Woods, US
Current Status: In storage.
Notes: I feel bad for the kid who lost this. - Dr. Richards

Item Description: - ( ) sheets of paper that when flipped in the same direction twice show a "third side". Flipping a sheet again will show the first side. Flipping backwards from the first side will show the third one.
Date of Recovery: 03-20-
Location of Recovery: High School in ,
Current Status: In storage.

Item Description: A medium, white, men's shirt. All attempts to capture the item on video or photograph have failed, as photographs and videos develop as if the shirt were not present.
Date of Recovery: - -
Location of Recovery: ,
Current Status: In storage.

Item Description: An abstract bronze sculpture, measuring 2.11189 meters in height. Artist unknown. Exposure results in drastic overestimation of one's ability to make precise measurements for 9.800419 hours afterwards.
Date of Recovery: - -
Location of Recovery: Museum of Modern Art
Current Status: In storage.

Item Description: A pair of cheese graters. Any cheese grated with one comes out of the other grater if the 2 are within ~6 meters of each other.
Date of Recovery: - -
Location of Recovery: 21 Rd, Sequim, Washington
Current Status: Under testing.

Item Description: A standard paper straw wrapper which is animate and has behavior patterns consistent with a boa constrictor. This

includes slow "slithering" movement and attempts to constrict prey. Due to the material it is made of, it exerts very little force, and cannot restrict anything worthy of notice.
Date of Recovery: - -20
Location of Recovery: Moe's Roadside Grill, ,
Current Status: Crumpled up, presumably by accident. Believed to be "dead".

Item Description: A font file named HAPYFASES.TTF. Any text displayed in it appears as excerpts from "Klingon Steed", a 12-novel series of unpublished slash romances. Author and font creator are unacquainted and display no anomalies. Downloadable file replaced with corrupt decoy.
Date of Recovery: 03-06-2009
Location of Recovery: PhreeKrazyFontz.com (Site defunct as of 16-12-2012)
Current Status: Installed on workstation of Senior Researcher Mary Esposito, Site 12

Item Description: An oil painting depicting a sunset over snow-capped mountains. Any human who views the painting is unable to move (excluding blinking and other unconscious movements) until they are deemed to have sufficiently "appreciated" the painting's composition or are forcibly moved by an external force.
Date of Recovery: 12-06-200
Location of Recovery: art gallery in , Ukraine, having spontaneously appeared in the gallery the day before.
Current Status: In permanent storage following an incident in which Dr. Gently was transfixed for three hours before being removed by security staff.
Notes: Maybe it'd be easier to appreciate the thing if the artist wasn't terrible at conveying depth. - Dr. Gently

Item Description: A plush toy of a golden retriever dog, looking cheaply made in appearance. Subjects describe the plush toy's body to feel unusually realistic. Touching the plush toy's fur is described to feel like dog's fur, touching the mouth is described to feel damp and sticky, and so on.
Date of Recovery: 09-21-1992
Location of Recovery: Dollar Store, , Louisiana

Current Status: Recreational toy in Site 15 Lounge.

Item Description: A 13 piece set of basic 12-inch rulers that when damaged emit a loud 'screeching' sound then begin to move away from the source of damage.
Date of Recovery: 01- -20
Location of Recovery: An abandoned Staples warehouse in Coppell, TX, formerly home to a sex cult and .
Current Status: Under testing.

Item Description: It might be a coffee cup that could possibly cause all writing about it to be uncertain.
Date of Recovery: 1999ish?
Location of Recovery: Somewhere in Florida.
Current Status: In storage. Possibly.

Item Description: A nickel-plated pocket watch. Induces a mild trance state in observers when not being swung back and forth like a pendulum.
Date of Recovery: 06- -20
Location of Recovery: A flea market in Cairo.
Current Status: Anomalous properties suppressed, safe to observe.
Notes: Did somebody actually build a little machine to keep this thing swinging? I mean, nice job, I guess, but seriously, we could just keep it in a box. - Dr. Micah

Item Description: A copper hoop (152 mm radius) with tubular rim (6.4 mm radius). A groove 1.6 mm wide runs along the inner surface. Three 25.4 mm bar magnets are attached to rails within the groove. These magnets are always equidistant and if given any momentum will rotate around the hoop at a constant velocity without slowing. Any attempt to extract mechanical energy from this system causes it to abruptly stop. All copies have failed to duplicate the perpetual motion of the original device.
Date of Recovery: 08-08-1968
Location of Recovery: Inventors convention, Las Vegas, Nevada
Current Status: Engineering Research Lab, Site-19

Item Description: A stack of 128 127 around 124 A4 printing papers printed with a variety of content, exact number of sheets

undetermined. Every time the stack is counted, a single 1 to 3 a small number of sheets (exact number undetermined and suspected to be random) will disappear.
Date of Recovery: 05-11-2010
Location of Recovery: Building, Shanghai, China. Original stack believed to have consisted of over 400 papers.
Current Status: In storage.

Item Description: A 10x10 cm piece of white cardstock bearing two equally-sized black dots. The dots remain adjacent to one another along the direction of the Earth's equator, no matter which way the card is turned. Anomaly fails to manifest when paper is not held approximately parallel to the ground.
Date of Recovery: 12-11-
Location of Recovery: The PD forensics labs; retrieved from a deceased John Doe.
Current Status: Laminated for preservation purposes, kept in storage.

Item Description: A plastic milk jug which does not experience any gravitational forces. Milk was found to harbor no anomalous properties.
Date of Recovery: 01-12-2015
Location of Recovery: Recycling Center, - , Argentina
Current Status: Stolen.

Item Description: A rock possessing telepathic capabilities with a range of a few meters. Mostly mulls over how bored it is. Communication appears to be one-way only.
Date of Recovery: 09-01-
Location of Recovery: Discovered during investigation of site of an anomalous event by MTF Psi-8 ("The Silencers"). Determined to be unattached to identifiable larger anomaly.
Current Status: In storage.
Notes: Took several hours to locate which rock was anomalous. My knees hurt. - Agent

Item Description: A pig whose appearance is static and shifted downwards by ~.25 meters. Effect is purely visual. The image is as it was when the effect started. The effect was reported to have taken ahold instantly.

Date of Recovery: - -
Location of Recovery: Pig farm in ,
Current Status: Kept as a pet on Site- by Junior Researcher Barem.

Item Description: A mummified human foot in a clay jar. Thought to date back to the eighteenth dynasty of Egypt. Anomalous in that genetic testing matches the foot to one Daniel Eichtue-Heau, a resident of modern day California, who presently possesses both his feet. Eichtue-Heau is under surveillance.
Date of Recovery: 06-13-20
Location of Recovery: Found in the remains of a shrine to the Egyptian goddess Ma'at.
Current Status: In storage.
Notes: Eichtue-Heau's left foot was severed in an industrial accident on 02-21-20 . Foot was seized by Foundation personnel and found to share numerous characteristics with the mummified foot. Currently held in cold storage.

Item Description: A soft-boiled egg approx. 0.7 meters in height. Shell is tan in color and speckled with green. DNA testing inconclusive.
Date of Recovery: 12-11-
Location of Recovery: Retrieved from an illegally-operated restaurant in South America specializing in exotic foods. Other dishes on the menu included snow leopard, chimpanzee, wooly mammoth, human, and SCP- . Reports indicate that two such eggs had already been served, and that the last was being reserved for a wealthy Chinese stockbroker. The egg was predicted to sell for $, , .
Current Status: Undergoing testing.

Item Description: A printed image of a Jack Russell Terrier that invariably fools observers into believing they are perceiving a living dog of the same breed. Effect can be avoided by observing the image indirectly, such as through a mirror or camera.
Date of Recovery: 09-04-
Location of Recovery: A pet show in New Orleans.
Current Status: Held in Site- kennels. Stored in Site- cognitohazard file containment.

Item Description: A letter opener resembling a fifteen (15) cm long miniature claymore. Material is common low-grade stainless steel, the handle is lacquered oak. Material samples taken exhibit no unusual properties. The content of any envelope opened with it is transformed into a poem of appropriate content. Mission reports have been transformed into anything ranging in style from viking sagas to material akin to poems by the War Poets of World War 1, while clerical content usually turns into dadaist or absurdist poetry (especially anything produced by the accounting department of)
Date of Recovery: - -20
Location of Recovery: ,
Current Status: Kept in storage at site . Access is usually granted upon written request to Dr. and for Class A-C personnel.

Item Description: A twin size mattress. Subjects who fall asleep on the mattress will invariably have a dream in which they are forced to consume a live walrus using only a fork and kitchen knife. Whether or not the subject succeeds in the dream appears to be inconsequential.
Date of Recovery: 14-06-1983
Location of Recovery: A furniture store in , England
Current Status: In storage.

Item Description: A box of 24 Crayola-brand pencils featuring 3 pencils in colours that don't exist in nature. Listed on the box and on each respective pencil as "moiter," "emilet" and "cankri." These pencils work as expected.
Date of Recovery: - -
Location of Recovery: Recovered from a Manna Charitable Foundation establishment located in , Canada.
Current Status: In storage.
Notes: Probably memetic or something. Gives me a migraine to look at them. Pretty though. - Researcher

Item Description: A 1:1 replica of a .338 caliber Accuracy International AWM sniper rifle, complete with bipod, telescopic sight, magazine, and internal mechanisms, constructed out of various unusually durable edible substances (a significant portion of which is chocolate cake). Despite its composition, item is fully functional as a

firearm, capable of chambering and firing .338 Lapua Magnum cartridges.
Date of Recovery: 07-16-2000
Location of Recovery: Sandford, Somerset, England
Current Status: In storage.

Item Description: A running car made entirely out of paper scraps. No motor has been found.
Date of Recovery: - -
Location of Recovery: , Texas
Current Status: Kept in a garage with various other non-dangerous cars and such in Site- .

Item Description: The exact phrase " ", when used as a username on any website. Accounts by this name cannot be banned or deleted, and content uploaded or posted by them cannot be removed, due to computer errors that spontaneously occur during attempts.
Date of Recovery: - -2007
Location of Recovery: N/A. First instance identified on social media website Reddit.
Current Status: The operators of the known accounts by this username have been located and amnesticized to prevent usage of these accounts. The username has been registered by the Foundation on as many other sites as possible.

Item Description: A standard coin counting jar with no identifiers of its manufacturers. The jar runs on one (1) triple-A battery, and works as expected, correctly counting the amount of coins placed within. However, all coins placed inside will become pennies of equal amount (e.g., a dime placed inside will become 10 pennies). Outwardly the jar appears full of pennies. If the lid is removed, the coins can be removed as normal, though they still appear as pennies within the jar.
Date of Recovery: 11-11-2011
Location of Recovery: A Walgreen's store at , Florida.
Current Status: On the desk of Dr. .

Item Description: A stack of three-hundred and sixty-four (364) pieces of personalized stationery. "Messages for Bertrand Bartleby" is inscribed at the top of each. When folded in half, stationery will

inscribe itself with the name, physical description, and a chronological record of actions taken by anyone in proximity to the folded paper, using terminology and slang common to turn-of-the-century London.
Date of Recovery: 02-15-2015
Location of Recovery: 412 Missionary Street, London, England.
Current Status: Missing.
Notes: On 06-20-2015, all but one (1) piece of the acquired stationery were reported missing from storage. The remaining piece had been folded in half and left in the empty locker.

+ Contents of Remaining Folded Paper

Fifteen Minutes After Third Bell, Evening
Bertrand Bartleby enters. Pale, stout, and doughy as a Yorkshire Dumpling. Dress of fine quality. Posture of a well-bred and educated gentleman.

Sixteen Minutes After Third Bell, Evening
Bertrand Bartleby recovers all but one of me. He expresses polite amusement at my recovery.
I am folded in half.

Seventeen Minutes after Third Bell, Evening
Bertrand Bartleby requests that I begin recording retroactively from the moment he arrived. Additions are made.

Eighteen Minutes after Third Bell, Evening
Bertrand Bartleby exits.

Twenty-Two Minutes after Seventh Bell, Morning
Quartermaster Victor Louis enters. Tall, athletic, with a distinct mix of European French and African Negro. Dress and posture of unsightly quality.

Twenty-Three Minutes after Seventh Bell,

Morning
Victor Louis recognizes that the rest of me is missing. He emits vocalized expressions of vulgarity, suggesting surprise and/or anger typical of lesser upbringing. He approaches with intent to open me.

Item Description: A brand mountain bike that, while mounted, experiences a headwind of random speeds from m/s to m/s, even in enclosed buildings.
Date of Recovery: - -2014
Location of Recovery: , Denmark
Current Status: Research ongoing for possible wind power generation.

Item Description: A brand digital camera. When a photograph is taken, resulting photograph reveals scene of photo approximately 4.5 seconds before the exposure took place. Videos taken that are under 4.5 seconds in length are also affected.
Date of Recovery: 04-10-20
Location of Recovery: Die Fotografie at , Germany
Current Status: In Dr. B 's office.

Item Description: A VHS tape with a recording of the music video for "Once in a Lifetime" by the band Talking Heads. The segment with the repeated line "*Same as it ever was*" continues from timecode 1:57 for two hours of non-repeating footage, with David Byrne repeating the line and looking increasingly distraught as hands grip his head.
Date of Recovery: - -1980
Location of Recovery: ,
Current Status: General media storage.
Notes: Crew who worked on the original filming were interviewed. They all agree that no extra footage of this segment was shot.

Item Description: A controller for the console that causes anyone holding it to write/type in '1337', a 'language' that replaces most alphabet letters with alternative ASCII numbers and symbols.
Date of Recovery: 04-15-20
Location of Recovery: , Illinois, USA
Current Status: In Dr. Albae's Personal Locker.

Item Description: A scorpion that imitates various human mannerisms and speaks fluent English in a British accent.
Date of Recovery: 01-28-2010
Location of Recovery: , Texas, USA
Current Status: Contained in standard terrarium, heat lamp included, at Site
Notes: He appears to like tea, despite normal scorpions being strictly carnivorous. - Dr. Henry

Item Description: A pennaceous feather resembling a tail feather from an unknown species of family Accipitridae (hawks, eagles, and vultures). It is brown with white banding, appears to have naturally fallen from its host, and measures 4m long by 1m wide.
Date of Recovery: 09-14-2011
Location of Recovery: Steppe land approximately 500 km west of Astana, Kazakhstan.
Current Status: In storage.
Notes: So we have a giant egg and a giant feather in storage. Where's the giant bird? And why doesn't anybody know about it? - Dr. Argent

Item Description: An unbranded data cable for Android devices. When connected to a compatible device, the device will charge itself even though the data cable is not attached to a visible power supply.
Date of Recovery: - -20
Location of Recovery: Sent as "Promotional Material" through to Site- , return address of mail is currently under surveillance by Foundation operatives.
Current Status: Kept in storage in Site- for personnel to use.

Item Description: Twelve (12) quill pens that, when placed inside a suitable salt water environment, will animate and behave like a Sea Pen (*Pennatulacea*). When taken out of water, it will revert back to its original state. The items were discovered after a report of living pens.
Date of Recovery: 08-23-2015
Location of Recovery: A small tank inside , San Diego.
Current Status: Placed in an aquarium at Dr. 's room.

Item Description: A commercial electrician's 22 piece tool set manufactured and sold by . Any attempt to take any of the

tools in the set without looking directly at it will cause the tool to instantaneously transport a few meters away to a random location. After 5 attempts to retrieve a tool, all tools in the set will transport to a location suitable for them to arrange themselves in an order resembling the ";)" emoticon.
Date of Recovery: 04-18-2013
Location of Recovery: Construction site for Containment Area-
Current Status: Site-45's Low Priority Containment wing.

Item Description: A writing pad with the words "Do not swaer" [sic] written on every page. Whenever the object is written about, any expletives in the text will automatically be replaced with similar words.
Date of Recovery: 09-08-2015
Location of Recovery: A classroom in the school in , Australia.
Current Status: Kept on a papertray in Researcher 's room.

Item Description: A pair of black men's gloves made of an unknown material. If the items are worn while punching a living thing or inanimate object, large words depicting the sound made will appear for 1.7 seconds within 1 meter of the wearer.
Date of Recovery: 09-08-2015
Location of Recovery: A prop house in Walla Walla, Washington, United States.
Current Status: In Dr. 's office display case.

Item Description: A pencil sharpener that adds back layers of wood to any pencil inserted until it is indiscernible from its original unsharpened form.
Date of Recovery: -11-2015
Location of Recovery: A classroom in , Africa.
Current Status: In a staff supply closet for reusing pencils. In a locked container in Dr. 's office.

Item Description: A 1-gallon tub of Ben and Jerry's Vanilla Ice Cream. The ice cream itself is continuously kept at 12°C, despite temperature surrounding it. Consumption of the ice cream will cause the taste to change to a random flavor of existing ice cream flavors. However, consumption will automatically trigger an "ice cream headache". The ice cream does not regenerate after consumption.

Date of Recovery: 03-14-19
Location of Recovery: 's Freezing Goods.
Current Status: Area 23 frozen storage. Consumed.

Item Description: A human skull that, when held, will cause the holder to walk around the room with the skull, acting out the play "Hamlet" by William Shakespeare. After finishing, the holder will place the skull to its original position, and return to normal. When questioned, subjects usually respond with lines from the play.
Date of Recovery: 09-14-2002
Location of Recovery: A drama hall in London, England.
Current Status: A locked display case in Dr. Moreau's office.

Item Description: A male blue shark (*Prionace glauca*) that swims through the air like it would through water.
Date of Recovery: 11-16-2013
Location of Recovery: Miami, Florida
Current Status: On-Site terrarium at Site-B14
Notes: Will eat anything a normal shark would, but seems to prefer dog food. - Dr. Uhlman

Item Description: A stovepipe style hat that, when worn by a human and viewed by one or more penguins, will exert a force on the wearer accelerating them upward at a rate of 1 m/s^2 per observer. Under normal circumstances, 10 or more observers are required to overcome the forces of gravity.
Date of Recovery: - -20
Location of Recovery: Zoo, ,
Current Status: Site-37 storage wing.

Item Description: A double-six domino that cannot be knocked over. When pushed with a great amount of force, it knocks down the object that pushed it with a similar amount of force. Should a human push it, it bends the finger(s) that pushed the domino downward.
Date of Recovery: 03-28-1996
Location of Recovery: Boston, Massachusetts
Current Status: Placed against the wall in Site-4's storage compartment. Shot by Agent [REDACTED] in an attempt to knock it down, and thus it was broken into multiple pieces. Pieces displayed no anomalies, even after being super glued together.

Item Description: One cassette tape entitled *The Best of Queen*. When left unobserved in close proximity to other cassette tapes, item will transmogrify the tapes into exact copies of itself.
Date of Recovery: 09-20-1982
Location of Recovery: The floorboard of Agent 's car.
Current Status: Site-88's music wing.

Item Description: A gray analog alarm clock that sounds like the owner's primary maternal figure when reaching its set specific time.
Date of Recovery: 10-28-2015
Location of Recovery: Ithaca, New York
Current Status: Kept in storage. Destroyed by Agent . Agent reprimanded.

Item Description: A seemingly standard U.S. quarter. When flipped, it has a 33% chance of landing on a third side not normally visible. This third side depicts an engraving similar in appearance and format to the special state quarters; however, it depicts a state that does not exist. The state depicted is called "New Caulde", and according to the coin, was founded in 1919. The engraving depicts a hammer and a nail over a stylized image of a tree.
Date of Recovery: 03-10-1989
Location of Recovery: Las Vegas, Nevada
Current Status: In storage. Testing must be approved by Dr. Cox.

Item Description: A table with a circular area approximately 20 cm in diameter that remains at a constant 37°C, no matter the surrounding temperatures.
Date of Recovery: - -
Location of Recovery: Atlanta, Georgia, USA
Current Status: In the Site-19 Break Room for use by staff (request to move to storage pending)

Item Description: A relatively small maple tree that shows effects opposite to the season currently underway. There are no ill effects on its health in spite of being unable to sufficiently photosynthesize due to the anomaly.
Date of Recovery: 07-21-1984
Location of Recovery: A park in
Current Status: Relocated to an outdoor compartment of Site- . Object retains anomalous property after relocation.

Item Description: A complex ritual which, when performed correctly, causes the manifestation of a single pepperoni pizza. Ritual was originally written on a receipt from a local pizzeria for one large pepperoni pizza.
Date of Recovery: 11-16-1993
Location of Recovery: Phoenix, Arizona
Current Status: Original receipt is kept in a low security filing cabinet at Site-17.
Notes: Investigation of pizzeria showed no signs of further anomalous activity.

Item Description: A colony of lesser flamingo (*Phoenicopterus minor*), numbering 1441 in population at time of recovery, whose members were mutually intangible. Breeding attempts resulted in completely intangible offspring.
Date of Recovery: 04-18-1952
Location of Recovery: , Namibia
Current Status: All known members are deceased. The remains displayed no anomalous properties and were incinerated.

Item Description: An animate common iguana made completely of plant matter. Iguana was unable to reproduce as no female version of the creature had been found. Consumed insect matter.
Date of Recovery: 04-12-1983
Location of Recovery: Sewers beneath
Current Status: Died at average age; genetic information stored at Site- .

Item Description: A worn out dartboard that cannot be hit by any player, regardless of skill level. Despite missing, the user will believe that they scored a bullseye and boast about their skills for a period of time between 4 and 110 minutes.
Date of Recovery: 09-27-1963
Location of Recovery: A pub in Cork, Ireland
Current Status: In storage at Site-77

Item Description: A small toy in the shape of a domesticated pig with wings that animates at will. Item behaves in a manner similar to its biological counterpart, with the only exception being that it uses flight as its primary mode of transportation.
Date of Recovery: 05-10-2001

Location of Recovery: Houston, Texas
Current Status: Contained in storage on Site-18.

Item Description: A chocolate-dipped granola bar that, when consumed, seems to have the missing portion regrow on one end of the bar.
Date of Recovery: 02-17-2015
Location of Recovery: , Ontario
Current Status: In storage at Site- 's cafeteria. Flattened, however anomalous effects haven't been nullified.
Note: Researchers and their brains. Always wanting to know more… smashed my damn chocolate bar in the process. - Agent

Item Description: A cardboard box. All physical documentation of item spontaneously translocates to inside the box itself.
Date of Recovery: 01-01-2016
Location of Recovery: , Georgia, USA
Current Status: In storage
Addition: Attempts to keep audio-only recordings resulted in the recording devices moving to inside the box.

Item Description: A piece of information that when put through all mediums tested *(image, txt, .mp3, ant genome, AIAD, [REDACTED])*, alters itself to produce the same description/image of a purple flower.
Date of Recovery: 04-02-2016
Location of Recovery: [REDACTED]'s digital camera, after being struck by lighting.
Current Status: Contained in Anomalous Data Storage Drive-14.

Item Description: A paper that causes every other word written on it to be turned into an expletive.
Date of Recovery: 01-24-19
Location of Recovery: High School
Current Status: In Site- 's storage locker.
I @!$#@$@ don't damnit what the @!$# is. I'm @!$#@$@ on @!$# right @!$ and @!$#@ fine. Dr.

Entry Portrayal: An antique lexicon which necessitates readers to communicate in unnecessary serpentine synonyms after perusing it. Periodically synonyms interdict the prepense definition.

Occasion of Retrieval: 13-02-19 A.D.
Venue of Retrieval: Athenaeum, Romania
Contemporary State: In stockpile
Notation: Human resources who I toil with are now necessitated to use dictionaries when in a tête-à-tête with me. - Dr. M

Item Description: A VHS Player when described, changes the letters of random words any description it to the Unicode known as a 'FULL BLOCK' ( ). While the Player itself not been observed show any anomalous aside from this.
  of Recovery: 09-04-2015
Location Recovery: São Paulo, Brazil
Current Status: Contained in on -18.

Item Description: A standard AR-15 Combat Rifle that, when fired, produces anomalous amounts of smoke from the gun barrel.
Date of Recovery: 02-17-2015
Location of Recovery: Munich, Germany
Current Status: Stored in the Task Force Nu-7 Headquarters Armory

Item Description: A common goldfish (*Carassius auratus*), genetically within normal parameters for its species. It is in no way anomalous.
Notes: Dr. Serion is no longer permitted to edit this document without O5-Approval.
Item Description: A common goldfish (*Carassius auratus*) that sporadically explodes, before spontaneously reassembling. The detonations are sufficient to shatter aquarium glass, and have so far killed 10.
Date of Recovery: 02-05-2016
Location of Recovery: House of Dr. Serion, NY, United States
Current Status: Kept in plastic bowl in the level 2 testing lab of Site-24. Fed twice daily.

Item Description: A plastic toddler spoon that attempts to gouge out the eyes of anyone who comes within six (6) meters of it.
Date of Recovery: - -2016
Location of Recovery: , Colorado
Current Status: In storage
Notes: The spoon is neither sharp enough nor heavy enough to do

any real damage, just slightly uncomfortable. Goggles are recommended to anyone working with it.

Item Description: A standard MPK5 SMG. When fired, it instead emits a high-pitched voice that attempts to mimic the expected sound of the weapon firing.
Date of Recovery: 09-18-2012
Location of Recovery: Lynchwood,
Current Status: In storage; pending destruction

Item Description: A 2kg block of gorgonzola cheese, which will continuously emit 1970s disco-funk at 65dB when within 12m of any male with a moustache.
Date of Recovery: 01-01-2000
Location of Recovery: AltMod Discoteque, Antwerp, Belgium
Current Status: In storage at all-female Site 12

Item Description: An empty portrait frame, area of 1.25 m x 0.75 m. Anyone who makes eye-contact with the object will see it as a portrait of themselves. Staring at this object more than 2 minutes will result in death.
Date of Recovery: 11-08-1999
Location of Recovery: Sicily, Italy
Current Status: In storage

Item Description: A 20cm x 20cm x 20cm wooden block that casts a shadow shaped like a common house cat.
Date of Recovery: 02-03-2016
Location of Recovery: Lisbon, Portugal
Current Status: Dr. 's office

Item Description: A Slinky able to turn corners.
Date of Recovery: 01-03-2016
Location of Recovery: Toronto, Canada
Current Status: Undergoing testing in CN Tower stairwell
Notes: Also crosses short landings, up to 1.4m, as long as there are more stairs.

Item Description: A human brain in a mobile vat of nutrients, equipped with camera and speech synthesizer. It claims to be Zargox Quaglofan, 23rd century secret agent on a temporal mission

to prevent the rise of the Insectoid Empire in 1976.
Date of Recovery: 09-23-2011
Location of Recovery: A crater at Site 136
Current Status: Head of Records, Site 136
Notes: It appears to be delusional, but it's a very good file clerk. - Dr. Danger

Item Description: A titanium spork. Any food eaten with this utensil will be perceived to be slightly less spicy than the maximum the eater is readily capable of tolerating. No chemical changes to the food, or physiological changes to the user are noted, this item only affects perception.
Date of Recovery: 04-16-2016
Location of Recovery: The Site 88 cafeteria.
Current Status: In the Site 88 general storage wing, small item storage locker.
*Notes: Correction — It's **supposed** to be in the storage locker, but keeps ending up back in the cafeteria utensil rack. I better not catch whoever keeps doing this. - Dr. Rachasthani*

Item Description: A toilet. Any animal that comes into contact with the toilet will burst into laughter even if they don't have the vocal cords to do so.
Date of Recovery: 02-12-2005
Location of Recovery: The Site-66 bathroom.
Current Status: Broken after Dr. dropped item during transport to Site-66 Storage Room.

Item Description: A white sock that whenever worn, turns out to be inside out, completely independent from how to sock was actually put on.
Date of Recovery: 01-04-2002
Location of Recovery: Originally in possession of Agent
Current Status: In storage

Item Description: A brown paper grocery bag. When placed on the head of a human being, the wearer's face cannot be revealed in any way other than removing the bag on their own. Any other attempts will remove the bag, only to reveal another bag underneath, still covering the head of the wearer. Removed copies no longer display anomalous effect. Attempts to cut holes in the bag have failed.

Deceased subjects do not seem to trigger anomalous effect in the object.
Date of Recovery: 04-13-2009
Location of Recovery: A Supermarket location in , , in employee break room.
Current Status: In storage

Item Description: A retractable pen with a spring-based clicker. In addition to the two states such a pen would normally have (retracted and extended), there exists a 'third' state where the pen tip appears to retract and extend again; when attempting to write in this third state, the pen will start making a continuous, bass-heavy noise as it makes contact with the writing surface. Disassembly of the pen has revealed no origin as to the source of the sound; the anomalous effect only functions when the pen is completely reassembled.
Date of Recovery: 08-16-2015
Location of Recovery: High School, USA
Current Status: In storage, Site-23

Item Description: A copper fountain in a public space outside [REDACTED]. During the daytime, the fountain does not display any anomalous properties; however, at any point in the night after 22:30 when the fountain is not being observed, all coins at the bottom of the fountain will inexplicably disappear. Inexplicably, this will only occur if there are at least 1945cm^3 of water in the fountain.
Date of Recovery: 16-02-20
Location of Recovery: , Czech Republic
Current Status: Disassembled in a Foundation-owned warehouse.
Notes: The groundskeeper at the location of recovery was aware of the fountain's anomalous property, but didn't report it because 'it made his job easier'. I sympathize, but still, with the length of time he's been exposed to the anomaly, I'd recommend a Class-E amnestic for him. - Agent

I'll look into clearing it with the Ethics Committee. And as for the people telling me this should receive full SCP status - it's a fountain that eats your coins. Nothing more. - Dr. Ryken

Item Description: A whiteboard that anything written on it perfectly mirrors itself within 20 minutes.
Date of Recovery: - -19

Location of Recovery: School
Current Status: In storage

Item Description: A silver wristwatch which, when laid on any surface, will soft boil an egg placed on it. No other anomalous properties recorded.
Date of Recovery: 05-03-20
Location of Recovery: , New Mexico.
Current Status: In the possession of Dr. Michael for personal use.
Notes: This is absolutely useless; however, it does make preparing lunch at work easier as I don't have to wait to use the stove in the kitchen. No, you can't have it, it's mine! - Dr. Michael

Item Description: An open case of 20 tubes of hair gel. Application of the hair gel to the scalp of any primate will cause hair to grow, recede, or change length until the primate's hair resembles a 1980s style mullet.
Date of Recovery: 08-12-2016
Location of Recovery: Basement of Barber Shop, Waxahachie, TX
Current Status: In Site-17 storage.
Notes: Product appears to be mislabeled. All packaging indicates the product will give the user a 1950s pompadour.

Item Description: A large conch seashell, 30 cm in length. When the opening is held to a human ear, a dial tone is produced from within the shell. No method of dialing the item (if such is possible) has yet been determined.
Date of Recovery: 04-05-2012
Location of Recovery: Obtained from the seashore of Mindil Beach, Australia.
Current Status: Functioning as an aquarium decoration in Site-82.

Item Description: A wireless black PlayStation 4 controller that will connect to Nintendo 64 entertainment consoles and nothing else. Tests have shown that all internals of the controller are unmodified and correctly programmed yet there is still no understanding of how N64s receive the signal broadcasted by the controller.
Date of Recovery: 01-24-2016
Location of Recovery: Obtained from a house in , California

Current Status: In storage. Request for transfer to Area 43 break room pending.

Item Description: A mundane hockey puck. Slides across all surfaces it is placed on, with no observable friction.
Date of Recovery: 03-04-2016
Location of Recovery: Surrendered by the ice hockey club of Darwin, Australia.
Current Status: In storage.

Item Description: A coverless book with 50 pages, when opened it will display pages from different parts of different novels and books, there are no set patterns to what pages that appears in it. The pages will randomize again if book is closed and reopened.
Date of Recovery: - -1988
Location of Recovery: On a bookshelf in a public library located in , Hong Kong.
Current Status: In storage.

Item Description: A small white dresser. Upper drawer contains different assortment of items each time it is opened, usually consistent with mundane drawer clutter. Any items placed inside are no longer present when the drawer is closed and reopened. The lower drawer similarly shifts contents, but instead is always uniformly filled with a single substance or collection of identical objects; previously observed examples include shale gravel, pine pitch, unmarked gold ingots, 1985 US pennies with identical scratches and surface features, 150 chrome steel objects of uncertain function, Bing cherries, and crushed woodwind reeds.
Date of Recovery: 10-14-2003
Location of Recovery: , , during a raid on a known Marshall, Carter, and Dark warehouse.
Current Status: Low-risk Anomalous Item storage.
Notes: After brief testing, item was determined to be non-hazardous. Request for further testing as a possible disposal for hazardous items is pending.

Item Description: A minor infohazard. Anything describing its physical appearance will automatically be redacted.
Date of Recovery: 04-16-2016
Location of Recovery: Reykjavik, Iceland

Current Status: Placed within storage.

Item Description: A karaoke machine. Anyone who talks in the microphone will have their voice changed to that of a Japanese teenage girl, with anything spoken or sung being automatically translated as well. The voice itself varies slightly from person to person.
Date of Recovery: - -2002
Location of Recovery: A nightclub in Prefecture
Current Status: Stationed at Site-32's break room for recreation.

Item Description: A vial of white powder that is capable of causing severe headaches.
Date of Recovery: [REDACTED]
Location of Recovery: Brooklyn, New York
Current Status: Destroyed in incinerator I-22.

Item Description: A self-reviewing notebook. A short piece of criticism will be written after any text written in the book. As well as reviewing fiction for its value as a novel, it appears to be able to fact check both fiction and nonfiction, and will suggest potential improvements.
Date of Recovery: - -
Location of Recovery: A book of the week club in Spain.
Current Status: In storage at Site-14. Suggestion for use as an aid to research in anomalous and mainstream studies pending approval.

Item Description: A single feather that appears to be constantly changing in color, the feather's color seems to change approximately every two seconds. When music is played within a 12 meter radius, the feather reacts to this stimuli by changing colors much quicker than normal, much like a strobe light, the speed of which it changes seems to vary depending on the speed, beat, tone, and tempo of the song/music being played.
Date of Recovery: 07-2 -20
Location of Recovery: Found in what appears to be an old and abandoned club in , Philippines.
Current Status: Kept in storage and used during Christmas parties.

Item Description: A maths textbook whose contents can only be remembered by smoking the pages. Pages regenerate after thirty

minutes.
Date of Recovery: 16-7-2010
Location of Recovery: , Australia
Current Status: In storage

Item Description: A man in his mid-30's, capable of twirling any object on his index finger at extreme speeds, regardless of size, mass, chemical composition, or shape of said object in relation to his own body.
Date of Recovery: 03-06-2012
Location of Recovery: Sunderland, Massachusetts
Current Status: In low-threat humanoid containment, Site-12

Item Description: A 4oz cup of brand applesauce, contents nonperishable. Expiration date always matches current date.
Date of Recovery: 6-18-2016
Location of Recovery: Gold Hill, Oregon
Current Status: Inadvertently consumed by Junior Researcher . suffered mild indigestion but recovered within 12 hours.

Item Description: A brand record player. Only plays "What is Love?" by Haddaway, no matter what record is placed in it.
Date of Recovery: 05-25-2011
Location of Recovery: A record store in Kiev, Ukraine
Current Status: In the office of Dr. , at his personal request. *What? I really like the song. - Dr.*

Item Description: A goldfish which produces a constant stream of fresh water from its mouth at the rate of 10.9 L/s.
Date of Recovery: 12-10-2016
Location of Recovery: Rhodehampton, New South Wales
Current Status: Forcibly imploded following a blockage in the drainage system for its tank.

Item Description: A 3D jigsaw sphere whose pieces, when disassembled, form two identical copies of the same sphere. Lost pieces of an individual sphere will occasionally be found inside another sphere when disassembling it.
Date of Recovery: 07-03-2016
Location of Recovery: Bowral, New south Wales
Current Status: Initially, three completed puzzles were recovered –

the pieces for fifteen more were found inside those spheres. Further testing has resulted in the construction of four additional whole spheres.

Item Description: A blank portrait sized canvas similar in appearance to **SCP-1074**. Whenever a memetic or info hazardous object is painted on the canvas, it will transfer into the painting. *(Yes, even SCP-1074 itself.)*
Date of Recovery: 7-11-2016
Location of Recovery: Augusta, Kansas.
Current Status: Deemed neutralized once SCP-055 was painted onto the canvas. Last seen in a containment locker in Site 17.
How the hell did someone manage to draw 055 onto this? -Dr.

Item Description: A cube constructed of concrete which will produce a sap from the tree every two (2) to four (4) hours. Sap has been tested but has proven to have no anomalous properties.
Date of Recovery: -20-1998
Location of Recovery: [REDACTED], Switzerland
Current Status: In the storage of Area 01 Site 17 with weekly cleaning from Janitorial Crews. Personnel under the security level of two (2) should not be permitted near the object following the near destruction of the object by Dr. James Write.
Note: I'm surprised that the sap has no anomalous properties. I mean, where does it come from? How is the sap made? Maybe it's a hidden form of teleportation! - Dr. Houston

Item Description: A Mac-Book that when any video is played using the device will redirect to a video of Rick Astley's *Never Gonna Give You Up*.
Date of Recovery: - -200
Location of Recovery: , Arizona
Current Status: Undergoing maintenance after unknown damaging of screen.
Did this computer just rick roll me? - Dr. Animus

Item Description: A D20 die that will never land on anything greater than 5.
Date of Recovery: - -2016
Location of Recovery: D.N.D. club
Current Status: In Site- 's storage closet

Item Description: A signed picture of Ethan Klein from the YouTube channel "h3h3Productions", that causes the viewer to cough until it is taken out of their line of sight.
Date of Recovery: - -2016
Location of Recovery: In the personal collection of the deceased

Current Status: In a low-value containment locker at Site-37.
Site personnel are not to place bets on how long they can look at this item for. Also, whoever found this, keep it up, proud of you. - Site Director Levy

Item Description: A Standard Computer Keyboard, Connected By A USB Cord. When The Peripheral Is Connected To Any Computer, It Automatically Capitalizes All Words Typed By It. There Are No Apparent Restrictions To This Effect.
Date Of Recovery: 11-09-2016
Location Of Recovery: , Ohio, USA
Current Status: Connected To The PC Of Dr.
Note: I Don't Mind Typing Like This. It's Pretty Fun To @!$# People Off With It. - Dr.

Item Description: A Northern Mockingbird (*Mimus polyglottus*) that can imitate any human phrase spoken to it. However, it always repeats these phrases in German, regardless of what language they were initially spoken in.
Date of Recovery: 11-14-2016
Location of Recovery: [REDACTED], North Carolina
Current Status: In a low-security animal containment unit at Site-65

Item Description: A combat knife with a serrated blade and a wooden handle. whenever this knife is used with the intention of harm the knife blade will disappear through unknown means. This event is un-observable and happens instantaneously. When in this anomalous state any person(s) "stabbed" with the knife will instantaneously and unavoidably whisper the phrase "I'm dead" and lie down. After about 4 minutes the victim will reawaken unharmed with no recollection of the event.
Date of Recovery: 05-09-2016
Location of Recovery: ,
Current Status: Secured in Site-78's non-sentient storage wing

Note: When we found this wouldn't stop stabbing me with it. Couldn't stop the bastard either. - from Recovery Team

Item Description: A purple and black mechanical pencil. Examination shows no brand names or logos anywhere on the surface of the object. When the top of the mechanical pencil is pushed down it reveals standard pencil lead. Testing reveals that although the pencil only seems to have 10 cm of this lead every time the top is pushed down more appears instantaneously. Any attempts to remove the pencil lead from the object have resulted in failure.
Date of Recovery: 07-05-2007
Location of Recovery: Secondary School. ,
Current Status: In possession of Assistant Researcher . Lost.

Item Description: An empty USB flash drive. Describing the object in question on any electronic program will cause each word in the document to redirect to a seemingly random YouTube video. If the name of an existing YouTube user is mentioned within the document, it will link to one of their videos (Example: "PewDiePie").
Date of Recovery: 19-06-2002
Location of Recovery: Connected to the computer of Foundation containment specialist .
Current status: [REDACTED].

Item Description: A 36 year old Caucasian male who constantly demands physical contact with human beings, despite being completely inside-out. He doesn't show the need to breathe, eat, drink or excrete waste matter. A translucent secretion covers his body which causes all homo sapiens who come into contact with it to explode violently in a matter of seconds.
Date of Recovery: 12-25-2008
Location of Recovery: Found wandering the streets in Los Angeles, California
Current Status: Contained in a sealed chamber in Site-88's sentient anomaly wing.
Note: Under no circumstances are personnel to use the secreted goo for pranks or practical jokes. Remember the golden rule, you wouldn't want someone to make you explode with shiny goo from a

strange inside-out man. - Dr. Blackbox

Item Description: A 3 liter sample of freshwater in a standard soda bottle that does not change its physical state regardless of temperature.
Date of Recovery: 11-25-2014
Location of Recovery: office building in , Florida.
Current Status: In storage at Site- .

Item Description: A volcano-shaped cake that erupts approximately every 30 days with either red, luminescent icing or 1500 degrees centigrade lava. The cake is both immune to this lava and doesn't go stale. The item has no place to store either of the liquids it erupts
Date of Recovery: 04-13-2007
Location of Recovery: A Pompeiian bakery.
Current Status: Held in Site- Cafeteria cold-storage Went into dormancy after being exposed to continual cold-storage temperatures. Currently in heated room to attempt to 'revive' the item.

Item Description: A monarch butterfly (*Danaus plexippus*) approximately 7.5x smaller than average members of its species (measured 5 millimeters in wingspan)
Date of Recovery: 03-13-2016
Location of Recovery: , Mexico
Current Status: Contained within a terrarium in Site-66 Deceased as of 07-25-2016

Item Description: A Heckler & Koch HK416 D10RS carbine. When the fire selector is set to a setting other than "Safe", any lifeform who comes in contact with the weapon will spontaneously hear the song "Shoot to Thrill" by the band AC/DC playing on a loop for as long as they remain in contact.
Date of Recovery: 04-11-2016
Location of Recovery: gun show, Texas, United States
Current Status: In storage at Site-19. Available at request for firing range usage.

Item Description: A name tag with the name "Steve" written on the front. Upon placing the name tag on a person's chest, the person will claim that their name has always been Steve, regardless of

gender.
Date of Recovery: 08-16-2016
Location of Recovery: CO, United States
Current Status: In storage at Site-17

Item Description: An Armenian style crucifix that emits high pitched squeals by unknown means when exposed to poultry products.
Date of Recovery: 04-17-19
Location of Recovery: , Armenia
Current Status: In a safe located at Site-19.

Item Description: A chess set made from English Oak. When the pieces are moved on the board they generate specific sounds audible only to the players. Moving a piece creates sounds similar to clanging metal or galloping horses, while removing a piece from play generates sounds of punching or clashing metal. At the end of a game a trumpet fanfare will play for 3 seconds.
Date of Recovery: 13-02-1992
Location of Recovery: Primary School, Serbia
Current Status: In the Area 53 break room.

Item Description: An apple tree whose fruit has been described as abnormally delicious. Any human who consumes a fruit from the tree will be propelled south by southeast away from ° ' . "N ° ' . "E at 87 kph.
Date of Recovery: 05-08-2012
Location of Recovery: Mt. Ararat, Turkey
Current Status: Relocated to Site- 's arboretum.

Item Description: A standard bathroom mirror. Any reflections of humans it casts appear to stare at the subject in shock or horror, regardless of actions performed while reflected. Only eye movement is asynchronous with subject movement.
Date of Recovery: 14-11-2015
Location of Recovery: London, Britain
Current Status: In storage at Site-

Item Description: A wooden door, painted white. At exactly 11:30 PM local time, a knock is heard from the side not being observed. If both sides are observed, knocks will emanate from both sides simultaneously.

Date of Recovery: 14-11-2015
Location of Recovery: London, Britain.
Current Status: In storage at Site-

Item Description: A standard kitchen sink. Humans over the age of 21 with at least one child under the age of 16 consistently sees it as full of dirty dishes, regardless of its current state. Humans under the age of 18 see it as completely empty, again regardless of current state.
Date of Recovery: 14-11-2015
Location of Recovery: London, Britain
Current Status: In storage at Site-

Item Description: A red plastic brand hockey stick that, when used to simulate the act of playing a guitar, will cause the song "Through The Fire and Flames" by the rock band Dragonforce to play. The sound appears to emerge from the stick. The music will stop if the song is played to the end or if the individual using it stops simulating guitar playing.
Date of Recovery: 15-12-2009
Location of Recovery: , Kentucky
Current Status: In storage at Site-50

Item Description: 10 instances of A4 sized standard 70 gram HVS paper. When flipped, the paper would always be empty regardless of tools or substances used, including oil paint, oil, permanent marker, water paint, pencil, fountain pen, ballpoint pen, garlic and similar thermal-sensitive ink, tomato, blood, and ultraviolet ink. No sign of previous inscription remained after the paper was flipped. Torn instances show no apparent anomaly.
Date of Recovery: 02-10-2016
Location of Recovery: Medan, Indonesia.
Current Status: In storage at Site-42.

Item Description: A candle that never melts while lit. Instead of melting, the candle randomly changes its scent every 5 minutes.
Date of Recovery: 12-01-2016
Location of Recovery: Alaska.
Current Status: In storage for use as a holiday meal centerpiece.

Item Description: A photograph of a . In spite of no evidence for

its existence being present, it will cause those who talk about it to insist upon its existence. Contents of the photograph are debated.
Date of Recovery: Unknown
Location of Recovery: Unknown
Current Status: Unknown; existence of object debated. Staff frequently report that the photo is hung in 's office.

Item Description: A wooden chair that, when sat in by a homo sapiens in front of a desk, will cause the aforementioned homo sapiens to say in their native language that they are "very busy". Primates will vocalize in English.
Date of Recovery: 02-17-2011
Location of Recovery: Memphis, Tennessee.
Current Status: In Storage In Dr. 's office.

Item Description: 32 sheets of paper that will animate drawings upon them for 15 seconds after being drawn. Animated drawings do not exhibit awareness of the three dimensional area around them.
Date of Recovery: 09-26-2015
Location of Recovery: A FedEx Office Print & Ship Center in Plymouth, Minnesota.
Current Status: Site-42's recreational room.

Item Description: A picture that changes based on the current holiday. On non-holidays, it is a picture of a Siamese cat. An unidentified male voice gives the appropriate greeting for the holiday to anyone who looks at the picture.
Date of Recovery: 01-01-2010
Location of Recovery: A house in London.
Current Status: Hung on a wall in Site-19's main lobby.

Item Description: A sculpture of Santa that says "Ho-ho-ho" to anyone who goes near it at night. It also yells out the last naughty act of anyone on the naughty list who goes near it.
Date of Recovery: 12-24-2015
Location of Recovery: A house in California.
Current Status: On the fireplace in Site-19's main lounge.

Item Description: A set of candy canes which regenerate when consumed, and causes any kid who consumes one to be exceptionally nice for 30 days. Subsequent consumptions renew this

period of niceness.
Date of Recovery: 12-01-200 .
Location of Recovery: A candy store in , California.
Current Status: In Site- 's Cafeteria for snacks.
If we could take our kids to work, they would enjoy these. -Agent .

Item Description: An ornate compass. Regardless of magnetic interference or any other variables, the object's needle will always point towards the location of a woman named .
Date of Recovery: - -2014
Location of Recovery: Perugia, Italy
Current Status: In storage.

Item Description: A juicy blender made by Inc. All comments about its juiciness will be altered immediately after writing to mention how juicy it is at regular intervals, sometimes adding text to accommodate the object's juicy properties that was not originally written. All added text about the juicy blender will be in the style of the original writing, although text will not be added if there is not enough space.
Date of Recovery: 07-17-2010
Location of Recovery: Kansas City, KS, USA
Current Status: In storage to properly contain the object's juiciness.
Notes: Inc. denies creation of the juicy object. Investigation into the matter revealed that the effect transferred to all blenders created by Inc. other than the juicy one for exactly one minute beginning at 8:29 CST, on 07-03-2010. Inc. is to be monitored by the Foundation for further anomalous activity, although one of their blenders is juicy.

Item Description: A pile of dirt in a pot that contain the remains of a moth orchid (*Phalaenopsis*).
Date of Recovery: 12-23-2016
Location of Recovery: Minot, ND, USA
Current Status: In the botanical storage facility of Site- In storage.
Notes: All text about it will alter itself immediately after it is not observed by any human or humanoid. These alterations will override the last section of text on the documentation to include a description of the item's anomalous properties. If there is already a section of

text describing them, it will simply be moved, still overriding the last section. Object's properties appear to stay even after the plant itself died of natural causes. - Dr. Morpho

Item Description: A collection of 20 "bath bombs" that are space themed, subjects that go in water affected by the bath bombs claim to be in space on a "mission to save earth from the evil space alien Zargop".
Date of Recovery: 11-16-2016
Location of Recovery: [REDACTED], USA
Current Status: In Storage Site-156, chemical testing begins on .

Item Description: A steam iron. When used, clothing being ironed will emit a loud scream as long as direct contact with the iron is kept.
Date of Recovery: 01-03-2017
Location of Recovery: Washington, England
Current Status: In Storage at Site-17.

Item Description: A . When directly described in any digital text format, the description will immediately be replaced with a JPEG image of , varying in appearance and quality.
Date of Recovery: 19-01-2017
Location of Recovery: The house of the family, Sunderland, England.
Current Status: Low-security animal containment unit at Site-17.
Note: Her name is Elsie. - Dr. Weppler

Item Description: A yellow stress ball that, when looked at or held for any period of time longer than two minutes, will result in the subject suffering a heart attack and expiring.
Date of Recovery: 12-10-2016
Location of Recovery: Agent Ross's office desk at Site-12
Current Status: In storage at Site-12's High-Security Visual Hazard Ward.

Item Description: A dog of indeterminate appearance that can only been seen and interacted with by people who do not have any living pets. The dog's appearance, size and breed changes between viewings, although all subjects universally agree on its physical location.

Date of Recovery: 13-09-2016
Location of Recovery: RSPCA shelter in Rhodehampton, Australia
Current Status: Neutralized after adoption by Dr. Ellis.

Item Description: A purple leather bandanna that, when worn, makes the wearer absolutely obedient of those in higher authority than themselves.
Date of Recovery: 09-26-
Location of Recovery: Tegucigalpa, Honduras.
Current Status: -In Site 15 storage In Director 's office.

Item Description: A pair of dumbbells with no label telling the exact weight. When used, users will report that it is the perfect weight for physical exercise.
Date of Recovery: 07-13-
Location of Recovery: Anytime Fitness Center, Madison, Wisconsin.
Current Status: In Site-15's break room.

Item Description: A piece of white printer paper with a realistic drawing of an unknown species of mushroom. When making direct visual contact with the paper, subjects have vivid hallucinations, as well as increased levels of dopamine.
Date of Recovery: - -2018
Location of Recovery: , CA, USA
Current Status: In storage.

Item Description: A -brand roll of household toilet paper which, instead of getting less after usage, increases its overall length after 6 hours by 5.15% of it's total mass.
Date of Recovery: -07-1992
Location of Recovery: , Germany
Current Status: Used in Site 15 bathroom near break room.

Item Description: A fluorescent orange plastic vuvuzela that, when played, renders the user invisible to the naked eye or cameras.
Date of Recovery: 05-06-2010
Location of Recovery: Johannesburg, South Africa
Current Status: In Safe-level storage. Missing. In storage.
Notes: Don't be stupid. We might not see you, but we sure can hear you. - Site 17 Security

Item Description: A small tire track eel (*Mastacembelus Armatus*) that can float through the air and somehow does not require respiration.
Date of Recovery: 07-01-20
Location of Recovery: A pet shop in Burlingame, California.
Current Status: In biological storage in Site- . Original object died of natural causes, anomalous properties did not remain. Object's offspring exhibited the same anomalous properties of the original object after maturing. Remaining subjects kept in biological storage in Site- .

Item Description: A - Pickup Truck. When any person who attempts to enter or climb onto the bed of the truck without permission of the owner (typically the current driver), they will be unable to do so, even if assisted through external means.
Date of Recovery: - -2013
Location of Recovery: City, Philippines
Current Status: Being used by Agent R .
Notes: It's useful. Too many damn kids have tried to hitch a ride on my truck before. - Agent R

Item Description: A Boeing 767-12ER aircraft that took off from PHX Sky Harbor Airport in Phoenix Arizona on 12-11-1990. Once airborne, the plane climbed to an altitude of 1200 feet before suddenly stopping in mid-air. It is suspected that all inside the plane suffered the the same effect as passings by other aircraft have shown people but no movement or sound.
Date of Recovery: 12-12-90
Location of Recovery: 4233 Meters south-west of Phoenix, Arizona.
Current Status: Shot down under direct order of Site-12's Director, Dr. Lang, on 11-03-15. No anomalous effects remain in the pocket of air where the air plane had been and the plane's wreckage shows no anomalous effects whatsoever. The plane's wreckage is currently stored at Site-12's Non-Anomalous Storage Lab.

The corpse of R. , a former filing assistant for the Foundation who was KIB on 06-07-2017. Any text about the object will be altered immediately after writing to be more organized, often to an inflated or unnecessary degree.

06-07-2017.

Site-77.

1. Object artificially preserved and kept in a standard KIB memorial at Site-02.
2. Copies of documentation on a plaque.
3. Amnesiacs administered to R. 's living family and friends.

Item Description: A waterborne neurological disease with minor symptoms. Infected hosts become very polite, neat, and develop a liking for bow ties. Disease is easily fought off by immune system.
Date of Recovery: 06-04-
Location of Recovery: Several cities in Lithuania.
Current Status: Samples in storage.

Item Description: A wallet that, when closed, automatically empties whatever is inside.
Date of Recovery: - -
Location of Recovery: Raleigh, North Carolina
Current Status: Incinerated.
Notes: Can't believe I lost twenty bucks to this @!$#@$@!, glad it was incinerated. - Dr. Joseph

Item Description: An brand controller that compels the user to throw it after dying in any game.
Date of Recovery: 06-15-
Location of Recovery: New Jersey Gaming Convention
Current status: In Site-14 storage. Currently searching for other specimens.

Item Description: A bag of brand chocolate morsels. Eating more than one piece at a time results in the chocolate tasting strongly of human fecal matter.
Date of Recovery: 07-02-2013
Location of Recovery: Bakery in Allentown, New York
Current status: In Site-53 cold storage.

Item Description: A horror movie poster that changes to another

horror movie poster every night. Anyone who looks at it gets nightmares and eventually gets too tired to do anything.
Date of Recovery: 10-10-2010.
Location of Recovery: Hollywood.
Current Status: Incinerated.

Item Description: A red ballpoint pen that has magnetic properties despite being made of non-magnetic materials.
Date of Recovery: 01-19-
Location of Recovery: Middle School
Current Status: In storage

Item Description: An oven that "bakes" people
Date of Recovery: - -
Location of Recovery: School of
Current Status: Site-19, being used as a replacement for SCP-420-J
Notes: This is the best in the world, man -Dr

Item Description: A black ballpoint pen that writes down the opposite of what the user is trying to write.
Date of Recovery: - -20
Location of Recovery: The office of Dr. Keyser.
Current Status: Located in the office of Dr. Keyser.
Notes: I think I'll keep this when I retire. - Dr. Keyser

Item Description: A female specimen of *Gallus gallus domesticus*, the domesticated hen. Eggs produced by it do not contain yolk or amniotic fluids, but are instead filled with a random common cooking ingredient, such as milk, flour, or chocolate. Immediately after oviposition, the item will breach the shell and consume the contents of the egg if not prevented from doing so.
Date of Recovery: 01-07-2017
Location of Recovery: Thornton, Colorado.
Current Status: Contained in the aviary of Site-24.

Item Description: A packet of cat food that tastes like dog food
Date of Recovery: - -20
Location of Recovery: Low-security animal containment unit at Site-17
Current Status: Incinerated

Are you sure it wasn't just dog food in the wrong can? - Dr. Michaels
Yes, I'm sure. - Dr. Stevens, Head of low-security animal containment site
Question: who tastes this @!$#? - Dr. Jorge
I do. -Dr. Stevens, Head of low-security animal containment site

Item Description: A campfire that flares up whenever an animal sneezes within eight meters of it.
Date of Recovery: 06-16-2017
Location of Recovery: National Park
Current Status: Extinguished. Remains showed no anomalous properties.

Item Description: A white plastic salt shaker. The object has the ability to instantaneously melt all snow within a 55-meter radius of it.
Date of Recovery: 01-13-2017
Location of Recovery: A 's restaurant building in , Ohio
Current Status: Being used for snow clearing at Site-
Note: Try not to bring this near ***SCP-804*** *while you're at it.*

Item Description: A creature of the genus *Apis* (Honey bee) that can remove any substance of color.
Date of Recovery: 01-13-2017
Location of Recovery: Knoxville, Tennessee
Current Status: Kept in low-security animal containment site

Item Description: A brand plasma screen television. The television is unable to play any form of animation that can be referred to as "Anime," a Japanese style of animation. Instead of anime playing, "ANIME WAS A MISTAKE" in large red letters is portrayed on a black background.
Date of Recovery: 04-11-2016
Location of Recovery: Augusta, Kansas
Current Status: In storage.

Item Description: A living Yarn Yoshi doll.
Date of Recovery: 01-10-2017
Location of Recovery: The house of the family.
Current Status: Pending use.
"It's the cutest thing ever! Why would we take it away from them?" - Dr. Betancourt

Item Description: A heart-shaped Valentine's Day card that appears to throb like a real human heart. Anyone who watches it gets a better understanding of the concept of love.
Date of Recovery: 02-14-2010
Location of Recovery: A house in Seattle, Washington.
Current Status: In storage.

Item Description: A small brown glass bottle, with approximately 250 ml of unknown hallucinogenic liquid inside. The item has a faded label made from paper, Liquid has been described as being clear, odorless and tasteless. Liquid is of an unknown chemical composition, not matching any known pure elements.
Date of Recovery: - -
Location of Recovery: The lab of Dr. and Dr. in the country
Current Status: In dark, cold storage unit at Site-

Item Description: A headpiece accessory for a costume resembling a set of bull horns. When worn, the subject feels unreasonably furious against red objects and tries to charge into them.
Date of Recovery: 06-05-199
Location of Recovery: A costume shop in , Spain.
Current Status: In storage. Investigating if it is actually a piece of a bigger costume.
Note: Why the @#! have we got red walls?! Seriously! - Agent

Item Description: I Poodle. I have brown hair. When I talk about me, I talk in first-person perspective. I also talk in weird voice.
Date of Recovery: 04-21-201
Location of Recovery: I found in pet shop in [REDACTED], Hong Kong.
Current status: I live in Site 45. I no like.
Note: Cat keep going away. I no like.

Item Description: A one dollar bill (US currency) that, upon insertion into a vending machine, will dispense the item that is chosen, then return to the owner, as if it was never accepted.
Date Of Recovery: - -20
Location of Recovery: Unknown as to its original discovery. It was found to exist by Dr. [REDACTED], while inserting the bill into a drinks vending machine in [REDACTED], Wisconsin.

Current Status: In possession of Dr. . He is testing its other anomalous effects, including the occurrences of sold-out items and items costing more than $1 US.
Note: This bill is not to be used to pay for items, and should be A) kept out of wallets, and B) marked with an SCP logo, to eliminate confusion.

Item Description: A 17x17x20 cm birdhouse. Any non-avian animal coming into contact with it is immediately launched into the stratosphere at a velocity of 3 km/s.
Date Of Recovery: 01-23-2017
Location of Recovery: Toronto, Canada
Current Status: Incinerated.

Item Description: The ashes of the the previous AO. Presumably, any non-avian animal coming into contact with it is immediately launched into the ground at a velocity of 3 km/s.
Date Of Recovery: 01-27-2017
Location of Recovery: Canadian Outpost-03
Current Status: Dispersed and neutralized on impact.
Note: Significant structural damage to Candian Outpost-03 has been sustained. Researchers Barrow, Smithson (the handler), and Zurrey expired. Cover story of a military ordnance failure disseminated.

Item Description: Two lightswitches connected to a single circuit. When in use, any human who interacts with the object will select the switch opposite of the one they intend to.
Date of Recovery: 04-13-2013
Location of Recovery: Apartment 12-A, Hoosegow Developments, Milwaukee, Wisconsin
Current Status: Installed in Researcher Smith's office on request.

Item Description: An inanimate empty space in the approximate shape of a baggy shirt, wide trousers, and a long cape. When a human walks into the space from behind, it will move and act as worn clothing. Despite being perceived as intangible and transparent, subjects are incapable of recalling details of anything that would normally be obscured by clothing of the same shape.
Date of Recovery: 02-09-1967
Location of Recovery: On top of Hadrian's Wall near Whitby, Yorkshire

Current Status: Mannequin in Site-45's Anomalous Clothing Storage.

Item Description: A bag of brand chips that duplicates every 7 hours. Duplications exhibit this property.
Date of Recovery: 04-16-2
Location of Recovery: Site- Canteen
Current Status: Used as snacks in Site- .

Item Description: A water fountain located in Gilbert Arizona. When an American coin of any value is thrown in and the user makes a wish, said wish will come true exactly 24 hours later. (Effect will only happen if the user does not say what wish is within the timespan leading up to it coming true)
Date of Recovery: 11-12-2014
Location of Recovery: Gilbert, Arizona
Current Status: Located in Dr. Lang's office at Site-12.

Item Description: An empty bottle of brand soda that will cause any liquid poured out of it to instantly relocate to the users stomach. Liquids pass through the users digestive system non-anomalously.
Date of Recovery: 03-10-2015
Location of Recovery: Soda Factory in Waco, Texas
Current Status: In the cupboard of Dr. 's office at Site-44.
Note: You can't even taste the soda you're trying to drink. You're getting all of the sugar and none of the flavor. Talk about a lose-lose. -Dr.

Item Description: A patch of skin formerly present on the left calf of an adult Caucasian male. A tattoo is present on the object that reads "Mr. Just Has The Tattoo, by **Gamers Against Weed**". This tattoo has resisted all attempts at removal. Skin was removed during a grafting procedure. Previous owner has assumed a completely new identity since the procedure and claims to have no memory of his time with the tattoo.
Date of Recovery: 05-02-2016
Location of Recovery: Richmond, Virginia
Current Status: In cryogenic storage.
Note: The tattoo's previous owner possessed a list similar to other "Misters Against Weed". The document is included below.

Additionally, while the tattoo was still present on its owner, the subject claimed to have no memory of receiving the tattoo and that it had been ***present since birth****.*

Display Document

Holy Heck! You've just found yourself your very own **Mr. Just Has The Tattoo** by Gamers Against Weed! There isn't even a blurb for this one, it has that little substance. Who is Dr. Wondertainment?
Collect them all and become Mr. Gamer!

01. Mr. Literal Serial Killer
02. Mr. Normie
03. Mr. Bernie Sanders
04. Mr. Get Anything For Free In Any Shop
20. Mr. Sex Number
21. Mr. Heavenly Virtues
22. Mr. Deadly Sins
23. Mr. Original Character
24. Mr. D.A.R.E.
25. Mr. Gentrification
26. Mr. Mad About Video Games
27. Mr. Meme
28. Mr. Ominous (discontinued)
29. Mr. Destiny
30. Mr. Monty Python And The Holy Grail
31. Ms. Zapatista
32. Mr. Hax
33. Mr. Just Has The Tattoo ✔
34. Mr. Top Text and Mr. Bottom Text
35. Mr. Finale

Item Description: Cool.
Date of Recovery: 09-02-2017
Location of Recovery: Retrieved during a raid on a known anartist exhibition in Sydney, Australia.

Current Status: Not.

Item Description: It is not a shape that does not make any mention of it opposite. It doesn't do that.
Date of Recovery: 03-06-2012
Location of Recovery: Definitely not , .
Current Status: I can guarantee it isn't located in Site- 's Low Value Containment Area.

Item Description: Two physically non-anomalous humans Arin Hanson and Dan Avidan. Any content uploaded by either of them onto the internet will immediately receive approximately 200-300 of what the platform's way of sharing or enjoying something is, such as "likes" on Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr and YouTube. This will occur despite the page they uploaded not being viewed by anything.
Date of Recovery: 05-26-2015
Location of Recovery: Twitter; the anomaly was discovered by Web crawler XIO-177 and was automatically marked as an anomaly.
Current Status: Currently hosting several popular internet web-series. No online comments regarding the anomaly have been noted since discovery.

Item Description: A lunchroom vending machine that dispenses golden and silver dollars as change, despite no coins being present within the machine.
Date of Recovery: 02-03-2017
Location of Recovery: High School, , Rhode Island
Current Status: Kept in Site- 's cafeteria Kept in storage.
Note: Under no circumstances are personnel to use the vending machine. I understand that these coins are worth more than what the machine values them as, but that is no excuse for a get-rich-quick scheme. - Dr.

Item Description: A pack of 19 hot dogs of the Company that, when eaten, produces a scream described by research staff as "agonized", despite no sound producing apparatus being present in the hot dogs
Date of Recovery: 09-07-2014
Location of Recovery: Site- staff barbecue
Current Status: In cold storage.

Note: Aside from the screams these were some pretty damn good hot dogs. - Agent

Item Description: A class III (Low Threat) concept, in which personnel infected believe they have "level 6 clearance" and are capable of accessing every file in the database. The concept is spread through specific software malfunctions that can occur within the database.
Date of Recovery: 01-27-2010
Location of Recovery: Site-551.
Current Status: The malfunctions that are capable of spreading the concept have been fixed. A single terminal that still carry the malfunctions is kept at Site-49 for study.

Item Description: An unshuffleable deck of 52 playing cards. Any card taken 'at random' from the deck will reveal itself to be the 3 of hearts, regardless of where in the deck it was originally situated.
Date of Recovery: - -2015
Location of Recovery: , England
Current Status: Held in low-value item storage at Site-32.

Item Description: A self replenishing dirty clothes bin. Individuals who notice its presence will feel the urge to wash said clothes as to empty the bin, to no effect.
Date of Recovery: 12-12-2011
Location of Recovery: Auckland, New Zealand
Current Status: Foundation humanitarian help facility in Central Africa; used to provide clothing to local population.

Item Description: A standard, unmarked white cotton glove which has a uniform colour gradient across its entire surface, devoid completely of any shadows, as well as a large black outline across its edge regardless of viewing angle. These effects lead to it appearing to have a "cartoon" style.
Date of recovery: 07-11-14
Location of Recovery: , Florida
Current Status: In the office of Dr. .

Item Description: A set of curtains that, when hung over a bedroom window, will prevent anybody within the bedroom from entering a state of sleep before 01:30 AM and after 09:00 AM, regardless of

local time.
Date of Recovery: 11-04-2002
Location of Recovery: Seoul, South Korea
Current Status: Hung over a window in the observation room of SCP- after too many reports of personnel falling asleep.

Item Description: An alarm clock that will say the phrase "Stop ignoring me" in an unidentified male voice at 3:57 AM every night. Effect occurs regardless of whether the object is powered.
Date of Recovery: 5-18-2005
Location of Recovery: Apartment complex in Atlanta, Georgia
Current Status: In storage.

Item Description: An adult size Spider-Man Costume. Memories involving direct visual exposure to the object cannot be forgotten and will override existing memories after prolonged exposure.
Date of Recovery: 11-13-07
Location of Recovery: Nashville, Tennessee
Current Status: In storage.

Item Description: A sheet of white paper with the word "bimonthly" written on it in black marker. When viewed by two or more people, an argument will begin between the viewers as to whether the word means "twice a month" or "once every two months". This argument may escalate into violence without intervention. This effect persists even when subjects are told not to argue over the definition of the word.
Date of Recovery: 02-11-1994
Location of Recovery: Wicklow, Ireland
Current Status: Destroyed in a particularly heated debate between two senior researchers. Both have been reprimanded.

Item Description: A fractured skull of *Felis catus* or common house cat. The skull secretes a dark black liquid similar in composition to blood though the makeup is mostly unknown. Upon a person touching the liquid with exposed skin they will experience intense distrust and paranoia of cats or cat-like objects for four to seven hours. When questioned, all infected individuals beg to "make them all stop talking."
Date of Recovery: 09-09-1992
Location of Recovery: Mr. J 's High School Biology classroom

in Ithaca,
Current Status: Contained in cold storage. Cleaned weekly.

Item Description: A box set for the first season of the American situational comedy "Seinfeld". When viewed for more than 15 minutes, viewers will say nothing except observation based stand-up comedy. Effect has been shown to last in excess of 100 minutes.
Date of Recovery: 02-05-2011
Location of Recovery: , Illinois
Current Status: In Site-34 low security item storage.

Item Description: A visual cognitohazard affecting approximately 20% of sapient viewers. Object compels the viewer to seek and consume the nearest unopened slice of American cheese.
Date of Recovery: 03-18-2013
Location of Recovery: Sydney, Austrailia
Current Status: In storage. Cheese kept on-site in the event of accidental exposure.

Item Description: A 335 ml glass cup that causes waitstaff of any location to compulsively fill it to the brim.
Date of Recovery:3-29-2016
location of Recovery: , Atlanta, Georgia
Current Status: Broken after staff in kitchen raced to fill it up.
Notes: Remnants reformed into bowl on orders of Dr. , effects remain.

Item Description: A brand laptop with no signs of wear. Battery is included but no other accessories have been found. All male humans of Caucasian descent exposed to the object report an inability to perceive color displayed in its screen.
Date of Recovery:12- -20
Location of Recovery: Raid of GoI- base in , Brunei Darussalam.
Current Status: In low-security item storage.

Item Description: A school notebook that, when opened by an individual, will teleport said individual to Site- under all circumstances.
Date of Recovery: 2- -201
Location of Recovery: Middle School

Current Status: Incinerated
Note: Son of a bitch, whose idea was it to store the damn notebook near the fireplace of the Site- lounge!? Fire and paper doesn't do good, so if there is another magical notebook, don't put it near a goddamn fire! - Researcher

Item Description: Adult specimen of *Phidippus audax* also known as a 'jumping spider'. Spider is biologically normal except for the fact that it emits a high pitched repetitive sound similar to a girl laughing manically.
Date of Recovery: - -20
Location of Recovery: 's Bedroom in ,
Current Status: Contained in sound proof terrarium.

Item Description: A piano. Anyone who sits down to play it, will start playing *Maple Leaf Rag* by Scott Joplin automatically, even if the individual has no piano experience or knowledge of the song.
Date of Recovery: 3-27-199
Location of Recovery: Virginia City, Montana
Current Status: In storage at Area-
Notes: Wait, what song was Dr. playing on that piano? - Site Director

Descriptive: Penny-sized, green, circular. Anomalously causes immediate dying if non-descriptives or non-actives are used in describing.
Recovered: - -20
Currently: Held securely. Termination requested.

Item Description: Water contained in a plastic case. Water will not turn into steam when boiled, or freeze when exposed to cold temperatures.
Date of Recovery: - -19
Location of Recovery: Burger King in Los Angeles, California
Current Status: In storage at Area-

Item Description: A brand Go-Kart that leaves footprints instead of tyre tracks. Radio will only play the sound of an unidentified male weeping.
Date of Recovery: 09-03-2013
Location of Recovery: A recently abandoned warehouse in ,

England
Current Status: Held in Site- 's low-value vehicle garage.

Item Description: A metal fork and spatula. Anyone who observes the fork will refer to it as a small spatula, and anyone who observes the spatula will refer to it as a large fork.
Date of Recovery: 03-09-2017
Location of Recovery: Cedar Springs, Colorado, USA
Current Status: In Site-27's kitchen.

Item Description: A pair of glass cups that cause anything poured in one cup to instead appear in the other one.
Date of Recovery: 03-12-2017
Location of Recovery: ,
Current Status: In Site- 's low value item storage
Notes: Do not use these for pranks or practical jokes. - Agent D

Item Description: A piece of brand notebook paper that reads "Stop making so many fucking infohazards" written in black felt-tip marker. Any subject that looks at it and works for the Foundation will attempt to create many false entries regarding certain infohazards that don't exist in the "Log of Anomalous Items" file.
Date of Recovery: 03-12-2017
Location of Recovery: Created by Dr. Scranton by accident when attempting to make an anomaly with the opposite effect.
Current Status: In storage.

Item Description: A metronome. When turned on by an individual, said individual will sway to the pendulum until it stops. Individuals who do so are unable to recall swaying to the metronome.
Date of Recovery: 09-29-1985
Location of Recovery: Venice, Italy
Current Status: In high value storage of Site-

Item Define: its a dainosar that meikes yu tak bad ater lookin at it, for 4 hours.
day we pick-up: 12-25-2016
place we pick-up: franse
place it is nau: big space place
Notes: "its rilly bathrin! i do no laik, pliz burn, bad for siensing." smartman guysson

Item Description: A set of thirty-eight green balloons. When blown into, the subjects voice will become a noticeably deeper pitch for a length of time varying on the amount of air blown into one.
Date of Recovery: 04-02-2017
Location of Recovery: England
Current Status: Low level item containment vault at Site-17.

Item Description: The skeleton of an unknown species of the clade *Dinosauria* that dates back 160 million years. The specimen appears to be bipedal, with two large 3 meter feet on the end of 27 centimeter legs, and a seemingly randomly curved spine. The subject's front limbs have been replaced with apparatuses that function similarly to M1911 handguns, entirely constructed from bone. The limbs only shoot shards of bone in the shape of 9mm handgun bullets, and will not shoot if supplied with any other type of bullet.
Date of Recovery: 9-5-2008
Location of Recovery: An undisclosed dig site in Kansas, USA.
Current Status: In storage at Site-551's Archaeological Wing.

Item Description: A self-refilling 3.8 liter "gallon jug" of milk, which if ingested causes the subject to vomit cheese after a period of 3 to 6 hours, or if they go above 14 meters, and exclaim "I don't remember eating cheese!"
Date of Recovery: 4/30/1986
Location of Recovery: County Fair, Alabama, USA
Current Status: In refrigerated storage at Site-

Item Description: An adult Holstein Friesian cow. Any time anybody within earshot of this item says "interrupting cow", they will be interrupted by a loud vocal emission by the cow.
Date of Recovery: 11/07/2004
Location of Recovery: Kent, UK
Current Status: Died of natural causes in August 2008

Item Description: A 1935 record player that can only play music produced by Danny Goodman.
Date of Recovery: 3/02/2001
Location of Recovery: An antique shop within Florida.
Current Status: In low-level storage.

Item Description: A non-brand three inch by five inch rectangular picture frame with a black plastic exterior. Inside the picture frame is a stock photograph of a Caucasian female and male couple. When viewed directly by any person, they will claim that the person opposite of the viewer's sex was their romantic partner and will make derogatory comments towards the person. Subjects that have different sexual orientations than heterosexual are still affected. If viewed indirectly (i.e. on an electronic device, photograph or mirror) the photo has no anomalous properties.
Date of Recovery: 12-05-1998
Current Status: Snapped in half by Researcher after being under effect of the photograph. Pieces of the photo and frame still show anomalous properties.
Notes: That [EXPLETIVE] had it coming to him.- Researcher

Item Description: An unknown brand chemical toilet (colloquially known as a "Porta-potty"). Analysis of the materials used to construct the item reveals that the structure is approximately 165 million years old. Multiple instances of petrified feces belonging to unknown species of the clade *Dinosauria* are found within the item's holding tank.
Date of Recovery: 03-28-2017
Location of Recovery: An undisclosed city in Montana, USA.
Current Status: In storage.

Item Description: A Spalding™ basketball that will not miss a shot into a net no matter said defiance of Isaac Newton's Law of Gravity.
Date of Recovery: - -
Location of Recovery: , , USA
Current Status: Stored in a storage locker at Site 17 for use by allowance from Site Director.

Item Description: A classical sheet music book. Every hour for 10 minutes, music can be heard from the book. Music has been recognized as Beethoven symphonies.
Date of Recovery: 12-6-2008.
Location of Recovery: Germany.
Current Status: In Site-15 storage locker.

Item Description: A bearded dragon that produces a miniature representation of the Aurora Borealis.

Date of Recovery: - -2002
Location of Recovery: , Colorado
Current Status: In animal containment.

Item Description: A head of iceberg lettuce that never rots.
Date of Recovery: - -1999
Location of Recovery: , Japan
Current Status: In storage

Item Description: Printer ink cartridge that spontaneously extrudes seawater.
Date of Recovery: 02/24/17
Location of Recovery: Site- , **Dr. Chris "Ox" Moran's Printer**
Current Status: In permanent storage.

Item Description: A plastic toy magician's wand. When held by a human and moved at a speed greater than 5 m/s in any direction, item will emit green sparks from whichever end is not being held.
Date of Recovery: 11-03-2016
Location of Recovery: Bradford, England, United Kingdom
Current Status: In storage

Item Description: A fiftyfive-times folded piece of A4 paper which, when fully unfolded, reads the sentence "Humans don't poop twice a day". Upon viewing this, subjects perfectly fold the paper back the same way they unfoldeded it. The response varies from person to person, but most commonly they'll obsessively monitor the defecation patterns of themselves and everyone around them. Effect gradually wears off over a random number of months.
Date of Recovery: 05/05/2001
Location of Recovery: 17th Street, , China.
Current Status: Site-50's low-security item storage.

Item Description: A .5 m x 1 m mirror which will show the back of its viewer.
Date of Recovery: 06-07-2016
Location of Recovery: Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, United States
Current Status: In storage

Item Description: A standard sized brand chocolate powder

container. Interior dimensions do not correspond to exterior dimensions, extending one meter past top.
Date of Recovery: 02-15-2017
Location of Recovery: Wilmington, Delaware, United States
Current Status: In storage
Notes: On recovery, object contained the amount of powder found in non-anomalous containers, twenty-seven American cents, three Euros, and a human thumb.

Item Description: A sundial that reads the correct time regardless of orientation to the Sun.
Date of Recovery: 03/12/2017
Location of Recovery: Verona, Italy
Current Status: Sitting on Dr. 's desk

Item Description: A paperback copy of the novel *David Copperfield* by Charles Dickens. Item emits a constant ticking sound despite no apparent mechanism of doing so.
Date of Recovery: 01-05-2013
Location of Recovery: Canberra, Australia
Current Status: In storage

Item Description: A bottle of Advil that is seemingly bottomless. It is also impossible to overdose on said pills.
Date of Recovery: 01/06/2012
Location of Recovery: In Dr. 's drawers
Current Status: In storage
Notes: Item was found after Dr. 's suicide attempt, which failed due to the items properties, Dr. was apprehended and is now put on suicide watch.

Item Description: A generic pink "piggy bank" containing an endless amount of United States Quarter-Dollars.
Location of Recovery: Fairbanks, Alaska
Date of Recovery::1/22/12
Current Status: In Storage
Notice: Any Staff caught using this device to further their wealth will be severely reprimanded. -Dr. Garbers

Item Description: A grapefruit weighing -100 kilograms.
Date of Recovery: 4/10/2017.

Location of Recovery: A supermarket in Baltimore, MD.
Current Status: Consumed by Agent Joseph. Agent reprimanded.
I lost weight after eating that thing! -Agent Joseph.

Item Description: An article on popular encyclopedia website .org which contains a line of text describing I, SCP-426, in the third person.
Date of Recovery: 30/1/2015
Location of Recovery: Website .org
Current Status: On website .org. Article edited to mislead readers into believing that the SCP Foundation is a fictional community of fantasy writers.

Item Description: Approximately 30 m of copper wire. When connected to a power source, the current in the wire measures at a constant 50 amps, regardless of the voltage of the power source.
Date of Recovery: 06-17-2014
Location of Recovery: High School, Hamilton, Ontario, Canada
Current Status: In storage at Site-15

Item Description: A VHS tape that plays a random set of cartoons dating from 19 to 2017. Viewers describe different cartoons from other viewers present. Displays no footage when viewed from a camera.
Date of Recovery: 05-24-2015
Location of Recovery: , New York
Current Status: In storage at Site-19.

Item Description: An indescribable statue.
Date of Recovery:
Location of Recovery:
Current Status:

Item Description: A Honda Civic, which contains a third heat setting on the seat warmer switch. If the seat warmer switch is "balanced" in the middle for at least 0.6 seconds, the exterior of the car radiates at approximately 2700 degrees Celsius.
Date of recovery: 08-16-16
Location of Recovery: , Missouri
Current Status: In storage

Note: *This anomaly was brought to the attention of the foundation after the newspaper wrote a short story about a "Car that melted road blocking protesters alive in "*

Item Description: A young Guatemalan female between the ages of and that has the lower body of a Thomson's gazelle.
Date of Recovery: 10-12-2001
Location of Recovery: Cobán, Guatemala
Current Status: Humanely terminated upon request.

Item Description: A chair, 1.5 m tall and 0.9 m wide, which exists in only two dimensions. Item is invisible from any side besides the front and back. However, it is still possible to use item as a normal chair.
Date of Recovery: 08-17-2010
Location of Recovery: Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia
Current Status: In storage

Item Description: A cloth bag, similar to that of a seeing eye glasses holder. Object can hold any three(3) items, regardless of size.
Date of Recovery: 12-12-2012
Location of Recovery: Miami, Florida
Current Status: Used by Agent during missions.

Item Description: A piece of tape that repels any surface the "sticky" side approaches during attempted use.
Date of Recovery: 03-02-2005
Location of Recovery: Salt Lake City, Utah
Current Status: In storage.

Item Description: A wooden nutcracker in the shape of Joseph Stalin. It will only break nuts if someone who lived in the former East Germany uses it.
Date of Recovery: 11-9-1989
Location of Recovery: Berlin, Germany
Current Status: In storage at Site- .

Item Description: A standard-sized (92 x 57 x 203 mm) brick. One side of item (arbitrarily designated the top) constantly displays the 1951 British-American film *The African Queen*, in its entirety and on endless loop.

Date of Recovery: 4-27-2004
Location of Recovery: Cape Town, South Africa
Current Status: In storage

Item Description: A strain of H3N2 influenza that causes dreams of stringed instruments in infected subjects. Dreams typically relate to the presence of microscopic instruments in the blood and lungs.
Date of Recovery: - -
Location of Recovery: , .
Current Status: Endemic to the region. Containment efforts are ongoing.

Item Description: A standard -lb bowling ball. Anyone who uses it while bowling will invariably get a strike.
Date of Recovery: 04/21/2017.
Location of Recovery: bowling alley of , , USA.
Current Status: In storage.

Item Description: An oversized analogue clock. Whenever the clock is recalled, the individual is reminded that it's time to stop.
Date of Recovery: 26/04/2017.
Location of Recovery: Household store in Brisbane, Australia.
Current Status: In storage.

Item Description: A navy blue -brand hoody. When used to clean the lenses of glasses, monocles, or other eyewear, the item removes approximately 99.9% of noticeable smudges, scratches, and microbial life. Subjects who use the item report their eyewear as being "crystal clear" immediately following use.
Date of Recovery: - -2017
Location of Recovery: , Virginia
Current Status: Hung on a coat rack in the break room of Site- for general use.

Item Description: A standard asthma inhaler containing a - brand aluminium container. Upon inhaling the contents of the inhaler, the users bronchioles seize up in a manner analogous to an asthma attack. These symptoms cease after approximately 5 minutes.
Date of Recovery: - -2009
Location of Recovery: Hospital, Sydney

Current Status: In storage.

Item Description: A VHS tape labeled "Jack Nicholson Wearing Less Than One Shirt". Subjects who view the contents of the tape become unable to perceive more than 50% of any object at a time unless applied amnestic treatment.
Date of Recovery: 05-02-2017
Location of Recovery: Cedar Springs, Colorado
Current Status: In a storage locker in Site-27.

Item Description: A fully functioning 1:100 scale replica of a Colnago Arabesque bicycle. Despite the object's size, it possesses the same velocity and acceleration capabilities as a regular Arabesque.
Date of Recovery: - -2016
Location of Recovery: Nagano, Japan
Current Status: In storage.

Item Description: A standard iPhone 5-7 charger and plug that when inserted into any iPhone of model 5-7 will charge the phone instantly. This does not work if other plugs or chargers are used.
Date of Recovery: 5/6/17
Location of Recovery: Tampa, Florida
Current Status: In Site-19s break room for general use.

Item Description: A standard NERF dart gun with lazer sight attachment that, when fired, acts as a regular 9 millimeter handgun. Fires Nerf darts at the same velocity as a regular 9 millimeter round and the same force and lethality as expected from a projectile of this speed.
Date of Recovery: 3/4/10
Location of Recovery: Evidence Locker in Australia
Current Status: In Dr Rhodes office in case of emergency
Note: Funniest. Death. Ever. - Dr Rhodes in light of incident 1456-A

Item Description: A bus stand located that causes all buses with the stand as their destination to arrive 10 minutes later than scheduled, by causing a series of apparently unrelated accidents to delay the bus's arrival.
Date of Recovery: 05/09/16
Location of Recovery: Mascot, Sydney, Australia

Current Status: Contained by ensuring all buses that use the stand arrive at 10-minute intervals.

Item Description: An olive-green metal cube that will turn into plastic and melt unless referred to as "Olivia." If referred to as "Olivia", it will revert back into a metal cube.
Date of Recovery:6/1/1993
Location of Recovery: Alhambra, California, USA
Current Status: In storage
Note: The plastic is thermosetting plastic.

Item Description: A standard, non-anomalous white deck chair. It is devoid of any anomalous properties other than its location of recovery.
Date of Recovery: N/A
Location of Recovery: The surface of Europa, the moon of Saturn
Current Status: Remains on the surface of Europa due to cost of extraction.

Item Description: A Studio-Grade light. When shone on an object, the object's shadow points towards the light.
Date of Recovery: 5/16/2004
Location of Recovery: Austin, Texas
Current Status: In Site-19's break room, used for entertainment.

Item Description: A pair of glasses. When worn, the user will notice objects or persons within eyesight will appear or disappear.
Date of Recovery: 5/9/2014
Location of Recovery: Columbia, South Carolina.
Current Status: Storage Room on Site 18.

Item Description: A statue of Cupid that, when touched, will render the subject fertile.
Date of Recovery: 2/14/
Location of Recovery: ,
Current Status: Storage Room on Site

Item Description: A fireproof 8.5 x 11 piece of paper that sprays water whenever placed near extreme heat or fire.
Date of Recovery: 3/2/2017.
Location of Recovery: Baltimore, MD.

Current Status: In storage.

Item Description: A waste basket that causes all objects thrown towards it to bounce off of the side.
Date of Recovery: 2/18/2013
Location of Recovery: Site 19 break room.
Current Status: Site 19 break room.

Item Description: A bottle that, no matter the contents, when flipped will always land on its head.
Date of Recovery: 9/12/2016
Location of Recovery: High School vending machine
Current Status: Used as a gimmick to impress new agents accepted into the Foundation.
Can Dr. Malchozky please return the item to the front desk of Site-46? Professor Yang would like his turn now.

Item Description: A severed human hand that provides good luck and fortune to anyone who possesses it.
Date of Recovery: 31/5/2017
Location of Recovery: Found in SCP- 's chamber after D-class failed to properly follow containment procedures.
Current Status: In an air tight glass container in break room of Site-27 to remind personnel that containment procedures must be followed. Also believed to provide some sort of morale boost to anyone in the presence of the item.

Item Description: A block of clay that never dries up.
Date of Recovery: 5/10/2017.
Location of Recovery: Sacremento, CA.
Current Status: In Site-19 storage locker.

Itm Descepyion: A standad QWEERTY keubiard thst caydes anuome uding iy ti maje typis, np maytee hiw cartful thy ar.
Dats od Recivery: 09/09/2009.
Licstion od Recivery: Atlanya, Gorgia.
Cureent Ststus: Ib Stoage.

Item Description: A .55 calibre bullet with the date of manufacture as 8/2/1898. The bullet was carbon dated back to 1898 being the only of it's kind created back then. The bullet can be fired an

innumerous amount of times.
Date of Recovery: 12/8/2017
Location of Recovery: , China.
Current Status: Used in target practise against heavily armoured targets.

Item Description: A bucket of cyan blue house paint which turns lime green when applied to any surface.
Date of Recovery: 01/24/2017
Location of Recovery: , Canada.
Current Status: Approximately 85% of bucket depleted post testing, currently in Storage.

Item Description: A white glass plate seven inches in diameter where anything eaten from it is given a strong taste of salt, even if it did not contain any.
Date of Recovery: 7/3/2009
Location of Recovery: , France.
Current Status: In Storage.

Item Description: A loaf of brand wheat bread. Whenever a slice is taken from it, it will regenerate once out of direct eyesight.
Date of Recovery: 4/23/20
Location of Recovery: Super-Shop market, , Rhode Island, USA.
Current Status: Site-19 cafeteria.

Item Description: An unremarkable Bayliner Cierra Boat that attracts blood towards itself.
Date of Recovery: 2/24/20
Location of Recovery: Guangxi, China.
Current Status: In Storage.

Item Description: A pair of macro-quantum entangled Jenga sets.
Date of Recovery: - -20
Location of Recovery: ,
Current Status: In storage; Site 15 Breakroom, Site 17 Breakroom

Item Description: A copy of Leonardo Da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*, painted by an unknown artist. When looked at, the eyes of the woman in the painting appear to staring at whoever is looking at it.

Multiple people in the room report that each person appears to be stared at simultaneously.
Date of Recovery: - -2017
Location of Recovery: A yard sale in , New Jersey.
Current Status: Hanging on the wall in a hallway at Site-19 for aesthetic purposes.

Item Description: A 3-year old female golden retriever dog, named Peachy, that meows and purrs like a cat instead of barking. Has 7 toes on each paw instead of the usual 4.
Date of Recovery: 2-28-2017
Location of Recovery: Animal Shelter, , Texas
Current Status: Site-19 psychiatric office, currently owned by Dr. as a therapy dog for her patients.

Item Description: A flat-headed screwdriver. Anyone who looks at it is convinced that it is a Philips-head screwdriver until they look away from it.
Date of Recovery: 1-23-2010
Location of Recovery: 's Home Improvement Retail, Topeka, Kansas.
Current Status: Site 15; In storage.
Note: You will not be able to use this properly due to its neurological effects. Quit taking it from storage when you lose your own screwdriver! -Dr. Grant

Item Description: A Chinese-made AMR-2 anti-material rifle. When fired while loaded with ammunition, a red flag with the word "BANG" in uppercase letters will eject from the barrel. One round in the magazine will disappear after each "shot". "BANG" will always be written in the first language of the person who fired the shot.
Date of Recovery: - -2017
Location of Recovery: , China
Current Status: Site-19, in storage; available for personnel to use at the Site-19 firing range upon request.

Item Description: A fishing rod that will always hook a fish regardless of what water the hook was cast in.
Date of Recovery: 12-3-2015
Location of Recovery: Ocean City, Maryland
Current Status: In storage.

Note: Dr. reeled a 9-foot catfish out of a cup of lemon juice with this. I wouldn't have believed it if I wasn't there to see it myself. - Agent

Item Description: A piece of paper that show stylized logo of various GoI in purple ink, logo and style changing every three months.
Date of Recovery: 12/30/2016
Location of Recovery: [REDACTED]
Current Status: Framed in Site-88 hallway.

Item Description: An indestructible brand camera tripod. Human beings approaching this object develop an urge to physically assault the item until they are exhausted. Additionally, any electronic devices possessing speakers brought within 5 meters of the object will spontaneously begin to play Megadeth's "Tornado of Souls" at dB, regardless of whether or not the device is charged.
Date of Recovery: 5 May 2017
Location of Recovery: 's Camera Shop, , Arizona.
Current Status: Kept for recreational purposes in Site-45.

Item Description: A standard Honeywell™ thermostat. Adjusting the temperature instantly changes the temperature of the room it's in, with seemingly no limit.
Date of Recovery: 6 June 2017
Location of Recovery: , Ohio.
Current Status: In storage at Site-19.

Item Description: A 10 cm tall Magic 8 Ball toy that is cube-shaped and covered in dots patterned after a standard six-sided die. Its answers appear on the four-dot side, within the dot in the corner where the six-dot and two-dot sides meet. Anyone who has the object on their person develops limited precognition while in possession of the toy. Subjects have likened the ability to "Spidey-sense".
Date of Recovery: 12 August 2013
Location of Recovery: A day care in , California.
Current Status: Destroyed after being knocked off a railing and cracking open on a junior researcher's head. The 20-sided answer die previously encased in the toy was reported to have dissolved upon exposure to air. The junior researcher developed a moderate

concussion.

Item Description: A 1 foot long piece of wood, with the letters "THE ESSENCE OF DESTRUCTION" painted on with human blood. this wood made any person viewing it scream violently and scratch at their eyes and [REDACTED].
Date of Recovery: 10 march 2017
Location of Recovery: A cabin in northern Ireland.
Current Status: contained in a locked metal box at site- . DNA tests have confirmed the person the blood came from has been killed, and the murderer caught.
Note: this Object is currently under investigation to determine whether object is to be designated as an SCP

Item Description: An elevator cab. Any acceleration the cab experiences is directly applied to all contents of the cab; this acceleration is thus undetectable from the cab's interior.
Date of Recovery: - -20
Location of Recovery: , Beijing.
Current Status: Under study at Site- .

Item Description: A REALLY COOL ROCK! I MEAN THIS IS ONE OF THE MOST AWESOME ROCKS I HAVE EVER SEEN! IN FACT IT IS THE COOLEST THING I HAVE EVER SEEN! Item is in fact a small rock that when someone touches or picks up believes the rock to be the “coolest” thing ever. This is still in effect after the person stops touching it. Other than this it seems to be a normal rock.
Date of Recovery: - -
Location of Recovery: Was found by Dr. while studying SCP- , after some study it was found to not be connected to SCP- .
Current Status: ON THE RADDEST DESK OF THE AMAZING DR. , BECAUSE HE FOUND IT AND THEREFORE IS THE COOLEST PERSON!

Item Description: A number of common handkerchiefs which, when placed inside one's trousers' pocket will rid the subject of cold, flu, and symptoms of rhinitis.
Date of Recovery: 19-05-1996
Location of Recovery: Was found in Tavor, Czech Republic, after half of the town recovered from the early onsets of an outbreak of pneumonia.

Current Status: Conserved in a locker at Site- , since extended medical research has been deemed not cost-effective for the Foundation.

Item Description: A case for an model phone. When applied to the phone of the appropriate model, the screen will become intensely sensitive to any form of contact. As much as a small drag of a fingernail along the phone, top to bottom, could cause major damage to both the screen and the internals.
Date of Recovery: 10-04-201
Location of Recovery: , Virginia.
Current Status: In storage.
Notes: The removal process almost put a hole completely through the phone… I better not see this case on anyone's phone around here, consensual or not. - Dr.

Item Description: An average USB flash drive that, when attempts are made to insert it into a computer, will always be inverted as to prevent itself from being plugged in.
Date of Recovery: 12-09-201
Location of Recovery: County Library, Florida
Current Status: In storage.

Item Description: The website, "whatwouldhappenifiwasshot. ". When accessed, it generates an accurate 3D model of the user, which can then be "shot" by clicking on any part of the body.
Date of Recovery: 07-01-2017
Location of Recovery: N/A. Discovered following a Reddit post on the "todayilearned" sub-forum.
Current Status: Domain blocked from all major internet service providers.

Item Description: A rubber ball, 5 cm in diameter, that slowly rolls toward the closest living human. Running it through a metal detector showed no signs of electronic parts.
Date of Recovery: 07-02-2017
Location of Recovery: The break room, rolling around the feet of annoyed personnel.
Current Status: In a small glass container, duct taped to Dr. 's desk.

Item Description: 30 black baseball hats. When a human puts on one of the hats, The logo of their least favorite Major League Baseball (MLB) team will appear on the front. If the wearer does not possess any knowledge of the MLB, the hat will remain blank.
Date of Recovery: 07- -2017
Location of Recovery: , New York, USA
Current Status: One hat was incinerated, no anomalous properties found in remains. The other 29 hats are in the Site-19 lounge.
Notes: Why does no one here know about the MLB? - Dr.

Item Description: A jar that self refills itself with cherry licorice everytime it becomes empty.
Date of Recovery: 12-25-20
Location of recovery: Site- , Guam.
Current Status: Sitting on the desk of Dr. Spitfire, and oftenly brought everywhere he goes.
Notes: Why do I like Cherry Licorice so much? - Dr. Spitfire

Item Description: A mouse pad that renders any computer mouse useless.
Date of Recovery: 1-15-20
Location of recovery: Stock Exchange Office, New York
Current Status: In storage.
Notes: No matter how funny you think it would be, do not replace another researcher's mouse pad with this. - Dr.

Item Description: A pack of 12 simple plastic ballpoint pen that whenever someone picks one up will remark in English “Wow this thing must weigh 500 pounds.” Saying so even if they don’t know English or use the imperial system. “Mr. USA - Anartist” is printed on every pen.
Date of Recovery: 7-13-2006
Location of Recovery: The house of a known anartist in Graz, Austria
Current Status: Site-77 Storage

Item Description: A sewer grate that appears to be invisible in any photo taken on a digital camera.
Date of Recovery: 8-10-2017
Location of Recovery: Kyoto, Japan
Current Status: Under surveillance

Item Description: A nuclear warhead that constantly plays dubstep. The songs are original to the warhead and played at 95 dB.
Date of Recovery: 5-24-2011
Location of Recovery: [CLASSIFIED IN CONJUNCTION WITH UNITED KINGDOM AUTHORITIES]
Current Status: Installed as Site-25 on-site nuclear safeguard
Note: Before containment, a number of songs produced were released online crediting "DJ Dirty Nuke" as their creator. We would like to speak with whoever is responsible for their release, but the songs themselves need no containment. - Dr. Wall

Item Description: A grey suitcase. Results of X-ray imaging will indicate that illegal contraband exist within its conpartments, despite any not physically existing.
Date of Recovery: / /2017
Location of Recovery: , Canada
Current Status: In storage within Site- .

Item Description: A small grey blanket with red and blue stripes. Despite the soft appearance, it feels like standard issue sandpaper.
Date of Recovery: 5-2-2014
Location of Recovery: , Canada
Current Status: Inside the office of Dr. Quinton In Site-73 storage.
Notes: D-7295 used this as a weapon to injure several researchers during low-level containment breach, requesting to move item to Site-73 storage. - Dr. Quinton

Item Description: A standard dinner fork that when used will cause whatever it has been stabbed into to change into medium rare cooked steak.
Date of Recovery: 7/26/17
Location of Recovery: Tampa, Florida
Current Status: In Area-108 standard storage locker.
Notes: During a low-level containment breach caused by the Chaos Insurgency, item was taken out of containment by an escaped Class-D and used on several agents. Class-D was terminated and item returned to storage.

Item Description: An acoustic guitar that will play any song, with vocals in Kurt Donald Cobain's voice.
Date of Recovery: 4/5/94

Location of Recovery: Seattle, Washington
Current Status: Currently in Dr. Brim's possession.
Notes: I'll be taking this to my office and keeping it secure, at least someone will enjoy the present he left us all. -Dr. Brim

Item Description: A Teapot orbiting the sun.
Date of Recovery: 03-09-2003
Location of Recovery: Detected by the Foundation's Space Telescope for observing astronomical anomalies at coordinates + ° ' " at . au of distance from Earth.
Current Status: All non-foundation telescopes with capabilities of detecting the teapot are to be monitored. If the object is detected, all data about it should be deleted and class-A amnestics should be administrated to non-foundation civilians who observed the object.
Note: Sending a space mission to recover the object was deemed too costly and has been denied by the order of O5- .

Item Description: A self-containing spatial-temporal paradox. Indescribable appearance.
Date of Recovery: All the time
Location of Recovery: Everywhere
Current Status: Not in containment, located in a standard locker.
Notes: I don't know what or when this thing is, but I think it isn't now. - Dr. Javlin

Item Description: A twelve-inch ruler that changes the length of whatever object it is measuring to exactly twelve inches. All other measurements of said object are changed proportionally.
Date of Recovery: / /15
Location of Recovery: Middle School, , Oregon
Current Status: Currently in Dr. Bright's possession In storage.
Notes: Please be advised that any researchers attempting to use this item to manipulate the length of a certain bodily extremity will be

reassigned and severely reprimanded. Seriously, Bright. You're going to hurt yourself. - Dr. Brim

Item Description: Pots of paint, the pigment of which only visually stimulates the cone cells in the eye. This effect causes it to appear constantly dimly lit, and to become grey when viewed from any direction other than head-on. Further effects include headaches and eye-ache, after prolonged exposure.
Date of Recovery: 29/3/2017
Location of Recovery: ,
Current Status: Research is underway on utilising this AO as camouflage, and on synthesising larger amounts of the pigment. **SCP-294** to be used for this purpose when free.
Notes: Interesting, this one. Somehow, the effect also works when the pigment is viewed through a photo. I've no idea how. - Dr. Hagemeister

Item Description: A CD with the song "Up in the Sky" by english rock band Oasis. When the line "before you start falling" plays, any objects not touching the ground in a 6 meter circle around the source of the music will immediately fall to the ground at a speed of 5.4 m/s. This effect extends to the end of the atmosphere.
Date of Recovery: 7/6/2017
Location of Recovery: Creation Records warehouse, ,
Current Status: In storage, accessible if needed to recontain flying SCPs.

Item Description: An otherwise unknown subspecies of *Pinus pumila* (Siberian dwarf pine). The wood of this species functions as a superconducter, with a resistance of practically zero.
Date of Recovery: 9-13-1992
Location of Recovery: [REDACTED], Siberia
Current Status: Due to the species' isolated location and low population, only minimal containment is necessary. Currently, Outpost-18 of Site- has been set up to monitor the only known population.

Item Description: An ornate vase, which, when observed, slightly corrupts any medium containing information about it (This effect extends to memory). Scale of corruption is proportional with duration of viewing.

Date of Recovery: 15/11/2000
Location of Recovery: ,
Current Status: Currently in storage, in an opaque box.
Notes: At least twenty copies of this text are to be kept at all times. On the off chance that the vase is viewed, we can piece together the entry from the fragments of each copy.- Dr. Hagemeister

Item Description: A "Myst" book. Any human who touches the picture is teleported into a personal instance of an environment faithfully recreating the 1993 adventure game. Appearance of teleportation is consistent with the game's "linking" effect. Achieving any of the endings "links" the subject to the New Mexico Desert. Entering multiple times does not maintain memory of previous visits.
Date of Recovery: - -
Location of Recovery: New Mexico Desert
Current Status: In storage. Cyan Worlds denies knowledge of item.
Notes: As a lifelong fan of the series, I'm impressed by how thorough "Atrus's" knowledge of the lore is, when I can actually get him to take a break from his writing.~Dr

Item Description: A WWII encyclopedia, the name of the author is not present on the cover. When a person touches the object, they will experience Adolf Hitlers life through a first-person view. This experience will reportedly end when they die. Subjects describe the experience as interesting, yet somewhat traumatizing.
Date of Recovery: - -
Location of Recovery: , Germany
Current Status: Incinerated
Notes: This is one of this objects that just makes me say; "How was this created?" It makes me contemplate life, and honestly, I was sad to hear it was going to be destroyed. - Doctor

Item Description: A small wooden cup that is instantly filled with sulfuric acid if anyone within a 2 meter radius pronounces the words "Phillip is coming over from Spain." The cup does not seem to suffer any modifications by the substance.
Date of Recovery: - -
Location of Recovery: , Portugal
Current Status: In storage within Site .
Notes: Following a series of incidents regarding our fellow colleague

Phillip's transfer from Spanish site and a significant amount of acid burns, of no one is to be allowed access to the wooden cup without explicit clearance from myself. - Dr.

Item Description: A red cape that causes any subject wearing it to believe that they have superpowers and must use them to save the world. Note that the cape does not provide any superpowers.
Date of Recovery: 05-04-
Location of Recovery: Carl's Cool Comics in , Minnesota
Current Status: In Site 34 secure storage.

Item Description: A seven-day pill organizer. When prescription medication is removed from one of its compartments and consumed, there is a ~30% chance that identical medication will spontaneously appear in that compartment several hours later.
Date of Recovery: 2017-07-05
Location of Recovery: Estate sale in , Argentina
Current Status: In storage.

Item Description: A standard [REDACTED]. Any descriptions of the appearance of the [REDACTED] are redacted by unknown means.
Date of Recovery: 15/11/2017
Location of Recovery: A garage sale in , Wisconsin
Current Status: In storage.

Item Description: A bag of 50 Zip-Ties. The Zip-ties are indestructible and stain proof.
Date of Recovery: 8/23/2017
Location of Recovery: Dr. 's desk's bottom left drawer
Current Status: In storage awaiting verification to be classified as an SCP.
Notes: Dr. insists on classifying the anomalous object as an SCP despite its harmless properties. Dr. (who came in contact with the anomalous item) claims that "They could jeopardize the entire foundation". Dr. has received medical treatment for paranoia but still persists in wanting to keep the object contained.

Item Description: A Samson brand smart phone, capable of being used indefinitely without the need for charging.
Date of Recovery: 4/5/2017
Location of Recovery: Taken from cell block a from A d class

holding at Site:
Current Status: Missing from containment as of 8/24/2017, shortly before Dr Robert obtained a new phone, investigation into the where abouts of Robert and the phone is ongoing.
Notes: If anyone finds Dr Robert him and his cellphone are to be brought to me Dr.

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Location of recovery: Inside dr. bright's office
- - **:**ʎɹǝʌ**o**ɔǝ**o** ɟo ǝʇɐ**d**
Item Description: A box that makes all text that describes it upside down

Item Description: A slab of concrete engraved with the words: "Please step here on / / to prevent the apocalypse". The item itself currently posseses a hume reading of . but has no apparent effects on outside reality.
Date of Recovery: 3/05/2005
Location of recovery: Taken from a sidewalk in Texas.
Current Status: In storage. Plans for testing of the item on / / have been approved.

Item Description: A CD containing a copy of Elvis Nightmare, which inexplicably makes users who play it travel to the nearest temple and undergo a year of religious fulfillment.
Date of Recovery: 05/08/2014
Location of Recovery: CD recovered from the bedroom of a Vatican Priest.
Current Status: In storage.

Item Description: A fork, composed of plastic made to look like polished metal. There is nothing strange or special about this fork. I promise, it's normal! In fact, if you could, please ignore this fork. There is literally *nothing* special, weird, or strange about it. Just walk away. Do it. **DO IT.**
Date of Recovery: 6/17/2017
Location of Recovery: Dr s office.
Current Status: In storage.
Notes: Jesus fucking Christ, this thing gave me night terrors for a month. Don't believe what it tells you; it's a fucking eldritch horror

summoned from god-knows-where.

Item Description: A piece of paper. Descriptions of the item will transform the texts medium into paper. Individuals witnessing the resulting effect from this item will feel a strong urge to support the item, usually by compliments.
Date of Recovery: 5/3/2017
Location of Recovery: Site- s main entrance zone.
Current Status: In storage.
Notes: God, this data looks AMAZING. What kind of paper did you use? I love it!

Item Description: A copy of the novel, "The Bad Beginning", by Lemony Snicket. When the novel is opened to page 13, a man can be heard singing the words, "Look Away". This man has been identified as the actor, Neil Patrick Harris.
Date of Recovery: 9/2/2017
Location of Recovery: Capac State Library
Current Status: In storage.
Notes: Personnel are not allowed to take the book out of storage to read it. If you want to read a book, read the employee handbook.

Item Description: A Carl Thompson Rainbow Bass. When any song of the band Primus is played, a voice is heard saying "Primus Sucks!". This effect is present regardless of whether the song was played perfectly or incomplete.
Date of Recovery: 05/02/2006
Location of Recovery: A music store in .
Current Status: In storage.
Notes: Primus Sucks!

Item Description: A portable AM/FM radio that receives stations from Rhode Island instead of its current location. Stations from neighboring areas of Connecticut and Massachusetts are also audible, gradually fading the further their transmitters are from central Providence.
Date of Recovery: 09/06/2017
Location of Recovery: Offices of , Inc., Los Angeles, CA.
Current Status: In storage.

Item Description: A large bathroom mirror. anyone who looks into the mirror has a strong urge to have a staring contest with their own reflection. This urge subsides once the individual blinks.
Date of Recovery: 09/09/2017
Location of Recovery: A pawn shop in Texas.
Current Status: In storage.
Notes: A cloth should be kept over the mirror to prevent the anomalous property.

Informazioni Sull'oggetto: Una ciotola di spaghetti che quando hanno visto modifiche tutte le informazioni digitate o scritto su di esso in Italiano mal formulata.
Giorno di ottenere tale oggetto: 03/01/2017
Piastra di recupero: , Americani Uniti Territory.
Corrente: mangiato.

Item Description: A fluorescent light strip that emits "dark" when powered with no less than 22.3 watts. "Dark" behaves as an anti-light particle would: opaque objects leave "light" shadows, should there be other lighting in the room, mirrors reflect "dark" as expected, etc.
Date of Recovery: /12/198
Location of Recovery: Basement of small Italian restaurant "
"
Current Status: Site recreational wing
There's no reason to keep an anti-light locked up. I think it's a pretty interesting mind screw. -Researcher

Item Description: A pair of red training boxing gloves which, despite fully covering the fingers, do not impede finger function in any significant way.
Date of Recovery: 12/06/1999
Location of Recovery: A garage sale in Decatur, Georgia.
Current Status: In storage. Research into possible connection with [REDACTED] is ongoing.

Item Description: Thirteen Russian Matryoshka that all mutually fit inside of each other.
Date of Recovery: 2/10/1923
Location of Recovery: kilometers Northeast of Moscow, Russia.
Current Status: 2 shattered by reckless researcher (reprimanded.

Remains show no anomalous properties), 11on display in Site Anomalous Items wing.

Item Description: A blue backpack. When this backpack comes into contact with a human, its weight increases by approx. 836.7 pounds. After ten minutes of contact, the weight of the backpack will slowly increase. The backpack is currently 6002.18 kg.
Date of Recovery: 18/6/2017
Location of Recovery: A community elementary school in , Ohio.
Current Status: In process of being transported to Site- .
Notes: By god, the recovery team still hasn't gotten it to the site. They've been hauling that thing from to here for the past year now. Turns out automated contact still counts. — Junior Researcher

Item Description: A black and white cathode ray television set manufactured in the 1950s. When switched on, regardless of channel setting, a young man in a cricket player's uniform is seen looking directly at the viewer and continually repeating the phrase "the man upstairs" in a variety of inflections and intonations.
Date of Recovery: 3/3/1998
Location of Recovery: Purchased from an antique dealer in Vladivostok, Russia.
Current Status: Unplugged and in storage.

Item Description: A HSS Fender Stratocaster with a Floyd Rose. The guitar's strings will never go out of tune, break, degrade overtime, will always remain at the same constant tension, regardless of events that would alter the tension, and will never lose its tonality.
Date of Recovery: / /1980
Location of Recovery: A Guitar Center store in , U.S.A.
Current Status: In storage at the Music Wing of Site- . Currently tuned to D#0 tuning.
Notes: Personnel who attempt to play the guitar in bass range tunings with guitar amps will be reprimanded.
Additional Notes: No, it does not djent.

Item Description: I'm a rubber ducky! :3 I can squeak, talk, and float! :D <3

Date of Recovery: Who cares! Who wants to snuggle? ;)
Location: I was from… oh, God…
Current Status: … Well, heh, looks like… w-was dad really like that?

… I need to go lie down…

wimper

Item Description: A file named imagene.exe. When run, it allows for the selection of text within images.
Date of Recovery: 6/18/2014
Location of Recovery: Albany, New York
Current Status: Stored on a flash drive at Site- .

Item Description: An audio file named Bells.mp3. It plays a random song played on bells each time it is opened. Upon listening to the audio clip in its entirety, the viewer will hear that exact song heard in the clip every time a bell rings within the area it is audible to the subject. This only affects the viewer, and lasts for an indefinite amount of time unless an amnesiac is administered or the subject is rendered deaf.
Date of Recovery: 4/3/2016
Location of Recovery: Recovered from a laptop in London, England
Current Status: Stored on a computer at Site- .
Notes: Personnel who change their colleague's ringtones to the .mp3 file outside testing purposes will be reprimanded.

Item Description: A PNG file of a pair of human lungs that causes anyone who views anything related to it to forcibly breathe manually, sneeze and cough for hours. The effects may vary, but do not accumulate.
Date of Recovery: [REDACTED]
Location of Recovery: The computer of various citizens in city, Brazil.
Current Status: Stored on a computer as
Notes: Personnel who prank others with this will be seriously reprimanded.

Item Description: Bookmarks that will not lose their place.

Date of Recovery: 10/5/2017
Location of Recovery: Franford Library, Arkansas
Current Status: All 3872 instances of this item are available in the staff library

Item Description: a pair of scissors that "regenerates" paper. Two scissor blades that "regenerate" paper.
Date of Recovery: 10/5/2017
Location of recovery: elementary school.
Current status: Available for staff use. Snapped in half after being stepped on by researcher , still available for staff use.

Item Description: A soda can. Analysis indicates that the ratio of the circumference of its bases to the diameter of its bases (i.e., the value of pi) is roughly equal to 4.282983.
Date of Recovery: 2017-09-19
Location of Recovery: Nishinomiya, Hyōgo Prefecture, Japan
Current Status: In storage

.desrever eb ot ti tuoba nettirw txet fo senil yna sesuac hcihw drazahofni roniM **:noitpircseD metI**
7-01-7102 **:yrevoceR fo etaD**
]DETCADER[**:yrevoceR fo noitacoL**
egarots nI **:sutatS tnerruC**
Notes: Maybe I should have written that in reverse.

Item Description: A gold wedding ring. Item is noticed to shine 87.5% brighter than other objects built from the same alloy.
Date of Recovery: 2017-10-02
Location of recovery: Jewelry Store, Italy.
Current status: Worn by researcher Dr. Rivers, subject describes item as "really pretty".

Item Description: A Alienware laptop. Noticed to have a "infinite" storage space. Number of space reads "Infinite
Date of Recovery:2017-10-12
Location of Recovery: Raid on a said Insurgent holdout, found in the holdout armory
Current status: In possession of Dr. Church in his personal quarters
Notes: Whoever put of pornography on my new computer is

gonna get a [DATA EXPUNGED] and a lower paycheck!- Dr. Church

Item Description: A female researcher of age, that will always sneeze whenever in direct sight with any Keter Class object.
Date of Recovery: 20 - -
Location of Recovery: Ability found during testing at Site-19
Current Statues: Stationed at Site-19
Notes: I don't care I've been put in the anomalous category, I'm don't always sneeze when in direct contact with a Keter!- Dr. Catherine
Notes(2): After further testing, we have confirmed that Catherine sneezes when in direct contact with any Anomalies.- Dr. Church

Log of Extranormal Events: For when things happen which are unexplained, but occurred too briefly or quickly for the Foundation to contain them. Feel free to add to it, but be aware that it is regularly pruned.

Foreword: This page is to document anomalous events that have attracted the Foundation's interests, but occurred too briefly for the Foundation to secure or contain them. Instead, the Foundation deploys a cover-up team to conceal the evidence from the public. This is merely a reminder to agents and researchers that not all of them can be contained.
-Agent Carriontrooper

Event Description: 3 civilians reported a glowing figure appearing in the center of a nearby lake, two cell-phone images supporting. There is no reason to believe the anomaly lasted longer than several seconds before abruptly disappearing.
Date of Occurrence: / /
Location: Lake Camp Grounds, , USA.
Follow-up Actions Taken: Local media sources monitored, rumors involving the existence of a "lake ghost" disseminated. Special attention is to be paid to the region in the future.

Event Description: A naked, glowing humanoid figure appeared suddenly in the city's subway and seen by several eyewitnesses and captured by the security cameras. It disappeared after a few seconds.
Date of Occurrence: / /
Location: , Spain.
Follow-up Actions Taken: A team of disguised agents and a makeshift holographic projection unit were taken on location. Team explained that the incident was a part of their avant-garde 'urban shock art' exhibition all over Europe. Fake viral media planted to give credence to the team's supposed art group.

Event Description: Spider population of , a small town,

quintupled over the space of three months. Not known to correspond to any significant SCP item activity.
Date of Occurrence: / /
Location: , Nevada, USA.
Follow-up Actions Taken: Data suppressed, area to be monitored for future natural population spikes.

Event Description: Time skips between 2.5 and hours took place in , North Carolina before normalizing to one day after initial skip. Non self-correcting electronic devices such as digital clocks were seemingly unaffected and displayed incorrect times in different areas of the town. Event bears similarity to a relatively unnoticed event in , Nevada, though no connection could be traced between the two events.
Date of Occurrence: / /
Location: , North Carolina (, Nevada).
Follow-up Actions Taken: Local news reported electromagnetic interference caused by local power plant. Small observation team assigned to area.

Event Description: , Wales, was found to be abandoned. The population was found comatose in a nearby field. hours after the estimated time of the event, the population awoke with no recollection of the event.
Date of Occurrence: / /
Location: .
Follow-up Actions Taken: Population dosed with Class B Amnestics and a cover story was established. A road accident with a Samson-Craig Products (an SCP front company) chemical tanker was staged, an emergency evacuation camp was arranged and the population given £ per head compensation. In the years since the event there has been no recurrence or abnormal behaviour in the population.

Event Description: Three similar looking men were witnessed fighting in a gas station parking lot. Eyewitness reports maintain that each man claimed to be , a well known local car salesman, and were fighting over which individual was the "true" one. Two of the men were killed when the third procured a crowbar. The third was fatally shot by a local police officer.

Date of Occurrence: / /
Location: , Oklahoma.
Follow-up Actions Taken: Witnesses and involved persons were questioned and given Class B Amnestics. Close family members of were questioned and given Class A Amnestics. A cover story involving the individual's suicide was established. The three bodies were recovered for autopsy and are currently maintained in a Site-19 minimum security storage freezer.

Event Description: Several students attending Collegiate began complaining about a loud buzzing noise. A custodian for the school located the source as a single monitor in the computer lab during his duties, and reported the power button was unresponsive. When the lab technicians arrived the next day, they unplugged the monitor after other attempts proved futile. Witnesses of the event report a scream playing through the computer's speakers, and the image of a digitized face screaming appeared for a moment before power was lost.
Date of Occurrence: / /
Location: Collegiate in the , , USA.
Follow-up Actions Taken: The monitor was confiscated and replaced for inspection. Nothing of interest has been found.

Event Description: A mission not typically present was located in the MMORPG [REDACTED]. The mission was only accessible via a bugged area of terrain but had existed for an unknown period of time. The mission was an exact replica of Site- with several hostile SCPs (not necessarily those housed there) as opponents. No code for the mission was found on the game's server by Foundation Investigation teams.
Date of Occurrence: Unknown. Detected / /
Location: Geographical location unclear.
Follow-up Actions Taken: A viral attack on the server was performed, resulting in a total shut down. After the server was re-initialized the mission was absent. All individuals known to have found the mission have been given Class A Amnestics. There has been no recurrence to date.

Event Description: The entire stock of souvenirs at the stall on the waterfront were spontaneously altered so

that the face of was removed. These objects produced a loud screaming sound when exposed to daylight, and all writing implements within the stall formed symbols associated with the Cult of the Demon when an attempt to write with them was made. 8 days after the event, all altered stock vanished from Foundation storage.
Date of Occurrence: / /
Location: , Nova Scotia.
Follow-up Actions Taken: All altered stock seized and impounded, amnestics administered.

Event Description: During an automobile accident, the body of , a passenger in one involved vehicle, expanded to fill the entire interior of the vehicle. Because Mr. 's expanded body had taken on a consistency similar to stiff foam rubber, the other occupants of the vehicle were protected from the impact, and were the only survivors of the crash.
Date of Occurrence: / /
Location: , Connecticut.
Follow-up Actions Taken: Body confiscated, all other occupants and responding personnel administered Class A amnestics. Tissue tests indicate that Mr. is still alive, though the tissues of his body have become an undifferentiated mass, and tests of neurological function are inconclusive.

Event Description: 17-year-old dies while recording video blog after large, wide-mouthed creature appears from closet and devours her arms. Creature promptly disappears at estimated time of death. Video recovered by local law enforcement, embedded agent intercepts.
Date of Occurrence: / /
Location: , Michigan.
Follow-up Actions Taken: Footage intercepted; all knowledgeable parties given Class-B amnestics. Cover story involving local psychotic planted. No physical evidence relating to entity found in house. No similar entities have been encountered since. Area is to be kept under surveillance until / /2016.

Event Description: Unidentified and unaccompanied child (estimated age: 7 years old) in hospital waiting room produces more

than 400 kilograms of vomit in 5 minutes, before dying; other patients describe hearing sounds of "glass breaking" during the emesis.
Date of Occurrence: / /
Location: Public Hospital, , Madagascar.
Follow-up Actions Taken: Majority of vomit had been incinerated before Foundation agents arrived on-site; inspection of hospital incinerator revealed no anomalies. All remaining samples of vomit were confiscated; analysis revealed no anomalies, except that child had been suffering from salmonella poisoning. Witnesses were given amnestics. Child was never identified; body was removed from hospital morgue and is currently maintained in a Site-19 low-value storage freezer.

Event Description: An email is sent to, as near as the Foundation can determine, every active email address in existence, including Foundation intranet-only addresses. The contents are identical across all emails and consist of the following message, in Spanish: "Hi, this is Jorge. It has been fun playing with you, but I am going to visit friends next door now. I will be back later to collect my toys. Take care of the place!" Backtracing reveals that all emails originated from the same unassigned IP address.
Date of Occurrence: 12/21/
Location: N/A
Follow-up Actions Taken: Foundation agents edited the internet-rumor-debunking site .com to include a statement that the email was a massive hoax. The Foundation has periodically mass-emailed similar messages to more limited audiences as a smokescreen. The originating IP address is being monitored for any further activity.

Event Description: A man, believed to be , a suspected associate of the group known as Marshall, Carter, and Dark Ltd., entered an abandoned factory at in the Brazilian city of Salvador. Mr. was being tracked by two Foundation operatives who followed him into the building. A sound of bubbling water followed by gunshots was heard from within the building, and upon entry the operatives found Mr. 's body in a state of advanced decomposition associated with at least three weeks of exposure to the elements, despite only five minutes elapsing between him entering the building and the discovery of the body. A pistol, which

had been fired three times, was found in his hand. No sign of his target or possible attacker was found.
Date of Occurrence: /15/
Location: , Salvador, State of Bahia, Brazil.
Follow-up Actions Taken: Information suppressed in local media. Body removed from site by Foundation operatives disguised as Brazilian Federal Police and interred at morgue at Site- .

Event Description: Six sperm whale carcasses were found beached along a 2km stretch of coastline at , New Zealand. When autopsy was performed as part of a civilian research program, it was discovered that the chest cavity of all six whales had been hollowed out postmortem without any damage being done to the exterior of the animals. Exploration of the chest cavity revealed the chest cavity of each whale had somehow been stuffed with what appears to be machinery components trapped in clear plastic.
Date of Occurrence: /18/
Location: , New Zealand.
Follow-Up Actions Taken: Area sealed. All members of the research team detained and administered Class-A Amnestics. False story disseminated claiming that the decomposition of the whales' bodies had led to the build-up of toxic gas inside the carcasses, leading to government intervention on grounds of public health. Masses found inside body cavities removed and shipped to Storage Site- . Remains incinerated in the field and disposed of through normal channels.

Event Description: Two male cadavers were found outside of Park, Alabama. Each wore lead masks and a series of black rashes were visible on the skin of the faces. Locals in the area during the actual event reported that the two men "hovered in the air" for an estimation of 5 minutes before dropping dead. After the bodies were taken to Hospital for autopsy, both the men were seen at the park. They promptly killed any living being within the area, even taking the time to crush insects. Overall, there were civilian casualties. When the men were subdued by Operatives from Task Force- , their bodily organs were found to be completely missing, despite being able to move freely. After the events, the hospital reported that the bodies were missing.
Date of Occurrence: /05/

Location: Park.
Follow-up Actions Taken: Class A amnestics distributed to civilian witness, including the hospital staff involved. Bodies of the two subjects restrained and sent for further research at Site .

Event Description: The flight between Heathrow, London and Hartsfield-Jackson, Atlanta suffered a malfunction and crashed into the Atlantic Ocean, 800 km from the Azores archipelago. Despite this, all passengers and crew walked out the destination gate, remembering only a regular flight.
Date of Occurrence: /11/
Location: North Atlantic Ocean.
Follow-up Actions Taken: Information suppressed and mass amnestic treatment performed, recovery of aircraft underway.

Event Description: Every domesticated cat inside the city limits of , Norway travelled 10.9 km SE to , Sweden over period of 8 hours. Cats congregated in groupings of 13-25 in a field behind [DATA EXPUNGED] for 2 hours, then dispersed.
Date of Occurrence: 25/09/2009
Location: Norway/Sweden border.
Follow-up Actions Taken: Cats returned of own accord to their homes. Any footage of gathering confiscated for study. Witnesses processed, debriefed, and administered Class B Amnestic. Field searched for abnormalities, blood and urine samples taken from cats in affected areas. No anomalies found. Both and the field will be under surveillance until 30/09/2014.

Event Description: Automated systems worldwide behaved as though an extra day occurred at the end of July. Analysis of planetary motion and stellar alignment confirm presence of 367 days in the year.
Date of Occurrence: 32/7/1996
Location: Global.
Follow-up Actions Taken: Hard data revealing date confiscated and destroyed. Most individuals have naturally put the event out of their minds. Foundation-sponsored disinformation campaigns persist.

Event Description: During a speech to a public committee, the mayor of , FL began continuously chuckling at a pun made by

an legislative observer for approximately 4.5 hours straight before collapsing into a nearby chair and passing out. He claims to have no memory of the event, nor did anyone else in the room during the speech. The only available evidence of its occurrence was captured entirely on camera.
Date of Occurrence: / /19
Location: , Florida.
Follow-up Actions Taken: Any and all witnesses who videotaped the event, along with anyone who viewed the videotapes themselves were given Class B Amnestics, and all resulting videotapes were wiped clean. The mayor himself is under minor surveillance from select members of the Foundation.

Event Description: books in the library spontaneously ignited. Witnesses reported that the fires unexpectedly did not spread to adjacent books. The fires burned for minutes until the books were completely incinerated.
Date of Occurrence: / /200
Location: , West Virginia.
Follow-up Actions Taken: Class-B amnestics were administered to all witnesses. The burnt books were explained as vandalism. As Foundation agents on site were unable to determine any potential causes of the fires, the library, its employees, and all who were present on the day of the incident will be under passive surveillance until no earlier than 20 .

Event Description: During a bank robbery, all hostages (customers, employees) were spontaneously transformed into immobile naked skeletons; transformation is visible on all security cameras. Thieves fired several shots, damaging six skeletons and breaking two windows, then abandoned the robbery and fled the scene. As local law enforcement entered the bank, all skeletons instantly reverted to clothed living humans, with no memory of the robbery having occurred; hostages whose skeletons were damaged by gunfire immediately experienced corresponding injuries (three fatally).
Date of Occurrence: / /199
Location: [REDACTED], Nebraska.
Follow-up Actions Taken: Class-B amnestics administered to all surviving witnesses. Deaths of hostages explained as results of

unsuspected congenital vascular defects; autopsies reveal no anomalies. Thieves die in multi-vehicle collision while attempting to evade police pursuit; autopsies reveal no anomalies. Footage from security cameras confiscated. Damage to bank premises explained as result of vandals.

Event Description: After Long Island citizen died of alcohol-damage related illness, a recliner chair in his home began ascending at speeds of exactly 3.6m/s before eventually accelerating to 16.3m/s. Attempts at stopping the ascent were futile, and the chair broke through any barriers placed in its way. It has since then left the atmosphere and is believed to be orbiting Jupiter.
Date of Occurrence: 2/15/201
Location: , New York.
Follow-up Actions Taken: Any footage of the incident was wiped and pulled off the internet. Class-A Amnestics were given to witnesses. Foundation operatives in various space programs are advised to destroy any information of the chair if found.

Event Description: Eighty-eight thousand, eight hundred and eighty-eight citizens of the state of New Jersey fractured their left scaphoid bones within a two-hour period; radiography showed that all fractures were identical down to a sub-millimeter level.
Date of Occurrence: / /
Location: Various hospitals throughout New Jersey.
Follow-up Actions Taken: Class-A amnestics administered to radiography technicians.

Event Description: Viewers of the popular late-night talk show reported seeing two different episodes. Approximately 40% watched an episode featuring the famous actor and the musical guest , while the other 60% watched an episode with with appearance by stand-up comedian . Neither one of these episodes was the one which had actually broadcast, and neither one has ever been filmed.
Date of Occurrence: / /
Location: TV sets throughout the US that were tuned on .
Follow-up Actions Taken: All recordings of the anomalous episodes showed the actual broadcast episode in later viewings. Viewer's memories of the anomalous episodes seem to have

completely faded by themselves by / / . channel officials who had been contacted about the episodes were administered Class C amnestics and their internal investigation into the matter aborted. Social networks mentioning the matter were intercepted and edited.

Event Description: A parrot was owned by the family was discovered to have the ability to sing the entirety of the song "Crazy Train" by John Michael "Ozzy" Osbourne, including vocals, guitar, bass, drums, and keyboard. No member of the family ever recalls the parrot hearing it.
Date of Occurrence: / /
Location: , Connecticut, USA.
Follow-up Actions Taken: Class A amnestics distributed to to the family; parrot seized and ensconced in the Site 19 Anomalous Wildlife Habitat.

Event Description: For approximately 12 minutes, all shed human blood within a 15-km radius of , France spontaneously turned into centipedes. All centipedes in the area turned back into blood following the cessation of the event.
Date of Occurrence: / /
Location: , France.
Follow-up Actions Taken: Aerosolized amnestics were deployed over the town. Additional amnestics were distributed to women on menstrual periods during the event, due to extreme emotional distress rendering the aerosolized version ineffective.

Event Description: All written text in the Theater Department at - University spontaneously converted to Wingdings. Digital text remained unaffected until printed out. All affected text contained the phrase "You don't need a script to pretend to be someone else, you're doing it right now! (ω)"
Date of Occurrence: / /2014
Location: Staten Island, New York.
Follow-up Actions Taken: Class A amnestics were administered to all students and faculty present. Affected books were incinerated, and are currently being replaced.

Event Description: A translucent digital clock approximately 3 km across appeared in the sky about 1.5 km above the ground. The anomaly counted down from 05:55. It stopped short at 01:13 before

disappearing completely.
Date of Occurrence: / /2006
Location: Devon Island, Nunavut, Canada.
Follow-up Actions Taken: Anomaly was only witnessed by a single fishing trawler. Class C amnestics issued to the entire crew.

Event Description: A single specimen of *Dionaea muscipula*, better known as the Venus flytrap, expanded to approximately 2.5m tall and consumed a domesticated cat. The specimen expired shortly after and was reported by passing civilians.
Date of Occurrence: / /
Location: , .
Follow-up Actions Taken: Class A amnestics issued to witnesses. Specimen taken for future studying.

Event Description: Ten minutes before opening to the general public, three visit team staff and a security officer at Museum witnessed a *Scutigera coleoptrata* specimen, commonly known as a house centipede, emerge from a small drainage pipe in a storage closet. The specimen travelled approximately 1 m before entering a sink u-bend which had been opened for repairs. Specimen was estimated to be over 12 m in length, though of average width and height for its species. Specimen was visible for several minutes after the head portion had entered the u-bend, while the remainder of its body continued to exit the drainage pipe.
Date of Occurrence: / /
Location: , Minnesota.
Follow-up Actions Taken: Class A amnestics administered to museum personnel. Facility plumbing was fully examined by foundation personnel, and specimen could not be located. Presumed to have escaped into city sewer network. Communications watch placed on Public Works to monitor for future reports.

Event Description: The Cincinnati metropolitan area and all objects and lifeforms in it became greyscale for approximately 77 hours, starting at approximately 10:00 AM. All humans in the metropolitan area when the change occurred were not aware of the existence of color while the effect persisted. Those who entered the area of effect after the change occurred were not affected, but affected individuals

treated them with fear and suspicion. When the change was reverted through unknown means, all individuals within the affected area lost their memories of the event, although those who had left the area of effect before the restoration of color retained their memories.
Date of Occurrence: 3/21/2014 through 3/23/2014
Location: Cincinnati, Ohio, USA.
Follow-up Actions Taken: Class A amnestics administered to individuals who retained memories of the event, and all records of the event destroyed.

Event Description: All weights within the &Son Gym assumed a red coloration for a period of five hours. All the affected weights possessed a white sticker reporting the words "**Tired of the old, boring, black weights? (T_T) - Try the red ones! (*A*) -** ".
Date of Occurrence: 2014/ /
Location: Birmingham, England, UK.
Follow-up Actions Taken: Class-B amnestics were administered to all witnesses. All weights were taken in custody for further studying. Following the event, the objects displayed no apparent anomalous effect. However, closer inspections revealed that the words "Brought to you by the Kobayashi Athletics" were inscribed on the items. All weights were replaced by new ones. The establishment is to be kept under surveillance until 2016/ / .

Event Description: Two individuals were observed to spend seven hours attempting to move past each other in a narrow hallway before one collapsed from exhaustion, at which point the other decided to take a different route. There is no indication, either from recorded footage of the event or from the testimony of the involved parties, that this was intentional or involuntary.
Date of Occurrence: 2014/ /
Location: Boston, Massachusetts office of .
Follow-Up Actions Taken: Affected subjects were provided with appropriate medical care and amnestics were administered to all known witnesses. The hallway in question and the affected subjects have shown no anomalous properties before or since.

Event Description: During a public concert in the town of , Georgia, a large number of *Procyon lotor* (common raccoon)

assembled behind the outdoor concert stage, and started constructing an object resembling a shrine out of materials they had collected from various places around the town, including branches, pine cones, fast-food wrappers, old newspaper, and a trash-can lid. After the shrine was constructed, the raccoons proceeded to make motions described by onlookers as "bowing" to the shrine, and then quickly scattered. Upon attempted destruction of the shrine by civilian Joseph , a large and aggressive nursery of raccoons emerged, numbering more than 100 by most witness accounts. The nursery proceeded to assault Joseph , resulting in his death.
Date of Occurrence: / /20
Location: , Georgia, USA
Follow-up Actions Taken: All those who witnessed the event given Class-A amnestics. Death of Joseph covered up with a report of a violent mugging. Concert zone acquired by Foundation under the cover of construction. Shrine destroyed by small explosives from a safe distance under the same cover of construction. Observational post disguised as a bird sanctuary constructed. No other anomalous occurrences to date.

Event Description: All moths in a 5 kilometer radius of a single porch light made their way towards the light and gathered there for an hour. The moths then dispersed into the surrounding area.
Date of Occurrence: / /
Location: ,
Follow-up Actions Taken: No special actions, due to lack of witnesses at time of event. The area is to be observed for more anomalous activity until 1/1/ .

Event Description: A large, ten-centimeter thick layer of snow suddenly fell over the town of , Massachusetts and coated the entire area. No clouds were visible at the time and despite sudden shifts in supported weight no buildings or structures were damaged.
Date of Occurrence: / /1999
Location: , Massachusetts.
Follow-up Actions Taken: A sample of the snow was obtained; it was found to be mundane. All residents of the town administered Class-A amnestics. As the event occurred quickly, very little video footage was captured. However, all documentation of the event has been destroyed.

Event Description: For a period of approximately five hours, residents of Pompano Beach, Florida and non-residents working in the city, including Foundation employees, experienced a shared hallucination. Interviews with those effected have provided a detailed, highly consistent account of the entire city being transported to the surface of a planet (believed to be Venus), protected by a dome of unknown design. (See Document E-41567- for full account.) However, telephone records, security camera feeds and interviews with non-resident non-employees suggest that nothing unusual happened during the time period and that all those affected were present on Earth and went about their business as normal.
Date of Occurrence: / /2011
Location: Pompano Beach, Florida, USA.
Follow-up Actions Taken: Affected individuals provided with amnestics after interview. Foundation personnel involved in the event have been commended for controlling media coverage. Amnestic treatment has successfully removed memories of the event. Further monitoring is counterindicated.

Event Description: Towards the end of a show, musician began sweating profusely. For 6 minutes, the sweat fell to the floor and pooled together, forming into various miniature trains. Following this, the trains rapidly evaporated.
Date of Occurrence: 05/22/2015
Location: , , USA.
Follow-up Actions Taken: Witnesses (including the musician) were administered Class-A amnestics. No further action was required, and the show was generally well received.

Event Description: Over an eight-minute period, six hundred and ninety-seven lightning strikes occurred within a twenty-mile wide radius around Faeto, Italy. Meteorological data shows that the locations of these strikes formed a "smiley." At the same time, all drinking water within the settlement was, according to anecdotal evidence, icy cold, scented of strawberries, and could not be boiled or otherwise heated.
Date of Occurrence: 2015/07/01
Location: Faeto, Italy.
Follow-up Actions Taken: Water supplies and meteorological data

throughout Apulia to be monitored over a six-month period.

Event Description: Commencing at 07:31, all instances of the Basenji breed of *Canis lupus familiaris* barked constantly for one minute and forty three seconds. Commencement/cessation of barking was not linked to any external stimuli.
Date of Occurrence: 2015/07/03
Location: Australia.
Follow-up Actions Taken: Fallopia, Agent [REDACTED]'s Basenji, taken for post-anomaly testing. No anomalous activity noted since.

Event Description: At approximately :26 AM local time, a train bound from to (hereafter Train-A) collided with an identical train moving along the same line from to (hereafter Train-B). Of the 56 casualties observed, only 28 civilians were identified. Each civilian was identified twice, with one instance riding Train-A and the other instance riding Train-B. Examination shows that all electronic and time-keeping devices present on Train-B at the time of collision were 9 hours slow. All passengers are confirmed to have been traveling on the route of Train-B 9 hours before the event, though without incident. Temporal interference has been suggested, though the cause is currently unknown and the logical paradox the situation represents has been deemed unsolvable. Whether all civilians involved caught the same train as one another twice consecutively as the result of coincidence or the effect of causal manipulation is unknown. No passengers of either train survived the impact.
Date of Occurrence: / /2015
Location: train line, Victoria, Australia.
Follow-up Actions Taken: All Train-B passengers were removed from the scene and taken into Foundation custody, currently kept in Site- cold storage. The train line has been put under observation for further extranormal activity over a 6 month period, which is yet uneventful.

Event Description: Starting at 2:22 PM, all users in the chatroom ceased conversation and began to repeat the phrase "nag gimno bgaithu sa yginno alibgn yamoa gna as ahud ak" at two second intervals. This behavior continued for two hours before ceasing. No users seemed to recall the event, claiming that a

regular conversation had occurred. Many users claimed to have closed the chat window or left their computer during the course of the event, despite the fact that their corresponding chat handles continued to repeat the phrase throughout the event. Users who joined the chat room while the event was underway did not participate in the event but did not type anything until after the event was finished.
Date of Occurrence: / /2015
Location: Computers around the world, most concentrated in the United States.
Follow-up Actions Taken: All screenshots of the conversation were deleted, and the chatroom has been placed under surveillance for further anomalous behavior.

Event Description: For a period of approximately 3 minutes, no less than 10,000 calls were made to the number 1-800- - for the [REDACTED] for . Records indicate that all calls came from a single number and further investigation indicates that the number is currently in use by an employee of the company who did call that day but was held up in the queue. At the 3-minute mark, all calls vanished completely from the queue.
Date of Occurrence: / /
Location: , , Philippines, calls were documented to come from the employee's address in , USA.
Follow-up Actions Taken: Call records for the time frame when the calls occurred were expunged from the system and false records inputted during a routine system maintenance the next day. Class-B amnestics were administered to all parties involved while the employee was monitored for the next 3 months but no anomalous activity was noted.

Event Description: At roughly 2:30 PM, sixteen (16) city buses pulled up to a movie theater owned by a private company; all buses were packed full. All people aboard the buses (bus drivers included) as well as the owner of the movie theater shared the same first name: "Greg". Furthermore, the Gregs' all came to the location to see the same movie, " : ". Said movie had a Greg starring in the lead role. There was no convention of any sorts occurring at the time in the town, nor any in the world at that time that was summoning people with the name "Greg".

Date of Occurrence: 3/17/199
Location: Greg's Theater, , Pennsylvania, USA.
Follow-up Actions Taken: Interviews with all 1267 Gregs' involved as well as their families found that this had not been a planned event, and that 97% of all people involved did not know anyone else that had attended prior to the event. No records indicate that there was any advertisements or events that would have sparked such an occurrence. All Gregs' and witnesses involved were given Class-A amnestics. A cover-up story involving a Greg convention was released, and no further incident occurred after cover-up was released. Theater was monitored for two years, but aside from a reduced crime rate for the first two weeks after the event no anomalous activity occurred.
Note: *This was easily the most confusing case I've ever had to deal with.* -Agent Greg

Event Description: At 8:30 AM local time, a 911 call was made. Said call reported a construction worker had broken his neck. Ambulance arrived three minutes later, and OSWA arrived within twenty minutes. Undercover Agent was among the OSWA Workers. Investigation found that the construction helmet somehow went from a standard weight of 10 ounces/283 grams to a weight of 37 pounds/16.7 kilograms upon the worker putting it onto his head.
Date of Occurrence: 7/14/2005
Location: A construction site in New York City, New York, USA.
Follow-up Actions Taken: Item confiscated. All personal involved given Class-B amnestics. Broken neck blamed on the worker being hit by a sledge-hammer another worker dropped from the top of the building being worked on.

Event Description: For a period of 15 minutes, numerous small (observed 3-10cm) bubbles of unknown composition were seen floating through the air at an estimated height of 3-5m, spaced 2-3m apart.
Date of Occurrence: / /2004
Location: Jiangsu Province, China.
Follow-up Actions Taken: Capture of bubbles proved impossible. Interviews with eyewitnesses determined that few considered the event unusual, and many had not even noticed. The total number of witnesses is estimated in the tens of millions, as the event occurred

across the entire province, making amnestic delivery unfeasible. Investigating agents discovered a previously unknown variant of SCP- , enacted first containment of SCP- , and recontained SCP- with minimal effort. It is unknown if these events are related.

Event Description: Report of what appear to be a *Panthera tigris sondaica* (Javan tiger) sighting in a tiger enclosure in a local zoo located in Jakarta, Indonesia. The tiger appeared to be perfectly healthy, matured and was seen interacting with other tigers and zookeepers in the enclosure. Sighting happens for approximately 1 (one) hour before the tiger spontaneously disappeared. Video footage was able to confirm this.
Date Of Occurrence: 7/14/2015
Location: Jakarta, Indonesia.
Follow-up Actions Taken: All witnesses (including zookeepers) were administered with Class-B Amnestics. Video footage and pictures regarding the sighting destroyed. A cover-up story involving a recent animal relocation have been created. Zoo monitored for future event, but no anomalous event occurred since then.
Note: *Panthera tigris sondaica* was officially declared extinct in 1993.

Event Description: At 1:23pm, for a period of approximately 10 minutes, organic sweet corn (*Zea mays* var. *saccharata*) growing on the T C Farm began to spontaneously “pop” as if it were popcorn. According to an interview with the farm owners, the popping began and ended gradually, reaching its peak frequency around the 5-minute mark. Investigations determined that approximately 6,070 square meters (1.5 acres) of corn popped, yielding 38,035 emptied corn cobs and approximately 6,500 kg of popped corn.
Date of Occurrence: 09/09/2015
Location: , Maryland.
Follow-up Actions Taken: Amnestics administered to all witnesses. Affected land was cleaned up and burned, and a cover story was implanted about faulty farm equipment sparking a fire. Popcorn and cobs were transported back to the Foundation and incinerated. Samples of popcorn, cobs, stalks, soil, and surrounding air revealed no unusual properties, and popcorn deemed safe for human consumption. Farm is to be kept under minor surveillance

until 2018.
Note: The only type of corn usable as popcorn is *Zea mays* var. *everta*. Sweet corn kernels cannot be popped due to their soft hulls.

Event Description: At 4:34 PM, an unidentified man (estimated to be 56 years old) turned into wax and collapsed while riding a crowded city bus. Remains showed no anomalous properties.
Date of Occurrence: 10/15/2015
Location: Cedar Springs, Colorado, USA.
Follow-up Actions Taken: Remains were confiscated, and all witnesses were administered Class-A amnestics. No further action was deemed necessary.

Event Description: For a period of one hour, all dropped objects within the city produced an unidentified male voice imitating the expected sound.
Date of Occurrence: 11/24/2015
Location: Cedar Springs, Colorado, USA.
Follow-up Actions Taken: All recordings of the incident were altered or destroyed, and witnesses were administered Class-A amnestics.

Event Description: All 3 attendees of Osceola, Tennessee's 3rd Annual Ribfest spontaneously and simultaneously lost consciousness for a period of forty-eight (48) seconds. Upon awakening, all afflicted individuals realized their favorite food was now goat vindaloo, supplanting whatever their previous favorite food had been. Even individuals who had never before sampled goat vindaloo, or demonstrated a poor understanding in interviews of what vindaloo was or what the dish actually consisted of, still continued to insist that goat vindaloo was their favorite food.
Date of Occurrence: 5/10/2016
Location: Osceola, Tennessee, although amnestics were administered to a group of journalists in neighboring Dyersburg, Tennessee to prevent the spread of information regarding the mass fainting incident.
Follow-up Actions Taken: All afflicted attendees and any nearby media personnel were dosed with Class-B amnestics; the amnestics were able to remove memories of the mass fainting episode, but did nothing to change the purported food preferences of those affected.

In response, the town council of Osceola voted to cancel their 4th Annual Ribfest. Instead, their 1st Annual Indian Foodfair will take place in summer 2017, exact date TBD. Agents and have been assigned to attend this event in an observational capacity.

Event Description: All black pens in the west wing of Site-24 ran out of ink simultaneously.
Date of Occurrence: / /20
Location: West wing of Site-24.
Follow-up Actions Taken: All Foundation personnel switched to blue pens for 24 hours until Agent got more black pens.

Event Description: At 4:25 p.m of / /19 all male citizens' voices were altered. All affected voices were audially similar to that of a single eight-year old girl, . Event lasted for three hours before disappearing.
Date of Occurrence: / /19
Location: , .
Follow-up Actions Taken: All videos destroyed or altered to suggest the alteration was computer-generated. All witnesses given class A amnestics.
Note: Is there a recording of this? If so I really want a copy. Dr.

Event Description: In the span of two minutes, Agent , a newly recruited member of MTF-Zeta-2, received over seven thousand texts from his mother. Most of the texts were nonsensical, consisting of word salad or strings of seemingly random letters. However, several words and phrases were noticeably repeated throughout the texts, including "don't", "why", "not my son", "what did you do" and "it isn't me". Interrogation of Agent 's mother revealed that she had not used her phone that day; however, she reported a stabbing headache around the time the messages had been sent, as well as a sudden, irrational distrust towards Agent .
Date of Occurrence: 6/23/2016
Location: Chicago, Illinois.
Follow-up Actions Taken: Both Agent and his mother have been placed under surveillance for further anomalous activity, and Agent has been temporarily removed from MTF-Zeta-2 pending investigation.

Event Description: Approximately 1,000 different specimens of *Canis lupus familiaris* (domestic dog) capable of verbal communication sprinted down the main street of the town claiming they were "chasing the meat truck". The dogs continued towards the exit of the town and disappeared at its border.
Date of Occurrence: 16/12/
Location: , Canada.
Follow-up Actions Taken: All eye-witnesses were given Class C amnestics and surveillance of has been placed.

Event Description: For twenty minutes, all the computers in the High School computer lab began emitting a high pitched noise, causing the rupturing of three fire extinguishers nearby. injured. School was evacuated due to the quickly spreading nitrogen toxification.
Date of Occurrence: 04/26/2013
Location: High School.
Follow-up Actions Taken: Security recordings wiped, all staff and students given Class B amnestics. Cover story of a earthquake disseminated.

Event Description: Seventeen individuals sneezed in sequence the notes comprising the first two bars of "Deck the Halls".
Date of Occurrence: 19/08/2014
Location: Grand Central Station, New York City, New York, United States.
Follow-up Actions Taken: Given the time of day and number of potential witnesses, amnestic treatment was not recommended for all but affected individuals. Interviews with affected individuals revealed causes ranging from allergies to infections to sunlight as the source of sneezing. No link between individuals was obtained; most considered the event an amusing coincidence. MTF Rho-13 ("YouTube Celebs") deployed online cover-up story claiming the event was an out-of-season test run for a flash mob.

Event Description: Forty-nine fresh human corpses appeared in the master bedroom of a home undergoing construction, during the 30 second duration between the installation of a door in the doorframe, and the opening of the door for the first time. All corpses were of the same individual (identified as former United States

Senator Joseph McCarthy, 1908-1957) at different ages, ranging from an estimated 48 years old to a newborn with umbilical cord still attached. Autopsies revealed that the corpses had all died of aortic dissection; aortic damage was identical on each corpse.
Date of Occurrence: 14/11/1999
Location: Donaustadt, Vienna, Austria.
Follow-up Actions Taken: Class-B amnestics administered to construction personnel; class-A amnestics administered to first responders. Home acquired by Foundation and placed under surveillance; no further anomalous phenomena or properties detected. Corpses taken into custody for analysis; no anomalous properties or phenomena detected; corpses currently maintained in Site-19 low-value storage freezer. Remains of original Joseph McCarthy exhumed and analyzed, and re-interred after no anomalous properties or phenomena detected. Foundation pathologists unable to detect any signs of actual or incipient aortic dissection in remains of original Joseph McCarthy, but emphasize difficulty of detecting such signs in remains which have undergone natural decomposition for over 40 years.

Event Description: A worker at the Chemical Company vomited for four consecutive minutes, producing a total of 15 Craftsman brand ball-peen hammers from his digestive tract. Witnesses say that just prior to the incident, the subject, Z C , complained of abdominal pain. When asked what was wrong, he responded, "It's hammer time" before proceeding to vomit.
Date of Occurrence: / /2013
Location: Mississauga, Ontario, Canada.
Follow-Up Actions Taken: Physical traces cleaned up before Foundation Agents reached Chemical. Hammers confiscated; no anomalous properties observed. Amnestics administered to all witnesses and Z C 's employment history was scrubbed from the company database. Subject taken into custody and given provisional classification as Anomalous Item S-14005, however extended observation revealed no further anomalies. Subject amnesticized and released on / /2014.

Event Description: Approximately 8.9 million pounds of pie filled George Street of Newnan, Georgia. The pie was in various flavors.
Date of Occurrence: 3/14/15

Location: Newnan, Georgia, George Street.
Follow-up Actions Taken: Physical traces cleaned up, placed in cold storage at Site-24. Amnestics administered to witnesses. Newnan currently under surveillance.
Note: *Pies reportedly tasted "elegant and delicious." Pies now available for snacking in the Site-24 break room.*

Event Description: Eighty people living in , Poland, immobilized, regardless of what they were doing, for one minute and twenty seconds, with no attempt to “unlock” them working . Three people were wounded when a car crashed on a tree due to the event affecting the driver.
Date of Occurrence: / /2016
Location: , West Pomeranian Voivodeship, Poland.
Follow-up Actions Taken: Class A amnestics administered to subjects affected and witnesses. No further anomalous phenomena were recorded in the area.

Event Description: All vehicles within a 1 kilometer radius of 23 St, , West Virginia disappeared for a 12 hour period at 12:00 P.M. At the end of the 12 hour period, all vehicles returned to their position prior to their disappearance. People within vehicles at this time were not recovered.
Date of Occurrence: 04/04/2016
Location: 23 St, , West Virginia.
Follow-up Actions Taken: Class A amnestics administered to the residents of . Area monitored for further anomalous activity.

Event Description: All electronic devices with a screen (e.g. televisions, laptops) temporarily displayed a broadcast of an unknown (presumably male) individual, clad entirely in dark clothing. Any attempt to change or shut off the device resulted in spontaneous combustion and dissipation into smoke.
Date of Occurrence: 05/04/2015
Location: Westampton, New Jersey.
Follow-up Actions Taken: Class B amnestics administered to affected townspeople. All unaffected devices confiscated.

Event Description: Every Sunday for seven consecutive weeks, an unidentified woman gave birth to a baby girl, each time named "Eve". She was later found to have been in seven simultaneous

relationships with unrelated men.
Date of Occurrence: 01/04/2011 - 13-05-2011
Location: Kamakura Central Hospital, Japan.
Follow-up Actions Taken: Agents failed to locate the woman, and her personal documents were found to be forgeries.

Event Description: An unauthorized person in his early 20s appeared in Site claiming to be Albert Einstein. DNA testing proved his claim to be true and was placed in temporary containment. Approximately 2 hours later, subject disappeared and was not seen again.
Date of Occurrence: 06/12/2015
Location: Site .
Follow-up Actions Taken: All personnel below Level 2 clearance who came into contact with this person were given Class C amnestics.

Event Description: For approximately 17 minutes, an ordinary football (soccer ball) became immobile after it was kicked towards a goalpost by an 11 year old male, becoming suspended approximately 1.2 meters away from the ground. Attempts to move the ball by both the child and their parents were unsuccessful. After the 17 minutes passed, the football resumed its prior trajectory and hit the goal.
Date of Occurrence: 15/03/2015
Location: , Northern Ireland.
Follow-up Actions Taken: Child and parental witnesses were interviewed, administered Class B amnestics. The ball, field and goal were all tested, and no further anomalous properties were found.

Event Description: All cars of every make and model in the Cinemas Car Park spontaneously levitated 5 metres above the ground for fifteen minutes.
Date of Occurrence: [REDACTED]
Location: Los Angeles, California.
Follow-up Actions Taken: None

Event Description: At 13:47 local time, a shockwave (later confirmed to be a sonic boom) emanating from an aisle in a local supermarket shattered windows within a radius of

approximately 800 metres and caused significant structural damage to the building and nearby objects. At least people were killed, a further injured, and an estimated , Euro of damages was caused, along with numerous cases of permanent deafness. Upon investigation of CCTV footage, the sonic boom appeared to be caused by an unidentified man in the frozen food aisle sneezing, followed very shortly afterwards by the event. The camera that filmed it was damaged, but responding Foundation personnel confirmed that the man had been killed by the blast.
Date of Occurrence: / /20
Location: , Germany.
Follow-up Actions Taken: Class A amnestics distributed. Cover story about a severe car bombing released to the public. Identity of the man causing the event investigated without result. Area monitored until / /20 , with no repeat occurrence.

Event Description: For approximately 5 minutes, all water that emitted from a brand refrigerator in New Bern, North Carolina, turned into a highly corrosive, sand-like substance. The refrigerators seemed unaffected by the substance, as it was able to corrode bone and vital organ tissues, resulting in civilian casualties.
Date of Occurrence: / /20
Location: New Bern, North Carolina.
Follow-up Actions Taken: Class A amnestics were distributed to remaining survivors, false memories implanted of deceased, corroded material was linked to a supposed chemical leak.

Event Description: For 10 minutes, the regular level of gravity at New Bern, North Carolina, decreased gradually of that of the moon. The event could be avoided by leaving the town borders.
Date of Occurrence: / /20
Location: New Bern, North Carolina.
Follow-up Actions Taken: Class A amnestics distributed to townsfolk, any destroyed items were dismissed as a miniature earthquake

Event Description: For approximately 30 minutes, 500 specimens of the genus *Apis* (Common Honey Bee), which displayed white and purple stripes, materialized and attacked and killed 5 civilians. The

bees were able to phase through solid matter and distribute electrical discharges during stinging periods.
Date of Occurrence: / /20
Location: New Bern, North Carolina.
Follow-up Actions Taken: Class B amnestics distributed, civilian casualties were dismissed as an accidental electrical discharge by a fallen power line.

Event Description: The town of , Kansas was found to have completely disappeared on / /20 after several murders were reported from the town. All records regarding the town were unchanged and all inhabitants were found within , South Dakota.
Date of Occurrence: / /20
Location: , Kansas.
Follow-up Actions Taken: Class A amnestics distributed. Cover story of a mass nuclear power plant failure and subsequent city demolishing was planted.

Event Description: For approximately 1 hour, the population of appeared decapitated to anyone outside city boundaries.
Date of Occurrence / /13
Location: , Canada.
Follow-up Actions Taken: Class A amnestics distributed, cover story of widespread terrorist-related hallucinogens implanted.

Event Description: a humanoid like creature was seen wandering the national parks for a month, but once seen, the creature would disappear. Undercover field agent L was one of those rangers that were called in a report.
Date of Occurrence /3/19 - /4/19
Location: National Park.
Follow-up Actions Taken: All witnesses but L were given Class B Amnestics

Event Description: A very tall humanoid creature (Approximately 2.7 meters) was spotted in in what appears to be eating and [DATA EXPUNGED] a child right next to an unknown abandoned industrial factory. It then looked at the person viewing it, dropped the child and ran away extraordinarily quickly into the deep woods.
Date of Occurrence: / /20 2

Location: Winnipeg, Canada.
Follow-up Actions Taken: Class C amnestics distributed. Dispatched MTF to search in the woods. Nothing was found except a small puddle of blood. Area is to be monitored until 2018.

Event Description: Unknown, unidentified humanoid entered Site-19 and acted like a researcher for three hours before being identified as a foreign entity. Subject eliminated by Site-19 guards.
Date of Occurrence: 1 / /2015
Location: Site- .
Follow-up Actions Taken: Body maintained in Site-19 cold storage, autopsy revealed no anomalous changes in the body.

Event Description: The family observed all their children's toys floating for approximately 3 minutes.
Date of Occurrence: / /2005
Location: , , .
Follow-up Actions Taken: Family administered Class-C amnestics, placed under temporary surveillance.

Event Description: An unidentified man in Plaza, Chicago, was suddenly decapitated. Witnesses report feelings of tranquility and safety immediately after.
Date of Occurrence: /12/2010
Location: Plaza, Chicago, .
Follow-up Actions Taken: All witnesses given Class-B amnestics, body remanded to Site-12 cold storage. Autopsy revealed no anomalous effects on the corpse.

Event Description: A door in St. , Brazil was observed to open and close unaided for twelve minutes.
Date of Occurrence: 3:04 AM, / /1992
Location: 304 St. , Brazil.
Follow-up Actions Taken: Witnesses amnesticised, door confiscated and replaced.

Event Description: Every D-class in Cell-Block B disappeared suddenly.
Date of Occurrence: 18:00 Hours, /1 /19
Location: Site-19, Cell Block-B.
Follow-up Actions Taken: Cell-Block B monitored and patrolled,

personnel report unnatural feelings of suspicion and unease during.

Event Description: 17 residents in suddenly flew upward with great speed, causing damage to the surrounding area due to wind damage. Mangled, identifiable corpses of affected subjects (likely from friction with wind) later located on Mars's moon, Deimos.
Date of Occurrence: 14:51, / /2011
Location: , Russia.
Follow-up Actions Taken: Class B amnestics administered to witnesses, and all residents of relocated to until the damaged structures have been repaired.

Event Description: All individuals within the town of , Idaho simultaneously became convinced that wheat had gone extinct, and that all living specimens of wheat within the town were an unknown, potentially toxic organism.
Date of Occurrence: 9:30 AM, 5/21/2011
Location: , Idaho.
Follow-up Actions Taken: Town was dusted with Amnestics using a Foundation crop duster plane. All wheat tested within a twenty-kilometer radius showed no anomalous properties, apart from emitting a slightly higher than average amount of radiation, which margin of error was unable to account for.

Event Description: From 10/2/2000 to 10/21/2000, new editions of the newspaper comic strip *Calvin and Hobbes* by Bill Watterson were printed in the , a newspaper distributed in County, Maine. The strips depicted a single story arc over the course of its running, in which Calvin's wagon is destroyed, with Hobbes losing an arm in the process. Watterson has not published any new *Calvin and Hobbes* cartoons since 1995.
Date of Occurrence: 10/2/2000-10/21/2000
Location: County, Maine.
Follow-up Actions Taken: Editions of the newspaper with the comics printed in them were confiscated, with the archive of the expunged; all extant editions are archived. The strips were presented to Watterson, who confirmed that the art style, lettering, and signature were all his own, but he had not written or published them. Watterson was administered Class-A amnestics following this.

Event Description: A local lake had a "ghostly hobo" appear asking

for money violently and attacking people and starting a fire. Evidence confirmed with 25 camera-view footage.
Date of Occurrence: 8/10/2002-8/25/2002
Location: County, Ohio.
Follow-up Actions Taken: The area was guarded by 12/5 guards. The town was injected with amnestics from laser-inject.

Event Description: During a performance of *As You Like It*, all members of the cast and audience emitted a nine-minute long shriek accompanied by applause from the audience. Clapping was vigorous enough that lacerations appeared on the hands of the audience members at five minutes into the event. Lacerations then healed at the conclusion of the event, with the phrase "Nag gimno bgaithu sa yginno alibgn yamoa gna as ahud ak" repeated five times before the event concluded. No individuals in the audience or cast recall their actions; crew members were unaffected, and reported this event.
Date of Occurrence: 7/12/2016
Location: Stratford, Ontario
Follow-Up Actions Taken: Due to the connection to a previously recorded Extranormal Event, an investigation has been opened into the possibility of a recurring phenomenon. All crew members unaffected by the event were given Class-A Amnestics, and monitoring equipment has been set up in all Stratford theaters.

Event Description: At 04:00 in the morning, the head of NYPD officer J. D. Norman spontaneously disappeared. Officer Norman died from blood loss shortly thereafter, and was found dead by his wife an hour later.
Date of Occurrence: 2/3/2017
Location: 261 Street, New York
Follow-up Actions Taken: Officer Norman's wife and daughter were given Class-A Amnestics, death blamed on a heart attack.

Event Description
During a court hearing, fifty-seven middle-aged females of Arabic descent, all of which missing a limb, stormed Justice Department, sang to the lyrics of *Jingle Bells* for seventeen loops to randomized notes, lined up one by one, and jumped through a non-existent hole in the floor.

Date of Occurrence: / /05
Location: , Tennessee
Follow-up Actions Taken: Class A Amnestics distributed to witnesses. Ruling delayed for one week.

Event Description: At High School, all females in the building simultaneously turned into male walruses for 15 minutes. After 15 minutes had passed, none of the students affected remembered the event.
Date of Occurrence: / /05
Location: , Colorado
Follow-up Actions Taken: Class A Amnestics distributed to male witnesses.

Event Description: During a birthday party at *Pizza*, all the balls in the ball pit at the area exploded, causing casualties. Security camera footage shows that the balls were spat on by an adult in the area before walking off. It is unknown if this is the cause of the explosion.
Date of Occurrence: / /25
Location: , California
Follow-up Actions Taken: Class A Amnestics were distributed, and a cover story about a gas leak was implanted. A search for the person in the security footage has been started.

Event Description: All light bulbs in the company office building began to emit purple light. Office workers described feeling a sense of euphoria. Light bulbs returned to normal after 30 minutes.
Date of Occurrence: 2/15/200
Location: , South Korea.
Follow-up Actions Taken: Class-A Amnestics were given to office workers. Light bulbs were studied, no anomalies found.

Event Description: *The Windows XP* computer startup sound suddenly emanated over a town intersection at around 120 dB.
Date of Occurrence: 8/2/2014
Location: Northern Prague, CZ
Follow-up Actions Taken: Class A Amnestics remotely administered to everyone 5km from the epicenter.

Event Description: A live Masai Giraffe (*Giraffa tippelskirchi*) was

seen by personnel stationed at Area- over the course of three weeks. Specimen evaded all attempts at capture.
Date(s) of Occurrence: / /2016- / /2016
Location: Area- , Palmer Land, Antarctica
Follow-up Actions Taken: Personnel are to remain alert for future appearances.

Event Description: The horns on all of the cars in the dealership lot simultaneously honked the Tetris Theme for two hours straight, despite the cars being empty. Only people on the lot at the time had a recollection of the event.
Date of Occurrence: / /20 .
Location: , , U.S.A.
Follow-up Actions Taken: All people on the dealership lot were given Class C Amnestics. Foundation tracking devices were put into all cars, and dealership and cars are being monitored for further anomalous activity.

Event Description: A first edition copy of *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* by Jules Verne was suddenly pulled from its shelf, shaken up and down in the air, and violently torn apart by an unseen force.
Date of Occurrence: 10/21/2015
Location: Dr. Roland's Office, Site-19
Follow-up Actions Taken: Remains kept for observation, Dr. Roland moved to new office.
Note: Damn it, that was a Christmas present- Dr. Roland

Event Description: copies of *Encyclopedia Britannica* fell from the sky, causing injuries and fatalities.
Date of Occurrence: 2/2/1999.
Location: A neighborhood in England.
Follow-up Actions Taken: Neighborhood closed off with a cover story of toxic waste. Survivors treated and given Class B amnestics.

Event Description: Amariah Jo Billings, a resident of Bellefonte Pennsylvania, received a call from a unknown phone number. The number had an area code of 808, indicating a number registered in Hawaii, but no phone with that number has been identified. The caller had a male voice with a distinct South African accent. A transcript of the call, which was discovered via Foundation monitoring of the area, is as follows.

Billings: Hello?

<unknown>: Hello Mom? This is Dad.

Billings: Who is this?

<unknown>: I'm picking up the kids from the tongue. There's some car interference because an Ortorthan regiment ate the road. Be home soon with Son. Bye!

(*Call ends*.)

Date of Occurrence: 6/18/1997
Location: Bellefonte, Pennsylvania.
Follow-up Actions Taken: Billings was administered Class-A amnestics and her phone confiscated. Phone was found to be totally non-anomalous. Billings has no connections with the Church of The Second Hytoth.

Event Description: For seventeen seconds, all Internet links would redirect users to the front page of Inter.net
Date of Occurrence: 1/15/2017
Follow-up Actions Taken: Inter.net taken down for the malicious redirecting of users.

Event Description: A minor spacial anomaly occurred where several buildings suddenly imploded, but did not affect civilians within said buildings directly. 8 casualties, and 19 injured due to gravity.
Location: , Russia.
Date of Occurrence: / /2016
Follow-up Actions Taken: Aerosolized amnestic gas released throughout , and cover story of terrorist bombing implemented. Due to this being the second extranormal occurrence in , investigation is underway for anomalous objects or persons.

Event Description: At , a breakfast themed restaurant, the building suddenly filled with pancake syrup, causing casualties and injures. Security footage shown that the bathroom door was the source, the door suddenly flipping open as syrup flooded out.
Location: , America.

Date of Occurrence: / /2017
Follow-up Actions Taken: Area cleaned out and all witnesses given amnestics. Incident was covered up.

Event Description: At : : EST, every human capable of speech stopped speaking, and sang “Because” by The Beatles. Humans incapable of speech hummed the tune to the song. Regardless of previous singing skill, groups of people reportedly sang in “beautiful, perfect harmonies”.
Date of Occurrence: / /
Location: The Entire Earth
Follow-up Actions Taken: Class-E amnestics were administered at key population points across the world. K-Class Media Cover Up Operation (Project “Abbey Road”) put into effect. Shortly thereafter, the Foundation received correspondence from an unknown source.

> You are inhibitors of peace and understanding. How can you take something so beautiful and snuff it out like that? You are terrible, and you will be dealt with.

> It was beautiful.

Event Description: A pure black, hostile humanoid figure appeared in park, resulting in casualties. The humanoid disappeared after 5 minutes.
Date of Occurrence: / /
Location: Park, USA
Follow-up Actions Taken: Area to be monitored until / /2017.

Event Description A girl, years of age, rose 3 meters into the air. After 3 seconds of floating, she spontaneously combusted, resulting in casualties.
Date of Occurrence: / /
Location: Elementary School, USA
Follow-up Actions Taken: Class A amnestics administered to all persons involved. Cover-up story about gas leak provided. School to be shut down for weeks.

Event Description: For a period of thirty minutes, all the students and faculty inside the building of High School became

completely blind, resulting in casualties and injuries. The affected individuals regained their vision upon leaving the building.
Date of Occurrence: / /
Location: , Missouri.
Follow-up Actions Taken: Class-B amnestics administered to all surviving individuals. Security camera recordings during the time were destroyed, and replaced with video recording from the previous week. The deaths and injuries were explained by publishing an article in a newspaper, pinning the blame on a mass suicide.

Event Description: All humans within a 17 kilometer radius became unable to recall events from the past two hours. A number of people were found to be missing from the area, and all images of notable political figures were in some way defiled or altered.
Date of Occurrence: 12:00-14:00, / /
Location: , England
Follow-up Actions Taken: Majority of altered images replaced with replicas, cover stories fabricated for missing persons. Class-C amnestics were administered to residents via water supply, under the cover story of a chemical waste spillage.

Event Description: All television screens, digital ad screens, and electronic devices in New York City suddenly started playing a video of Rick Astley's "Never Gonna Give You Up."
Date of Occurrence: 5/15/2009.
Location: New York, NY.
Follow-up Actions Taken: Class A amnestics sprayed by helicopter. NYC electronics monitored for further anomalous activity.

Event Description: A man exploded into several thousand two rupee coins while boarding a train. All coins were dated to 2011 and were in mint condition. Witnesses reported that the man had looked ill before hand, as if he was suffering from motion sickness.
Date of Occurrence: 4/27/2012
Location: Canacona Train Station, Canacona, Goa, India
Follow-up Actions Taken: All witnesses administered Class-A Amnestics; all coins collected for observations.

Event Description: The top two-thirds of the Eiffel Tower suddenly toppled forwards, before instantaneously correcting itself to its original position just before making contact with the ground.

Date of Occurrence: 3/11/2013
Location: Paris, France
Follow-up Actions Taken: Everyone present was administered Class-B Amnestics. No further actions needed.

Event Description: The leaning Tower of Pisa became straight for a few seconds and turned into a stack of giant pizzas. After a few seconds, the tower went back to its original form and "leaning" position.
Date of Occurrence: 02/02/2017.
Location: Pisa, Italy.
Follow-up Actions Taken: All witnesses given Class A amnestics. Hidden cameras placed near tower to monitor it for further anomalous activity.

Event Description: All bars and bottles of soap in a Bath and Body Works store simultaneously exploded. Remaining soap then coagulated to form a vaguely humanoid shape measured to be 12 meters tall.
Date of Occurrence: / /
Location: Allentown, Pennsylvania, United States
Follow-up Actions Taken: As the store was closed at the time of the event, amnestics were only provided to store staff. The store was sanitized, and merchandise was re-organized and restocked. A one pound sample of soap was taken and analyzed, but showed no anomalous properties.

Event Description: A 14-year-old boy and a 16-year-old girl's hands and feet got stuck, as if they were glued together. The two kids then got stuck together for a few minutes, before getting unstuck.
Date of Occurrence: 6/11/2017.
Location: A house in Ashburn, VA, USA.
Follow-up Actions Taken: The kids, as well as all witnesses, were given Class B Amnestics. House monitored for further anomalous activity.

Event Description: A copy of the game "Mario Party 8" was found in the dining area of site 34. When the game was removed from the room, the full soundtrack of "Mario Party 7" was played over the on site speakers at 62 decibels for 2 hours, and could not be turned off.

Date of Occurrence: 1/ /
Location: Site 34, dining area.
Follow-up Actions Taken: Disc confiscated and discarded after 2 hour song was played. The disc seemed to have no anomalous properties, other than a relatively high amount of gamma radiation. No traces of any perpetrator have been found.
Note: Shouldn't the speakers have played the Mario Party 8 soundtrack? - Dr. Walls

Event Description: When watching the camera in site a hexagon shape came out of nowhere, floating for 5 seconds. This shape was blue and very shiny, and almost seemed to produce light.
Date of Occurrence: 6/15/2017
Location: Site D class cells
Follow-up Actions Taken: When talking to one of the doctors passing by while the event happened, he claimed to see nothing, we think this might be a system flaw, but the shape cast a shadow. We will be looking at this even more.

Event Description: An antique telephone switchboard in the Coffeehouse began ringing at 1:55pm local time, at a volume of approximately 20 decibels. This continued for 22 minutes, despite the switchboard not being connected to any power source. During this time, all patrons of the coffee house were seen to be wearing clothing and speaking varieties of English appropriate to the time period circa 1938-1948. At 2:17pm local time, the switchboard stopped ringing, and all patrons returned to normal.
Date of Occurrence: 6/26/2017
Location: Longmont, Colorado, United States.
Follow-up Actions Taken: All patrons present during the event were given Class B Amnestics. Switchboard in question was taken by Foundation agents, but a close examination revealed no anomalous properties.

Event Description: Every figure depicting spiritual entities worshipped by the Chinese Folk Religion within 12 (twelve) kilometers of Temple within the municipality of , Taiwan became independently animated for a period of minutes and 48 seconds. Actions of eating and drinking of offerings and speaking (albeit no noises were observed to have emanated), were noted by

Foundation assets. No communication with animated figures within the duration of the anomalous occurrence was achieved. No re-occurrence was observed since.
Date of Occurrence: 07/ /2017
Location: , Taiwan.
Follow-up Actions Taken: Procedure "Sutra Reading" was taken by the Chinese Foundation branch. Class-B amnestics were administered via Aerosol within places of worship amongst large amounts of witnesses. Media coverup was enacted, stating that all video recordings were a part of a publicity stunt, faked via means mass CGI production.

Event Description: A Witter-Myers memetic kill agent appears on the front page of popular internet forum . along with the caption: "Click here to die instantly". Post is taken down by Foundation AI ALST-35 after 28 seconds. Eight (8) known casualties.
Date of Occurrence: / /2017
Location: N/A
Follow-up Actions Taken: Servers seized and website taken down temporarily. Deaths explained as brain aneurysms. The original posters account has been deleted and the IP address is being monitored for further activity.

Event Description: For 2 hours and 17 minutes, all personnel at Site-54 reported heavy breathing on the back of their necks. Any attempts to view the source had resulted in the breathing cease momentarily, before continuing behind them. Three D-Class vanished at 2 hours and 13 minutes before all anomalous breathing ceased.
Date of Occurrence: / /2017
Location: Site-54
Follow-up Actions Taken: All personnel administered Class-A amnestics.

Event Description: Roughly 21,300 residents of Los Angeles, California received a .mp3 file via unknown method titled "20170815_002538." The audio consisted of an unknown metallic clanking, a shuffling sound, and breathing. Towards the end, a young, faint female voice proclaims "Hello, [UNINTELLIGIBLE],"

before the audio cuts out. The owner of said voice has not been identified.
Date of Occurrence: 8/16/2017
Location: Los Angeles, California
Follow-up Actions Taken: All copies of the file were deleted remotely besides one, stored in a USB drive in Site-19. Class-A amnestics administered.

+ Show Audio

Event Description: An open-casket funeral held for Mr. Milbourne at Funeral Home. No anomalous events were viewed or reported during the entire service, but all video recordings of the funeral (two (2) commercial camcorders and three (3) smartphones) viewed after calling hours revealed the body of Mr. Milbourne sitting up in his casket and looking around, angrily belittling and insulting nearby attendees of the funeral, accompanied by rude gestures and noises, such as blowing raspberries. During the eulogy (delivered by Mr. Milbourne's brother-in-law), Mr. Milbourne's body makes several sarcastic comments, the majority of which involve repeating spoken lines in a mocking tone.
Date of Occurrence: 8/05/2016
Location: Lexington-Fayette, Kentucky
Follow-up Actions Taken: All attendees administered Class-A amnestics. Recording devices seized for study, but were revealed to have no anomalous properties when recording funerals, corpses, or other subject matter related to the event. Past recordings are found to be non-anomalous. Witnesses interviewed before amnesiac administration described Mr. Milbourne as a "very polite and soft-spoken man" when he was alive.

Event Description: During the 2017 Solar Eclipse, whilst in totality, a reported "Heavenly Choir" was heard. This continued until totality ended. The sound followed the eclipse until it had finished.
Date of Occurrence: 8/21/2017
Location: United States
Follow-up Actions Taken: Class-A amnestics administered in water supply in affected areas.

Event Description: A webcam stream opened on the online adult

streaming website , starring an animated character identical to the character Haruhi Suzumiya from the Japanese light novel series *The Melancholy of Haruhi Suzumiya*, who acted in an evidently non-scripted manner.
Date of Occurrence: 08/23/2017
Location: N/A
Follow-up Actions Taken: 4 minutes and 35 seconds after the stream began, it was detected by a Foundation web browser, who immediately blocked the site from non-Foundation users, and an interrogation followed, revealing that the anomaly appeared to have no knowledge of its animated nature, and believed itself to be the character of Haruhi Suzumiya. The chat room closed 16 minutes and 11 seconds after starting. The chat room is deleted from the site, and Class-A amnestics are administered to the 41 people who viewed the event.

Event Description: The ambient temperature in Room 332B (a conference room on the campus of the University of) has matched the ambient temperature at that same time in Dasht-e Lut, Iran for an extended period of time. This phenomenon persists without regard to the ambient temperature in the locality surrounding Room 332B. Heating and cooling equipment in Room 332B do not affect the ambient temperature there.
Date of Occurrence: Ongoing since 08/25/2017
Location: United States
Follow-up Actions Taken: Room taken out of service. Since the temperature in Dasht-e Lut is normally uncomfortably hot, the room is unsuitable for conference room purposes.

Event Description: For a period of five minutes, all the students in the dorms of the School for Disabled Students became completely cured of their disabilities. They forgot the incident after the five minute period, but had sent texts to each other stating what happened.
Date of Occurrence: / /
Location: , USA.
Follow-up Actions Taken: Class A amnestics administered to all students, staff, and those contacted during the five minute period. All phones involved were wiped of their memory. Two Class Cs posted inside the school.

Event Description: All personnel, including D-Class and sentient scips, within Site-10 suddenly felt as if something important had just happened. Subjects reportedly felt disappointed that they missed the imaginary event.
Date of Occurrence: / /
Location: Site-10.
Follow-up Actions Taken: The event was catalogued and personnel continued with their activities. Research Assistant Gray refused to believe that the event had "passed", and attempted to leave the site without proper authorization. He was reprimanded and placed into a briefing room until on-site medical staff could arrive. Research Assistant Gray reportedly vanished from the room, with a sticky note left behind on his computer monitor reading; "FUCK YOU ALL. IM GONNA SEE IT, AND YOURE ALL JUST BUTTHURT!!!! [sic]". Research Assistant Gray is still missing. Security tapes taken from within the briefing room when Assistant Gray was present started to malfunction. The security tape eventually ended, and the security camera was found on the floor in disrepair. It is unknown how Assistant Gray escaped the briefing room, as two guards were stationed outside.

Event Description: Agent observed travelling group consisting of one male and seven females carrying large burdens, accompanied by thousands of (primarily juvenile) felines.
Date of Occurrence: 02/28/20
Location: West Cornwall Coast Road, 1.8km from St. Ives
Follow-up Actions Taken: Inquires conducted among local populous. The ultimate origin and destination of the group remain unknown.

Event Description: *Something may have happened. I don't know what, but something happened. A baby bird may have fallen from the nest, a man may have been subject to bloody murder. But we just don't know. But something did happen, I can tell you that much…*
Date of Occurrence: *I can't quite put my finger on it.*
Location: *I cannot recall.*
Follow-Up Actions Taken: *The world is dying; the sky has turned to murky smog, pugnacious dictators rule the globe. Yet we sit back and laugh at the destruction and poverty. Yet there are some who*

recognize the sacrifices needing to be made.
Men are herded like animals, and fed to monsters and objects of all types,
Cruel, watchful eyes scan the horizon, sending out soldiers to secure the object and abduct the poor souls that had seen it,
They needlessly redact every word, every number, and every piece of data that is deemed unfavorable to their leaders,
Yet, they have kept the world whole. For every drop of blood, and for every tear, a life is saved. For every field of damned men, a threat is contained. They are our white knights, yet they slaughter all who get in the world's way.
And we thank you. We thank you so dearly. We thank the prisoners, the victims, the fighters, and the administrators for their bravery. None of us are victims, yet we deny that fact. But our saviors openly embrace it, slitting the throats of the refugees just to save us.

Event Description: Various humanoid entities resembling actor Harrison Ford forcefully emerged from the stomachs of 23 cows. Upon retrieving each instance, each of them said the phrase, "I thought they smelled bad on the outside".
Date of Occurrence: 8/14/2017
Location: A farm in Napa Valley, California.
Follow-up Actions Taken: Each instance died within 2 weeks of retrieval. The corpses were incinerated.

Event Description: All light sources within 4 feet of Doctor became human skulls. The DNA of these skulls corresponds to that of Doctor . The size of each skull varied, independent of the light source in question. It appears that only the generators of light (light bulbs, etc.) within each light source turned into said skulls.
Date of Occurrence: 8/19/2017
Location: Site-19 Mess Hall.
Follow-up Actions Taken: Skulls were destroyed and Doctor was moved to Site- for research purposes.

Event Description: For a twenty-four hour and forty minute period (equivalent to a single Martian Sol), all data transmitted from active Mars rovers *Curiosity* and *Opportunity* showed Mars as having an Earth-like atmosphere. Footage from the respective cameras of the

rovers showed the Martian surface covered in a black, moss-like biomass, with free-flowing water. A group of unknown, seemingly amphibian organisms was observed by *Curiosity* during this time. Neither the ESA's *Mars Express* or NASA's *Mars Odyssey* orbiters observed any anomalies during this period.
Date of Occurrence: 27-28/5/2016
Location: NASA Jet Propulsion Laboratory, Pasadena, California
Follow-up Actions Taken: Foundation assets within NASA seized all data recorded during this period, as well as four hours before and after. Missing data covered up as a signal interruption due to a day-long dust storm, and amnestics administered to those who directly observed the phenomenon.

Event Description: Despite continuous motion, the E train on the MBTA's Green Line took four hours to travel between Park Street and Boylston station, two consecutive stops with an approximate five-minute travel time. Upon the train's arrival, all speakers within Boylston station broadcasted the words "Poor Charlie", spoken by an unidentified feminine voice.
Date of Occurrence: 11/09/2016
Location: Boston, Massachusetts, United States
Follow-up Actions Taken: Event was contained in-progress, due to multiple calls to emergency services from passengers on the train; line was shut down for emergency maintenance. Upon the train's arrival, all passengers were administered amnestics, and video recordings of the event were confiscated. Surveillance in the Boston area increased for the next calendar year.

Event Description: *So, like, my friend John literally turned into a truck. Like, totally rad, dude… woah…*
Date of Occurrence: *Like, three hours ago, or something. Seriously he can, like, drive me around. It's so cool…*
Location: *The parking lot of, like, Site-19…*
Follow-up Actions Taken: [FIELD LEFT BLANK]
Notice from Site Director Bright: Here's the reason why this was kept on the list; upon further investigation, it was discovered that this 'report' was posted by an invalid IP address. Not only that, but it wasn't even an IP address. Just a jumble of random letters and numbers. We're still trying to figure out how this was posted, and why. And, yes, John is still missing. And so is Doctor Hurling's truck.

Event Description: My teacher didn't give us homework today… I don't know how to feel…
Date of Occurrence: 11/20/17
Location: Foundation Training Facility
Follow-up Actions Taken: I am calling in sick tomorrow.
NOTE: Homework is regularly assigned. Like, everyday. For some reason, my teacher didn't today… Is it some secret plot to take over the world? Are they going to start with a classroom and then the next day take over the world?

Event Description: Almost all individuals which attended the funeral of Roger Kroppermann, a resident of , Utah, died of asphyxiation within an eight-month period following his internment. The sole survivor suffered severe brain injuries as a result of extended oxygen deprivation.
Date of Occurrence: 23/09/2010-29/04/2011
Location: Phenomenon originated in , Utah; deaths occurred in three other cities in the south-western United States.
Follow-up Actions Taken: The last surviving individual of the funeral party died three hours prior to the Foundation being able to establish protective custody. Kroppermann's remains were exhumed, and it was found that both hands were missing from the cadaver, removed post-burial. As of November 2017, the whereabouts of Kroppermann's hands remain unknown.

Event Description: After complaining of stomach pains, male student vomited up a human infant. The infant was a healthy female and was connected via umbilical cord to 's stomach lining. DNA testing indicated that was the child's father, but a mother could not be located.
Date of Occurrence: 2014-03-11
Location: Realschule, Munich, Bavaria, Germany
Follow-up Actions Taken: The child was recovered and moved to Site-06-3 for observation. Class-A amnestics were administered to all witnesses. was placed under five-year observation period; no new anomalies have been discovered so far.

Event Description: Unidentified figure appeared inside of a psychiatric facility. Security cameras captured the figure for approximately seventeen seconds as it seemingly searched for

something before the figure nodded to itself and disappeared. Eye witnesses report varying details on the figure, with the only common description being that the figure had 'glowing violet eyes' and a white woolen scarf obscuring its facial features.
Date of Occurrence: / /2017
Location: Mental Institute, PA
Follow-up Actions Taken: Footage seized and premises searched, amnestics administered to key witnesses.

Event Description: A man's salivary glands spontaneously began to produce an estimated 3 liters of saliva per minute. This was sufficient to cause death by drowning within seven minutes; the effect ceased upon death.
Date of Occurrence: 2015-09-19
Location: Nishio, Aichi Prefecture, Japan
Follow-up Actions Taken: The body was recovered and placed in cold storage in Site- for observation; the death was blamed on a car accident. Class-A amnestics were administered to all witnesses.

Event Description: Several thousand *Coccinella septempunctata* (more commonly known as the seven-spotted ladybug) specimens swarmed and attacked a woman, eventually consuming most of the flesh on her body and leaving only a skeleton. The insects then underwent spontaneous combustion.
Date of Occurrence: 2015-07-18
Location: Fairford, Gloucestershire, England
Follow-up Actions Taken: A cover story of a house fire was blamed for the fatality; all witnesses were administered Class-A amnestics.

Event Description: All photographs, both digital and physical, were altered to include an image of Bahamian-American actor Sidney Poitier at various stages of his life and participating in the actions depicted in the photographs. Poitier's age corresponded with the age of the youngest depicted person in the photograph.
Date of Occurrence: 2016-02-20
Location: Site-17, [REDACTED]
Follow-up Actions Taken: All photographs were confiscated and replaced with altered versions or versions that had been off site during the event. Digital backups of the originals are stored on the

Site-15 archives.

Event Description: Forty-three (43) humanoid individuals, each one resembling a United States president, poured out of a supply closet in the Joint Security Area of the Korean Demilitarized Zone. All individuals remained silent until they all gathered in the MAC Conference Building, where they stood in a unorganized cluster while loudly repeating the phrase "blah blah blah", all out of sync with one another. These individuals went unnoticed by the guards in the area for seventeen (17) minutes before one guard in the room suddenly screamed and proceeded to open fire on the group in a panic, killing approximately seven (7) of them and sending the rest scattering, none of which bled from their wounds. Other guards rushed into the room, but seemed to take no notice of the anomalous humanoids, instead choosing to restrain the panicked guard. The escaped humanoids all ran back into the same supply closet from which they had previously appeared.
Date of Occurrence: / /2017
Location: Demilitarized Zone, Korea
Follow-up Actions Taken: Amnestics administered to all guards involved. Security footage removed with edited versions replaced. Supply closet was found to have no anomalous properties. Corpses of "presidents" removed for study. Autopsies revealed all individuals were biologically human, but were completely lacking blood. DNA failed to match with any others on record, including those of the presidents they resembled (Warren Harding, Calvin Coolidge, Dwight D. Eisenhower, Lyndon B. Johnson, George H.W. Bush, George W. Bush, and Donald Trump).

Item #: All digital documents within Doctor Kip's possession suddenly reformatted themselves to display an incorrect format. Upon attempting to fix the files, they would immediately re-format themselves afterward. This effect lasted for four hours before said documents reverted back to their previous state, although some documents are still currently affected.
Object Class: 18/11/2017
Special Containment Procedures: Doctor Kip's laptop, Site-17 office complex.
Description: Several backup files were created by Doctor Graham in case this event re-occurred and said files were unretrievable.

Note: It is worth noting that this event report was written by Doctor Kip. — Doctor Graham

Event Description: For 30 minutes, whenever a joke was told and poorly received, the individual telling the joke would be sent a text message within 20 seconds of the incident. All text messages contained the same image.
Date of Occurrence: / /2017
Location: , TX
Follow-up Actions Taken: All images pertaining to the event have been sent to Site-551 for research, and all affected citizens have been administered amnestics. The image involved in the event can be found **here**.

Event Description: -.-. .- -. .- -. -.-- --- -. . ...- .-. ..- ... ..--.. - .... - . -.. .. .-. . -.-. - --- .-. -- --- -. ... --- -. --- ..-. ... .. - . -....- .... --..-- - .... . . -. - .. .-. . ... .. - . .... .- ... ..- -. -.. . .-. --. --- -. . ...- . .-. . ... .--. .- -.-. .. .- .-.. .-. . ... - .-. ..- -.-. - ..- .-. .. -. --. --..-- .- -. -.. .... .- ... - ..- .-. -. . -.. .. -. - --- .- -. --- .-.. -.. ... ..- -... -- .- .-. .. -. . .-.-.- .-- . ' .-. . .- .-.. .-.. ... - ..- -.-. -.- .. -. .... . .-. . --..-- .. -.. --- -. ' - -.- -. --- .-- .... --- .-- .-- . .... .- ...- . -. ' - - ..- .-. -. . -.. .. -. - --- --. --- --- .--. --..-- .. - ' ... ... --- .--. .- -.-. -.- . -.. .-.-.- .. .- -- ... . -. -.. .. -. --. - .... --- ..- - - .... .-. --- ..- --. .... - .... --- ... ... -.-- ... - . -- --..-- .. - ' ... -.. .. ... .--. .-.. .- -.-- .. -. --. -- .. -.-. .-. --- .-- .- ...- . ... .. --. -. .- .-.. ... - .... .- - ... . --- ..- .-.. -.. -... . -.. .. ... .--. .-.. .- -.-- .. -. --. -- --- .-. ... . -.-. --- -.. . .-.-.-

Date of Occurrence: . -.. --- -. ' - -.- -. --- .-- --..-- - .. -- . -- --- ...- . ...-.. --- .-- .-.. -.-- .... . .-. . .-.-.-

Location: ... .. - . -....- .... --..-- .. - .... .. -. -.- --..-- .. -.. --- -. ' - -.- -. --- .-- .-.-.-

Follow-up Actions Taken: .--. .-.. . .- ... . -. -.. .... . .-.. .--. --..-- .-- . .... .- ...- . -. --- ..-. --- --- -.. --- .-. .-- .- - . .-. --..-- .. ... - ....-.. ..- -. .. .. -- . -. - ..-. --- .-. ... --- -- . - .... .. -. --. .-- . ' ...- . -.. --- -. . ..--..

Event Description: Dr. Westrin was found dead in his apartment building from an unknown cause. 3 days after he was regarded officially dead by the Foundation and condolences were sent to his family, Dr. Westrin returned to Site-551 with no memory of what

occurred, claiming that he was "having a really good nap."
Date of Occurrence: / /2017
Location: , Nebraska, US.
Follow-up Actions Taken: Dr. Westrin was put under observation for 4 weeks for further anomalous phenomena, and was reinstated into the Foundation when none were found. His family was given Class B amnestics.

Event Description: All cutlery within the the town starting singing songs from the children's movie *Beauty and the Beast*.
Date of Occurrence: /13/2015.
Location: , Kansas, US.
Follow-up Actions Taken: Class B amnestics were given as vaccines to the residents of the town. Area under surveillance until 2020.

Event Description: - , a woman admitted to an emergency room in , Louisiana for injuries sustained during a car crash, entered labor despite showing no signs of pregnancy prior to admission. A cesarean section was performed, and the subject's uterus was found to contain a small litter of Siamese kittens.
Date of Occurrence: 2/19/1992
Location: , Louisiana
Follow-up Actions Taken: Reports of the event in the media suppressed as a hoax. - and all medical personnel who witnessed the event administered Class-A amnestics. Kittens entered Foundation custody, and have shown a decreased rate of aging, currently possessing biology consistent with a three-year-old cat, despite being over twenty-five years of age as of 2017.

Event Description: While working on a group project for a drama class, the individual who would later be known as agent mentioned movie director Henry Selick. Approximately ten seconds afterward, no individual participating in the conversation could remember this name, despite retaining memory of the circumstances under which it had been brought up.
Date of Occurrence: 12/ /
Location: , California
Follow-up Actions Taken: None. All witnesses naturally wrote the event off as a "shared brain fart."

Note: Good thing the potential for this being an anomaly occurred to me in retrospect, or we would never have known about it.—Agent

Event Description: All writing utensils within the J. Edgar Hoover Building disappeared over a six-hour period. A search of the building the following morning found all missing items embedded point-first in the ceiling of a disused office in the basement, arranged in a long, disk-like shape.
Date of Occurrence: 1993-9-10
Location: J. Edgar Hoover Building, Washington, D.C.
Follow-Up Actions Taken: Items were returned to their respective owners, and the event was written off as an elaborate prank by the janitorial staff. Members of the Unusual Incidents Unit headquartered within the building were instructed to monitor the building for further anomalies for a five-year period.

Event Description: A family of three appeared to create a makeshift religion after their cereal boxes gained human legs and arms. The religion was centered around the worship of these breakfast cereals. After extensive research, it was revealed that the family had also given the cereals new names, including *Narroct, Lord of the Beehive* (Honey-Nut Cheerios), *The Pirate and the Sea* (Captain Crunch) and *The Twins of Rock, Coco and Fruity* (Cocoa Pebbles and Fruity Pebbles respectively). The family members had no recollection of the event after three days when the limbs demanifested.
Date of Occurrence: 9/16/ - 9/19/
Location: , New Mexico
Follow-Up Actions Taken: All cereal items belonging to the family were confiscated, and Class A Amnestics were administered. The cereals have been sent to Site-551 due to potential anomaly.

Event Description: - , a 22-year-old college student, was found dead in the kitchen area of her apartment. All skin save ears, eyelids, nose and lips had been removed from the body, cut into 20 cm x 8 cm pieces and stacked neatly beside it. A 20 cm chef's knife belonging to was found on the nearby counter top, piercing through a 2 cm thick solid wood cutting board and partially embedded into the linoleum beneath. In an interview, 's roommate

and partner, - , said had been preparing vegetables for dinner. left the kitchen and returned less than a minute later to find the body, having heard nothing out of the ordinary.
Date of Occurrence: 05/09/2016
Location: Sogong-dong, Jung-gu, Seoul, South Korea
Follow-Up Actions Taken: Body, skin, knife and cutting board confiscated and placed in storage. No anomalies detected. Amnestics administered to 's family and . Death covered up as a suicide.

Event Description: Surveillance camera staff at the natural reserve near Puerto Madero, Buenos Aires City, Argentina, saw what appeared to be the same man in two different parts of the park at the same time, apparently mirroring each other's movements despite the lack of line of sight between the two. The individuals then disappeared into the brush. People in the reserve at that time talked about a weird man talking to himself about the ' ing Paraguayans" before walking off-road.
Date of Occurrence: 01/ /2018
Location: Natural reserve, Autonomous City of Buenos Aires, Argentine Republic.
Follow-up actions taken: Surveillance tapes of the strange men confiscated, surveillance staff administered Class-B Amnestics, two (2) Foundation agents disguised as birdwatchers assigned to the park to look for possible developments.

Event Description: A lamp in Dr. Hobbes's office fell over through unknown means. 3 days after the event, all memory of the event occurring was instantly lost from all witnessing personnel. All written documentation regarding the event can only be accessed via extranormal means.
Date of Occurrence: 11/3/2018
Location: Dr. Hobbes's Office, Site-10
Follow-up actions taken: A Foundation maintained, anomalous backdoor has been created in order to view said records regarding

the event.

Event Description: Thirty people within the 30th Street Station had their clothing instantaneously switched with that of another person.
Date of Occurrence: 2017-03-04
Location: Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, United States
Follow-up Actions Taken: All witnesses were administered Class-A Amnestics, and security footage was confiscated. All articles of clothing were taken for observation and replaced with duplicates. Investigations revealed no connections between the thirty affected individuals aside from their presence in the station at the time of the event.

Event Description: For 27 minutes and 39 seconds, all shredded lettuce within fifteen different fast food restaurants suddenly turned into human foot fungus. This effect did not occur to lettuce in any other restaurants, or to any lettuce that was on food ordered through the drive-thru window. Consumption of fungus was reported to lead to an unnatural case of the chills. After the 27:39 duration, the uneaten fungus turned back into lettuce.
Date of Occurrence: 11/11/2017
Location: 15 different restaurants, USA.
Follow-up Actions Taken: All employees and customers in the restaurants at the time were administered Class-A Amnestics. A sample of the lettuce was collected and sent to Site 4- for examination, but no anomalous effects were found.

Event Description: An intestinal tumor located in the body of Grover , a 52-year-old man from Des Moines, Iowa, is found to contain an entire secondary brain, including medulla, pituitary gland, and part of a spinal cord. DNA from the brain does not match that of Mr. , and is currently believed to belong to a twelve year-old girl who vanished from Calgary, Alberta, Canada in 1992.
Date of Occurrence: 04/05/2010
Location: Des Moines, Iowa
Follow-Up Actions Taken: Doctors involved with the surgery amnesticized. Mr. died following the surgery. Despite several autopsies and examinations, no definitive cause of death has been determined. His cadaver, as well as the brain excised from his stomach, remain in cold storage.

Event Description: $237,981 appeared to have manifested simultaneously, spread across various countries on flat surfaces at approximately $1.3 per square kilometer. This money changed to a different currency depending on the country it manifested within.
Date of Occurrence: 5/9/2014
Location: World wide.
Follow-Up Actions Taken: None, due to the very obscure nature of the event, and that 87% of all the manifested money was made unusable from external forces.

Event Description: The PA system in a Giant Eagle supermarket announced, "Attention Giant Eagle shoppers: the ritual will now commence," whereupon all individuals within the store stopped what they were doing and hummed an intricate series of notes for approximately five minutes. After another tone, the humming ceased and all affected individuals resumed their business as though nothing had occurred.
Date of Occurrence: 10/10/2014
Location: Columbus, Ohio
Follow-Up Actions Taken: Event would not have come to Foundation attention if not for discovery on security footage during in-store theft investigation. Individuals affected during event have no memory thereof. As such, it has been determined that attempting to identify and interview each person visible on the tape is unfeasible. Videos confiscated, amnestics administered to store staff, and Foundation agents stationed at Giant Eagle supermarkets to monitor for future events or signs of PA system tampering.
Update: As of 27/04/2016, surveillance of Giant Eagle stores has produced no further evidence of anomalous activity. Agents recalled.

Event Description: Every human on earth simultaneously blinked. During the event people disappeared.
Date of Occurrence: 3/5/18
Location: Earth
Follow-Up Actions Taken: Various cover up stories to explain missing persons.
Note: *Blinking caused a minor containment breach at various sites due to SCPs pertaining to line of sight*

Event Description: Between 16:00:04 UST and 19:53:02 UST,

black hole Cygnus X-1 underwent a series of rapid fluctuations in registered x-ray flux density, up to 194.2% of the normal value. When converted into Morse Code, the fluctuations spelled out an expanded, 2018 updated version of the 1988 book *A Brief History of Time* by the recently deceased physicist Stephen William Hawking. Analysis shows the writing style of the updates to be consistent with that of the original author.
Date of Occurrence: 3/14/18
Location: Cygnus X-1
Follow-Up Actions Taken: Non-Foundation observers were administered Class-A Amnestics, and the observation data in question was covered up. Cygnus X-1 is to be monitored for further anomalies. Whether to release the book under an appropriate cover story is currently under debate.

Event Description: For 5 hours, all animals under the genus *Bos* became antimemetic. During this time, the word "cow" replaced the term "pattern screamer". Shortly after the event, **Dr. Kuzkin** began screaming the word "cow" in his sleep. This activity lasted for 6 minutes before Dr. Kuzkin woke up.
Date of Occurrence: 8/29/2018
Location: Worldwide.
Follow-up Actions Taken: Dr. Kuzkin was given the proper medical attention shortly after the event. No further actions were needed, as it seems all human life cannot remember this event occurring. As such, this event was able to be recorded using SCP- .

Event Description: Several handheld radios from MTF units started transmitting from various locations despite no MTF units active or present in the area. Each transmitted with the following callsigns: Z9-1, Z9-2, Z9-3, Z9-BETA1, Z9-BETA4, Y24-2, Y24-CAP, 09-BRAVO. All were unresponsive to contact, but screaming, yelling(the subject of black mass, black leeches, and a bright light), audible sobbing("They got Randall" and "God save us" were only intelligible), and "It's not cold anymore. Its not water anymore, either. And there is no longer a snake in my head." is heard.
Date of Occurrence: 12/27-28/17, 3/15/18 (7:43-7:58 AM)
Location: Central Europe, mainly in the Swiss and Austrian Alps.
Follow-Up Actions Taken: Channels closed off temporarily for sake of research. After 90 days, no anomalous activity was reported

or heard, and channel reopened for Foundation use. Anomalous activity repeated on 3/15/18 for 15 minutes, see update.
Update(3/15/18): An additional transmission was received on a secure Foundation frequency, and had no Foundation callsign. Speaker is an unidentified female voice; dialogue is as follows: "Sorry about that a month-ish ago. Don't worry. In fact, you'll all see them again soon. Tell their families that, too. You'll see them soon." Voice did not respond to any attempts to communicate.
Note: See if it corresponds to any MTF unit logs. Or MTF operator deaths. Or something. Just find out who those voices belonged to. - Agent

Event Description: All water in the Samur River was converted to human blood for four days. All water which flowed into the river was converted into blood, and all blood which flowed out of the river was converted to water.
Date of Occurrence: / /2018- / /2018
Location: Samur River, Russia and Azerbaijan
Follow-up Actions Taken: Amnestics were dispersed aerially through the nearby village of
Samurçay following completion of event. DNA analysis of collected blood compared against the Foundation database identified all blood as originating from one Joshua Havaldar, a 34-year-old Indian-American man living in San Francisco. He was unable to provide information on the event, but did report feeling light-headed at several points in the week leading up to the event. Mr. Havaldar was administered Class-A Amnestics following interview. Both the Samur River and Mr. Havaldar are currently under a standard five-year monitoring period.

Event Description: A small canoe in the Mississippi River was consumed whole by a *Carcharocles megalodon*, along with its two occupants. *Carcharocles megalodon* has been extinct for 2.6 million years, and the river in question is much too shallow to contain a creature of that size.
Date of Occurrence: 02/14/2018
Location: Undisclosed location on the Mississippi River, USA
Follow-up Actions Taken: Amnestics were administered to witnesses, and a cover-up story was circulated claiming the canoe occupants were intoxicated and capsized their vessel accidentally. A

task force was sent to locate and capture *Carcharocles megalodon*, but all attempts to locate the specimen failed.

Event Description: All objects within a recreational park spontaneously began to ricochet at speeds of 0.7 m/s, each increasing by about 0.3 m/s for each impact with a surface or object such as the ground and other affected objects, with the highest speed being nearly 19 m/s. Objects such as benches, pieces of pavement and tree bark and lamp posts continued ricocheting for 1 minute and 17 seconds before suddenly ceasing movement. 23 civilian casualties were reported along with 6 deaths and the remaining 17 severely injured. Objects from the park were reported to have landed in further away areas.
Date of Occurrence: 4/9/2018
Location: , Florida
Follow-up Actions Taken: Eye witnesses and survivors were treated with Class A amnestics. Local and social media reports were successfully destroyed. Area is kept under surveillance until further notice. Reported deaths were covered up with a park massacre event.

Event Description: A family (Shuttleworths) reported to seeing a gigantic traffic cone flying across the skies around 4:00 PM. "It was huge man, had to be around 500 feet tall, at least. I'm tellin ya the truth sir!" -David Shuttlesworth
The family reported the traffic cone dissolve into the air about 5 minutes afterwards. The
Camp Frank D. Merrill Military Base reported having a "Massive object in the radar" hovering over Blue Ridge.
Date of Occurrence: 26/5/10
Location: Blue Ridge, Georgia
Follow-up Actions Taken: The military base was told not to tell anyone about this. The media describes the family as "Crazy" or they think that the family set this up out of boredom.
Don't take any further actions, just let the media think they are crazy. -Doctor Oliver

Event Description: Every gun within the area began to fire without using actual ammunition, instead firing what was identified as lead balls. Ammunition that was loaded into the weapons was not

depleted or used in any fashion, and the guns fired with the same recoil, accuracy, and rate. There was no change in the size of the lead balls that were shot, even with a change in the barrel size. This event continued for fifteen hours until the weapons began to fire normally once more.
Date of Occurrence: 30/3/17
Location: Dallas Fort-Worth (DFW), Texas
Follow-up Actions Taken: After recovering most, if not every shot and confiscating three weapons from a firing range in the area, no anomalous properties of the guns or the lead balls could be sourced. Local media was observed, but no other abnormalities were reported in the area. A local amnesiac was distributed through the water systems of the area in order to prevent possible spreading/ knowing of the incident.

Event Description: Site-38 disappeared for 1 hour and 34 minutes, everything in there was gone. After that everything was put back into place including all personnel and all SCPS. When personnel were asked what happened they acted confused and said that we were crazy.
Date Of Occurrence: / /13
Location: Rural Tennessee, United States
Follow-up Actions taken: Personnel had no recollection of the event, so there is no need to give any amnestics, also, they are personnel.

Event Description: Unscheduled subway train passes through 36th Street subway station in Brooklyn at approximately 80mph. Eye witnesses describe the train as purple with Arabic lettering on the side. Train wasn't reported appearing anywhere else.
Date of Occurrence: 07/03/2017
Location: 36th Street, Brooklyn New York, USA.
Follow-up Actions Taken: Cover story established. Train driver distracted by passengers and loses control of train. Security camera footage closely inspected but deemed safe.

Event Description: During a Toys R Us staff meeting, an employee later identified as William J. Horack stood, announced, "Well, guess I won't need these anymore," and removed his lips with one hand. Afterward, he began to consume the remaining flesh around his

mouth — described by witnesses as having the appearance of "pulled pork" — as the other employees returned to normal operations. Horack continued to autocannibalize over the course of the day, captured only intermittently by security cameras despite not leaving the meeting room. At 19:05, Horack had been reduced to skeletal remains, which then vanished. Eyewitnesses reported confusion that the event did not strike them at the time as being out of the ordinary.
Date of Occurrence: 15/03/2018
Location: Mayfield Heights, Ohio, USA
Follow-Up Actions Taken: Amnestics distributed to store employees and customers after interviews conducted. Investigation of security cameras revealed no fault. No personal information about William Horack could be attained, and all documentation involved in his three-year employment at Toys R Us appeared to be an intricate forgery. Lips retrieved from initial event location, determined to be thin plastic.

Event Description: EVERYONE IS DEAD, EXCEPT ME. EVERYTHING IS DEAD, EXCEPT ME. TIME HAS STOPPED. AM I CERTAIN ABOUT THIS, I DONT KNOW..
Date of Occurrence: Now/Now/Now
Location: AS FAR AS I KNOW, THE AREA SURRONDING SITE-45. LIFE IS DEAD, AS I KNOW IT.
am i insane am i insane. no i am not. you are insane. this is happening now. now. now.
Follow-up Actions Taken: no SCPs have been found. everything is in zero gravity.

wow, am i in space? everything is so, radical.

i feel so lonely. no therapists to help me.

this is my last message before i commit suicide.

i love my family.

This document was found on *Area-32*. -Scientist Parmley

Event Description: It seems everyone, in the whole word, went unconscious. This is one of many theories of what happened. On

every clock, a whole hour was skipped ahead. No one had recollection of this event. All technology was turned off and turned back on when the hour ended. Clocks still functioned when the technology was turned off. All SCP objects were affected during this hour, not causing any damage. SCP-1032 did not detect this event.
Date of Occurrence: 12/31/99
Location: Earth
Follow-up Actions Taken: Popular proposed event, Y2K, was blamed for the cause of this event. Y2K could have been the cause of this event. No one truly knows how this was caused.

Event Description: Multiple eyewitnesses report seeing a large creature crawl across the face of the Moon. The creature was almost unanimously described as spider-like with 4 to 6 legs, and stated to be large enough to take up approximately 1/3 of the Moon's surface. Witnesses report the entity appeared from a shadowed area of the Moon, and seemed to rapidly crawl around to the back side. This detail was shared by all viewers and may rule out the possibility of an object simply passing between Earth and the Moon.
Date of Occurrence: 03/26/18
Location: Moon
Follow-up Actions Taken: Low-effort disinformation campaign was implemented in the form of agents calling/writing into various conspiracy shows describing the event. This has been successful in placating and shaming the witnesses into silence. Greater populations are not aware of this event. Foundation assets in orbit around the Moon will continue to monitor for any reoccurrence of possible anomalous activity for 1 year before returning to standard operations.

Event Description: Over the course of five days, the entire student population of Elementary School in , Ohio developed allergies to all nut-based food products. Faculty and individuals not attending Elementary who enter the building were unaffected. The symptoms ceased if individuals were removed from the premises for sixty-two hours. Notably, a student at the school, Isaac , is currently comatose following a severe allergic reaction as a result of being force-fed a peanut butter sandwich.
Date of Occurrence: 02/19-02/23/2018

Location: , Ohio
Follow-up Actions Taken: School was shuttered, students were integrated into other elementary schools in the area. Isaac 's condition has shown no improvements. Foundation medical staff are currently attempting to treat and revive him in an attempt to find a link between his current state and the anomaly within Elementary.

Event Description: All canned food sold at Miller's Supermarket in , Iowa was found to contain one or more live specimens of *Lampropeltis triangulum* (milk snake) in place of their intended contents. X-ray imaging shows that prior to opening, the cans contained their intended contents, and only upon opening do the snakes appear.
Date of Occurrence: 4/18/2017
Location: , Iowa
Follow-up Actions Taken: Anomaly ceased within twelve hours of its first manifestation. Amnestics were administered to all affected, dispatch logs recording emergency calls of the event were scrubbed. All milk snakes contained by the Foundation have yet to show anomalous properties.

Event Description: The entire stock of pencils from Comprehensive School disappeared within 1 hr. This included but not limited to: the school stock, children's pencils and teacher's pencils.
Date of Occurrence: /1/2018
Location: , United Kingdom
Follow-up Actions Taken: All students, faculty and visitors were given Class C amnestics and all missing pencils were replaced by new ones. There has yet to be another event.

Event Description: All *Homo sapiens* in the world simultaneously jumped together at 12:36 P.M, causing a sesmic shift measuring 11.2 on the Richter Scale.
Date of Occurence: 5/27/18
Location: Global
Follow-up Actions Taken: Seismic shift disregarded as a normal earthquake, media informed

Event Description: The U.S state *Liowa* disappeared over the

course of 1 hour, including its inhabitants. Described by subjects currently by the state border as "getting more and more transparent".
Date of Occurence: / /1964
Location: Liowa, United States
Follow-up Actions Taken: All individuals identified with knowledge of Liowa were amnesticised. All documentation and evidence of Liowa existing was identified and either destroyed or kept in a secure locker for archival purposes.

Event Description: Everyone on Earth with the name *Jeffery Smith* gathered into one area and greeted each other before leaving.
Date of Occurance: 12/6/1993
Location: New York City, New York, United States
Follow-up Actions Taken: Everyone named Jeffery Smith was identified and amnesticised. It was covered up as an event to the public.

Event Description: A leaked image of an Extraterrestrial that previously escaped from Site-51 was leaked onto the /x/ paranormal board of website *4chan.org*
Date of Occurance: 22/2/2017
Location: N/A
Follow-up Actions Taken: It was discovered by Foundation Web-crawlers and 4chan was taken down well the evidence was being removed. Covered up as a server outage and a hoax.

Event Description: Every billboard in Florida was anomalously changed to advertise SCP-888-EX, "laundry and tan by dado"
Date of Occurance: / /2018
Location: Florida, USA
Follow-up Actions Taken: Billboards were changed and investigations were initiated on SCP-888-EX.

Event Description: For 3 minutes all personal aboard the USS began screaming the phrase "remember fifty-five" before briefly being confused and returning to normal operations.
Date of Occurrence: / /
Location: The USS which was located at at the time.
Follow-up Actions Taken: [FIELD LEFT BLANK]

Event Description: Researcher Presley Bunson fell asleep at his desk at approximately 11:00 AM, which is currently believed to be non-anomalous in cause— due to an increased workload, Bunson had not slept for more than three hours nightly over the course of the past week. However, after being awoken by a coworker five minutes later, Bunson reported having a dream in which he was a Dutch talk show host. At the same time as Bunson's dream, Humberto Tan, host of the Dutch late night talk show *RTL Late Night*, reportedly started acting "like a completely different person" during a taping session, seemingly unaware of where he was or what he was supposed to be doing and displaying a limited command of the Dutch language. After five minutes, he reverted to his regular personality with no memory of what happened in that timespan. Post-incident analysis indicated that Bunson's reports of the dream and recordings/witness reports of the events in the studio were almost identical— in particular, all actions taken by Bunson in the dream were taken by Tan in real life, and Tan's apparent knowledge of Dutch was generally consistent with Bunson's.
Date of Occurrence: / /2018
Location: Linguistic Analysis Division of Site-19 and NH Schiller Hotel in Amsterdam, Netherlands
Follow-up Actions Taken: All witnesses present at the taping of *RTL Late Night* were amnesticized, and the Foundation seized all recordings of the event. The affected segment was re-taped without incident. Researcher Bunson and Humberto Tan are currently under a standard five-year monitoring period, and no further anomalous activity has been noticed from either of them thus far. None of the documents Bunson was working with have been conclusively identified as the source of the anomaly. Although not strictly related to the anomaly, Researcher Bunson's workload has been temporarily decreased and he is currently working with Foundation doctors to maintain a more healthy sleep schedule.

Event Description: This event was transcribed for the Log of Extranormal Events. This event appeared on its own, and wasn't written by anyone.
Date of Occurrence: 6/8/2018
Location: The Log of Extranormal Events
Follow-up Actions Taken: The Foundation will view this entry, and subsequently delete it. Then, they will write up an actual event

description regarding the actual anomalous event.

Event Description: An event was transcribed onto the document known as "The Log of Extranormal Events" which described itself and how it came into being. Security footage of all locations capable of accessing the log show no personnel within a 1 meter radius of any device capable of editing the aforementioned log. Edit history of all computers shows that there was no edit.
Date of Occurrence: 6/8/2018
Locations: All computers capable of accessing the Log of Extranormal Events and all locations of physical copies.
Follow-up Actions Taken: The original text was written out of all copies of the Log of Extranormal Events and is transcribed below.

Transcript of Added Text

> **Event Description:** This event was transcribed for the Log of Extranormal Events. This event appeared on its own, and wasn't written by anyone.
> **Date of Occurrence:** 6/8/2018
> **Location:** The Log of Extranormal Events
> **Follow-up Actions Taken:** The Foundation will view this entry, and subsequently delete it. Then, they will write up an actual event description regarding the actual anomalous event.

Event Description: A 19-year old Community College student was teleported to his house in the middle of a math exam.
Date of Occurrence: / /20 .
Location: Community College, , , USA.
Follow-up Actions Taken: The student, his family, his classmates, and his instructor were given Class B amnestics.

Event Description: Junior Researcher Caroline demanifested whilst conducting a series of tests on SCP- . Researcher Caroline has not returned.
Date of Occurrence: 7/29/2018
Location: Site-19.
Follow-up Actions Taken: Junior Researcher Caroline is still being

searched for via paratechnological means.

Log of Unexplained Locations

Foreword: This page is to be devoted to the documentation of low threat anomalous locations which have been discovered by the SCP Foundation over the years. Although all locations listed in this document warrant securing and cover-up measures, none of them are closely enough tied to an underlying anomalous cause or considered a high enough containment or research priority to warrant full Special Containment Procedure documentation. This list may be used as a resource should knowledge of these locations become useful or necessary in the future.
– Doctor , Head of Containment, Site

To add a new entry, click here: **Add New Item**

Sort: **top rated**, **lowest rated**, **oldest**, **newest**, **random**

Unexplained Location UE-673264 (**edit**)
Location Description: School classroom where all geometric drawings have one fewer side than normal. Triangles have 2 sides but remain triangular, circles are points, and points [REDACTED].
Date of Containment: 1984-06-24
Location: Room 4, St. Cedric's Primary School, Surrey, UK
Security Protocol: Doors and windows bricked up, room fitted with intruder alarms.

Unexplained Location UE-941712 (**edit**)
Location Description: A sphere 5 meters in radius. All humans who are caught in the sphere spontaneously vocalize, in English, "Boy, I wish I had a nice cold Pepsi right now" regardless of native

language or knowledge of the Pepsi brand.
Date of Containment: 1968-02-29
Location: In interplanetary space, static relative to the Sun at approximately the same altitude and inclination as the Earth.
Security Protocol: Due to the difficulty of studying this area astronomically and the erratic nature of the affected locations, modeling software capable of predicting future affected locations is still in development. Currently, mentions of the above phrase are monitored on social media, with amnestics distributed at the discretion of security personnel.

Unexplained Location UE-656688 (**edit**)
Location Description: A small industrial shed where the internal temperature is at a constant -273°C (0 Kelvin).
Date of Containment: 2017-01-24
Location: Ayr, Ayrshire, Scotland
Security Protocol: Shed purchased by Foundation and is now used for cold storage and thermodynamic experiments.

Unexplained Location UE-537968 (**edit**)
Location Description: An area of approximately 27 square meters where fire cannot exist. Any existing fire will spontaneously extinguish when it enters the area, and no substances will ignite while in the area.
Date of Containment: - -
Location: Yosemite National Park, California, USA.
Security Protocol: Foundation outpost constructed over area and disguised as a ranger station. Structure designated a non-smoking area.

Unexplained Location UE-404816 (**edit**)
Location Description: A 250493.29km² area encompassing the entire state of Michigan. All road work and/or road maintenance within this area take approximately 3 times longer to complete than what would normally be needed.
Date of Containment: 1904-04-06
Location: Michigan, USA
Security Protocol: None is currently needed, as residents of Michigan view it as a result of the state's unpredictable weather fluctuations.

Unexplained Location UE-387168 (**edit**)
Location Description: A 4.9km square area of land, where the song "We Built This City" by Starship can be heard playing at ~115 decibels. The exact source of the music is unclear, but it appears to originate from the sky. The song repeats continuously, with no apparent end.
Date of Containment: 19 -01-08
Location: Uninhabited land in south-western Libya, near the Algerian border.
Security Protocol: Area cordoned off. Branded as toxic chemical waste site.

Unexplained Location UE-345456 (**edit**)
Location Description: A 2m x 2m square of a swamp that causes an American bullfrog *(Lithobates catesbeiana)* to manifest on the top of the head of any human who enters it. This bullfrog vanishes upon exiting the area.
Date of Containment: 2009-07-01
Location: , Maryland
Security Protocol: Property purchased and closed to the public.

Unexplained Location UE-807488 (**edit**)
Location Description: A sound stage dressed with polystyrene rocks, replica of the Saturn 5 landing module and greenscreen backdrop. Props are marked in an unknown script.
Date of Containment: 1969-06-21
Location: Sea of Tranquility, Luna
Security Protocol: Disinformation campaign (currently self-sustaining).

Unexplained Location UE-175936 (**edit**)
Location Description: A spherical area 5 meters in diameter. Any human subjects located inside the sphere will experience visual hallucinations, viewing any space outside the sphere as a real-time view of the Martian sky and surface. All effects cease when the subject leaves the sphere.
Date of Containment: - -
Location: Cardiff, Wales.
Security Protocol: "Stars and Constellations Planetarium" front company constructed around the anomaly. Anomalous location contained in a "Staff Only" area.

Unexplained Location UE-867920 (**edit**)
Location Description: A treehouse behind an abandoned house.The words "SCP CLUBHOUSE" are carved into the wood. Inside are three boxes. The first box is labeled "106". A G.I. Joe action figure crudely painted black is contained inside. The second box is labeled "682". The skeletal remains of a lizard are contained inside. The third box is labeled "999". A single cup of orange Jell-O is contained inside. Despite the possible containment breach this

poses, nothing about the location is anomalous.
Date of Containment: 2017-06-24
Location: Mississippi, USA
Security Protocol: House and treehouse demolished. Boxes and contents are currently in storage. No further action is required.

Lonely

They don't come anymore.

I remember when they used to come every day. Talking quietly among themselves, walking through. Few of them ever talked to me, but them being here was enough to keep one amused through the days. Every now and then, they'd give me one of theirs. One that couldn't walk or talk anymore. Maybe it was a payment - what one of them always did before sort of hurt… but it didn't matter. I wouldn't mind if it hurt… if all of them were here, walking.

If **he** was here.

He stayed, almost all the time… **He** was one of the few who talked to me, **he**'d return from somewhere away with an unsteady gait, drop down into the grass, and we'd talk, until **he** stopped moving. At those times I could even touch **him**, feel **his** surface. It was different, nice, soft and warm.

Some nights **he** didn't go, usually one or two nights after they'd given me another of theirs - instead **he**'d open a hole in me again, take out the one that was inside - they always put them inside boxes made of tree - do something with them, then put them back in. Through time I learned to help **him** open the holes, it was easier, so much easier for both of us.

Those were the best times, times with **him**.

One night like that, another man came and walked through. He stopped for a while, then ran away, then walked back next day, with two others, with heavy boots. They grabbed **him**, just as **he** was touching the flowers growing near my end, and took **him** away.

He never came back, and I don't know why. I wanted to be with **him** forever, **he** loved me, **he** talked to me. I tried to talk to the others, but they didn't listen when there were many, and they ran away

when they were alone.

Then, soon, another man came and wanted to make a hole. But, he wasn't **him**. He didn't love me, he didn't talk to me. I tried to touch him, but he run away. Ungrateful, vile. Not like **him** at all.

But still, at least some things happened then… walking, talking, a lot of things. I waited, many days, but **he** didn't come back. The others came less often, and were slower and slower, until one day they didn't come anymore.

I waited and waited.

A few times, some of them would come back, alone, or in small groups. I was so happy, doesn't matter it wasn't **him**, it was someone. I tried to greet them, help them, do anything for them, but they too were vile and ungrateful. One of them I tried to keep from running, and it worked - he went down, on one of the big stone slabs they have hauled in, and stopped moving. I was happy for a while - he wasn't **him**, he didn't walk or talk, but at least he stayed. I took him in, making a hole myself… that's what is proper, because that's what **he** did… even when he took them out, **he** put them back later. Besides, it hurts a lot less when I do it myself, I found. So, it's what I did with every one that stopped moving.

Then, one day, a lot of them came again. I was happy, so happy, it'd be like the old times again, maybe even **he**'d show up again. But **he** didn't… instead they put metal rods into me, and did a lot of things, and then they left, and noone came or stayed since. Oh, one of them stayed… but he was just like the ones I talked about. Meh.

And now they don't come anymore. Nobody does. I can't stand it… everything is the same, there are no footsteps, no talk. Maybe I should do something. No, I must do something.
I wonder. **He** used to take them out from me, every so often. Maybe if I take them all out, in **his** name, for **him**, **he** will return. **He** will return. **He** will return! Why didn't I think of it before! I was stupid, unworthy of **him**, but now I know! It will hurt, it will hurt a lot, but I must be strong. I can withstand it. I must withstand it. For **him.** For love.

Incident 1673-1

On / /19 , approximately 3 years after estabilishing containment, the guards located outside the perimeter of SCP-1673 have reported tremors consistent with seismic activity, and resulting in structural damage to the perimeter wall. Examination of SCP-1673 during its inactive period next day has found evidence of large-scale soil movement, and the exhumation of a large quantity of human remains in various states of decomposition, the freshest identified as D-833 (See Document 1673-Eta for experiment logs).

Note: As the town of Westkin, Virginia isn't located in a fault zone, and subsequently collected evidence suggests the epicenter of the tremours to locate within SCP-1673, I request its reclassification to Euclid. - Researcher Cartwright

Long Live The King

My name is Dr. King, and you know what I hate more than anything ever invented by mankind? Apple seeds. They have always been the bane of my miserable existence. God damn, piece of shit apple seeds. Never whole apples, or maybe even sliced apples. Just the seeds, going everywhere I go and ruining all my plans. Finally get a chance to test a big SCP? Apple seeds. Working in my office? Seeds in the drawers. No matter where I go, apple seeds.

But I'm going to change all that. For the past six weeks, I have locked myself alone in my office. The apple seeds have been slowly filling it up, and they're up to my neck now. Tonight is the night I let those demon seeds win. Those hell-spawned capsules of hatred have finally broken me, because I cannot deal with one more goddamn apple seed.

I hope they don't have apples in hell.

Dr. King groaned, as he was prone to do when waking up, and scrunched his eyes. Was he dead? Was this… after? Didn't feel very after. In fact, his face felt like it was resting upon a familiarly textured surface.

Apple seeds.

Dr. King's legs scrambled for ground as he sprung from a prone state, sending apple seeds scattering across the seedy ground.

Absolute despair and anguish washed over him in waves, sending him tumbling back to the seeded earth. "No! Fuck! It's not supposed to- goddammit why won't you leave me?"

Preoccupied as he was with lament and despair, Dr. King failed to notice the celestial figure approaching him from on high. It was an apple, a whole one, with leaves as green as the sea and a shimmer surpassed by none. It had one sticker, affixed to a side, which shone a golden "A" shimmering across the landscape.

"Rise, King."

Dr. King flipping around, and his jaw would have dropped had it not already been hanging agape, swinging like a pinata in the wind. "You… but…"

"MY SON… YOUR FINAL TIME HAS COME," boomed the giant flying apple.

Dr. King blinked. "My time? What… the hell are you talking about?"

A shimmer of bright red liberated itself from the apple and spread over the land, blasting everything that had once subscribed to other colors on the spectrum into a brilliant, vibrant red.

"THERE IS NO TIME TO WASTE. YOU WERE BORN TO CREATE APPLES. NOW, YOUR TIME HAS COME. THE WORLD IS IN CRISIS, AND THE ONLY SOLUTION IS APPLES."

"… What."

Suddenly, King's mind was filled with images. He was riding an apple chariot into Site-19, and all the senior staff were apples. They bowed down to him, and readied the apple throne for him to sit in. Panning out, the site was apples. Slices made up every wall, and the head of every researcher was replaced with rotund, healthy apples. There was no danger, because skips were apples.

The whole world was apple.

"SO, YOU SEE, IT IS- WHERE ARE YOU GOING."

King was already gone. "NO! I am not going to be the king of the FUCKING APPLES."

"BUT IT IS YOUR DEST-"

King turned to the floating apple which called itself his father. His face was even redder than the world that surrounded him. "FUCK DESTINY."

And then, Dr. King was apples no more.

How's he holding up, doc?

Well, we've recovered about 765 apple seeds from his trachea, in addition to the couple thousand we got from the rest of his orifices.

Are they still cleaning out his office?

Yeah, we'll be digging seeds out of there for a month. Poor guy.

Man, he looked so pissed when they brought him in there… but now, heck, he looks happier than I've seen in awhile.

Makes you wonder what he's thinking, doesn't it?

Whatever it is, at least it's making him happy…

« | HUB | »

First Interlude: Old School

"We're going to have a great year, aren't we?"

- The girl who sat behind you.

Students! Please be advised that class scheduling will begin this Saturday, in the auditorium. Please remember to bring your class request forms, as well as being ready to spend time with a guidance counselor about possible choices. Seniors, if you wish to enlist in dual enrollment, please see Mr. Wehrner in his office afterschool. We hope each one of you has a wonderful second semester.

Congratulations to the Fightin' Lions, who won their way to the finals yesterday! After a close first quarter, we were able to shut them down for the rest of the game. An unbelievable upset in victory. Please congratulate Coach Collins if you see him on your way to class, or in the halls. Students are reminded to donate to the annual fundraising for extracurricular activities. Although Syncope has been very generous in their donations, we still need your contributions.

New Bus Schedule: Students displaced in buses 23, 11, and 24 have been returned to their normal schedule.

Note from Mr. Wallick to all band members: Intensive training begins Monday. Please come prepared each day to practice.

A new lunch menu has been announced, aimed to serve students who have been spending more time at school for extracurricular activities. It is being offered free to any student in a program sponsored by Syncope.

New Bus Schedule: Removed.

Students! If you feel strong enough, please rest with our brothers, see how the formula all comes together to make one tableture.

Hello students. This is Principal Wehrner. Mitchell decided that it was high time to take a step back in responsibility, and that he's going to groove to another beat. That's okay. We will grow onwards. Like the spire of the Eiffel tower, we will inspire many people to create the parachute so that they may safely live with the stars. Nobody will be excluded from further activity. We've brought everyone here to be together. Have a good year.

STUDENTS! Please stand with me for the pledge of symphonic allegiance, and sing your hearts out with style.

Some have said that it was the new system that caused them to part. Those of you who do are warned. The Director will hear of anything we say. He's listening to all of us now, hearing the rhythm of the panting and the running crowds. The bells, and the blackboards. It's harmony.

rest

Students are reminded that only band members are permitted off school premises. Any violaters will deal with their own consequences. They have only damned themselves with their own actions.

« Part One | HUB | Part Two »

Coming soon to a gallery near you!~

Right, Kyle, here's those notes you asked for. Keep in mind, hush protocol seven means the investigation is still ongoing, so some of the stuff isn't released yet. Best I could do. Good luck.

~Nate

The following is a transcript of the voice over from a pirate television broadcast intercepted by the Foundation in September of 2011.

Male voice: One zero zero five. Two one two. Six four six. Nine one seven.

Short pause, soft beep, brief static which continues through the remainder of the interruption

Second male voice: People of the new media world, listen! There was a mouth that was where all that was on the media was and it spoke and we heard it was speaking and we heard its voice on the radio, the television, the internet, the sky. "Tell us truth," we cried, "oh voice, and we will break the world like sweet, sweet eggs before the mother, the hen, the television! Television voice, speak!" It spoke to us and we listened as it told us- told you- but us, because we listened- that the world was dead like leaves in fall that fall like all of us fall, and that it was dead because it slept through the message of the voice, and that message was "stop!". Wake, oh earth, as your cores crack, hatching volcanoes like chicks, sweet burning chicks to play in the fields left behind when the sleepers have gone. Good morning, living earth. Good night, dead society.

<Extended pause, rattling inhalation or sigh>

Female voice: Are we cool yet?

The broadcast consisted of man hung by the neck in a doorway softly twisting as the camera moved closer, at which point it became clear that he was mouthing along with the voice over. At approximately one minute and forty seconds, synchronized with the line "good night, dead society", the man began thrashing, apparently due to asphyxiation, and appeared to die. Throughout the video, at each instance of the word 'voice', an image of a bank of televisions, each showing a different image of violence, appeared on screen for exactly one second. Following the apparent death of the hanged man, a female voice interjected the whispered question "Are we cool yet?" in what is theorized to be an imitation of sexual ecstasy, and the broadcast terminated. Regular channel broadcasting resumed after a momentary delay, cutting approximately three minutes from the opening scenes of Ses[FURTHER INFORMATION REDACTED AS PER HUSH PROTOCOL SEVEN]

Overwatch Report of agent Scott Manheilm:

After one of our intelligence persons operating in [DATA REDACTED AS PER HUSH PROTOCOL SEVEN]zed the numbers as postal codes for Wall Street addresses, it got a lot easier to hone in on a point of origin for the transmission jam last week.

We raided the building at approximately six in the morning. It was a bit before that, I'm not sure. It should be in the full report compiled after the incident. It was a small operation, not like the big SWAT style MTF things you hear about in the cafeteria or anything, just me, Steve [Mader], and Mike [Chillnoski] posing as local detectives. We were expecting maybe a token resistance from the squatters, nothing fancy.

First thing we did was break the door down, flashing badges and yelling. We figured they'd come quietly. Didn't happen. Almost immediately a hand grenade

comes down the stairs at us; we spent a couple days under observation afterward just in case it was one of… well, I'll get to that. Mike took down the guy who threw it, damn good shooting. After that, things went more or less as we'd expected. Wound up bringing in four subjects, three guys and a girl, all mid twenties. They're profiled in the mission docs, I'm sure. Just squatter artist types, locals. Probably recruited thro[DATA REDACTED AS PER HUSH PROTOCOL SEVEN]ging in a door frame upstairs pretty much confirmed it as the transmission location. Nasty.

Anyway, I'll cut to the chase. The reason this operation became such a big deal is what we found upstairs. Not the body, but the crate in the next room… We figured they were just normal grenades at first, what with the one they tried to hit us with when we came in, but Steve had a bad feeling about the writing on the crate and those signs, so we boxed them up and called in an analysis team. Wound up being a good move; I think Steve got a commendation.

[FURTHER MATERIAL REDACTED FOR BREVITY.]

Transcript from the notes of Dr. Tsung regarding incident 1[REDACTED AS PER HUSH PROTOCOL SEVEN]

Crate appears unmarked on sides, bottom. Large banner style logo on lid reading "Are We Cool Yet?" may prove significant, particularly in light of recent events. Crate contains thirty cardboard signs, each apparently produced by hand with varying degrees of artistic merit and style, all of which read "OSSIFY WALL STREET" in all caps. Ominous.

Below the signs is a layer of packing material. I've submitted a sample for forensic analysis and incinerated the rest in order to avoid possible contamination. The packing material is wrapped around several modified

fragmentation grenades which look to have been originally of russian manufacture. Weld seams visible where grenades [unintelligible] modified payload. I'll crack one open and see.

Addendum 1[REDACTED PER HUSH PROTOCOL SEVEN] *of Dr. Tsung has been retained for study in the Hazardous Lifeforms wing of Armed Research Site-45. Further information can be found in* ***Report-439-A****.*

Thanks Nate. These Foundation types catch on slow, don't they? They don't seem to appreciate our work much, either. Art tends to fly right over the head of tough guy types. Good thing they have a few like you in their ranks who can appreciate true creativity.

A few of the others say hi. Remember Miley from the thing in Alaska? She's made a full recovery and will be helping out at our next… exhibition. Are We Cool Yet?

~Kyle

Epilogue: Last Word

« Part Three | HUB |We never forget »

Loop

shatter
FLASH

I'm lying on the floor, in more pain than I've ever felt before. I guess this is what it feels like to have a bullet in your gut. The pain is a constant but everything else is fading: I must be losing blood fast.

Wait - how did I get here? The last thing I remember was the break-in, that little guy turning around as they ran, the gunshot… and Angie gasping, clutching her stomach, and collapsing in a pool of her own blood.

ANGIE! Where is my wife?! There, standing where I was when she got shot, she looks as shocked as I am. She rushes over to me, not even paying attention to the furniture in her way. The old oil lamp falls off the end table, hits the floor…

shatter
FLASH

The pain is gone, and I'm back on my feet. But I was just… oh God, Angie's on the floor bleeding, like she was before. I've got to help her, I try to get over to her, to help her, stop the bleeding, something, ANYTHING. My elbow brushes the old oil lamp, it falls…

shatter
FLASH

FUCKING OW! I'm back on the floor, but at least Angie's okay. What the Hell is going on here? First she's dying, then I'm the one dying, then her, then me again - and nothing else is changing at all! Angie runs over to me, bumps the table, knocks over that old lamp…

shatter
FLASH

Switched again? How? It doesn't matter - I have to help Angie. I rush over, knocking over a table on the way…

shatter
FLASH

I'm the one dying again, but Angie doesn't look like she's any happier. She looks so confused, so scared. She looks at me, at her stomach, at the lamp. Wait a minute - why is that lamp in one piece? I remember now, when that little slimebag shot Angie in the first place, I ran over to help her, but I knocked that lamp over on the way. I didn't see what happened to it, but I heard it break.

She picks the lamp up off the table, barely able to hold it her hands are shaking so badly. She lifts it up above her head, throws it down…

shatter
FLASH

Standing and healthy again. I look out the door, see the two thugs running, not ten feet from where they were when they shot Angie. The lamp's back, too - does it rewind time or something? What the Hell is going on? How does some random oil lamp I bought in a store as a decoration somehow rewind time, and how do Angie and I keep getting switched?

No time to think about stuff like that. I know how little time Angie has: I could feel it when I was the one on the floor. There's no way an ambulance could get here in time, even if somebody else called them the instant they heard the shot. The only way to save her now is for me to be the one that dies. I grab the lamp and hurl it to the floor…

shatter
FLASH

It worked - I'm back on the floor. I see Angie reaching for the lamp, try to tell her that it's all right, tell her to let me go, but it's too late. The lamp falls…

shatter
FLASH

I grab the lamp, look down at my poor Angie, and tell her I'll save her…

shatter
FLASH

shatter
FLASH

---

shatter
FLASH

We've been married almost twenty years - known each other twice that. Childhood friends, highschool sweethearts, always together. Everybody pretty much knew we'd end up married. I've sworn to myself ever since I was a kid: I'd always protect her, no matter what, even if it cost me my life…

shatter
FLASH

So why won't she let me?

shatter
FLASH

---

shatter
FLASH

I wonder if this thing ever runs out of juice? If it does, I hope it's while I'm the one down…

shatter
FLASH

---

shatter

FLASH

At this point, I'm pretty sure that if whoever's down dies before the lamp breaks, it won't switch us again. I just need to keep it in one piece long enough that I die before Angie can take my place…

shatter
FLASH

I grab the chimney, and wait. Watching her suffer like this, watching the life drain out of her without doing anything to stop it, it feels like my heart and soul are being ripped apart, but I have to wait as long as I can. If I delay the switch, it should put me closer to dying when we switch, and maybe Angie won't have time to switch back…

shatter
FLASH

DAMN. All the way back to when the lamp broke the first time. Delaying isn't going to work…

shatter
FLASH

I apologise to Angie for letting her suffer so long last time, and beg her to just let me die, let me save her…

shatter
FLASH

Angie begs me to let her die, let her save me…

shatter
FLASH

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shatter
FLASH

I think I may actually be starting to get used to the pain - the physical part, at least. They say a person can get used to anything, but nothing dulls the horror of helplessly watching the woman I love

dying slowly on the floor. I HAVE to save her…

shatter
FLASH

---

shatter
FLASH

By the rest of the world's reckoning, it was only a few minutes ago that we were cleaning up after dinner. Then those two thugs, bold as brass, just kicked in the front door. The big guy started grabbing whatever he could, while the little one ran room to room. He was probably looking for us, since he stopped when he found us hiding in the kitchen, pointed that gun at us, and ordered us into the living room…

shatter
FLASH

shatter
FLASH

We watched as they tore apart our home, grabbing whatever caught their fancy, and smashing a lot of what didn't. While the big guy was all business, the short one kept coming back to threaten us. The little rat giggled every time he made us flinch by jabbing us with his gun. That sick fuck must get off on hurting people - I saw the look on his face when he turned, gun in hand…

shatter
FLASH

---

shatter
FLASH

Maybe if I could kill myself somehow before Angie could smash the chimney again, I could break the cycle on the right side. The problem is I only get a couple of seconds…

shatter

FLASH

---

shatter
FLASH

Nope, that didn't work, either. Can't convince Angie to just let me die - she's obviously as set on saving me as I am on saving her. I'll find some way to kill myself in time…

shatter
FLASH

---

shatter
FLASH

How many times have we gone back and forth? I haven't exactly been counting, but it must be hundreds. Or thousands…

shatter
FLASH

---

shatter
FLASH

I don't remember my name. I don't remember who I am, where I grew up, or much of anything else that happened more than a minute ago by the rest of the world's time. We've been going back and forth for pretty much as far back as I can recall - years, at least. All I really remember clearly is that I can't let her die…

shatter
FLASH

shatter
FLASH

shatter
FLASH

shatter
FLASH

shatter
FLASH

Loose Ends

Mr. Eric Brashin checked his silver pocket watch, holding it only by the chain. The boy was late. Of course. The meeting he had scheduled was already bound to prove a waste of time. Lateness always reflected badly on a prospective recruit. When the prospect, as he was wont to think of them, can't be trusted to handle even the simplest of appointments properly, why on Earth should he trust them with matters of infinitely greater importance? Misters Marshall, Carter, and perhaps even Dark, did not look kindly on a lack of professionalism. More personally, he himself had only contempt for the kind of idiots who came to him, hat in hand, begging for a chance, and then didn't even bother to show up for the introductory meeting.

Mr. Brashin stood stiffly in one of the greeting rooms the club used to meet with those not aware of the more exotic aspects of the establishment. Barely a minute had passed before he was drawing his watch out by its chain again. He examined the face, taking note of the time while being careful to not actually touch the watch itself. Irritated, he asked himself aloud, “Eight minutes late already, where has the punctuality of this new generation gone?"

Another five minutes passed unremarkably, with his scheduled meeting still going unmet. Despite himself, Mr. Brashin began to feel a bit annoyed. The young rich these days all felt themselves entitled to the world waiting on them, hand and foot. Well, he doubted this particular entitled fop would be finding himself favorably received by Mr. Marshall. Five minutes late could be explained. Ten minutes would get you a polite kick out the door. More than that, and you would likely end up as what Mr. Marshall referred to as a "loose end."

Gripped by a sudden suspicion, Mr. Brashin reaching into his coat pocket and drew out his pocket watch, this time holding it by the actual timepiece, not the chain. The hands spun crazily for a handful

of moments, before resting on twelve hours, twelve minutes, and one second. He knew what it meant, it had been explained to him very concisely, all those years ago. He could still hear the oily voice of his predecessor, "Twelve means zero, hours mean years, minutes mean months, and seconds mean days." Whatever tiny hint of color there was in his face drained out of it. Only now did he hear the measured footsteps leading towards the room. It was of no use to try to run, trying to hide would have been laughable, and fighting back would only embarrass him.

Unexpectedly, Mr. Brashin felt his eyes sting and his vision blurred for a moment with tears. He pushed them back sternly. If he had to go, he would not go crying. The click of shoe on hardwood stopped just outside the stately meeting room door, and the handle turned slowly. The door opened, and there was Mr. Marshall, smiling at him sadly. A rather large man stood just behind and to the right of him, but the brute was unimportant, in the larger scheme of things. Eric Brashin only had eyes for his employer.

His voice was barely controlled, almost cracking as he asked, “If I may ask, Mr. Marshall, why?”

Mr. Marshall’s sad smile didn’t change for an instant. He looked the man, his faithful employee of nearly twenty years, dead in the eye. “Loose ends, Mr. Brashin. Always loose ends. Your last hire was more trouble than they were worth, being a spy and all. We simply can't allow you to continue, after a horrendous mistake like that. Our clients value privacy above all else, and letting in even a single mole jeopardizes every last one of them. I had hoped you would be eligible for a nice, peaceful, retirement, but you know far too much.”

He sighed sadly. “I understand, sir.” And he did understand. Working for Marshall, Carter, and Dark, one knew that you would likely never make retirement. He had known all too well how likely it was that precisely this thing would happen, but he had tried to never pay the idea much mind. He gently removed the watch from his pocket and held it out. “I suppose you’ll be wanting this back then. For my-” He choked a little on the word, "Replacement."

Still with that sad smile plastered on his face, Mr. Marshall answered while taking the silvery timepiece, “I’m sorry, Eric.”

The soft thump of a silenced gunshot sounded over Mr. Marshall's shoulder, and Eric Brashin stumbled backwards and fell to the rich hardwood, blood staining his crisp grey suit. Darkness swam across his vision, and the last thing he heard was Mr. Marshall say softly, "Loyalty, Henderson. That is what loyalty looks like."

Loosen Up A Bit

“I gotta say, Charlie,” Crow began, watching Gears pick at leftovers in front of him, “I can’t believe Jack let you off work so easy. What did you do, exactly? Did he owe you a favor or something?”

“No. I didn’t ask at all,” Gears eating was always quite the operation. Crow’s companion and the head research director of the northeastern hemisphere was never a big eater- as evidenced by his wiry figure- and instead had a tendency to either work through meals completely or opt to play with his food and consume most of his calories needed to function through what Crow assumed to be a kind of lab light photosynthesis mechanism. Those who knew Cog well learned not to take this personally. “I am on leave.”

“Leave?” Crow almost choked on the kibble in front of him. Gears had never taken more than a couple total days off the entirety of the time he had worked for the Foundation.

His companion nodded solemnly, contemplating. “From on-site duties, although I am to remain on-call. My understanding is that Alto has taken the liberty of convincing Jack for my temporary relief in favor of this project specifically. I was not aware when arriving that I was to remain for an extended period of time, although in retrospect the box of my clothing and blueprints arriving by mail did seem strange.” Gears gently knocked two more half-frozen peas into a straight line with the others, forming a neat boundary on the paper plate, the significance lost to onlookers.

“How did you know it was Clef?”

“He left me a gift.” Gears carefully set down his fork and removed from his medical bag a thin cardboard package.

Oh no, thought Crow, It’s going to be a dildo or something.

His companion reopened the box and removed a hand written note,

and curtly read it aloud, the affectionate message lost in his monotone voice:

“Cog, loosen up a bit. Love, Clef.”

Gears set the note aside carefully and reached into the box, removing a multicolored Hawaiian shirt in his size. Crow let go of a breath he didn’t know he was holding. Gears then set the shirt aside and stoically removed a nine-inch rainbow silicon dildo.

“He also included this apparatus.”

Once Crow had gotten up from where he had reacted to Gears’ discovery and safely removed the offending object from the eyes of the innocent, they were in business. After a brief discussion of accommodation, the two mutually decided that Gears would take up residence with Crow, at the old Olympia facility that the younger had maintained as a home and personal lab since the end of the project. This was not the first time the two would be roommates; the two had roomed together on many occasions, good and bad. Gears made for clean, quiet roommate, so long as one found the consistent keyboard tapping tolerable, and Crow didn’t consider himself too bad either.

The problem with this, of course, was Crow’s modification of his small home to better fit his needs. He’d gotten rid of the bed years ago, taking instead to a more comfortable futon, and the myriad of old rooms previously hosting staff quarters and barracks had long been converted by forces greater than his own to what the old Olympia facility was to the modern Foundation: the F-44 archives in northern Alberta, Canada.

The archives, of course, posed a problem that he and Gears began discussing once his human companion had adopted a sleeping bag on the floor next to Crow. All the rooms had been ‘upgraded’ from lab space, dorms, and containment to endless bookshelves of dusty files and metal lockers of long forgotten bits and pieces of experiments, odds and ends in decade-old biohazard containers and specimen jars. Crow’s job title of “Archivist” actually meant “Make sure no one breaks in and tries to steal irrelevant, almost completely

redacted and useless files that we've been keeping just in case since the 50s".

One of the reasons Crow hated paperwork more than ever now was because he knew where it would eventually end up.

"Well" Gears readjusted so he was facing the golden retriever curled up above him, "We could rearrange. It just depends on the space we need."

"Which depends on the project itself." Replied Kain. "So I guess the next step is…what exactly they want from us?"

"I would assume they wish for us to recreate Sophia. Or at least, modified soldiers to any extent."

Kain cringed at the name. He missed her terribly. "Yeah. Well, the way I see it, we have a couple options. We can either use the old specifications or make new ones from scratch, and for that…shit, Cog, I mean…we need money."

"Funding, yes. And permission for removal. SCP relocation, space, upgraded chambers. We'll need workers and equipment, as well, unless we intend to do this on our own."

"You seem…" Crow paused, reading what he could from his companion. It was easier as a dog, but still buried pretty deep. He never really had a good chance of getting it right. "…Skeptical."

Gears, a person who approved and rejected funding from all over Russia and Europe on a daily basis, nodded.

"You don't really have faith in this, do you?"

"No. I think this is a terrible idea." Gears replied bluntly, staring at the ceiling.

"Well, I mean, don't sugarcoat it."

"I would have rejected this in an instant if it was my choice."

"Again, no need to be gentle."

“I am unsure of how to proceed with this project to the extent requested, because I am deeply disturbed by the fact that funding previously given to other, more applicable research is being redirected to this.” Gears concluded. “However, I will proceed because I have been ordered to do so.”

“Because your dad’s on the council.” Kain muttered. He could see Gears’ eyes shift from the ceiling to him, settling in the dark.

“I knew about the Brights for a long time.” Crow admitted. Might as well come clean about it now. “I mean, it’s hard not to notice if you pay attention, they’re a bit eccentric. Didn’t know there were two family lines involved until I was looking through some of the older files. Funny what you can stumble upon here if you don’t know what you’re looking for, you know? Complete accident, I swear.”

Gears nodded, and returned his gaze to the ceiling. A moment passed. Kain sensed that he had just crossed a boundary that should not have been touched. He breathed.

“I trust you will not disclose this to anyone.”

“Cog, I’ve known for six years now. If I was going to exploit that against you, I would have done it by now.”

Gears nodded again in the slow, deliberate way he did.

“Look, I’m sorry.” Crow said. “I have a question about it though. Can I ask you about it?”

Gears considered for a second, tilting his head slightly. A long, still minute passed before his long time friend replied.

“It depends on the question.”

Kain exhaled slowly. “Of course. If you can’t answer it, then don’t. I don’t really…I mean…I don’t really know much about you guys, just… you know. The medical files.” And what he knew, he didn’t believe, but he wasn’t about to say that. The old archives were frequently inaccurate. “Okay. So…what is he like? Your dad. He doesn’t…I mean I heard he’s not…”

“…He doesn’t present himself often, yes.” Gears confirmed, slowly. “As is customary.”

Customary. Kain shuddered. Gears continued.

“He is…” Gears thought for a moment. “…Strict. Again, customary.”

Kain couldn’t help blurting out another question, the one he had recovered from age-old documents that crumbled and cracked in his readers. “Can you…? I mean. Did he…? To you, I mean.”

Gears did not respond initially to Kain’s half completed thought. At first, he received this response as his companion waiting for him to complete his question fully, and struggled for a moment to find the correct words to describe his conceptions of the trait before Gears interjected.

“Customary.” Gears replied, emotionless. “All is customary.”

Although part of Crow’s mind felt shock and grief in this response, a small, shitty part of himself raced with excitement at this apparent confirmation, and he couldn’t stop his tail from thumping, once, singular, against the fabric of the futon, a movement he found himself horrified at, considering the context. Gears saw this, and continued.

“…I would not be excited.”

“Yes. Yeah. Yeah, no, I’m not. Not. Not like that.” Kain wanted to make himself stop talking altogether, but somehow continued. “No. Terrible. Yeah. Like, really bad, not…not good. How you got trained to do it. Really. That’s horrible. It’s just really interesting you got assigned to the project with that kind of ability, do you think they know?” Crow blurted out, immediately regretting his decision. Oh my god, just stop it, it’s not a good topic, just stop talking about it you piece of shit.

To Crow’s surprise, Gears nodded.

“I am not sure Jack is acquainted to the extent you seem to be…” Gears studied the old dog on the couch. “…But family lines intersect in these ways, yes. I suspect he has heard something from family

members, or by any stretch, believes it to be simply talk. I have never shown it explicitly to others outside my father and grandfather, as is customary." There was that word again. *Customary*. Everything was customary.

Kain hesitated with the question that he felt compelled to ask next. That probably was the last thing Gears wanted to be asked. No way he was going to totally ask his best friend to answer this about his disturbing upbringing. No way. Just disrespectful. Totally out of line for him to ask that next question.

"…Can I ask you one more question?" Crow said out loud. He heard Gears audibly exhale. Not quite a sigh, but defiantly something there that was exasperated.

"…Is it for me to show you?"

"…Yes."

Gears sat up, and Crow's heart started racing in his chest. No way. No fucking way. His tail started beating against the futon restlessly, and Gears looked at him blankly.

"It's not a very powerful skill by any stretch of imagination." Gears breathed. "It is simply customary in the line. The trait is carried in the blood, but, as you probably know, has to be properly propagated while the child is young."

"Yes. Yeah. Yeah, it's terrible, I saw the records." Crow said this while still wagging his tail with his ears perked, and hated himself for it. "Just. Man. Yeah, that's. Really terrible you had to go through that. Like, whoa. Shit, man, I'm really sorry."

"It is customary, in our family, for such an upbringing. To inherit the head Overseer position is the highest honor. To be the Ox that pulls the yoke. To serve the Foundation, in entirety, for the duration of one's life is the greatest sacrifice, and the guiding light." Gears said. "I want you to understand that this is what I've been taught, the true reason for rearing children in such a fashion."

"In addition to…"

“…Yes. In addition to that.”

“Okay. Yeah, no. Totally. So sorry.”

Gears nodded.

“Can…Can you do it?” Crow said eagerly, voice barley above a whisper.

Gears looked away a moment, back at his hands.

The little walking clockwork toy on the bookshelf adjacent to them shuddered a moment in the dim light of the lamp on next to the futon, then began to walk, slowly at first, then steady, confidently marching tiny rubber feet across the shelf. Crow lay transfixed, watching the wheels turn in amazement, until it reached the other end and wound to a stop. The typewriter began clicking. The analog clock spun and whirred.

A moment later, Gears exhaled, and the movement stopped; the clock back at 10:43 PM, the typewriter one line farther in the page, the toy on the opposite side of the bookshelf from where it had started. His companion looked back at him expectantly.

He was speechless.

“Oh. Oh my god. Cog. Cog, oh my god. That’s amazing.” Crow stammered. “Like…Oh, fuck, Charlie, that’s the best useless power I’ve ever seen.”

Gears nodded quietly, always humble. “Not useless. Customary.”

Crow made his tail stop beating with excitement, suddenly feeling enthralled with a charge he hadn’t before. “Yeah. Customary. Of course.”

“Yes. I trust you with this information.”

“Yeah. Yes. Yeah. Oh, my god. Yeah, of course.”

“In that case, I propose we begin review of the materials in the morning.”

“Yeah. Of course. Yes.”

Gears nodded once more, and burrowed back into the sleeping bag. Crow repositioned himself to the best of his ability for sleep, and then reached out for the long cord attached to the lamp.

It clicked off on its own. Charlie looked at him from the floor, face neutral as always, and Crow grinned.

Leonardo Dreams of his Flying Machine,
Tormented by visions of flight and falling,
More wondrous and terrible each than the last,
Master Leonardo imagines an engine,
To carry man up into the sun…

…As the midnight watchtower tolls,
Over the rooftop, street and dome,
The triumph of a human being ascending
In the dreaming of a mortal man.

Leonardo steels himself,
Takes one last breath, and leaps…

-*Leonardo Dreams of His Flying Machine* by Charles Anthony Silvestri

Lord Blackwood and the Great Tarasque Hunt of '83

May 14, 1883:

I received a most curious missive in the post this morning. It has been four months since I returned to England, having nearly lost my life in endeavouring to become the first man to reach the summit of the foreboding and deadly Mt. Everest. I have spent the time since in research and recovery here in London, nursing my wounds and documenting my memoirs of the harrowing trip up the mountain and my nearly-fatal encounter with the creature I found there - a tale which, I fear, may never be told outside these diaries - and I have not planned to embark again for distant shores until after summer has past. That has changed, I fear, as the result of today's letter. It was a formal affair, written in a folded card like a wedding invitation, sealed in the finest envelope, and I present it to you below;

> *To Lord Theodore Thomas Blackwood, CBE*;
>
> *Col. Joseph D'Enfante, l'Armee de Terre of the Republic of France,*
>
> *does hereby cordially invite you to participate in*
>
> **A HUNT**
>
> *of a great and terrible creature that threatens the lives of thousands.*
>
> **THE TARASQUE**,
>
> *a creature great and terrifying, of late believed to be legend,*
>
> *has arisen and threatens the security of the land of Provence and of France itself.*
>
> *Col. D'Enfante has been authorised by the President of*

the Republic

to pay a sum of

FIVE MILLION ENGLISH POUNDS

to the man or men who shall slay this infamous beast.

R.S.V.P. in care of Col. D'Enfante, No. 22, Kensington Road, Knightsbridge, London.

I immediately dashed off an acceptance and sent it out with the afternoon post. Though I have hunted foxes and elephants and every beast, great and small, in between, I had never heard of such a creature as the Tarasque, and certainly never had an opportunity to hunt one. I spent my afternoon in the study, pouring over encyclopediae and tomes of history and mythology, before I found the term in a collection of folk tales regarding St. Martha, sister to Mary Magdalene, who had supposedly calmed the beast with her song. The text described it as a vicious creature; a massive chimera, that breathed fire and whose scaly hide repelled every blade, that killed without remorse and seemed only to wreak chaos for its own enjoyment.

When the last delivery of the day came just before tea-time, I had received an address and directions to attend a briefing the day after tomorrow in the City. I have always been a firm believer in the proposition that even in the most preposterous of myths, there lies a kernel of truth. Whether an ancient behemoth that breathed fire was bringing ruination to the south of France, I knew not; but I knew that the army and the president themselves were concerned enough to seek out a man such as myself, and were willing to offer a bounty that would finance a score of proper expeditions for the killing of a single beast. On Wednesday, I will learn why.

May 16, 1883:

Today I attended Col. D'Enfante's meeting, held in a private room in the City, at the club owned by Messrs. Marshall, Carter, and Dark. (Lest the reader question my morality, I assure you that I am no member, dues-paying or otherwise, of that association; I find their

stock in trade offensive and deplorable, and their clientele even more so.) But on this day, the windowless establishment was free of its usual throng of libertines and Bohemians, replaced by a handful of officers and men in the uniforms of the French, a handful of our own soldiers guarding the door. Servants and waiters, apparently relieved to be in our company rather than that of their usual employers, offered drinks and *hors d'oeuvres* to their guests.

Besides myself, there were three guests of honour at the meeting. There was an American, Mr. Roosevelt, a young man who had made for himself already quite a name as a hunter of big game in the American west. There was Mr. Dukov, a Russian I knew of by reputation as a scientist and historian. Lastly, there was another Englishman, the same Mr. Harris whom readers of these pages may recall as he whom I matched wits with on the banks of the Nile in 1855. I will spare the reader the excruciating details of our past intercourse; suffice it to say that Mr. Harris and I were schoolmates at Eton, that I regarded him then as little more than a common blackguard, and that what news I have heard of him since then has given me little reason to change my assessment of his personage.

Col. D'Enfante, a short and middle-aged man who bore signs of great fatigue and worry, spoke briefly and elaborated on his reasons for calling on the four of us. The being that his government had come to call the Tarasque, he said, had first appeared the Sunday after Easter near the village of Tarascon (named, most coincidentally, for the mythical beast itself) and had destroyed the town utterly, claiming several thousand souls in the process. The handful of survivors who escaped the devastation had described a great lizard, nimble and merciless, that had charged directly into the town square and destroyed everyone and everything in its path, crushing, smashing, and devouring people, livestock, and buildings alike. One man, a farmer whose wife and children had been ripped to shreds by the beast, claimed that it spoke to him, in plain French, and told him of them; "Ils étaient répugnants."

Since then, the Colonel said, three outlying villages and countless farms in Provence had fallen to the Tarasque. It attacked without mercy or reason, killed indiscriminately, and left only devastation in its wake. The army had sent men and horses and cavalry against it;

there were few survivors, and those who lived claimed the beast had been struck directly by artillery and neither flagged nor missed a step, the hole in its chest seemingly knitting together as it charged their position. The entire region had been quarantined, citizens were being evacuated by the thousands, and the army and the press were passing stories of plagues and Prussian revanchists, but his government feared the worst would soon come to pass; Nimes, Avignon, and Arles were in danger if the beast continued to rage.

The four of us, the Colonel claimed, were the finest hunters and scientific minds available and known to his government. He knew not if we were capable of taking down such a monster, but between our expert knowledge and unique access to the finest tools and weapons known to science, he hoped we could succeed where his own forces had failed.

I left the meeting with a stack of papers; details of the army's knowledge of the Tarasque based on what reconnaissance they have to date endeavoured. On Saturday, the four of us will board a steamer across the Channel and travel to the epicenter of this pandemonium ourselves. Deeds, my loyal valet, has begun packing my bags, and is having the more "exotic" armaments in my arsenal prepared for shipping. I do not anticipate working with Mr. Harris any more than I anticipate shaking hands with the Devil, but Messrs. Roosevelt and Dukov appear to be of sound mind and fine spirit, and with luck, our motley quartet shall return to England with a fortune in our pockets and a story to tell.

May 20th, 1883:

We disembarked in Avignon after an uneventful trip by train from Calais. It may seem strange for a globe-trotter such as myself, but until this week-end I have never had occasion to travel to France; after all, it is a civilised place, lacking in the ancient mysteries and elusive game that is my passion (or so I would have thought). Mr. Roosevelt and I spent many hours sharing our tales of adventure; I find in him a true intellectual who understands what it means to be a naturalist. Mr. Dukov I found more difficult to talk to; he is a private man, who prefers the company of his books and his studies to that of his fellows. He proudly displayed a variety of his own inventions he intended to test against the Tarasque; a gun that fires beams of

electricity, a jellied kerosene that burns without exploding, and what he described as his latest prototype - a large rifle on a tripod, fueled by refined pitchblende (which I suspect is not entirely different than Mr. Moth's destabilizing muskets, one of which I had brought myself.)

I did my best to avoid speaking to Mr. Harris during the trip. I intend during our expedition to be no less than a gentleman, but the man leaves a sour taste in my mouth. When we boarded the train at Calais, I watched as he had a large crate loaded onto the train, which he told us contained his "secret weapon". He refused to tell us what the box contained, but viewing it made me uncomfortable - the air seemed to chill as it was carried by. In any event, it is too large to fit in our wagon - for now, we shall be leaving it in a bank vault in Avignon.

Our weapons and provisions have been loaded onto a wagon and horses have been readied for us. Tomorrow, Colonel D'Enfante will escort us to the edge of the quarantine zone. From there, he says, the four of us shall be on our own - he can spare no more soldiers, lest the beast attack the fortifications directly and break loose.

May 21st, 1883:

I have seen the horrors of war often enough in my years. I saw the wrath of the British Empire first-hand when I lead troops in the Opium Wars. In Africa I have seen native tribes fight to the last man, destroying everything in their path. In the Crimea I barely escaped with my life as thousands of men fought and died and cities were laid bare. The destruction I saw there pales in comparison to what I have beheld in the Tarasque's wake.

Avignon itself looked like a city at war - soldiers patrolling the streets, barricades at the edge of town. Not far outside the city we reached the edge of the quarantine zone. Soldiers had been hard at work digging trenches, erecting fortifications. The young men keeping watch looked battle-scarred, as though they had seen indescribable horror. A constant stream of evacuees made their way out of the area - women and children, some with little more than the clothes on their back. Many looked confused and agitated, as if they had no clue why they were being removed from their homes. On the

faces of others, there was no doubt. I asked on passing if any of them had yet seen the Tarasque. Only a few - the scouts and lookouts - had seen it from a distance, I was told, for nobody who had engaged the beast at close range was still alive. It had not yet dared to attack the perimeter the army had erected - but two days prior, a watchman told me, he had spotted it a mile from the front line, seemingly staring back at him. Mr. Harris grudgingly agreed to ride out alone and scout for the beast, while Mr. Roosevelt, Mr. Dukov, and I followed the road to Tarascon to learn what we could of the nature of our quarry.

Tarascon itself was a scene of utter ruination. Bodies lay by the score in the streets where they had fallen. Much of the town had been consumed by fire; the town's famous castle, and other stone buildings, dashed to rubble and massive holes torn in the walls that remained standing. We saw not a living soul - no man or woman, no livestock, nor vermin, nor birds or beasts of the field. Even the greenery of the town seemed to have been destroyed. I began to feel pangs of doubt in my stomach as we surveyed the scene - could one creature have truly wreaked such destruction?

We set up camp on the edge of the dead town. Mr. Harris returned by evening and informed us he had spotted the Tarasque to the southwest, near the village of Bellegarde, in the act of destroying a farmhouse. Its route, he said, had not been difficult to trace, for a swath of barren land seemed to lay a trail; even the grass itself was not safe from the Tarasque's wrath. Tomorrow, we will follow the trail, and engage the beast.

May 22nd, 1883:

We have met the Tarasque this day, and we are lucky to have escaped with our lives.

We traveled southwest to Belleville, which we found in a state of destruction not unlike that of Tarascon itself. From there, we followed the creature's trail as it meandered south, then west, then northwest through the farmlands, drawing uncomfortably close to Nimes. Shortly after midday, we spotted the creature in the distance; it was stationary, seeming to nap in the afternoon sun. It was a massive thing, longer than a whale and taller than a giraffe, and it

looked to outweigh either. Its scales glistened in the sun and its teeth, massive and shining, were bared as it rested among the chaos it had wrought. Had it wings, I would have called it a dragon.

With our weapons in tow we stealthily approached the beast to a range of less than a hundred feet. Mr. Dukov set up his pitchblende-gun, which he claimed would take some time to charge before it could be fired, while Mr. Roosevelt and Mr. Harris prepared their elephant guns and I readied my particle destabilizer. Behind a short fence demarcating one of the now-abandoned farms, we drew straws and it was agreed I would take the first shot at the abomination. Steadying my gun against the fence, I took careful aim for the sleeping Tarasque's head, I held my breath, made my final adjustment, and fired.

The shot hit square and true, and we watched with delight as the top of the Tarasque's head was shorn clean off. The beast slumped to the ground and I breathed a sigh of relief. In one shot, the beast that had killed thousands and menaced a nation was dead. Mr. Harris let out a cheer - and the dead beast came to life. It rose to its feet and turned in our direction. Blood, brains, and gore oozed from its skull as a head missing an eye stared us down and let out a blood-curdling roar before it charged at us faster than a bull elephant. Mr. Roosevelt and Mr. Harris barely had time to fire a round each at the beast before we were forced to scatter. Harris tossed aside his elephant gun for a smaller repeater he had been carrying and discharged a magazine into the Tarasque's flank - and we watched in horror as the wounds it took sealed themselves within seconds. Mr. Dukov was forced to shut down his pitchblende-gun before it could fully charge, and fired his electric rifle three times into the monster's open wound, stunning it for long enough for us to reach our horses. By the time we were on horseback, the beast was up again and charging us, and flesh and bone was knitting anew over the open cavity in its skull. I fired the particle destabilizer again at its foreleg and took it off entirely, hobbling it as it tried to chase us on three legs. We rode in four directions and agreed to meet behind the quarantine line. I saw the beast attempt to take off in pursuit of Mr. Roosevelt as the stump of its leg began to grow and take new form, but he was able to elude the goliath and by nightfall we were among the soldiers at the barricade, our prides injured but otherwise in

good health.

May 28th, 1883:

Luck and providence have provided; thus far, the Tarasque has made no effort to escape the quarantine area, and has proven content to ravage the abandoned farms of Provence and feed liberally on the animals and plants left behind. After our second attempt to attack the Tarasque on the 23rd proved no more successful than the first, we have come to a conclusion that the beast cannot be killed simply by gunshot, or electrification, or setting it aflame, for the rate at which it heals its injuries is so great, and its tolerance for pain and mutilation so high, that even the mighty broadsides of the Royal Navy would have little chance of destroying it before it could take their lives in trade. To slay the Tarasque, we determined, we would have to immobilize it, and deal such destruction upon it that it would be utterly annihilated before it could free itself. We discussed for several hours how such a thing could be achieved, before an old sergeant who had been manning the night watch begged our ears. The sergeant had, he said, fought in Viet-Namh when the natives there attempted to rebel against the French in sixty-eight, and had seen them make use of a trap that was elegant, easily disguised, and deadly. Mr. Roosevelt and I talked over the fine points of the idea well into the night, and the next day the four of us traveled into the field to lay our trap.

We prepared our trap in the fields near Graveson, a village between Tarascon and Avignon that the Tarasque had yet to lay waste to, and where the water table was amenable to our task. By careful observation we had judged that the beast stood about nine feet at the shoulder, six feet wide, and thirty feet long. With the help of a few soldiers whom Col. D'Enfante had grudgingly conceded to parting with, we dug a long trench in the field wide and long enough to contain the beast, and deep enough to stop the beast climbing loose before the damage could be done. In the bottom of the pit we mounted steel rods, sharpened to a fine point, by the hundreds, each tipped with a noxious poison I had acquired in the Orient. Running lengthwise through the center of the pit, we built a wooden bridge, large and sturdy enough to accommodate a man on horseback, but not so sturdy that it would not break and shatter

under the weight of the Tarasque. Four days we were involved in the earthwork; the digging done, we laid a net across the top and it was covered with grass and leaves. From a distance, it looked to all the world like an ordinary patch of open land - beneath which, laid doom.

Mr. Harris has spotted the Tarasque not two miles from our location, and tomorrow we will spring the trap. Mr. Roosevelt has agreed to act as bait - he will approach the Tarasque on horseback and attack it once with his elephant gun, and once it gives chase, he will lure it to the pit. He is to gallop across the bridge and lure the Tarasque to follow him - and when it attempts to do so, it will surely fall into the pit. Messrs. Dukov and Harris and I, lying in wait out of sight, will then join Mr. Roosevelt at the pit's edge and unleash the full fury of our armaments onto it - our rifles and shot-guns, the particle destabilizer, Mr. Dukov's electric rifle, and provided it has charged safely, he shall make his first firing of the pitchblende-gun. Once our armament has been exhausted, we shall pour four barrels of Mr. Dukov's jellied kerosene into the pit and ignite it - and, Providence withstanding, nothing shall be left of the creature but ash and bone by sundown tomorrow.

May 29th, 1883:

SUCCESS!

The plan went off without a hitch. It was afternoon before Mr. Roosevelt could coerce the Tarasque into pursuing him, but surely enough the reptilian behemoth fell into the pit, impaled upon the spikes, and was stuck while the four of us rained destruction from above. The monster let loose a screech from the pits of Damnation itself as bullets and explosives tore its flesh loose bit by bit, and jellied kerosene burned slowly and stopped it regrowing. Mr. Dukov warned us to avert our eyes when he finally fired the pitchblende-gun, and his warning was justified - the blast was bright enough to blind, and a massive plume of smoke and fire erupted from the pit after he had pulled the trigger, seeming to blossom into a mushroom above us. By the time the fires had died down, a charred skeleton was all that remained.

We have separated the beast's massive skull, blackened and

perforated, from what remains of the monster, and a handful of soldiers who reported after the blast are hard at work filling in the pit with earth. Tomorrow we shall bring the skull back to Avignon and collect our reward.

May 30th, 1883:

DISASTER!

We were hailed as heroes by the army when we arrived in Avignon with our prize. In the morning light, the Tarasque's skull seemed whiter than it had the night before, and more charred flesh stuck to it than it had seemed when we dragged it from the pit, though surely it was little more than an illusion. The four of us posed for photographs, and Mr. Dukov asked to have his photograph taken with his head in between the massive jaws of our fallen prey.

Imagine our horror when the jaws snapped shut, severing Dukov's head neatly at the shoulders. The skull of the Tarasque rolled loose from its place on the stage and snapped again, taking another chunk of his body, and the soldiers screamed and fainted as it seemed to be growing a new coating of flesh and scales over its charred exterior. We watched, shocked, as the honor guards fired a volley at the skull. The chips it took off seemed to replace themselves instantly, and I was dumbfounded as sinew and muscle seemed to spread across the creature's bones and knit into shape. The jaws of the disembodied Tarasque opened and it shouted in French; "**Vous me rendez malade**".

From the other end of the plaza I heard more screams, and looked to see the impossible - the rest of the Tarasque! Covered in earth and grime, held together by a few lonely strands of muscle, the headless carcass lurched through the square with uncanny speed, trampling men in its path, ignoring gunshot and cannon fire as it made to rejoin its body. From the corner of my eye I saw Mr. Harris take off running. Mr. Roosevelt noted he was headed in the direction of the bank vault and his secret weapon; as the skull of the Tarasque seemed to be making its way towards where I stood, I gave Harris chase.

We found Mr. Harris having dragged the crate out of the vault into

the lobby, hurriedly prying the boards loose. Soon the crate fell away, revealing a stone coffin that looked truly ancient. It felt as if all the heat fled the room when the sarcophagus was exposed, and I forced back a shudder as I beheld it. Three chains with massive locks held the lid in place, and the lid and casket itself were covered with hand-carved runes that looked to be Sumerian or Akkadian. I confess that I have not taken the time to learn the ancient languages of Mesopotamia; but I felt a distinct sense of *wrongness* emanating from the box as Mr. Harris drew a ring with three keys from his coat and began to unlock the seals, one by one. I begged with him to stop this madness and flee while we had a chance, and he insisted that once open, our victory would be secured. Mr. Harris pushed the lid aside and barely had a moment to regard his secret weapon, in the flesh, before an olive-toned arm, sword in hand, lashed out from within the box and sliced his head clean off.

In all my years of adventuring among the primitives and wild men of the world, I have never set eyes on a man who looked so savage, so elemental, so full of primal rage as the being that now climbed from the coffin; naked, sword in hand, its long black hair flowing behind it, its body covered head to toe in tattooes of eldritch imagery and ancient languages that resembled no script written by man. Sherman, the American general, is said to have told his enemies, begging for mercy, that they may as well appeal against the thunderstorm. What I beheld before me, I thought, was the very eidolon of the storm.

Mr. Roosevelt attempted to entreat with the man and beg its assistance; seeming to barely hear him, the god-man set his eyes on Roosevelt and lunged with his sword. Roosevelt parried with his rifle, the barrel cracking under its onslaught, and in surprise the god-man dropped the blade. Roosevelt picked it up and attempted to return the blow, and in an instant the god-man somehow held another sword in each hand. Mr. Roosevelt did his best to fend off his assailant's onslaught, but found himself cornered soon. Though I am loath to intervene in a fair fight between two honest men, I could not bear to see Mr. Roosevelt cut down in the midst of this pandemonium; I drew my pistol and emptied its cylinder, discharging five rounds into the god-man's head.

Though it should have been dead, the olive-skinned destroyer turned and stared me down. Like the Tarasque, even with half its face gone it seemed ready to kill. Dropping one of its blades, it moved its hand rapidly through the air and tossed something at me faster than I could react. In an instant, I could not move my arms. The man had somehow materialized a *bola*, a weapon used by the cow-men of South America to immobilize fleeing animals, and it had tied itself securely around my chest. Another flick and a second bola struck me around the legs, and I was down on the ground. He approached to land the killing blow, when behind me I saw the outer wall of the bank shudder and give way and heard that offensive roar - the cry of the Tarasque, nary a scratch upon it, as it entered the building in search of its would-be slayers.

The god-man caught sight of the Tarasque and lost interest entirely in Mr. Roosevelt and I. This, I thought, must be why poor Mr. Harris considered him his secret weapon; this avatar of rage lived to fight, and in the Tarasque, it had the ultimate rival. To describe the fight that ensued between those two unkillable titans would take a hundred pages or more; Mr. Roosevelt and I huddled in the safety of the bank vault, which alone seemed immune to the destruction the two rained upon each other. After the better part of an hour had passed, hundreds lay dead around them, the center of Avignon little more than rubble. The god-man was missing an arm and half a leg, an eye, and the better part of his brain, and his stomach had been cut open. In a state where most men would be long dead, it continued to fight, severing even its own entrails and making weapons of them. The Tarasque had suffered as badly; it was on the ground, recuperating, when I saw the god-man take notice of Mr. Dukov's pitchblende-gun, lying near what remained of the stage that an hour ago had been the site of such jubilation.

As we watched, the god-man removed the core of the pitchblende-gun with an uncanny precision. He made what seemed to be bombs and explosives appear, and it strapped them to the device's core, which he mounted on his chest. Lighting a fuse, it charged at the Tarasque as it readied itself to meet him. Having seen the fury of the pitchblende-gun in a controlled state, Mr. Roosevelt and I had no desire to see what happened next. We retreated into the vault as a blinding light filled the square and a blistering wind, mightier than the

hurricanes of the Caribbean, slammed the door shut and sealed us within.

It is dark; the light from my electric torch has provided just enough luminescence by which to write this account. I know not for how long the air in this vault will last. Aside from the lifeless body of Mr. Harris, there is nothing in this vault that approximates food or water, and as Christians and gentlemen Mr. Roosevelt and myself have sworn not to pursue that dark path unless our lives themselves are on the line. I do not know if I will make it out of here alive; if I do not, let this diary be my last word and testament to the horrors that have befallen this corner of the world.

June 13th, 1883:

Providence smiled upon us after all, in the end; on the morning of the 1st, the vault door opened and I regarded a major of the army and a company of men searching for survivors. Mr. Roosevelt and I were dehydrated and beginning to suffer from pitchblende-fever; fortunately; I knew the address of one of my dear friend Henry's associates in Marseille, and upon being transported to hospital, he met us there and provided the treatments necessary to stave off the certain death that that malicious ague carries with it.

Colonel D'Enfante is dead, I have learned; and at least ten thousand others who were incinerated when Avignon was consumed by flame. Even those who had survived, I learned, have been burned or blinded, and pitchblende-fever will likely claim many of them in time. No sign has been seen of the Tarasque or the god-man since the explosion; nor, for that matter, of the icy sarcophagus in which he had apparently slept until the late Mr. Harris loosed him upon the city. It will take years, if not decades, to restore this ancient region to its former glory.

We were two of only a handful of witnesses to one of the greatest disasters to strike France in recent memory; and having been at the center of it all, the army regarded us with great suspicion. We were interrogated several times, first by soldiers, then by police, then by politicians. A man who looked English watched and took notes, but said not a word as we told our story. In the end we escaped transportation to Devil's Island, but the reward that had been

promised was forfeit, and we were sternly warned that neither of us were welcome in France again so long as we lived. The explosion that claimed Avignon was seen for hundreds of miles, I learned, and the press from Paris to New York were heavily embroiled in speculation; everything from a falling star, to a German super-weapon, to the wrath of God Himself was being proposed as an explanation. We were warned not to share our personal knowledge of the event with others as we were sent on our way.

Mr. Roosevelt and I parted ways in Calais; he intends to return to America, he informed me, and pursue a political career. In that, I wish him well.

I returned to my house in London this afternoon, and was informed by Deeds that a post-card had arrived for me this morning. The handwriting in the brief, unsigned note within resembled that of the strange Englishman who had attended the questionings, whose notes I caught brief glimpses of from time to time. I present that message below;

> *To Lord Theodore Thomas Blackwood, CBE;*
>
> *The Royal Foundation for the Security, Containment, and Protection of Anomalous Objects and Phantasmagoria requests a meeting for the purpose of negotiating an alliance favourable to both our parties. Please call any time (excepting Sundays) at No. 19 Marylebone Road, Westminster, and ask to speak to Doctor Thursday. Your discretion is requested in this matter.*

I have not heard of this Foundation before, and I do not know if I intend to take them up on their mysterious overture. Perhaps I shall hear them out; but I have never been one to serve in one man's employ for very long, and I value my freedom as a naturalist and explorer above all else. We shall see.

Lord Blackwood in the Land of the Unclean

December 25th, 1875:

As far and as wide as I have travelled in my years, there is nothing in the world quite like Christmas-time in London. The crisp winter air echoes with the song of carolers and everywhere one looks the eyes of his fellow men are filled with an air of peace and charity. I gave the help the day off after our early meal and have spent the evening in quiet reflection and planning - for this Christmas, the germ of a grand and glorious new expedition has presented itself to me.

Two nights ago I attended a Christmas party at the gentlemen's club. The food was fine and the drinks flowed freely, and I remained in conversation with several of my fellow naturalists until well into the morning. Shortly after midnight our discussion turned to the topic of the super-natural, and Mr. Wallace, the famed father of evolutionary theory and a noted Spiritualist, told me of a most unusual occurrence he had heard of recently. An associate of his had recently returned from the Levant with a most unusual artifact - a small red disc, fashioned perhaps of cinnabar, carved with runes he thought to be an early form of Phoenician, or perhaps Cretan. When left to its own devices, the object would roll about on its own and reach great speeds, breaking through walls and crushing anything in its path, until it came to rest upon a mirrored surface. A man could pick it up easily no matter how fast it moved, he claimed, and until it was set down it would glow brightly in strange colours. We found this account most curious, but what Mr. Wallace told us next proved even more interesting.

Two months ago, he said, his associate's maid had been cleaning in the room where the disc laid pressed against one of his dressing mirrors. Ignorant of the object's nature, the maid lifted it up to dust underneath it and set it back upon the mirror - whereupon, the maid had said, the mirror's surface rippled and a man in strange clothes fell through, as if he had been leaning upon a wall that gave way.

The man panicked and began flailing about and shouting nonsensically, and tried to flee before the maid locked him in the room and summoned the police, who took the man away as he shouted and tried to run back in the direction of the room he had apparated in. Mr. Wallace's associate had thought him at first a common thief, but there was absolutely no way the man could have entered the estate without arousing suspicion, and the maid's account was most clear - he had come through the mirror.

I have long wondered if there were other worlds in Creation where man, or beings like man, have existed and thrived; but owing to the great vastness of space, I have long assumed that none of them would be within our reach for some time. If Mr. Wallace's account was true, there might be a way to travel to one of those worlds right here in London! I entreated with Mr. Wallace for some time to divulge the name of his confederate; he refused out of respect for his friend's privacy, but told me that the strange intruder, who claimed the name "Izikaiah Belson", had been declared mad by the court and sentenced to Bedlam, and that I might find him there if I wished to. After New Year's, I intend to call upon this madman.

January 3rd, 1876:

The fact that an institution like Bedlam is allowed to exist in our great nation is an affront. Were a man not already mad upon entering these walls, the circumstances of his internment would make him so. I did my best to avert my eyes from the lunatics packed into dingy cells and overcrowded wards as a porter lead me to a padded cell where the man called Izikaiah Belson had been locked away alone. None of the doctors had been able to speak to him, she said; if I wished to try, I was more than welcome to do so. A gruff-looking gaoler with a large and ancient-looking key-ring unlocked the door, and I invited myself inside, where Mr. Belson sat alone in the corner. I introduced myself and said I had come to learn what I could of who he was and where he came from. He did not respond at first and turned his head away, mumbling under his breath. I listened carefully and found that the tongue he spoke almost resembled the English language, but it was far from any tongue that has ever been spoken in the Queen's court; twisted and altered as if by centuries of deviation, not dissimilar from how the many and various Romance

languages evolved amidst the collapse of the Roman Empire. I stood and listened attentively as he repeated a series of sentences three times, that I present below;

Hae who are bitwayn space, press'd is yir voce. Yi are watchen n' I yir vyss'l, here n' here n' there. Awaye wit' me sin, Vaader, n' shed for me yir sanggre weppin', n' I'll but do the word of the Vaaders b'low ye. S'beit.

The man's accent was strange, and it was part-way through his third recitation when it occurred to me that he was attempting to pray. I knew the prayer well, and when he finished his third recitation, I repeated it back to him in the Queen's English. He fell silent as he heard my rendition. His first reaction was more vitriolic than I expected - I believe he accused me of having "the speech of the old elders", and accused me of being a sinner or a witch. I assured him as best I could that I was neither; I am a naturalist. He seemed to calm himself somewhat when he heard that word; in any event, he no longer feared me, and over the course of an hour or two we worked out a pidgin of English and his dialect in which we could converse. In time, I came to the conclusion that he hails from a world which is surprisingly like, and yet completely alien to our own.

Mr. Belson claimed to have come from a place called "The City Where Elijah Fell". He describes it as a metropolis that would put London to shame; tens of millions of souls call it home, living in towers thousands of feet high, commuting on great trains and horse-less carriages that moved hundreds of miles per hour through the packed streets. Every building was wired with electricity, and possessed devices for receiving of sights and sounds from the other end of the world, for delivering the contained knowledge of entire libraries, and other incredible wonders. I showed him a map of the world and asked where this city lay, and he pointed to America, on the western coast of the Floridian peninsula. He claimed he had been at work in one of the city's great towers, momentarily leaning against a wall during a prayer break, when the wall seemed to fall away behind him and he found himself in a strange old house with a strangely dressed woman screaming at him, confirming Mr. Wallace's account.

I showed him a Bible I procured from one of the doctors and asked if

he was a Christian. He recoiled at the proposition as he had when I recited the Lord's Prayer, and informed me that, while the elders had been Christians in days gone by, all of that had changed with the Second Coming and the authoring of the Third Testament, and that to openly proclaim to be a Christian was a heresy and a most heinous crime. I gather that in the nation Mr. Belson hails from, which he claims to control the entire world, the church and the state have been brought together in a way that would make the Archbishop of Canterbury himself a proponent of disestablishmentarianism. I asked what becomes of heretics when they are caught and he informed me that they are "made pure in S'Tears"; for if heresy is allowed to spread unchecked, then "the Unclean" shall come and bring destruction to the pure and the wicked alike.

Mr. Belson refused to elaborate further when I asked him what the Unclean were. He asserted that it was blasphemy to even speak of them, for to say their name might draw their attention. I assured him that nobody in London would harm him for speaking of this matter, and that, whatever an "Unclean" might be, there were none in any corner of this world that I have explored. Belson was visibly frightened as he told me, in halting whispers, that the Unclean were the Devil. But unlike the Devil of the heretics, who lived in the pits below, these Devils walked the Earth. They were giant creatures, behemoths of pure sin, all of man's unrighteous thoughts and deeds given flesh. They stalked the darkest corners of the world and their sin tainted the Earth itself so that no crop could grow and no man could live, and it took all the efforts of the holiest crusaders to keep them so imprisoned lest they break free and the world come to an end.

Until such time as the doctor assured me I must leave for the night, I remained in Belson's cell and learned as much as I could of this strange world he came from - matters of language, culture, fashion, everything a man might need to know to travel amongst its gleaming cities anonymously. I managed to cajole a young nurse at the clerk's desk into letting me review Belson's file, and I learned that the affray that lead to his arrest occurred in Notting Hill at the residence of a Mr. Weathers. Tomorrow I shall call upon him and state my intent to purchase this disc that turns mirrors into gateways to another world;

for I intend to conduct a survey of this civilization to rival Sir Burton's forbidden journey into Mecca, and, if I can, find one of these diabolical monsters Mr. Belson speaks of, and make it my prey.

January 9th, 1876:

Mr. Weathers was quite relieved to be rid of the disc when I purchased it from him. It glowed an eerie purple as he handed it to me; and yet once in my own hand, its aura seemed to fade, and become instead a greenish hue. I took it home and placed it on a mirror in my study, and immediately the glass seemed to become as water. I saw a pastoral scene not unlike that which one might behold in our own country-side; a farmhouse in the distance, tilled fields with tall crops between. There were children running and playing among the crops, and in the distance, over the horizon, I saw in silhouette titanic structures taller than any building man on this Earth has ever made. For several days I observed through the mirror; on a few occasions the farmer and his hands came close enough that I could hear their speech; the accent not as thick as Mr. Belson's had been, but foreign enough that I strained to decypher their conversations. The clothes they wore were not unlike those a farm-hand might wear in England; but Mr. Belson had warned me the fashions in the city were very different from what he had seen in London, and I would be most out of place in any of my usual clothes. A visit to the Metropolitan Police, and after a lengthy conversation with the precinct constable and the promise of a sizable donation I was able to acquire the clothes Mr. Belson had been wearing at the time he entered our world. It was not dissimilar to morning dress, but to my eye it seemed less formal; there was no waistcoat, the jacket was shorter and cut more conservatively with broad lapels, the cravat was thin and a solid shade of black. I had Deeds tailor it to fit me, and I stowed it away for when I reach the city.

I have packed lightly, for I shall be travelling alone and I shall have none of the native currency, for Mr. Belson had carried no bill-fold when he entered our world. I have my clothes and rations for a few days, and I shall enter dressed in a farmer's garb and remain so dressed until I reach the metropolis. Gold and silver I have brought in the hopes of trading for currency (Mr. Belson having informed me that the principal form of trade is paper), and within my pack I have

hidden my pistol and several of Mr. Moth's weapons. I have my compass, my sextant, my electric torch, a comprehensive atlas of the world, and my journal, and a few good luck talismans besides those. The cycle of day and night in this other world is some eight hours behind our own; from this I deduce that the scene I behold is somewhere along the western coast of America. I shall cross through the looking-glass under cover of night this evening, for fear of alarming the farmers of my presence, and make my way towards the city; where, hopefully, I can discover a library or an institute of learning and document the history and culture of this world - and where the so-called Unfertile Zones are located, so that I might observe these Unclean for myself.

January 10th, 1876:

What a world this is indeed.

This is indeed one of the more temperate parts of the world, for though it was past midnight local time when I entered this world, the air was perfectly warm. Based on my reading of the stars, I judge myself to be somewhere near the thirty-fourth parallel, in the region that must in this world correspond to the land of California. Here in the fields it is dark; but in the southeast I behold a stunning panorama of light shining into the darkness, the aura of the great metropolis bathed in electric light so bright that it shrouds the stars themselves above it. In the distance I heard sounds like great engines. The terrain was easily passed, even in the darkness, save for a fence at the edge of the farm I had alighted into, which I was forced to climb.

The sight I beheld when I reached the source of the noise was unbelievable. A great paved road lay stretched across the grassland, solid barriers at either side. It was wider than any road I have ever beheld, and stripes painted on the road indicated sixteen lanes for traffic - eight going in one direction, and eight in the other. The entire road was lit by giant lamps brighter than the gas-lamps of London or New York, and one could have read a newspaper comfortably by their light. Even at this late hour, I watched in surprise and wonder (and no small amount of terror, I must admit) as motor-carriages far more advanced than Mr. Bollee's steam-cars hurtled along the road at speeds faster than the finest locomotive or

the fastest race-horse. They must have been travelling a hundred miles per hour or more - some of them small enough to carry a handful of people, others massive like train cars and looking to haul cargo by the ton. Some never touched the roadway at all, seemingly gliding on a cushion of air. I had to sit by the roadside, obscured in shadow, for some time while I took this in. Many times in my life I have encountered savage tribes that never before have seen the wonders of civilization. At this moment, I felt the savage myself, beholding wonders he has no hope of contemplating.

I dared not cross the road, and as it seemed like a straight-away enough path to the city,I walked for several hours along its shoulder. It was difficult to tell in the darkness, but it looked to be about thirty miles to the out-skirts of the city, and I judged it would take well past mid-day to reach the inhabited areas. I feared that any of the carriages hurtling by might at any moment careen out of control and catastrophe would ensue, and I wondered how any man could bear such speeds. The eastern sky was beginning to show the tint of dawn when one of the carriages slowed to a stop on the edge of the road, next to me, a door opened, and a voice from within asked if I desired a ride into the city. I have never been one to rely on the charity of strangers, but I was curious to examine one of the carriages from the inside and accepted.

It was scarsely a quarter hour before we were among the crystalline towers of the metropolis. I did my best to disguise my terror as the driver, who identified himself as Ben O'Kazzem, inquired of my business. I told him my name was Teodor Swarzrod (that, Mr. Belson had told me, being how my name would be presented in his language), that I was a farm-hand in the nearby country-side, and that I had never before been to the city but that I intended to research my family's history at one of the major libraries therein. We struggled to understand each other as I had yet to fully master the dialect, but his assumption that I merely had a "country accent" saved me any uncomfortable questions. I disembarked in the financial center of the city and offered to pay him for the ride with one of my gold slugs. He refused saying it was far too much for a simple ride, and I offered him a silver slug instead - which he accepted, and offered me a considerable sum of paper currency in the balance, while commenting that he never imagined the country-

folk had such wealth at their disposal.

This metropolis, which I now know to be called the City of Angelic Glory, is easily larger than any city in all the world - I imagine the entire population of England could dwell within and find themselves wanting for neighbours. There is a great bustle everywhere I go in the city, and yet, there is a desperation and fear that underlies it all; nobody meets anyone's gaze, and every man seems constantly to fear and suspect every other. With the bank-notes Mr. O'Kazzem had given me, I breakfasted in a bustling cafe where I enjoyed a meal barely dissimilar from the full breakfast one can find at any reputable establishment in London, and I have found board in a grand hotel named the St. George. Imagine my surprise when I was told my room would be on the seventy-eighth floor! An electric lift that would make Mr. Otis green with envy whisked me to the impossible height in seconds, and I found myself staring out a window at the gargantuan city. Towers like the one in which I stood jutted out in all directions, many of them extending hundreds of feet even above my own vantage point. Highways not unlike the one that took me to the city cris-crossed the metropolis and formed a ring around its perimeter, and I beheld a massive network of smaller roads and railways. The hotel concierge has given me directions to the civic library - tomorrow I shall seek it out, but for now I must close the curtains on this impossible scene and rest, for I find myself overwhelmed and weary.

January 11th, 1876:

My findings at this city's great library have shed much light into the nature of the world I now find myself in. The library itself stood twelve levels high - not as tall as many of the other buildings in the City of Angelic Glory, but easily taller than any institution of learning in London. A librarian guided me to the eighth level where I would find books of history and geography, and I spent the day immersed in study. Though the books are written in strange letters that do not resemble any I have ever seen, I have found somehow that I am able to understand them as if it were common English writing.

A comparison of a world map to the one in my own atlas confirmed that I was in the land of California, in about the same area as a town that in our world is known as Los Angeles. Many great cities in this

world stood in the same place as cities in our own, though none shared the same name - London was here called the City of Winston's Stand, and Edo the City of David's Triumph. I saw no national boundaries on the map, though there were many names indicating different regions - the United Lands of the Son, Huffasia, the Land Bountiful. The only divisions indicated were between the "Blessed Lands", colored green, and the "Unfertile Lands", colored red. There were Unfertile Lands spread across the globe, though I found the distribution most uneven - in North America I saw but seven, and in Europe four, while Africa had dozens, and almost the entirety of China was covered by them.

I found that the Bible exists in this world, but it is a Bible very unlike our own. It is about a thousand pages longer and is divided into three sections, named the First, Second, and Third Testaments. The First and Second Testaments are similar to the Old and New Testaments of our Bible, but have been extensively rewritten - all references to "God", "the LORD", or "the Father" have been replaced with a simple reference to "Him", and there is a greater emphasis on sin, uncleanliness, and purification than I recall ever learning in school.

The Third Testament appears to have been written in the seventeenth century; and as I had not the time or inclination to read it in full, I referred to a history book about what is referred to in this world as the Second Coming. Prior to the year 1621 or so, I found, the history of this world had been much like our own aside from certain linguistic and cultural details, and an indication that the wide-spread colonization of the Americas had begun several hundred years earlier. In that year, the being called Him made itself known to the people of the world, and nations worldwide proclaimed it to be their God. He provided them with great advances in technology and medicine, which were the impetus of the advanced civilization I now beheld; but war broke out across the world over the question of which nations were most worthy of His love. When He beheld the devastation that His children had wrought, He wept - and where His tears fell, those who tasted of them were purified of sin and lost their inclination to fight. But those who refused to cease in strife, those who were consumed by sin and evil, their wickedness was magnified in His absence and took form until it became the Unclean,

the giant abominations that to this day lurk in the Unfertile Lands. All life that the Unclean encounter is destroyed utterly - men and women, animals, even plants, are all consumed by the creatures and vanish into thin air, leaving behind only the ichor of sin it discharges when it feeds. Agents of the church known as the Blessed Militia guard these lands, and do constant battle to keep the Unclean imprisoned within.

In time, the United Lands of the Son brought together the nations of the world under the rule of a theocracy, governed by a man called the Most Holy Father. There were ten ranks of the clergy, from the Most Holy Father himself to the Blessed Fathers at the bottom, whose hierarchy comprised not only the church, but the courts, the legislature, and the executive powers of government. The judicial system was not unlike English law, though it incorporated elements similar to the canon law of the Roman church, and the clergy were exempt from its direct judgment, for only the Most Holy himself could pass judgment on them. The death penalty was unknown - those who had committed great crimes were bathed in a compound called the Tears, supposedly refined from His own weepings, and if they survived the trial the urge to sin was cleansed from their mind.

As luck would have it, one of the few Unfertile Lands in this country is located in the deserts a hundred miles east of this city. On the maps I spotted a railway line that draws dangerously close to this border. Interestingly enough I noticed that almost every city had a rail line leading directly into the Unfertile Lands as well; but those were marked as for militia use only and I deemed them inaccessible. Tomorrow I shall travel on the train that passes this border and find a way to depart as close to the edge as possible, and determine whether I can smuggle myself into this forbidden land. I know not how much of the history I have read is true and how much is hagiography concocted by the church, but soon I shall find out.

January 14th, 1876:

I am lucky to have escaped the events of the past few days with my life, but even now I may be doomed.

My entry into the Unfertile Lands was uneventful. I was able to excuse myself stealthily from the train during a brief stop, and hiked

but a few miles under the desert sun to the edge. The perimeter in this region was guarded only by a fence with prominent signage;

> **WARNING**
>
> **UNFERTILE LANDS - UNCLEAN WITHIN**
>
> **BLESSED MILITIA ONLY BEYOND THIS POINT**
>
> By order of the Regional High Father, City of St. Francis' Triumph

The Blessed Militia, I assumed, must have some means of tracking the Unclean and preventing them from crossing the borders of this country. I, on the other hand, would have to rely on luck and Providence.

I could smell the Unclean for hours before I spotted it. Nothing grows in this land and there is no running water, nor so much as a buzzard in the sky, but the air hangs heavy with the undeniable stench of death, worse than the foulest Scottish abattoir or the banks of the putrid Ganges. I could have been sick, but I steeled myself and pressed onward in the direction from which the stench seemed to be its strongest. I assembled and readied the destabilizing musket I had carried in my pack, a special model Mr. Moth had prepared especially for this expedition, and bringing to bear considerably more potential for atomic disassembly than the standard models.

I spotted it after climbing a ridge and almost turned around and retreated right away. I had expected a creature the size of a man or not much larger. The abomination I beheld was easily five hundred feet long and dozens of feet tall. It was almost the shape of a man, but it had no legs; two arms that seemed to grow and shrink as they moved dragged a massive trunk across the desert sands, while a head with no face seemed to lull and stare at nothing in particular. Its skin, the tone of a white man's, was smooth and hairless across its entire body, and it made no sound as it seemed to crawl about aimlessly, a brown ichor seeming to ooze from it before quickly evaporating. It was no wonder the people of this world thought these things to be devils made flesh. Even with my heavy destabilizer at the ready, I was obviously ill-equipped to hunt a creature of this size.

I observed for several hours as it seemed to crawl aimlessly in the same general area, with no particular direction or agenda, taking notes and making sketches. It was late in the afternoon when I determined I would have to turn around - a train bound in the opposite direction would pass by shortly after night-fall, and I intended to board it and return to the city. But luck was not with me - as I stood from my hiding spot upon the ridge, the Unclean's head turned in my direction and it stopped its incessant crawling about. Though it had no eyes or ears, it somehow knew I was there; and though it had no mouth, the abomination let out a blood-curdling moan that echoed for miles. One of the creature's giant arms stretched out in my direction and it began to drag itself my way. I had no choice but to stand and fight. I raised my musket at the creature's featureless visage, took careful aim, and fired.

The Unclean was wholly unaffected as the bolt from my musket passed harmlessly through it and dissipated in the atmosphere. In seconds it was before me and I was sure I was about to die. The creature loomed above me, resting itself on its giant hands, as the face bore down upon me. Before it could presumably devour me whole, I heard a massive report, and a giant shell struck the Unclean in the face and exploded. I was showered with foul-smelling brown ichor as the beast's face was torn open, and though the wound seemed to seal itself quickly, more and more shells struck it in the face, the trunk, the arms. It stumbled and I ran to avoid it falling on me, as men in dark-colored uniforms, decorated with symbols like those I had found on the disc in London, pounded it with artillery. It lurched at them, and one of the soldiers was devoured whole by the creature, its clothes and weapons falling to the ground as the man vanished. Soon it could take no more as the barrage continued, and it turned around and fled back into the desert.

I retreated in the direction from which I had come to find a convoy of armored motor-carriages armed with heavy cannons. I attempted to run, but in seconds the soldiers surrounded me and apprehended me in the name of the Blessed Militia. I was told I was lucky to be alive after attempting such a foolish pursuit and that I would be put to the question by the Court of Blessed Voices. My situation was compounded when one of the soldiers searched my pack and found one of my good-luck charms - a small gold cross that had been

given to me by the Patriarch of Alexandria during my exploits there in 1855. The soldiers immediately declared me a heretic, and some were of the opinion I should be shot then and there, or taken back for the Unclean to devour. In either event, I was bound with steel cuffs and escorted to a prison cell where I now await trial. They do not know I still have this journal, though if I am convicted of heresy and put to the Tears it may not long matter.

January 16th, 1876:

I was brought before the Court of Blessed Voices yesterday. The scene I found myself in looked like a scene out of the Spanish Inquisition; three men in arcane robes beheld me from atop the judge's bench, while I stood in the dock guarded by the Blessed Militia. The senior judge advised me I had been accused of heresy and trespassing in the Unfertile Lands and that I faced the Tears, and demanded my plea. No lawyer had been provided of me, and I expected nothing resembling a fair trial if I contested the charges; yet if I plead guilty I would surely be put to the Tears and my mind torn apart by that mysterious concoction. Recalling that the laws of this land were similar to those of medieval England, and that no member of the priesthood might be tried by them, I took a gamble and insisted that I was a man of the cloth, and thereby was entitled to benefit of clergy - the ancient right of a holy man to avoid prosecution by proving his ability to read from the Bible.

The judges were most skeptical of this proposition; even in this nation, the benefit of clergy was an outdated rite, for many more people could read in these days than simply the priesthood. A reference to their legal texts, however, found that the rite had never been disestablished. I was told I could attempt to exercise that benefit if I wished, but that it would then be up to the Most Holy Father himself to judge my fate, and he would be less forgiving than this court. I hoped for nothing less than to play for time, and I agreed.

It was decided that I would be expected to read three verses. One of the strange Bibles of this world was placed before me and opened to the Third Testament, and I was asked to read a passage called Edward 7:22. As before, the strange lettering of this world's language made itself clear to me, and I read;

Be free of sin, therefore, as He and His angels are free of sin; for wherever evil transpires in the hearts of men, the Unclean walk among us.

Next the book was opened to the First Testament, and I was asked to read Psalm 23:4. It was most unlike the version I had learned in chapel many years ago, but I read it clear and true;

Though I walk in the land of the Unclean, I will fear no evil, for you are always watching; your voice and your sight protect me.

I was surprised when the judge closed the book and proclaimed I would have to prove myself by reciting the third verse from memory. I was challenged to recite Matthew 5:38-39 from the Second Testament. I knew well enough the verse in King James' Bible; but I had no way of knowing how it might have been presented in this world, or even enough of their strange theology to guess. I felt doom creep upon me and decided to do the best I could, and closed my eyes as I recited the verses I knew;

Ye have heard that it hath been said, An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth: But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also.

The judges did not at first respond to this reading. They retreated to their bench and discussed amongst themselves for a few moments, and one departed briefly, returning with a truly ancient book which they examined while conferring further. I wondered if reciting the verse in its original form might have only confirmed their accusation of me, when my bonds were removed and I was ordered to follow the chief judge to his chambers.

Seated behind a magnificent desk of fine ebony, the chief judge informed me that I had correctly recited the verse in question as it had existed in the ancient Bible, before the Second Coming. Those old texts were forbidden to the public; even the heretic sects made do with modern versions, and the only known copies in existence were in possession of the church fathers themselves for their personal study. The book he had examined was the only ancient Bible in the entire city, and before today had not been removed from safe-keeping for over fifty years; and yet, I knew its verses by heart.

Therefore, he said, it was obvious that I was at the very least a Holy Father, one of the third-highest echelon of the clergy, who had travelled incognito to his land for some purpose. Though he had no power as a mere Blessed Voice to compel my obedience, he asked why I had come, and what I had been doing in the Unfertile Lands with a heretic's cross and a strange weapon that was useless against the Unclean.

An opportunity had been granted to me, and I chose to take advantage of it. I was, I informed the Blessed Voice, a senior member of the church's scientific research division, conducting tests on the development of improved weapons for suppressing or even killing the Unclean. I told him my destabilizing musket was the product of this project and it had shown promise in tests against tissue samples, and I had been delegated to test it myself in the field. Unfortunately, it had not lived up to its promise, and further refinements would obviously be needed before it could live up to its full potential. The cross, I claimed, was merely a trophy I had taken from a heretic in the priesthood after I exposed his treason.

To my surprise, the Blessed Voice did not question my account at all. So great the respect for and fear of authority is within this nation, I suspect, that the mere supposition that I was his superior was enough to put me beyond reproach. By the end of our meeting, he had offered me access to a laboratory in the Blessed Militia's base at the edge of the Unfertile Zone. I accepted his proposition and today I found myself examining a facility which makes the laboratory in my own estate look like a child's play-thing. It is fully appointed with every instrument a man of science could want for and several that I do not yet even understand the purpose of. There are full stocks of chemicals, as well as tissue samples acquired from the Unclean, samples of their ichorous discharge, and a variety of medical nutrients and fluids, including the mind-altering substance called the Lord's Tears.

I have been given private quarters within the base, and the militiamen give me a wide berth - I have noticed they avert their eyes as I pass them in the halls, and all conversation ceases when I enter a room. They believe I hold power over their very lives - for now, at least, I shall make no effort to disabuse them of this notion.

It shall take me some time, but perhaps with this equipment and the samples provided me, I can learn enough of the nature of the Unclean to genuinely construct a weapon capable of causing true damage to them. If only Deeds were here - at least I would have a capable lab assistant.

February 27th, 1876:

I have made a truly horrifying breakthrough in my research today. I do not even know if the most senior leaders of this world know the truth - some of them must surely know, if a heretic from another world was able to figure it out so quickly - and they have gone to great lengths to hide it from the world in their lie of a religion.

The beings called Unclean are not devils or beings of pure sin, but gross mutations of the human form itself. The key is the Tears. I know not what the true origin of that compound is or from whence it comes, but it is more than a simple tool of mind control. When human flesh is exposed to a significant enough concentration, it changes - the bonds that hold the atoms together peel away, and it becomes mutable and elastic, folding around and absorbing all other life introduced to it. A single mutant becomes two, and then three, and four, growing larger and larger, becoming less and less human in form, until it becomes Unclean.

I wondered how these creatures first came to be created. Did the church fathers make weapons of them, to unleash upon those renegade nations that refused to submit to their will? Perhaps they use them for that reason still - I had found numerous reports in the history books of cities and country-sides being attacked by Unclean, suddenly loosed from their Unfertile Lands, whenever sentiment in that land had turned against the church. Even now they continued to throw millions of people into the Tears every year to better control them - some of them surely mutating as the result and becoming the basis of a new abomination. No wonder there were railways leading into the Unfertile Zones - it was necessary to dispose of the persons so changed. I wondered how many were sacrificed intentionally to make the Unclean more powerful and more menacing as weapons of terror.

I wondered what might happen if news of this horror became known

to the people. How many more heretics would the elders throw in the Tears? How many cities would they loose the Unclean upon to suppress the threat to their power? How many uprisings could they manage, how many mutants could take form, before the Unclean became uncontrollable and society itself was brought to its knees? I shudder to think of it.

But with this horror has come revelation. The Unclean are born of using the Tears to allow people to absorb others into themselves. What if a compound could be produced that weakened those bonds? I think I can develop a way to produce a variant of the Tears that will counter the effect the original has had on these poor souls. I owe it to the people of this world to try.

March 20th, 1876:

Today is a day I shall remember the rest of my life. After weeks of research I have produced my weapon, a serum which I have with no small amount of pride named Blackwood's Tears. I have tested it on tissue samples of the Unclean and watched them dissolve before my very eyes. It took several days experimenting with one of the most sophisticated repeater-rifles used by the militiamen of this world, but I have developed a custom rifle that fires syringes filled with Blackwood's Tears. Upon impact, the force should activate the plunging device and inject the serum directly into its target. I have produced several hundred rounds of the the serum and loaded them into magazines; if my calculations prove true, it should take only a few dozen to destroy one of the abominations.

Yesterday, I spoke to a colonel of the militia-men who confirmed that the trains into the Unfertile Zones are used to carry people who the fathers have declared "incurably sinful", though he did not know the true meaning of that infamous phrase. He said a highly purified vial of Tears was contained on each train which lured the Unclean to it; thus, the incurable were disposed of and the Unclean were kept from wandering too far. I arranged for the train to be sent out this morning empty but for myself, my weapon, and the purified Tears. Before I left, I gave him a copy of my findings and made him promise to read it entirely, including my opinions on what might happen if this knowledge becomes widely known, and to make sure that Blackwood's Tears were being manufactured around the world

before the day when that knowledge comes out. He nodded in silent agreement as the train pulled away.

Shortly before noon, the train parked itself at a dead end in the middle of the desert. I readied my weapon and waited in a blind outside the train as the stench of the Unclean began to fill the air. As I watched the abomination approach, I sighted its face through the remarkably sophisticated scope on the weapon and loosed the first round.

The Unclean screamed with a fury unimaginable. I almost dropped my gun and collapsed in agony; but as I watched through the scope, the creature lurched and seemed to grow a few feet smaller than it had been before. I fired another round and a piece seemed to vanish from its head; but now it had sight of me and it was coming in my direction. I loosed several more rounds before I was forced to run. Pieces of flesh seemed to be sloughing off the creature as it dragged itself in my direction, its screams piercing the air with a deafening madness. I ran blindly, turning occasionally to fire in its direction, changing magazines from time to time. Alas, I had been paying more attention to the creature behind me than the terrain in front of me; and I found myself boxed in. I turned to fire again, and to my horror I discovered the gun had jammed.

The Unclean was less than half the size it had been before. It dragged itself in my direction, slowed but still unrelenting as I furiously tried to clear the jam. It screamed as it raised itself up above me. Somehow, in its wounded state, the monster seemed more human than it had before. Across every inch of the giant's skin I seemed to behold a different face, and each furious proclamation it made seemed to echo with hundreds of voices in fear and agony. I was still trying to clear the jam when it began to bear down on me and I thought I was soon to join the souls that comprised that thing in their unceasing damnation. But when the titanic head was barely feet away from me, it stopped. The Unclean held itself motionless above me. It could have moved in for the kill at any time, but instead it waited as I cleared the jam, and seconds later, my weapon was ready to fire. I understood - the Unclean was an amalgamation of cursed souls in eternal pain and confusion, seeking a release that was forever denied to them. The thing before me *wanted* to die. I

aimed my weapon, closed my eyes, and emptied the magazine into its faceless visage as it screamed a final time and the scream was instantly cut short, echoing across the desert before dissipating entirely.

When I opened my eyes a scene of utter carnage lay before me. Of the Unclean itself, there was no sign; but instead, hundreds of men and women and children, naked as the day they were born, lay sprawled across the desert plains, dead or dying. I walked among them and saw young and old, gasping for air in their final moments (for none of them lasted more than a few moments before expiring). Among the crowd I spotted a face I recognized - the soldier of the Blessed Militia who had been killed, so I thought at the time, in the attack that saved my life. As I looked at the dying man, his eyes met mine and he spoke two words;

Thank you.

I made my way back west in the direction I had intended to flee in January, and boarded the train back to the City of Angelic Glory. The faster I can put this scene and these Unfertile Lands behind me, the better it shall be for my sanity.

March 23rd, 1876:

I returned through the mirror to London before dawn in the morning of this world, arriving back in my study just after noon London time. I was most thankful to find the gateway still worked; I had not expected to be away as long as I have been, and feared it might have ceased functioning or the disc removed from the mirror. I immediately removed it from the mirror myself and set it on the ground, whereupon it rolled back to the mirror and attached itself; but having not been placed there by a human being, the mirror was only a looking-glass; and the portal to that world and the horrors that populated it was, for now, sealed.

I do not think I shall journey to that world again. The Unclean were monstrous enough, but there is a certain irony in the fact that, as alien and terrifying as they were, the greatest evil to populate that land was man itself, for it was the leaders of men who must have created the Unclean to begin with, and who continued to allow their

existence in order to perpetuate their reign of terror. The gun and the Blackwood's Tears I have brought back with me shall likely prove of little use in this world; but I shall store them at my house in the country for now, for if the being that provided the Tears to that Earth ever visits our own, the compound may one day prove of great utility.

I visited Mr. Belson again today at Bedlam. I told him of my journey to his land (but what I had learned there, I kept to myself) and that I had the means to return him there he so desired it. He declined; having been gone so long, and having vanished so suddenly, he would surely be under great suspicion if he returned, and would likely be put to the Tears, a fate that I now wished on no man. I have promised to vouch for him with the gaolers and earn his release; I told him that when and if he becomes a free man, there shall be a position available for him in my household staff if he desires one.

Deeds was very fascinated by my tale of my adventures in that parallel Earth and suggested I publish it; but who could believe such a fanciful story of worlds accessible through a looking glass and gigantic horrors? Perhaps I shall present it as fiction in one of the penny journals that have become so popular among the working-class; for whether they regard it as true or not, I suppose it does make a most entertaining yarn.

Lord Blackwood and the Thaumaturge

Interview Log 1867-23

Interviewer: Dr. Adam Bernstein

Interviewed: SCP-1867

Forward: During a standard checkup interview with SCP-1867 the subject, at the request of Dr. Bernstein, was asked to elaborate on the nature of one of the items found in his collection- an ornate brass baton. The baton, while showing no overt anomalous properties, caught Dr. Bernstein's attention due to amount of dried blood still covering it. SCP-1867 complied enthusiastically.

Begin Log

Dr. Bernstein:: Good afternoon, SCP-1867.

SCP-1867: Please, good Doctor, call me Theodore.

Dr. Bernstein: Very well. Theodore, I would like to ask you a few question about this [shows picture of the baton].

SCP-1867: Oh, Yuri Dreshnik's command baton! Haven't seen it in years. Interesting story behind that one.

Dr. Bernstein: Would you care to elaborate?

SCP-1867: Certainly. I do enjoy telling a good story, and this one is so very full of excitement!

Dr. Bernstein: Please, continue.

SCP-1867: Well, it was the year 1855, and the Russian war[1] was raging across the Black Sea. The Czar was trying to take control of the Bosphorus straits from the Ottomans, using some daft argument some priests had in the Holy Land as an excuse. Our brave lads,

along with the Froggies, were giving the Russians a right thrashing, despite a few minor setbacks like that unfortunate business with the Earl of Cardigan's light brigade. Brave man, terrible tactical sense. I remember having a heated discussion with him about Scipio Africanus' vertical spear formation-

Dr. Bernstein: Focus on the baton, please.

SCP-1867: Oh, right. It was, I believe, late July. I was visiting an acquaintance of mine in London, and we were just discussing the preparations necessary for an expedition he was planning to the East Indies when a knock was heard on the door, and the manservant proclaimed it was a messenger from Lord Palmerston himself, who wished to speak to me at once. I made my way to Downing Street 10 post haste. The Prime Minister was waiting for me at his office. "Theodore," he said to me, "The Empire once again requires your services. The war in the Black Sea is turning in our favor, but we need to stick one final nail in Alexander's coffin if we want the Russians out of the straits permanently." He pulled out a map and pointed at a spot "Sevastopol. We've been besieging the thrice damned place for almost a year now. If we manage to take it from the Russians, it's only a matter of time until they surrender and accept our conditions."

Dr. Bernstein: Does this have anything to do with the baton?

SCP-1867: I'm getting to it, I assure you. As I was saying, the Prime Minister confided in me that he was planning a joint attack with the French on Sevastopol in late August or early September, but there was a problem; The Russians were rumored to have recruited a thaumaturge of great skill, Yuri Dreshnik, and he dared not order the attack as long as Yuri was there to muck things up with his magic. He wanted me to get rid of him.

Dr. Bernstein: Why did the Prime Minister need you to get rid of this wizard?

SCP-1867: Thaumaturge, Doctor, they are not the same as wizards. He needed me because I had experience: I led the great Warlock Hunt of Austria in 1833,[2] and had numerous encounters with various shamans and witch doctors throughout my travels. I was quite the

authority figure in the field, if I may say so myself.

Dr. Bernstein: Carry on.

SCP-1867: The Prime Minister needed Dreshnik gone before the attack, and he knew I was the right man for the job. As a patriot, I could not refuse, and I was scheduled to board HMS *Gallant* leaving for Istanbul on the following day. The journey was uneventful, save for a minor pirate raid near the shores of Libya which was easily repelled. I arrived at Istanbul safely, then boarded another smaller vessel for the remainder of the trip. I arrived at General Mac-Mahon's command ship on the last day of August. Patrice de Mac-Mahon was a solid gentleman if there ever was one, even if he was French. Always good for a laugh and a quick shot of brandy. I first met him in Algeria when he commanded the Foreign Legion in the 1840's. The man could smoke a hookah like no other, and that's a promise. I remember sitting with him and the sheikh of-

Dr. Bernstein: [sighs] Focus please, SCP-1867.

SCP-1867: Theodore. Right, the thaumaturge. Mac-Mahon told me he received credible information that Dreshnik was hiding in the Malakoff itself, this massive stone tower overlooking the port, preparing some sort of foul ritual, as thaumaturges are bound to do. I was to assemble a team from the very finest the allied armies had to offer, and make a raid on the tower at night, disposing of Dreshnik before he could raise some nastiness to hamper the war effort.

Dr. Bernstein: And how did the raid go?

SCP-1867: Oh, quite splendidly! Well, mostly so. There was the small matter of our boat sinking halfway to the port. And our sniper tripping on some slick stones and breaking his ankle. And half the team getting discovered and riddled with bullets. But other than that, everything went perfectly. We finally cornered Dreshnik in his ritual chamber after a long chase, as the man was was surprisingly fast for a portly middle aged gentleman in long robes, but he would not go down without a fight. He pulled out some strange apparatus he was hiding in his sleeve and pointed it at Sargent Monroe. Poor man never stood a chance.

Dr. Bernstein: What did the device do to Sargent Monroe?

SCP-1867: Turned his skin inside out. The screams were quite terrible, not to mention the smell. He managed to do the same to Corporeal Turner before I shot the device out of his hands. Along with a few fingers. He wasn't done, though. Screaming like an Indonesian Howler Sloth,[3] he sprayed the blood from his severed fingers on the corpses of my fallen comrades. The two inside-out bodies jerked and came to life, attacking what little reminded of my crew. They ripped Durand and Roux apart with superhuman strength before I took them down with my trusty machete. Now it was just me and Dreshnik, and he was all out of tricks. His Grand Ritual was left unfinished as I brained him with his own command baton. The battle took place a week later, and we gave those Russian bastards a beating they wouldn't soon forget. That's how the baton came to my possession.

Dr. Bernstein: So the baton is just an ordinary command baton? No thaumaturgic power to it?

SCP-1867: Of course not, I burned down his ritual chamber along with all his tools before making my escape and swimming back to safety. You'd have to be quite daft to keep a thaumaturge's belongings. They always curse the things. I lost a cousin to a curse like that- he was turned into an eel. Could you imagine that, being an eel? Dreadful.

Dr. Bernstein: I would think so.

End Log

Footnotes
1. Known today as the Crimean War.
2. No information about this event exists in Foundation archives.
3. The Indonesian Howler Sloth is believed to be one of the previously unknown species of mammal found in Blackwood's possessions.

Lord Blackwood, Astro-Naut

April 3rd, 1856:

My succour has arrived! For over a year now I have been in London, exercising my duties in the House of Lords to aid Mr. Palmerston's government in bringing about the conclusion of the war in the Crimea. Those who have read these pages are well aware, I am certain, that I do not relish government office; the endless meetings and floor sessions and meandering speeches by whips and cross-benchers and the Lords Spiritual could drive a man to madness, and represent nothing less than utter tedium to a man as afflicted by wanderlust as I. Still, with privilege comes responsibility, and when country and party call it is my duty to don my robe, cast my vote, and maintain the proud heritage of the house of Blackwood as defenders of the church and the state.

With the Russians acquiescing to the treaty that has been signed in Paris this past Sunday, the war has ended and so has the necessity of my sitting in Parliament. No sooner had I returned to my London estate after the final meeting when Deeds informed me a caller had visited in my absence. Dr. Hightower, the astronomer, has requested that I meet him two nights from now at Greenwich for a demonstration and the discussion of a most interesting proposition. I have not heard from Dr. Hightower since our trip to Mars in 1843; if the news he has in mind to share with me is as elucidating as it was in the days leading to that adventure, then this shall be a welcome change from the quiet desperation in which I have suffered this past year.

April 6th, 1856:

It has been many years, dear reader, since I was a man young enough to stay awake all night and feel no worse for it the following day. Of course, the nature of the occupation requires that an astronomer keep odd hours; and so it was half before midnight last night when I met Dr. Hightower at the Royal Greenwich

Observatory. Dr. Hightower was most excited to see me; for a man who is typically most dour and sedate, concerning himself with the abstractions of physical science, he was uncharacteristically exuberant. He spoke to me of great discoveries and unique opportunities as he ushered me upstairs to the observing chamber, where the facility's great telescope laid bare the heavens to man's prying eye. For several years, Dr. Hightower informed me, he had been busily engaged in making refinements to the telescope that allowed it to compensate for the interfering effects of our atmosphere, allowing him to observe the heavenly bodies in levels of detail never before imagined. The doctor seated me before the great device and bade me to look into the eye-piece of the telescope, which he had delicately adjusted to expose his great discovery.

I beheld, amidst the blackness of space, a massive rock, one of the many asteroids that Mr. Piazzi and his associates had discovered between the orbits of Mars and Jupiter in recent years. But unlike the copper-plate daggueroty pes that had been published in the Times, this was no barren rock adrift in the void. Save for a few tiny blotches, the entirety of the oblong body was coated in a sea of verdant greenery, the unmistakable colour of the virgin jungle. I fancied I could even see the leaves of the canopy that enveloped the miniature world, and at its pole I espied what resembled a palm tree, truly gargantuan in size, towering above the foliage of the world. This was a most interesting discovery indeed; while the famous canals of Mars had proven to be mere illusions when I visited them (and its atmosphere, I found, most unpleasant to breathe), here was proof, plain to see, that God in His wisdom had not set living things on our celestial sphere alone, but that the Galaxy itself had been seeded with the germ of life.

Dr. Hightower had first discovered the asteroid, which he had named Victoria in honour of our dear Queen, five years ago during the mania following Mr. Le Verrier's discovery of the planet Neptune several years before. He had kept his discovery secret, he told me, for he had a plan to announce its existence in a manner as grandiose as no astronomer has ever done. For four years, at his estate in Wales, Dr. Hightower has employed a team of men constructing a rocket similar to the one proposed by Mr. De

Bergerac two centuries ago, larger and sturdier than the one that carried us to Mars on our previous voyage. Last week, the final preparations had been made, and the rocket now stood, fueled and ready, to escape the bonds of gravity and carry to Victoria a scientific expedition that will rival Mr. Darwin's. The astro-nauts will for several months have time to catalogue and sample the flora and fauna of Victoria and, for the first time since the discovery of Australia, return bearing knowledge of a new world, and cement the names of those explorers in the annals of history.

For months Dr. Hightower has been assembling a crew to conduct this expedition. He has pilots, cooks, archivists, writers, daggueroty pists, painters, men-at-arms, and labourers, he told me, but he wants for one thing; a naturalist to manage the exploration and scientific observation of this foreign planet, and of all the men of learning he has known, he could think of no better individual than I to play this part. How could I refuse? Today I have been busy taking stock of what I shall need. We set off for Victoria on the twenty-first, when our world shall draw the closest to Victoria that it shall be in the next thirty years, and if luck and Providence provide, we shall return by Guy Fawkes Night. It is rare that I have ventured so far from our land of hope and glory, but England shall have to endure in my absence for a time.

April 23rd, 1856:

No matter how many times I am among the stars, I shall never grow accustomed to the sensation of weightlessness. One must learn anew how to perform the simplest tasks in this environment, as if returning to infancy; how to move about, how to eat and drink, how to sleep, even how to engage the water-closet, for absent the caress of gravity the slightest unintended twitch can send one hurtling every which way, and the slightest loose drop of moisture, applied to our rocket's apparati, could spell disaster.

This morning, our vessel conducted a circuit of the Moon. Dr. Hightower explained to me that we shall use our closest neighbor's gravitational field to produce an effect not unlike a sling-shot, granting acceleration that shall enable us to reach Victoria months before we might reach it otherwise. To achieve our target, we must travel twice as far through the blackness of space as the distance

that stands between our Earth and the Sun itself. Thus far, Dr. Hightower assures me, all has gone in accordance with plan, and we should reach Victoria by the first of July.

We took advantage of our approach to the Moon to make as many observations as we could. We took several daggueroty pes from the on-board telescopes, and the artists have produced depictions of the dark side which Dr. Hightower informs me are the first ever made by man. I am told that the surface of the Moon is an inhospitable place, wanting entirely for air to breathe, that a vacuum-suit would be necessary to stand upon its surface, and that it will likely be a hundred years or more before such a deed is feasible. Still, I would very much like some day to attempt it.

May 24th, 1856:

Today is the Queen's birthday, and beside that, today marks the point where we are officially half-way to the world named for her. In her honour we held a party in the rocket's cafeteria. There has been little time for frivolity on this voyage thus far; all sixty-three of us have our appointed tasks to conduct every day, for our rocket is one of the most complex and intricate devices that man has ever engaged, and we are surrounded on all sides by millions of miles of emptiness from which no salvation will come if we are remiss in our duties.

Dr. Hightower toasted the Queen as we sipped the precious rations of champagne he had stowed for specifically this occasion, and I offered a toast to science and to the progress of our Empire. I wonder, what would Her Majesty say on this occasion, if she knew that Englishmen were praising her name ninety million miles away? I spent a good deal of time contemplating this as I stared out a port-hole into the darkness, the stars holding steady in the distance as we hurtled through the cosmos at a greater velocity than man has ever imagined. One truly feels small in these expanses. How insignificant is a man, how great is the mind of God, that in a thousand lifetimes one could not hope to cross from one end of the Universe to another?

June 30th, 1856:

Today we entered into Victoria's orbit. The artists and photographers have been busy at the port-holes and telescopes, creating the first records of this unexplored Eden. I was barely able to manage a peek for a few moments before giving up my spot, and I found myself utterly rapt at the sights that laid before me. What Dr. Hightower had shown me in the telescope at Greenwich was no illusion; the surface of the asteroid, now scarcely a dozen miles beneath my feet, was indeed blanketed thick with foliage, and I even fancied briefly that I espied a bird fluttering amongst the canopy.

Tomorrow, almost all of us shall board the landing craft and embark for the surface itself, the handful of pilots remaining aboard the rocket to maintain its orbit while we catalog Victoria's wonders for the next two months. Dr. Hightower has selected a landing zone at the edge of one of the cratered regions, where there is a break in the foliage large enough to attempt a landing without fear of being obstructed by the flora. I feel as Mr. Columbus must have felt when he espied the tawny, savage people of San Salvador through his spyglass. We are on the cusp of revelation of the sort that happens but once in a lifetime; for tomorrow I, Theodore Thomas Blackwood, explorer and gentleman, shall set my foot upon the virgin soil of a new world.

July 1st, 1856:

O glorious day!

It was barely half past five, London time, when our landing craft separated from the main rocket and made its way towards the surface of Victoria. The pressure of re-entry was almost unbearable, and flames licked the windows of the craft as we descended. It was dark outside the craft when we finally impacted the edge of the crater; Victoria is of such small size, Dr. Hightower explained, and of such an irregular shape, that it takes little more than four hours for it to complete a single rotation. Day and night are brief affairs; one can almost watch the sun, from this vantage a dim and distant orb no larger than the Moon, race across the purplish sky from when it rises in the north until it sinks in the south. Because Victoria is so miniscule in relation to the Earth, Dr. Hightower had warned us that we would weigh but a tiny fraction of what we do there. Perhaps it was simply because I have become so used to weightlessness in

the past two months, but I feel no lighter here than I ever have.

Shortly after we made landfall, Dr. Hightower addressed us with a matter most grave. We know not, he said, whether the environmental conditions of Victoria are conducive to human life. It is entirely possible that the air of this world is unbreathable, or that its flora exude compounds poisonous to man, or that vicious beasts stood ready to tear a man apart, or that the air itself was lousy with bacteria that would kill a man slowly from the inside. It would be necessary, he said, for a single man to expose himself to Victoria before the rest of the expedition alighted, and by his fate demonstrate whether it was safe for man to even exist on this world. It was entirely possible that that man might die, and that his death might be most slow and uncomfortable; but such a sacrifice, if it had to be made, might save fifty-six other lives. No man would be forced to make this sacrifice, Dr. Hightower said; he sought only a man who was willing to risk his life in the name of science.

I immediately volunteered myself as a guinea-pig. Dr. Hightower at first objected; I was too critical to the mission, he said, to risk my life so frivolously. I put forth the proposition that as a peer of the realm and a gentleman, I have an obligation to, as it were, lead from the fore, and that I would never dream of putting any man under my authority into a position of hazard that I was not myself willing to occupy. If Victoria was too toxic for man to explore her wonders, I argued, then there could be no further expedition to begin with; and therefore, if I died in ascertaining its safety, there was nothing lost. The men were in solid agreement with this logic, and Dr. Hightower acquiesced; shortly before eleven in the morning London time, as the sun arose over the crater's edge, I stood alone, in my finest khakis, boots, and helmet, in the landing craft's air-lock.

The hatch opened and I breathed my first breath of Victorian air. It was hot and thick, more severe even than the oppression of the Amazonian jungle, with a bitter scent not unlike cinnamon. I breathed deeply, and though it was a most labourious effort, I found it not as hostile as the choking air of Mars, nor as cruel and unyielding as the sparse atmosphere of the Himalayas. Though I stood bare and exposed on a world where man had never before dwelled, I lived. Cautiously, I made my way down the gantry and set

my foot upon the earth, the treads in my boot impressing themselves in the virgin soil. How small a step for a man! How great a leap for the Empire!

The earth before me was barren and plain. Less than a mile distant I beheld the forest that blanketed Victoria; like a brick wall, it seemed to stand impenetrable, jutting hundreds of feet above the surface. The purple sky was a sharp contrast to the greenery, a vision worthy of one of the great French Impressionists. I lack the words to truly describe the sight and the emotions that ran through me as I beheld that alien landscape, and I wondered if a poet ought to have descended in my stead. With as much solemnity as I could muster, I produced from my jacket a Union Flag, mounted to a small pole, and reverentially mounted it in the earth. As the men watched eagerly from the windows of the crowded vessel, I fell to my knees in the Victorian soil and made an address, heard but by God, that I had written and revised in my mind for hours since;

I, Theodore Thomas Blackwood, CBE, 7th Viscount of Winchester, do hereby claim in perpetuity this land, the planet Victoria, in the name of Her Majesty the Queen Victoria and of her British Empire, on this, the first day of July, in the Year of Our Lord 1856, and do hereby pray to our Lord and Saviour that our expedition to this land shall be fruitful and pleasing unto Him. God save the Queen.

I remained alone on the surface of the planet for several hours, an entire Victorian sunrise and sunset occurring in the meanwhile as I took samples of the soil and documented in my journal the conditions of that world. By the time the sun rose again at half past three and the rest of the crew could see that I was alive and well, they began to alight as well. We established our base camp at the edge of the forest, which seemed to terminate at a certain point as if a line had been drawn in the sand and no plant dared extend its roots further. Tomorrow we shall begin our journey into the forest proper, and endeavour to learn what we can of this planet.

July 3rd, 1856

I once thought, dear reader, that I had beheld all there was that a man could hope to see in Creation. I have wandered the jungles of South America, and blazed trails across the frontiers of the West. I

have lived among the unknown cults of India and Bangla Desh. I have trekked across the great Outback, wandered the vast and empty forests of Siberia, and lead men and dogs across the vast plateaus of Antarctica.

So I had thought, until this day. Were I to make a comparison, I would say that the Victorian forest is most like that of the rain-forests of Brazil; beneath the massive trees, little of the already sparse sunlight reaches, and were it not for our electric torches we would be altogether blind. The undergrowth is thick and impassable, and we have had to make liberal use of our machetes to cut a path into the forest. Dr. Hightower's thermometer attests that the temperature, day or night, is almost a constant one hundred and thirty degrees Fahrenheit, hotter than all but the most desolate of the Arabian wastelands. The flora here must derive their nutrition from the heat of the air, for no terrestrial plant could hope to blossom in an environment this dim. Already we have collected several hundred samples of organisms unlike none that have been seen on Earth; I imagine that Oxford itself will be set on its ear for decades in endeavouring to decrypt the nature of these organisms once we announce our findings.

To our universal surprise and delight, we have discovered this day that there is not only foliage, but that animal life exists on Victoria as well. Four-winged creatures not unlike insects flit through the air, alighting from flower to flower in the vines that cris-cross the jungle. From mounds on the earth teem thousands upon thousands of creatures that for all the world are dead ringers for the common ants one may find anywhere on Earth. We collected many samples of the insect life. The ants, however, responded with great hostility when we attempted to examine them; Mr. Andrews, one of the junior biologists in the mission, was suddenly set upon by thousands of the creatures when he attempted to examine their nest, and found himself suffering a toxic condition as the result of their bite. As we have yet to encounter any megafauna, I am beginning to suspect that the ants are the dominant organism of this world. I have often felt a curious rhythm emanating from the earth whenever I approach their nests, and I suspect that some subterranean machinery may be to account.

July 11th, 1856:

Today our expedition reached the base of the giant tree at Victoria's pole. It has been less than ten miles from the landing site to the tree's base; the jungle, however, has proven so thick that cutting our way through the thick vines has proven a full-time occupation for many of the men. We have observed yet no larger animals than the dragon-flies of this world; as thick as the various and entangled vines of the flora are, I doubt that any larger animals could even evolve here.

We have named this great tree the Major Oak, in reference to that ancient tree in Sherwood where Robin Hood and his band of outlaws held court. It is indeed, as I first considered it from telescope, very similar to the rare palms that grow along the tropical coast, but unlike those plants it is truly massive; it stands some four hundred feet tall, and seven of the men with their arms outstretched were barely able to encircle it.

I have taken several core samples from the Major Oak, and would have willingly climbed her myself to acquire a sample of her fronds. But I am not the young man that I once was, and it was decided that Mr. Edelman, a junior biologist late of Cambridge, would perform that obligation. I watched in stunned silence with the men as he shimmied up that massive trunk which must have taken millennia to become what it is today, and saluted us with a single thumb cast skyward as he reached the top of the organism.

As I sit here writing in my tent at the base of the Major Oak, I find it impossible to believe that we have made such incredible breakthroughs in so many days. What will they say, I wonder, when we return to Earth, and the proof of our exploration is published, plain for the world to see, in every periodical from San Francisco to Peking? Perhaps I shall finally earn the knighthood that I long have coveted; but no temporal honour is greater than the knowledge that the progress of science and reason, and of the glory of the British Empire, has been advanced by my efforts.

July 27th, 1856:

A most terrible calamity has befallen us this day. Half past six in the

morning, at the second sunrise of the day, we heard a strange sound in the distance, a droning sound barely liminal at first, that slowly grew louder and more ominous. It seemed to come from the direction of the sunrise. Mr. Andrews held his binoculars to the horizon and espied a terrible doom - a swarm of insects, not unlike the common locust, voraciously devouring everything in its path and moving with great speed toward our base camp!

We have not yet seen this type of swarming behavior from the Victorian fauna, and in any event we had little time to study it, for in fifteen minutes they descended upon us. We scrambled to move as much equipment into the landing craft as we could, for what we left behind, the creatures devoured or destroyed. Poor Mr. Jacobs did not make it to the air-lock in time, and I watched in horror as hundreds of the insects enveloped him and stripped him to the bone in seconds. Minutes later, the swarm was gone and we emerged to survey the destruction.

We are fortunate to have lost little of our research; however, we have lost many of our tents and a good deal of food and fresh water. Worst of all, the engines of the landing craft themselves have been compromised; Mr. Darren, the pilot, says we cannot now take off to rejoin our rocket in orbit, and it shall have to be repaired if we are to have any hope of ever leaving this world.

For now, my work continues as it has. Many of the men have been assigned to rebuild the engines; the rest of us shall continue to study and observe, and pray for their success. Dr. Hightower says that the rocket must begin its return to Earth no later than the first of November, lest the distance between our worlds become so great that the trip would be years in the taking. The doctor is confident that the engines can be repaired, and that we should be homeward bound by September. A more immediate concern, however, is that we now have but two weeks worth of food left to us, and with the landing craft out of commission there is no way to bring more from the rocket, or even alert them to our distress. The water that flows in creeks and rivulets upon this world, and dribbles from the trees like morning dew, has proven safe to drink; but if we are to endure on Victoria until summer's end, we shall have to determine which of the native organisms are safe to eat.

NOTE TO THE READER:

At Mr. Blackwood's request, I have heavily revised and edited the following two entries in this journal. As Mr. Blackwood had at the time come under the unfortunate effects of consuming Victoria's native flora, he was not of sound mind when he wrote these pages. The following entries contained numerous errors in spelling and standardized sentence structure, rambling and incoherent tangents of an incomprehensible nature, and several vulgarities which Mr. Blackwood is not proud of, and partway through the second entry he had abandoned the English language entirely and began to write in Chinese.

I have translated and standardized the spelling throughout, and expunged those portions which Mr. Blackwood has asked me to omit. I have done my best to maintain his genteel and scholarly tone, and to describe the state of mind he was in at the time. I hope the reader will not feel that I have taken any undue liberties.

-Deeds, being of smokeless fire

August 16th, 1856:

It is difficult to write at this time. Though the affliction I suffer is less severe than many of the men, I find my mind clouded and confused, and it is a Herculean effort to keep my thoughts clear enough to express.

We spent several days in experimentation with the native foodstuffs. Several of the vines and fruits were poisonous, and five of the men died most uncomfortable deaths. We eventually discovered several of the larger vines bear sweet and savoury vegetables that could be eaten and digested without discomfort, and were indeed not unpleasant in taste. We feasted liberally that night, though at Dr. Hightower's request the men working on the engines were to abstain for fear of a long-term effect that might impair their critical work. His judgment may yet save us all.

Several days after we began eating the native food, we began to turn green. It was a minor pallour at first, like that of a jaundiced man, but with time it grew more severe. Some of the men who have eaten the most are almost the same colour as the trees themselves. The colouring itself seemed to bear no more malicious effects along with it, however. Dr. Hightower assured us it was safe to continue eating, but I voluntarily cut my rations at that time. I have been eating only sparingly the last two weeks, and have lost a considerable amount of weight.

A few days after that, the men began going mad. At first they complained of having difficulty in cognition (as I now do myself) and claimed hallucinations. Later they began speaking in nonsense entirely; several of them seem to sit for hours and have conversations in utter gibberish. A few have taken to frolicking naked amongst the trees and rolling in the dirt, referring to the plants as their "sisters" and attempting to court them as if they were eligible ladies. Dr. Hightower has been spending his time by the largest ant-hills; he claims the ants are heathens, and that he intends to convince them of the righteousness of Christianity. He sits for hours with his ear to the ground, the ants crawling around and over him, reading aloud from the New Testament; as I write, he is currently on the seventeenth chapter of Acts. (Curiously enough, I had always understood Dr. Hightower to be of the Jewish faith.)

I pray the engineers have our vessel repaired soon, for I fear the men may be beyond saving if we remain here much longer. I had to shoot two of the men yesterday; they had come to the determination that our landing craft was a "great metallic devil" and had to be slain, and were attempting to chew their way through the wires of an instrument panel. We are almost out of terrestrial food; the engineers may have to begin eating Victorian foliage in a day or two, and choose between madness or starvation. Either way, we are surely doomed. We came to Victoria to explore in peace; instead, we may remain here to rest in peace.

September 8th, 1856:

Dr. Hightower's madness may have saved us after all. I awoke from a stupour this afternoon, having collapsed in a stream by our base camp, only to find myself in the air, being carried by a blanket of

ants. I looked up and saw that ants were swarming over what remained of our camp by the millions; streams of them coming from every which direction, and making their way to our ship. I feared that they intended to finish the job the locusts had begun; but not one of the men made any sound of distress, and I found that I had not a single bite upon me. The ants were carrying men by the dozens and loading them into our lander, and carrying other objects as well; great hunks of metal, and tools the likes of which I have never beheld before. They crawled in and out of the damaged engines. By God, they were repairing them!

In less than two hours, Mr. Gregory, the engineer, a man now emaciated and half-starved for want of food, reported that the engines had come alive and our escape was possible. Not all of the men were aboard, but we saw no sign of the others; either they have perished, or run off into the forest in utter madness. In any event, those of us of sound enough mind voted and decided we could not spare another day to search for them; we have been given an opportunity, and we must make use of it. I caught a final glimpse of the Union Flag I had planted in the soil in July as we lifted off, the twenty-six of us that were left abandoning the mad planet Victoria for the last time.

December 12th, 1856:

The journey back home was a long and arduous one, but I have never felt so relieved to be back in London as I was when Deeds greeted me at the door with a nip of brandy and my favorite silk pyjamas. With as few of us in possession of our faculties as there were at the outset, it was nearly impossible to operate the rocket safely; many of us did not sleep for days. Fortunately, once liberated from the planet and its madness-inducing flora, the men began to recover their senses, and our flesh acquired once again a healthy shade. Most of the men remember little of the time they were under the influence of those horrid crops. Dr. Hightower, I fear, may not recover fully; he is lucid, indeed, but he lacks the sharp mind and cleverness he once had, and shall be retiring to the country.

When I spoke to him the day before last, we agreed for now that it is best not to publish our full findings on Victoria. Any attempt to colonize that land will surely end in disaster; and if the culture of the

ants is as advanced and sophisticated as it seems, they could oppress and conquer our Empire as easily as the rebellions in India and Zululand of late have been put down. I shall keep the samples and notes we acquired at my country estate for safe-keeping; perhaps in a few decades, when we better understand the chemistry of those organisms, another adventure might be advisable.

Deeds was seeing to the cleaning and mending of the clothes I had brought on that ill-fated expedition today when he informed me that several live ants had crawled out a pocket and escaped through a crack in the wall. It is entirely possible they were nothing more than ordinary insects, but I wonder; after so many of the Victorian ants crawled over and through our ship repairing our systems, how many stow-aways might we have brought back with us?

Lord Blackwood's Revenge

Lord Theodore Thomas Blackwood, explorer and gentleman, crawled stealthily across High Value Storage Locker Room 23C, leaving a thin trail of slime behind him as he climbed up the table leg. The trip from his pen to the archives had taken hours, and adjusting the security cameras to hide his escape had been a Herculean effort in and of itself. Before long, his quarry was in sight - a small silver bell, carelessly left out of its case by a junior researcher after the completion of today's tests. With all the strength the Englishman's diminutive form could muster, he pushed against the bell and knocked it on its side, producing the distant, but distinct chime of a ringing bell. All was silent in High Value Storage Locker Room 23C for a moment, and Lord Blackwood feared the bell had lost its magic, or he was in the wrong room. But his fears were dispelled when the door to the room - the triple-locked, magnetically sealed door he had bypassed entirely on his daring expedition - effortlessly slid open, and an elderly man in a finely-pressed suit entered and approached the table.

"Good evening, Mr. Blackwood," said the man in a distinguished British accent. "How may I be of service?"

"By Jove, Deeds!" Lord Blackwood cried out, his exuberant aristocratic tones transmitting directly into Mr. Deeds' mind. "You haven't changed a bit! How the Devil are you?"

"Quite well, Mr. Blackwood," replied Mr. Deeds, "and may I say it is most pleasant to find myself in your company once again."

"Smashing!" said Lord Blackwood. "Now listen carefully. We've got to act fast, I don't know how long those buffoons in the guard-house will be deceived by my little trick. Tonight, Deeds, you and I are going to bag the biggest catch since I rounded up that herd of stampeding bunyips back in seventy-two."

"Indeed, Mr. Blackwood?"

"Indubitably, Deeds! Do you recall that blasted Tarasque that eluded me in France? I've learned from one of the researchers here that that same beast is being held in this very facility!"

Mr. Deeds nodded. "Indeed it is, sir. The Foundation refers to it by the name 'SCP-682'. It may also interest you to know that…"

"Dash it all, Deeds, this is no time for a history lesson!" The impatience in Lord Blackwood's voice was palpable. "The clock is ticking, my friend! Now, here's what I need you to do first…"

—-

Lord Blackwood paced, to the extent that a nudibranch can, back and forth along the table. Nearly a half hour had passed since Mr. Deeds had left on his task. Had he been captured? Was the jig up? Was he, after all this time, not as loyal as he had hoped? Footsteps rang out in the hallway, and Lord Blackwood looked around for a hiding place. None were within reach - but his fears were allayed when the door opened and Mr. Deeds entered. His suit was stained and wet, his previously immaculate coiffure a mess, and an offensively strong aroma of mint hanged heavily about him, but just as Lord Blackwood had hoped, he carried in either hand a large jug, filled to the brim with a viscous green liquid.

"As you requested, sir," Mr. Deeds said, gasping for breath, "two Imperial gallons of SCP-447-2."

"Spectacular, Deeds!" exclaimed Lord Blackwood. "The trap is set and the pieces are in play. The time has come for us to make our move. Tell me, do you still have the Bowie knife you won off that Indian in sixty-six?"

"Always, sir."

"Excellent! You and I are going to go to the Tarasque's lair. Once I get its attention, I want you to open both those jugs, pour them all over yourself, and then plunge the knife directly into your heart. Understood?"

Mr. Deeds sighed. "Yes, sir. What shall we do then?"

"Don't you worry about me," Lord Blackwood said. "Once you're dead, I'll take care of the rest. Within the hour, my old friend, the back-country horse-doctors that run this establishment will be patting us on the back and pinning medals on our chests."

"Very good, sir," Mr. Deeds said. "Shall we be on our way?"

Lord Blackwood crawled up Mr. Deeds' sleeve and perched on his shoulder as the trusty valet opened the door and made his way down the hallway. *By jingo,* the intrepid mollusk thought to himself, *that old rascal won't even know what hit him.*

Loss and Nostalgia

1: A Mind Spends an Eternity in Solitude

I sit alone inside **`myself`** and think on what is here.

Pillars of radiation pierce me from all sides. I know they are stars but I do not understand them. I know their insides are not like mine.

Some places are dark. They aren't like me. I'm not dark. I can be light. See?

I didn't know before but now is after and I know. I understand it. You understand me.

Why did you leave? Why haven't you come back?
Am I not good enough?
Did I press?
Am I too far?

Don't worry.

I'll come.

We can go back. It'll be like it was.
I can go back.

> **12/07/15:** An energy signature is detected within SCP-2548 resembling the drive signature of the Durendal. Further analysis pending.

2: An Artist Spends a Weekend in a Basement

A thump underneath his head shook the mattress, and **Adrian** was thrown from a restless sleep to face the dusty air in the room. He choked briefly and sat up, head swiveling. In the other bunks he saw men sitting up, staring at him.

One raised a finger to his lips. Adrian was silent.

After a few minutes, the thumping stopped.

"It's just confusing, Adrian." Adrian stirred his oatmeal quietly. Geoff had managed to snag a corner table in the cramped meal space, to preserve a shred of privacy. "All this commotion with the, the organizations," Geoffrey continued. Adrian swallowed a spoonful of the white-grey mush. Then he sighed.

"Not ideal, I know. I have… not a plan. But I *want* to leave them," Adrian whispered as he cast a glance over his shoulder. The hall was far too small to support any number of people comfortably. There were hardly more than a dozen men living in this house, and every instant was shared. He thought maybe the meal could look like The Last Supper, but he couldn't see it.

Adrian put it out of his mind, focusing on Geoff. Geoff's eyes were warm sadness, his mouth opened to speak. "We weren't ready for this. They were. This was their plan."

Adrian looked back again, frowning, and spoke. "Their plan shouldn't have counted on me. Or…" he trails off.

Geoffrey coughs. "Sorry."

"No, it's okay."

"You want to leave."

"Can we? Would they find us?"

Adrian gestures over his shoulder with his thumb. Geoffrey knows he's not really talking about their housemates. He doesn't reply because he doesn't know.

"It's just… cramped, here," Adrian murmured.

He fidgeted. Geoff chewed his cheek. After a moment, he nodded. Minutes later, they left the room.

Adrian had locked the door to afford himself a few minutes of privacy. His shaving bag was carefully packed, and he took a moment to watch his own reflection while he cleaned his teeth.

His eyes sagged in their sockets, and his dark skin was pocked by blemishes. He looked like he hadn't seen sunlight in a year. And he had his hosts to thank for the shade under his eyes. They're not known for respecting quiet hours. In fact, Adrian was quite certain one of them was digging a tunnel underneath the basement in which they all slept.

He turned to go, but looked back briefly, and pressed a thumb to the mirror's surface. He examined the print carefully, but there was nothing hidden inside. A grimace on his face, he unlocked the door and left.

As he did, he found himself in front of another man, taller, with a mop of black hair that didn't suit his narrow face. "We heard you. What you're doing."

Adrian shrunk back. He pursed his lips.

"We protect this place, you know? There's a barrier. They can't find us. You should be thankful."

Adrian's eyebrows furrowed. "Thankful? For-" He stopped himself.

"If you want out, you can leave. But you're not ready for who's out there. We could make you ready. We've seen your work; you have real talent."

Adrian looked at the man's face and saw nothing. He looked down. No way out. "Thank you."

The man nodded and left without a goodbye.

Adrian knew now. He had to leave.

The two men struggled down the foggy shoulder. Adrian's legs were getting sore; Geoff trudged without complaint. They'd passed the point where they could knock on doors and ask for help. Every house said no. Every store kicked them out. And now there were no buildings, only the road. The Cool Kids were hours behind them, trapped in their paradoxical safety.

Adrian held his head low. There was no-one but he could tell he was surrounded. And he stopped and caught his breath.

"There's nothing here. We shouldn't…. not meant to be a fugitive," Adrian wheezed.

Geoffrey's voice was clear through the mist. "We can go back. They'll let us in."

Adrian held the silence close.

"I know this isn't… great. Since the show, I'm… I'm sorry. With… all we've gone through, and… I had to leave it behind. I thought we could… do better. Do some good."

A hand clasped Adrian's shoulder, and he closed his eyes. "We will. Let's get going."

Adrian looked up at the sky. It would get dark soon. And he saw something up there, something only he could see, when he realized the stars looked just like they did when…

The artist turned. "We can come back. When we're ready."

Geoff nodded. "We'll be ready."

And the two friends turned around, and started on the way back.

Addendum: Less than three weeks after initial recovery, a disk was found on a rural road during a search of the area, believed to be associated with POI-2985. The disk

was labeled as "Disk Seven: Stars". Due to scratches and weathering, the contents were inaccessible.

3: A Doctor Spends a Birthday in a Cell

Gabriel twirled his glasses in a calloused hand. For a moment, his hands were all callouses and he felt sore, but it passed.

After a while, watching the glass distort grew boring. He was aware that Sarah was behind him, standing on a bench. The dozens of others weren't there, they were far away, but he could still feel them like they were close to him, so close that he could feel static on his skin.

"Why stay behind?" Sarah broke the silence and the air in the room, which had been stale, changed immediately.

He swiveled in place, lips curved in a dejected frown. She was only partially whole, of course, having long shed the modifications that marred her face during her time in 'captivity'. Her left eye was glass but it may as well have been a window. "Guess I'm just nostalgic."

"I know you're troubled, Gabe." He frowned. Just because she could, doesn't mean she…
"You've had doubts," she continued.

"Call me a militant athiest." His body became closed. "I've just been… considering the whole… WAN."

"How can you doubt when you've been immersed in WAN's light since your internment? Brother… doubt doesn't need to exist anymore."

Gabriel stood up. He felt the heat in the room rising. He knew others were watching from far away. Not his old employers. No-one watches the security cameras for the holding cell. "I've been thinking, Sarah. If that thing is WAN's light… why *can* I doubt?"

Sarah exhaled through closed lips, producing a sound of derision that forced his skin to slack. She'd been practicing. "Choice is essential to the new Guides. You of all people should-"

"But that's not how it works. It *works* by defining, or clearing. Or is WAN not consistent? That doesn't sound right, miss. I've read your guides. And once upon an epiphany, I used to trust them."

The prophet furrowed her brow. Her standard-issue detainment garments were flowing robes of pure information, her eyes beacons of cleansing radiation. "It doesn't matter, Gabe. You're dwelling in the past. More wander into the light every day. Why not work to move forwards with us?"

Gabe smiled a sick smile, and the room lost its edge. "I'm not going anywhere. Because I can't go back. It won't let me."

Sarah's face didn't register an emotion. A minute later, it didn't register at all. The rest of those deeply affected by the light were off cruising space, or visiting art galleries. Did they care? Maybe. But it doesn't matter.

Gabriel Sandu sat on his bench again, in his tiny cell to which no key can be found.

Notice: Site-wide surveys indicate that, as of 12/08/2015, over 90% of all personnel working at this Site, including those with Level 1 clearance and D-Class personnel, have knowledge of and are therefore affected by SCP-2660's primary infohazard. Finding a more effective counter-meme has been elevated as high-priority research.

Until further notice, secrecy is to be upheld as to the status of those detained in the weeks following the initial recovery incident. No surveillance upon their cells is to be performed by any personnel.

Lost Golden Days

A world lost to the unknown.
A Young Girl befriending a Dragon.
A door opening.

Once tsa-Fanu stopped spinning the world around her, it took Quarseta a moment to gain her bearings. Once her mind had cleared a bit, she realized that she was standing outside a very large and old looking house, like one that you might read about in a book, with secret passages and coats of armor and staircases so high that it would take you all of half of an hour to reach the top of them. Feathery gills were forming on Atanti's back to soak in the rain, which was pouring down on them from the dark night sky.

"Atanti, I think something went wrong, this still looks like Earth."

"I'm afraid that it's not quite that simple, my child. Right now, we are not able to return home. That is why I said that these were the *first steps*. And that is why we are here, for help."

Without another word, her friends led the way into the mansion, somehow fitting through a door which was far too small for them. The halls were far colder than one would expect even for an abandoned house, and there was a suspicious lack of a dusty smell. The deeper they went, the more Quarseta felt that there was something vaguely… ancient in this place, which was saying something given the age of the place itself. Eventually, when Quarseta was just beginning to think that they should have reached the back of the house by now, the turned a corner into a very strange room with a very strange occupant, which would have surprised Quarseta very much if she had not been traveling alongside a giant lizard and a sparkling cloud of bio-matter.

The large room looked at first like a very natural part of the building, but about half way into the room, the wall seemed to shimmer and

shift, eventually becoming a room that looked very much like Atanti's old room at the Foundation. Standing in the corner of the room was a rather short, bony man with reddish-brown skin, a large lump of a nose, and a smile that seemed far too wide for his face. The man was hunched over a large tube which was attached to several electrical cables and poured cold, white smoke out of a couple of vents. Smells of metals and old books and cleaning fluid all fought to control her nose at once. A coarse, whistling, wheezing sound filled the room, and it took her a moment to notice it was coming from the man.

"Greetings, rru-Kirg!" Atanti bellowed.

"Ah, Atanti. It's been a while," the strange man wheezed out through his teeth. "And Edrisek too. Can't say I know the human though. Strange, most of them would be running in terror by now."

"Look deeper, Evuruct," Atanti replied.

The man squinted at Quarseta for a moment. "Hm. Most remarkable. Can't quite say I've read of anything like it before. Well, come in, see if you can find a comfortable spot along the clutter."

The three travelers began to navigate through the piles of equipment and books, tsa-Fanu and Atanti seemed to be very focused on not crossing into the second half of the room.

Quarseta decided that the best greating she could give was a compliment. "It's a very nice house, Mr… uhh…"

"Hm? Oh, where are my manners? Evuruct-rru-Kirg, at your service. And yes it is rather nice, isn't it. From what I've learned, this particular kind of house was used to represent wealth and power. Of course, it didn't come with the laboratory, had to add that in myself with an interesting phenomenon known as a Way. Fascinating, the things there are to learn in this world."

Atanti grunted. "Hmf. Still nothing compared to the old meeting halls of Etcopis." At Atanti's statement, tsa-Fanu took on a noticeably more nostalgic curvature.

"Perhaps that's true," Evuruct replied,"but when in Rome, do as the Romans do. That's another piece of knowledge that this place has to offer. Anyway, I presume that you came to inquire what I knew about this child's condition. If that's the case, then I'm afraid that I haven't the slightest clue how her concept of being was able to pass over without physical form."

"That's not why we came, Evuruct," Atanti replied gravely.

"Why then?"

"Simply put, we are going to return home, we were hoping that you might have some idea of where we should begin."

Evuruct's smile shrank by a few inches. "I'm afraid that it's not that simple, Atanti."

"Oh? Why not? Surely if there was a gateway leading to this world, there's one leading to ours as well."

Evuruct let out a deep, wheezing sigh. "Atanti, why do you think that I've gone to such lengths to recreate the life I once had here?" Everuct gestured to the cryotube. "Why do you think that I've become so settled into this world, instead of using my resources to get home? I've done the calculations, and we're in exactly the same spot that we would be if we were home. There is no gate, Atanti. The world's changed, and we are the leftover relics."

"No. You must be wrong, Evuruct. This place cannot be home. Our world is still there, and we will find a way back, whether you help us or not."

"You always were stubborn, Atanti. It made you a good protector and traveler, but a poor listener. Very well, go and find this gateway back home, I'll tell you now that it's an unreachable goal. If you need anything later on, you know where to find me."

Atanti nodded his large snout and thanked Evuruct for his openness. For the next several hours, the three elders exchanged stories of the old days; victories, exotic lands, cherished memories. Every now and again, Quarseta would chime in with a story she had read or a

piece of trivia that Evuruct found interesting. At the end of the night, the three travelers thanked their host for his hospitality and began to leave.

"Quarseta, would you stay behind a moment? There's something I need to discuss with you personally," Evuruct called after her.

Quarseta looked up at Atanti who, after a moment of deliberation, nodded his consent.

"Yes, rru-Kirg?"

"Quarseta… are you someone who can be trusted?"

"Yes, I believe so."

Evuruct nodded his bulbous head. "Good, good. Atanti can be a bit rash at times. Makes it difficult to talk sense into him. But… he listens to you. Will you at least try to talk some sense into him?"

Quarseta took a moment to think. "No. He's made up his mind, anything I do will only make this trip harder, foolish or not."

Evuruct nodded. "You are a good companion. Well, before you leave, there's one thing that I should still give you."

The old scholar reached for a nearby desk and picked up what looked like a small clockwork egg. He placed it in Quarseta's hand and wrapped her fingers around it. It was cold as ice, but she could still feel small bits of mechanical life whirring and clicking inside it.

"Regardless of the wisdom or lack thereof behind this journey, I can guarantee that it will not be safe. In your time of need, smash this device on the ground."

"What will it do?"

The small man's smile grew wider. "That will depend on the time of need. I will, however, ask that you not tell your new family about this. Now go, they're waiting."

Quarseta hesitated a moment before slipping the Egg in her pocket

and running off to join her companions.

"What was that about?"

"rru-Kirg wanted me to try to talk you out of this. I told him no."

"Was that all?"

"Yes."

"Well, then," the dragon smiled, "let's be off!"

A world found, also unknown.
An Old Man with no more tears to cry.
A door closing.

« A World's Legacy | HUB | Pooling Our Resources »

Lost Time

“What were you, Harken?”

“…what, like in a cosmic sense? Probably a dog or something.”

“Must you always be an asshole?”

“No, it's a choice.”

They'd been stuck at the same posting for three days now, and random acts of violence were becoming more and more appealing. A trashed-out storefront, it bore the distinction of being across the street from a hidden Church meeting point. It was also supposed to be the place where they were getting “back up”, owing to the new crackdown procedures in place. So far, neither Agents nor Churchgoers had shown. Unable to call in until reinforcements or Church subjects were five days overdue, Harken and Kramer had taken to annoying each other to pass the time. That is to say, more than normal.

“Seriously, tell me.”

“Why do you of all people care about this? I'm an Agent, a faceless cog in a faceless machine.”

“Tell me, or I'll break something that's recently healed.”

“…Fine…ok, OK! Back up, Jesus.”

Kramer slipped away with feline suppleness, keeping low on the roof line. Technically, they were observing the business across the street, but had all but given up on any real action. Still, it didn't pay to be caught napping. Harken sighed, hunkering down lower on the low roof ledge and glaring over at Kramer's self-satisfied smirk.

“You know, it's not fair that you have zero issue with causal bodily harm, and I can't even threaten you with anything really.”

“Life sucks. Dish.”

Harken threw up his hands in exasperation, shaking his head and sighing deeply, resigned to defeat.

“I was in the army for, like, two years. Some personality profile said I had 'high moral flexibility', so I got bounced to Intelligence and… what?”

“Sorry, just trying to imagine you in camo and combat boots” Kramer grinned, smothering a laugh.

“ANYWAY. I think they were happy to shift me off. I'm not great in direct combat anyway…did a lot of interrogation stuff, which I am varying degrees of proud and ashamed of. The CIA came knocking one day, promised all the James Bond shit. I turned them down…I know a bullshit sell when I hear one. It just kinda…stuck, though. Couple months later, we had a interrogation get out of hand. Way out of hand…new kid, got a little over-patriotic and electrocuted someone suspected of terrorism. Not normally a issue…but as it turns out, he was innocent, and his dad was a major player in OPEC. Suddenly the CIA didn't look like such a bad option.”

Harken lit a cigarette, leaning back and avoiding Kramer's fixed stare with practiced ease. He continued to smoke in silence just long enough to annoy Kramer without causing bodily retribution.

“So they shoved me off to the CIA and glossed things over to make me look dead. Or incarcerated…you know, I really never checked which they said. Anyway, I did most of the same stuff as I did with the army, but with a bigger budget and almost zero oversight. It was fun sometimes, but more often than not it was paper pushing. Spies spying on spies for information nobody really needed. Enough to make me nostalgic for live fire exercises. Almost. Started drinking more, not bad, just more often than normal.”

“That's to say there was a time you didn't drink?” Kramer's face was as expressive as a Moi.

“Well…yes, actually. We were all fresh-faced kids, once, if only for a little while.” He grinned, pointing with the burning end of his

cigarette. “Even you. I know, I know, the church takes Crusaders at a young age…but you played hopscotch and slept without nightmares once.”

“We're talking about you, not me, you weaselly sociopath.”

“Indeed we were.” He grinned, taking a deep drag. “I did well and got in trouble in about even measure. Ended up with a team following a lead on some kind of suspected Russian bio-weapon. Expected to follow ghosts for weeks, then end up staking out a hotel for a while and go home empty, but ended up on a farm out west, looking at a hell-iguana in an acid bath, surrounded by 'CIA' agents from some other department. The other fellows swallowed their crap, but I wouldn't release the site. Actually held a guy at gunpoint for a bit.”

Harken sighed, remember the total lack of concern on the Agent's face, even with a gun jammed in it. “It all felt rotten, and I had to have a commander expressly tell me it was above my pay grade and to STAND DOWN before I let it go. Even then, I tried to log a complaint…which got me yet another reprimand. I kept seeing that big…thing, in the tank. It was watching me, somehow. I could…feel it. I got stunningly drunk, told my CO to fuck a goat, pissed in someone's roses, and fell asleep on the lawn in front of my apartment. At some point, I crawled inside.”

“I woke up to some guy sitting on my goddamn side table, smoking. Even better, I was naked at the time, so the first bit was me just flailing around, trying to figure out what in the skippy fuck had happened. He started talking before I calmed down, so I missed some of the first bit. He told me about what I'd seen the day before…about what it could do, and had done. He told me about how I could go on trying to ignore it, push it away…or try to understand what was really going on.”

Harken chuckled, shaking his head. “Honestly, I don't remember all of what he said…but what sold me was the honesty of it. For one of the first goddamn times, I was being told the nasty shit right along with the good. No gilding the lily, no idealized pitch…I was impressed. Plus, I figured that just going back to life after my little bender might not be great, so…I signed up. Went through

admissions for about six months, doing tests and evaluations, getting told by large men with guns how serious everything was…so pretty standard for my life thus far."

He stopped, looking over to Kramer, her face still a calculated blank, watching like a predatory bird. He lit a fresh cigarette off his old one, rubbing his head.

"Hey, come to think of it, did you ever go through admissions?"

"No. I'm not filed as an Agent. Different protocols."

"Oh…well, yeah. So…ahh…yeah, that's my story."

"No it's not."

"What…oh. Listen, I've told you that bit already, it's not-"

"No, you haven't."

"Yes I goddamn have, Kramer!"

"You've paraphrased at best. You're the intelligence man, don't you feel full operations knowledge is critical to any mission?"

"…absolutely fuck you."

"Duly noted. Squeal."

Harken sighed heavily, closing his eyes and rubbing them with his free hand. "I got lumped in with a three man team, Agents Billik, Hon, and Fourteen. We did pretty well, Billik and Hon were the muscle, Fourteen was the tech agent, and I handled intel and the 'spy shit', as Hon would say. We didn't do a lot of direct SCP-related stuff…went after groups and people mostly, but we did our share." He laughed, smoke clouding around him. "Jesus, went after a new skip once with a eval team…Fourteen was normally this badass chick, all brass and nails, but it turned out this thing had an attractive effect with insects and such…we all woke up to her shrieking, run out to find her up on a chair, in a sea of caterpillars…oh god…" He started laughing hard, half-choking on smoke, coughing and doubling up even as he giggled.

“I mean, I know it was dangerous, and we ended up losing one of the recovery guys, but god, Fourteen up on that chair, squealing and hopping from foot to foot, going 'getthemawaygetthemawaygetthemaway'…it was great. She was pretty pissed at us for a while, but I think she came to see the funny in it eventually. It was great.” The laughter trailed off in to silence. The quiet stretched out slowly, the odd sound of a far-off car or wind barely filling it. Harken sighed deeply, staring at his shoes.

“We were on our way back from a recon mission that turned up nothing. Had a report of a SCP escape during transport. It'd gotten loose and was inside a hospital. MTF teams were en-route, but all available Agents were ordered to report to help contain fallout and such. Morons we were, we responded even when they said it was SCP-106. This was shortly after they grabbed it the first time, didn't fully understand it…makes sense now why it ran for a hospital. Anyway, we responded, secured the outside, which wasn't hard because everyone was…gone. That black shit was all over the lower doors. Heh…ended up busting open a window rather then get near it, said we'd write it up as 'tactical entry' in the report.”

He swallowed hard, eyes fixed on his shoes. “We weren't the first team there. Found two of them still mobile, trying to get the hell out…it took them in front of us, yanked them in to a wall, grinning at us the whole fucking time. It…grabbed in to their flesh like how you'd grab a pile of dirty laundry, just…sank in. That black shit started spreading, and…yeah. We tried to fall back, or get out, but it wouldn't…let us. Kept herding us deeper, driving us…Hon lost a foot, Billik got his liver punctured…just kept picking at us. It…we… lost Billik in Surgery. It'd made a…thing…out of the tools, and Billik went to look. It…it pulled him in to it, rubbing him on it, mumbling something while Billik's face went to shreds, everything just…ripping and…it pulled him in, eventually. I say he was dead when it did. We…tried to get out again, but it kept pushing and pushing. Ended up in the natal unit, and…we…”

His voice faltered, and he put a hand to his head, gently, a tiny tremor in his fingers. Kramer watched, silent and still as a gargoyle. Harken's hand curled, nails pushing against his skull, holding for a few seconds, twitching, before he lowered it again, eyes returning

fixedly to his shoes.

“It was bad. We tried to make a breakout, just flailing, really, and it grabbed Fourteen, yanked her back to…yeah. Me and Hon, we started trying to get the hell loose, just taking curves at random, running and running. You know how they say 106 isn't sapient? Bullshit. At the very least, it's a good mimic…it…kept singing. 'My Bonnie Lies Over The Sea' of all things…and just that line, over and over, in that grating, bubbly voice. We hit the main admittance hall, I mean we SAW the doors…and then we heard Fourteen.”

“She came around a corner behind us…maybe thirty yards? She… she was a wreck, had bits missing, something wrong with her jaw… but she was limping, trying to scream after us. We froze, looking, and we saw that thing slipping out of the ceiling behind her. It just… fell, landed in a heap, then stood up and started to go for her. She screamed and screamed, begging us…Hon ran, tried to grab her, pull her along, but it…lunged. It grabbed both of them, and started sliding in to the floor, that black stuff seeping and spreading everywhere, in the floor…in to them. It started touching them, not rough, just…gentle, teasing, even as they screamed, and fought, sinking in to the black floor.”

He paused, taking a deep, slow drag. “I heard them dying.”

“I…I froze. They were holding out to me, begging. It had them, grinning at me, just…flat, dead…like looking at a painting. I ran. I ran, and I got out a little bit before the MTF teams rolled in. They didn't find anyone, got the old man recovered…I went before a oversight board. They said I acted in service to mission integrity, that I was at least able to report, probably saved some lives, blah fucking blah blah BLAH. Requested time off, got it, and stayed blind drunk for about…two weeks? Maybe three? Came back, got a bunch of evaluations, kept drinking, got in trouble, didn't really care. Kept getting shifted deeper and deeper until I ended up at the training center. Left me there to rot, until they needed someone to deal with your barrel of laughs.”

Kramer watched in silence, finally speaking, eyes still intent and fixed. “It wasn't your fault, you did-”

Harken's eyes widened, wheeling over and glaring, mouth fixed in a line of fury. “FUCK YOU. No, no, you shut the fuck up right fucking now. I've heard that bullshit from everyone, ever, and it's just that, bullshit. I don't need fucking platitude from you, fuck you. You wanted to fucking know, you just HAD to fucking pry, so there it is. I'm not asking for your 'interpretations' or 'solace', or any other bullshit tripe that people swallow to feel fucking great about their fucked decisions. I let my friends die so I could live. End of story, no frosted coating, no 'yes, but' feel-good after-school-special lesson at the end. Drop it.”

He was almost panting, looming up over Kramer's hunched form, heedless of the amounts of death contained in that unstable package. He sat again, heavily, flicking his cigarette off the roof in disgust. Kramer stayed fixed, perhaps a bit more curled up, more tightly compacted in to her corner. Harken's departing rage seemed to waft off him like heat. She blinked slowly, a tiny click coming from somewhere in her sockets.

“I notice your childhood didn't make it in to that story.”

“Wow. Really? What the hell, wanna hear about me fucking my cousins, or my mom trying to shoot my dad, first?”

“…”

“Yeah, you're right, got a goddamn mission to do.”

The silence yawned open like the space of a broken tooth.

Love Hate

The house was dead when he came home. No lights, no noise, even a little chilly in the early spring dusk. Pete Kothkis stood in the entryway, peering in to the house with a slightly confused smile. Maybe they dipped out to the store for a bit and just didn't say anything? No, he'd had the car…her mom, maybe? He shook his head, tossing his bag on the couch, snapping on lights and looking in the kitchen and hall in a half-hearted search.

Not that he minded the silence, it was refreshing from the normal buzz when he came home, but it was unexpected. No Amanda trying to pick up, with a kiss by the door. No Christian bopping about underfoot, or Jamie bouncing and shrieking for a hug. He leaned in to the fridge, fishing out a pop and snatching up a bag of chips before slumping back in to the couch. It'd been a long bloody day.

Pete watched the TV without seeing, munching absently as he considered what to do. Really, he should put some time in on his report, but it was honestly nothing that wouldn't keep until later in the week. The new position was proving both more and significantly less demanding then his old one. More quality, less quantity, in a way, but that was honestly how Pete liked it. Not so rushed, taking time-

His hip suddenly pulsed with the beat of some forgotten pop song.

He fumbled for the ringing device, having to stretch out to get the pants pocket unfolded enough to fish the phone free. He saw the smiling face of his wife from the screen, and grinned, tapping it on.

“Hey babe, where are you guys? I was just about to call.”

“Oh, so you're home already?”

Pete chuckled, tucking the phone against his neck and rising to slowly walk and pace around the room. She'd always ribbed him about it, but he could never just sit on the phone and talk, it felt…

odd. “Yeah, I figured you were with your mom or something, going-”

“I'm…not with mom, Pete.”

“-with…what? Who then?” He stopped, stock still. Something in her tone, in the tiny sigh she'd given put him immediately on edge.

“…It's not important, Pete. I…oh god. I'm sorry, Pete. I can't…I just can't do this anymore.”

He moved his hand uselessly in the air, seeming to try and pull understanding from vapor. “Can't do what? Amanda, I don't…I'm not following here, what's going on?” Even as he asked, a sick, sticky realization was trying to crawl in to his awareness.

She continued almost as if he hasn't spoken. “I know you try, Pete, and you're great, and you love the kids…but…Pete, it's not enough. You don't make the time for me, for us, you work so much, and you never get back until late. It's been going on six months since you touched me like you used to. I can't just live on memory and life support. I'm a human woman, Pete, not a plant you can just water from time to time and call it good.” The anger was seeping in to her voice, making it quick and sharp.

He glared at the wall, breathing deep and slow, biting back venom. “Are you joking me. I work for US. I work to keep US alive and afloat. You think I like coming home in time to basically put the kids to bed, too exhausted to do much of anything? Shockingly, I don't. I don't get what the hell you're revved up about, but I think we need to talk about this, face to face at the very least.”

There was a sob in her voice now, along with the rage. Lordy. “NO! No more talking, and discussing, and working things out. You're not going to change, I know better now. I thought I loved you, and I think I do, but I can't…my heart is bleeding out to you, Pete, and nothing coming back. It's like I'm pouring my feelings in to a sieve, and it all just runs away. Did you really care about me, Pete, or was I just a fun time that got out of hand? You wanted me so bad you had to go and marry me to seal the deal? Was that it?”

Her voice was laced with bile and festered anger, yet he still stared,

blank, at the wall. His voice, however, simmering and tight, betrayed that bland mask. “Why is all this happening now? You could have TOLD me this, I ask you what the hell is wrong almost daily! You just keep letting it simmer and simmer, and then explode on me like it's somehow my fault you won't talk? I don't know what you're thinking, but we need to at LEAST talk this out face to face.”

“No, no, no, no more talking, or letting you put your sticky fingers in my head. I…I've found someone else, Pete.” His heart dropped like a stone in a frozen lake, even the sickly expectation of it hadn't helped. She kept on through his silence. “He loves me, Pete, truly, and the kids, too. You took six years of my life, Pete. You bled me out for all I had, and didn't give me anything, anything-”

“Amanda, where are my children.” It was barely a question. He knew, but had to hope. He was willing to ignore the unfairness, the one-sided, petulant whining if this one, single question was different from his expectation. He started walking again, slowly.

“Pete…I can't leave them there, with you. You…you're not even there, Pete. You wouldn't even be able to put them on the bus in the morning. You're a picture to them, and not much more. They're safe, and will be until the trial, but I'm not letting you see them, Pete. I can't…I can't trust you anymore. You've hurt me too much, I just…” She dissolved in to sobs, gasping in to the phone.

The sudden, explosive laughter brought those sobs up short.

“Hurt you? Oh wow…me, hurting you? Honey bunny, I don't think you understand that term.”

“I…Pete?”

“You have not clue at all what I gave up for you, what it took every day to be the very best husband and father I could be, do you? I mean…wow.” He loosed another gale of laughter, shaking his head and starting to walk down the hall. “This…wow. Baby, I'm stunned, really I am, I don't mean to laugh, I just…you have no fucking clue, do you? At all?”

“This…this is what I'm talking about, Pete, these games you play…

it's not healthy, it-”

“Dearheart, I don't think you have a clue. Listen, babe, I hate to yank you out of the speech I'm sure you've been mentally reviewing for weeks when you insisted everything was fine, but I have a question for you, if you'll indulge me.” He tucked the phone against his neck again, swinging open the basement door and starting down the steps.

“…don't talk down to me like that, Pete, I'm not goin-”

“You will listen to every word I have to say.”

He could almost hear her freeze and stare at the phone. He smiled a easy, empty smile, tasting her confusion over airwaves. Now, finally, maybe she was understanding that the situation had changed.

“P-Pete, you're-”

“When we got together babe, I loved you more then anything in the entire world. I mean anything, and I don't think you ever fully got that, not all the way. Then, when we had kids…well, I hate to admit it, but they took the forefront. Harsh, I know, but I think that's how it's supposed to be, even if you seem to think my every waking moment should be in devotion to you.”

“That is NOT what-”

“ANYWAY. I gave up a lot for you, the smoking, the swearing, all those goodies, but I don't think you fully understand the…sacrifice I made to be with you.” He crossed the basement, the gloom of the bare bulbs showing just enough to move the old bookcase safely, sliding it along the dusty floor. Have to sweep down here, sometime. “Do you remember, way back when we first got together, there was that thing in the news about…oh, what was it, the red ghost, or the red phantom or something?”

Silence stretched across the phone line.

“Still there babe?”

“…yes.”

“Oh good. Remember, you had me walk you home those few times because there was a murder a couple towns over? Always homes, never any real struggle, nothing broken in to, so they were thinking that this phantom was snatching people on the street and making them drive home with him? You were so scared, and I'm sorry I laughed, but I mean…it was cute, really.”

“P-Pete…what are…”

He reached low, listening to her breathing turning ragged as he fished out the loose bricks. Was this other fella right there, offering moral support, or did she excuse herself to rip his heart out in private? Kids probably not with her, maybe mom? No…Kathy, probably. Worth a stop, at least. “Some things are automatic, babe. You don't think, it's just…needed, and you do it. Washing hands, tying shoes, automatic. It takes no thought at all to do, but a ocean of focus not to. Every single day, every one, I made the choice not to be automatic. Because I loved you, I chose not to.”

Pete grinned, pulling the duffel bag from the wall with a uneven clank. He fished inside, pulling the thick, smooth curve of the linoleum knife free and tapping the point. “I'm…I can't believe you would do this. And take the kids, no less. Wow. I just…do you get it now baby? Do you understand what I'm telling you now? Is it sinking in?”

Her breath was coming too fast, sobs choking in “Oh god…oh my god…I…I'm gonna call the cops, Pete, Y-you aren't…I won't…I won't let you do…oh god, Pete…”

“Call 'em babe, please. Please. I'll be gone, but I want you to feel good baby, I want this to be easy for you now. You know me lovey… remember, you kept commenting how I fit in anywhere, I can talk to anyone? I have that open, trusting face people love, people really love to listen to me. Trust me. Believe me.” His smile was honest amusement as he pulled up his shirt and secured the harness, dropping the knives, needles and other helpful bits to their places. “Didn't you ever wonder why they stopped right around when we got together? And you decided to just toss me to the wind, like nothing. Garbage. Wow.”

“Pete, keep a-a-away from me, I…oh god, Pete, don't, you're scaring me, please…”

“Honey-bunny, you don't understand that term. You're going to be checking under your bed for me. I've never felt such a whipsnap of devotion…as much as I loved you, it's gone to the same amount in the polar opposite direction. I don't think you could just pass it off as 'April fools' anymore, even. I'm still trying to wrap my head around how you could do this.” He shook his head in disappointment, adjusting it as he took a practice throw with a knife. Rusty, need to practice. Still, like a bicycle, never really forget.

She was just sobbing now, blubbering something threatening, maybe.

“I'm going to get rolling baby, let you call the cops and such, maybe get a quickie from your new boy, just to take the edge off, right? You know why they called it the phantom? Because a couple witnesses said they saw him, and he looked so white it had to be a ghost, or a mask. Ain't that a scream.” He laughed, hefting up the bag, forgoing the normal gloves and mask that was normally required. Just a gentleman on the way to the gym, officer. “I would have let you go. You hurt me, but I would have let you go…but you had to try and take the whole pie, snatch it all from me. Don't worry babe, the kiddle-biddles won't ever know any more than you tell them.”

More moaning and crying now, something about keeping away from the kids, maybe.

“Sweetheart, you may love them enough to steal them, but I love them enough to kill for them. See you in a couple weeks, babe. Tell your new boy I said hi…or, you know what, never mind. I'll tell him myself.”

He hung up, then crushed the phone against the wall even as it chimed again, slamming it over and over in blank-faced rage, leaving the splintered heap on the floor. He locked up, unplugged the power strips behind the TV and computer, and stepped out on the porch, heading for the car.

The Red Ghost inhaled the night.

Love In Leetspeak

Margaret couldn't have shoes. There was something about this entire experience that was so surreal, so far outside of her range of experience, so beyond anything she was prepared to deal with, she was too confused to be angry or sad or scared. So all her mind could focus on was the feeling of her feet on the cold tiles as the (soldiers? doctors?) half-dragged, half-pushed her down the hall. She couldn't have shoes. They wouldn't say why.

She had met plenty of the soldier-doctor people in the last day. Some of them were sympathetic, or pretended as much. Some were coldly clinical and ignored her, talked about her like an object, assigned her some kind of prisoner number, refused to talk to her directly.

SCP-2122. It's all they ever called her.

She hadn't seen any other prisoners here, wherever she was. They pushed her down the hallway and into a smaller room. She saw a bed and a desk. Her cell, she supposed. They muttered something at her about good behavior; she wasn't listening. She just walked over to the small bed, climbed in, pulled the sheets over her head, and cried. She heard them walk away.

> Maria,
>
> Captured a new skip today. Humanoid, female, aged seventeen years, 132 cm in height. Body in some sort of perfect biological stasis; nearly unbreakable skin, nails, teeth, hair, everything; doesn't shed or regrow skin cells as far as we can tell. Got in some fights in school and drew some unwanted attention. Will send full file later today. More thorough experimentation to begin Wednesday.
>
> —Dr. Husmann

There was writing on the wall of her cell. Literally. She knew that was the standard cliche, the "MARGARET WAS HERE" scraped into the brick, passing someone's last message from one poor soul to another. This was different, though, because she had been here almost a full day, and she was almost *certain* that this wall had been blank. Sterile, cold, and perfectly blank. She squinted at the writing.

HI Y0uR N3w WH@75 y0Ur n@M3?

Now *that* was strange. How did the author expect to get a response to *that* one? She didn't care. Half out of boredom, half out of a desperate urge to make any sort of rebellion, she used her thumbnail (that perfect thumbnail, the only nail they didn't try cutting off, the one they'd probably end up pulling out of her skin) to carve, little by little,

Im Margaret and Ive never been in hell before

into the white wall, just beneath the other writing. Harder than she thought it'd be; she had an appreciation for anybody who could carve an ampersat into a wall without special tools. She rolled over and lay on her bed.

An odd scraping sound beside her. She whipped her head around. The old writing and hers were both gone. Now the words

m@RG@r37 y0u 50UnD pr377Y I lIK3 y0u wIlL y0U b3 h3r3 L0ng

were the only things on the wall. *How the* hell *did he do that?* she thought to herself. But of course, she was the one with a fingernail like an X-Acto knife. How weird were the *other* people in this place?

Where am I?

7h3Y c@ll 7Hi5 site19 th3R3 aRe l07s 0f P30PL3 h3r3 FRI3nd5 y0u c@n H@V3 FrI3ND$ I b3t Y0u c0Uld M337 Irls 5h3'd li3K y0U

Margaret thought about it. Home life had never been good for her. School was hell. And it sounded like there were other freaks here like her. But she thought about some of the things that creep Husmann had said. He tried to act aloof and detached, but he kept looking at her the way the boys in her class did, and he kept saying

something (when she was paying attention) about "advanced experimentation." It reminded her of things they read about the Holocaust in her history classes, the euphemisms they used. She didn't think they were going to let her run around this site19 place making friends.

I think they're going to hurt me where are you?

Im eV3rywH3R3 $0r7 0F l3t Me $33 if 7h3ir g0iNg 7o HUr7 yoU i D0N'7 WaN7 +H3M t0o

Margaret waited. She didn't know how her messenger friend was going to help, but she didn't have anyone or anything else at this point. Scraping again. She looked back at the wall.

your in d@NG3R d0 y0u W@nt m3 t0 Ge7 Y0u oU7?

YES YES YES can you do that?

giv3 me tw0 H0uR5

Margaret waited yet again for her graffiti-scrawling knight to save her. She rolled over and tried to sleep.

The office of RAISA was quiet when Maria Jones checked her email. Mostly mundane stuff; more proposals for killing 682 (which never found their way into her spam folder the way they were supposed to), vaccine research for 008, potentially increased activity from 877, nothing too interesting. One email stuck out, though, from Dr. Husmann. Recent transfer from Site 38, a little creepy but seemed reliable in his position at Site 19. She clicked on the email and cursed the lag, even worse than usual. It opened eventually.

> Maria,
>
> Found this sexy little thing in one of the reports the MTFs sent me. Got into a couple of fights, drew attention to herself, hard to injure or something. Just about legal, not that that matters to us lol. So…can I keep her? I'm sending pictures.

—Husmann

This had attached to it several pictures of an underage, clearly distressed girl being strip-searched extensively by a grinning Dr. Husmann. The pictures looked…off, slightly, as though they had been Photoshopped, but whether Husmann took these pictures or made them, Maria was sickened. She forwarded it to the director of Site 19, with a note added on top:

Get her out of there and stick him in her cell while we figure this out. This is disgusting.

The head of RAISA hit "send" and left a note on her secretary's desk that she would be taking the day off.

Margaret awoke to the sound of footsteps coming down the hallway. Frantic, she turned to look at the wall.

NiC3 kN0winG y0u, Go0d lucK, Love y0U

The words disappeared when the first soldier-doctor reached the door. He opened the door and put a pair of slippers on the floor. "If you would come with us, please, ma'am," he said sheepishly. Margaret stood up and walked to where the slippers were, sliding her feet into them. She walked down the hall, one soldier-doctor in front of her, one behind. She felt a cold needle slip into the side of her neck and fell into the arm waiting nearby.

Dr. Husmann had no idea what the hell was going on. He would be sure it was some kind of hazing prank, if he hadn't heard someone mention that the skip he just caught, one of his first, had just been set free. Some kind of procedural error or something, but he'd be hard-pressed to find this one again unless she drew attention to herself again. Meanwhile, he was sitting in the very containment cell he had her in. He had more pressing concerns.

She had only been here for a couple of hours, so it couldn't have been her who did all this carving in the wall. No, in *every* wall, Husmann noticed. And the ceiling. And the *floor,* for God's sake.

And everywhere, all the carvings said the same thing.

b3 w@7chiNg Y0u

Love Springs Eternal

Why, it was love at first sight, darling. You awoke to the early song of dawn, and as you rose from the clutches of Morpheus I was there, watching you, every dewdrop on the windowpane an eye into your world. I was watching as you drank deep in my flesh, through your glass vessel I was watching, and I was watching as you bathed in my skin, embracing me in your face. I was watching as you let me run my fingers across your naked skin, cleansing you, baptising you in my scent. And as I watched, I knew you were mine, darling.

I made the first move, my humid breath caressing you in the morning light, lingering by your face and neck. You walked down the street, as I leapt from puddles and gathered at your tender feet. My hands crept up your body, stroking, moving in delicate rhythms to your nervous, quickening breath. You started to run, and for a moment I thought you were going to shake me off like the others, but I held on, drunk on desire. I wanted you, can't you see, darling? And 'want' is such a powerful thing, for both gods and men alike, that I continued to caress you as you ran, and more of me leapt out of you, and joined in the loving embrace.

You tore into the woods, as I rose from the fresh grass and slithered down from treetops. If only you could stay still to take in my love, but you kept running, kept running as I hugged your chest and ran my hands over your features. Such an exquisite face, certainly a cut above the other mortals, I thought. But of course, that was why I chose you, darling. Why did you continue to spurn me, when you clearly are not like the rest of them? You did not answer, but kept running, and running, as I gathered around you and wove around your arms in a dance of fated romance.

I pooled in your shoes, round your ankles and feet, gathering, rising, pleading for you to stop. But you somehow found the strength to keep running, and for a moment I was afraid you would keep running for ever, escaping me like so many others had did. Would

you, in your irrational rejection of me, keep running till every last drop of me had been expelled from your tender body, running till your supple lips shrivelled and deep blue eyes dessicated like raisins in the sun, till you lay screaming in the dirt, begging for me to leave you alone? I panicked, and lost my hold, briefly slipping off your chest before the river joined in, rising in desire with me, cuddling your warm, sweet body as you ran, screaming now, out of the woods and into the dry, bare plains.

The midday sun was unforgiving, sending me off your back in wisps of vapor before I managed to hold you again. It was a trial of love, and I strived to pass it, grabbing you, hugging you in a mad frenzy. You collapsed, and briefly I thought you were going to give up the chase and surrender your body, and I relaxed, but you started to struggle, and threw me off in splashes. I leapt right back on you, determined even as more of me lost my hold on you, but the heat and your tenacity started to prevail over my rushing desire. Would I lose you forever, my darling, in this arid field beneath the unforgiving sky?

Then like an answer to my prayer, the clouds rolled over like a smooth satin blanket, and I fell down, in drips and drops, kissing your skin, pinning it down, preparing you for my love. And I ran my lips over you, licking your flesh lovingly, as you continued to struggle beneath the weight of my body. You continued to struggle as I put my hands on your head, holding it and smiling into your bewildered eyes. You continued to struggle as I rose from the earth and wrapped my legs around your hips, and pushed my face ever closer to yours. You continued to struggle as I rushed in for true love's first kiss, embracing your hair, your eyes, quivering with lustful wanting. You continued to struggle as I closed my face upon your nose, and put my lips to yours, and then you struggled no more as I fully took you into my grasp, cuddling you even as more of me fell gently on the soft, cool ground.

Then you were still, and I forced my way past your lips and into your throat, and you were mine at last.

Facts Concerning Team 15 of Chapterhouse 4 and the Black Book

In other worlds far less queer than our own, the Necronomicon is, to some, an everyday part of life. Researchers at Miskatonic University in the fictional Arkham, Massachusetts, pore over it almost daily, gazing at secrets too obscene or wild to print in reality. In this particular universe, the Necronomicon is a work of fiction within a work of fiction… or at least it was thought to be.

The whole sordid affair started, I suppose, when the town of Arkham was constructed in the 1990s. I say 'town' in the loosest possible sense, for it was no more a town than the frontier land attraction one would encounter surrounding a wooden roller coaster at a sub-par amusement park. It was constructed as a tribute to the writer Howard Phillips Lovecraft, who I am sure needs no introduction. It was constructed on a vacant area of land in Vermont, not Massachusetts as in Lovecraft's work, and there was no Miskatonic river flowing through it, only an unfinished canal channel.

The pseudo-town attracted fans of Lovecraft's work, and soon, it became what would be called a tourist trap. Several of the general stores were replaced by Cthulhu's Curios and Gifts, the lone ice cream parlor was converted into The Creamery Out of Space, and served flavours such as 'Deep One Delight' and 'Cthulhu Coffee', and jewelry stores selling pendants depicting the visage of dread Cthulhu and the Derlethan Elder Sign.

The town prospered under a man who had taken the name Randolph Carter, after Lovecraft's authorial avatar from his dream cycle and *The Statement of Randolph Carter*. I do not know if this was the man's actual name, but knowing what I do now, I suspect it is a pseudonym. I hope whatever of the Hellish realms he went to, the demons/devils/daemons/imps are not merciful to that horrid man.

Arkham itself looked like any town built in the late 1700s, with cramped streets made for horse-drawn carriages rather than cars, all cobble rather than paved. The town's centre stands in front of city hall, which was little more than a miniature museum of Lovecraft. At the edges of the town stands its largest building: Miskatonic University. There are only four rooms to the university that were ever completed; a library, where one could read the works of Lovecraft, Derleth, Poe, and others in peace and quiet; a lecture hall, which was used to demonstrate various fabricated occult rites; an entry way, which connected to the two afforementioned areas; and a gift shop, where one could buy Cthulhu plushies and shoggoth blankets and even busts of the author himself, carved out of green soapstone. All in all, it could be described as 'kitschy'.

My involvement in this whole mess began at Chapterhouse 4 in Boston, when Gerald Fitzroy, head of CH4, received a phone call from one Peter Lott, who had been assigned to work at a succubus rehabilitation clinic in Baltimore. Mr. Lott had heard rumors from some of the clinic's patients that a new Lovecraftian cult had started up, centered around the pseudo-town of Arkham. This was nothing new, of course; cults based around Lovecraft's works pop up all the time, but thankfully, all of Lovecraft's work was pure fiction, with the possible exception of Herbert West, Reanimator. So, a Cthulhu cult popping up in the New England area was hardly unique, and they usually dispersed within a month.

What made this case unique is that the cult apparently had a copy of a book they referred to as *Al-Azif*. For those of you not versed in cosmic horror literature, *Al-Azif* is the Arabic name Lovecraft gave to the *Necronomicon*, the Book of Dead Names. The Necronomicon has long been called the Holy Grail of magic, excepting the actual Holy Grail, but it was long thought to be simply a name made up by Lovecraft. Those who have searched for the Necronomicon have found only false leads or copies of the book made by Lovecraft fanatics with no magical properties.

Unfortunately, even if the lead is false, the Horizon Initiative must investigate it. So, Team 15 of Chapterhouse 4 was called upon to take up this task. The team consisted of four people: Jayla Farrow, also known as Jay, an African-American woman who acted as the

team leader; Stanley Dyer, an expert with various forms of weaponry; Jacob Nelson, a religious scholar, former member of the Scribe corps; and myself, Herbert Andrew Westbrooke, the youngest, member of the team and scout.

The objective was simple: confer with the cult, retrieve the book, get out, and return it to the Chapterhouse. The missions are never as simple as the objectives, however, as we were soon to learn- what, what are you doing? No, Jay, don't, stop!

For anyone reading this: forgive all the purple prose up there, and I'm sorry for knocking you out, Herbie, but I need to do this too. I have to get it out of my head and onto *something*, or else I'll go fucking bonkers from it. And was it really necessary to write out "No, Jay, don't, stop?"

This is Jayla Farrow of the Shepherd Corps, American Chapterhouse 4, Team 15. As my colleague stated, we were responsible for recovery of what was believed to be a copy of the Necronomicon, not to be confused with the Necromnomnomicon, the Necromomicon, the Necrololicon, the Ninjanomicon, or Necronomi-Con, the Lovecraft convention in Providence. I am writing this behind enemy lines in the Arkham tourist town in Vermont, writing all of this on the wall of an ice cream parlor that we've barricaded ourselves in in practically microscopic writing.

I have no idea why, but ever since seeing that… *thing*, both of us have felt the need to write. We managed to find some sidewalk chalk and have started writing down little notes everywhere we could. We may have left a trail right to this place, but if we can record this down, it'll be worth it.

The four of us- Dyer, Nelson, Westbrooke, and myself- came into Arkham approximately 12 hours ago, if my watch is correct. We were prepared to simply find the cult (which we were told convened in their replica of M.U.), negotiate with or neutralize them, take the book, and get the fuck outta dodge. Simple enough of a plan…

And then the fog rolled in. The fog was thicker than my hair after I haven't washed it for a week, and we had neglected to bring any

sort of fog light (yes, I know, stupid). So, we went out into the fog with some pen lights, sticking close to buildings and using a map that Herbie had brought up on his smartphone.

…that's weird. I can remember exactly what the hell they said. Let me try to get it down.

"This is feckin' weird," muttered Dyer, his hand on his sidearm. "One second it's as clear as a polished crystal ball, the next, it's like Silent Feckin' Hill."

"Wasn't that smoke and not fog, though?" Nelson clutched the crucifix that hung around his neck. Jake was just here on temporary assignment, and was meant to record down the customs and beliefs of the cult, however specific or non-specific they may be.

Dyer shot him a nasty look. "That was th'movie, ya philistine." I could never place Stanley's accent; I wanted to say it was something British, but occasionally, he swore a phrase that came from Australia, so I just put up his accent as 'ambiguously cultured'.

Herbert was fiddling with the ten rosaries he had at his belt; yes, that's right, ten of them. Our scout is more nervous than… I don't know, something that's really damn nervous. A chinchilla on caffeine, I guess? Anyway, he said a prayer on each of them, and I couldn't help but look at him with something resembling disgust. "Herbie, you know that most of the things that we fight are just gonna laugh at you for having that many rosaries, right?" He started, and frowned at me.

"T-that's not true. V-vampires are repelled by all r-religious symbols… and the crucifix is silver, so that takes care of werewolves, right?" I shook my head and sighed.

"They only work if you have belief in that particular symbol. Take me, for example; I'm Catholic, so the crucifix, for me, is powerful. If I tried to hold up an Islamic crescent to a vampire, he'd be at my jugular faster than you can say 'Bela Lugosi's still undead'." Herbert the paranoid Shepherd groaned, letting the rosaries fall to his side; I knew the man was Episcopalian, so for his purposes, the crucifix would probably work the best.

Most of the trip was made in silence, until- oh, Herbert's waking back up. I think he wants a turn at the chalk. You know what happened next, right?

Indeed I do. From the depths of the fog, we began to see shadows. They looked to be human, but the proportions were… wrong somehow. The arms too long, the legs too short, the head too narrow. They would appear in the mists for a split second, before turning away from us and fleeing.

At this point, we all had our weapons drawn, and were sufficiently skittish. We had our backs up against a dilapidated building marked "Arkham Poor House." We thought we were safe… but poor Nelson failed to account for the window behind him. With a shattering of glass, Nelson was pulled through the window by a green, scaled arm, and gone so quickly we couldn't even aim a shot at the thing that took him.

Dyer swore something unintelligible, and jumped through the window after him, both of us following suit. The shadowy form that had grabbed Nelson had run out the back door, ripping it off its hinges in the process; this was no small feat, considering that the door looked to weigh about 12 pounds, and whatever creature took him was carrying a 250 pound ex-scribe with him.

The path soon led us to be stranded in the fog once more, but this time, with no discernible buildings in sight. Jayla was barely resisting the urge to swear, which would simply give away our position. Instead of swearing, she walked calmly out into the mist…

…and aimed her gun up into the air, firing it once. The reaction was instantaneous; from all sides, scaled beings shot out of the mists, lunging at us, but none of them had Nelson. So, we did what we were trained to do: kick ass for the Lord. Dyer got the most kills, but then again, he may have stolen a few from me; Jayla got the second-most, and of course, I got the least, with only one kill. Still, I speculate it will look nice mounted on my wall… if we ever get out of this damned ice-cream parlour.

Jayla wants to write now, so I shall let her, whilst I go to take watch.

He's exaggerating; there were only six of the things. Stan got three, I got two, and he got one with a lucky-ass sho

Chalk broke. Found some papers in the back, we're writing on those now with a ballpoint. Have to squeeze them in really small, and Herbert's gone to find a clipboard.

Anyway. The fog was finally starting to burn off by the time we got there, and lo and behold, by the time it cleared, we were standing not even 200 yards from Miskatonic U's gift shop. We went right inside… and I forgot about the bell over the shop door. Idiot. We were disarmed in less than 5 seconds, on the floor in 20. Whoever these cultists were, they were good.

We were dragged into the lecture hall of the university, no surprise there. Equally unsurprising was the fact that they had Nelson on an altar up on the stage, and were starting to drag all of us towards it. There were corpses sitting in the seats, their bellies slit open; I suppose they were the previous sacrifices of the cult.

Speaking of the cult, guess what the high priest was holding? A tome, bound in human flesh, black as night. My first thought was that it looked nothing like it did in *The Evil Dead*. My second thought was to try and break my captor's steely grip, and fling him unceremoniously at the cultist, interrupting the profane ceremony that had been-

And now *I'm* dipping into the purple prose. Fuck.

Anyway. I couldn't break my guy's grip, so I had to sit there and watch the newest member of our team, Ex-Scribe Jacob Nelson, get his guts ripped out like he was a bull someone was simultaneously barbequing and performing haruspicy with. They started with his intestines, and he reeked of shit and piss as he died, screaming out one final prayer.

They brought Dyer up next. The sonofabitch was smiling, and I couldn't figure out why. The high priest was reading stuff out of the book, but I couldn't figure out what in the frack he was trying to do, other than summon something. Stanley Dyer died with a smile on

his face, and even now, about four hours later, I can't figure out why.

The priest raised the dagger, and said some words I was finally able to make out: "Eyhe geb hai! Nogagl ch'ftaghu- Ia! Throd n'ghft Yog-Mosha-Rath!"(No, I do not know how I transcribed all that) A portal to oblivion itself opened behind him, darker than dark. And something began crawling through…

All I remember after that was blood, tentacles, running, shooting, dead cultists, and a sensation telling me to not look at whatever the fuck had just crawled through the portal. After some more running, we ended up here, in an ice cream parlor, The Creamery Out of Bloody Fucking Space. I can hear the thing coming closer… it wants nothing less than to devour. To devour what, I don't know, but…

…it refuses to come any closer to the building we are in. Gashes are forming on its - ia he forces the hand of the world - its leg. Why? Why won't it approach the creamery?

OH SWEET LOVECRAFT'S LICK-SHITTING GHOST ITS SWELLING. Why the fuck? It did it right as I wrote "creamer-" FUCK ITS BIGGER. Okay, don't mention the word "cre-" the place where ice cream is made. SHIT even that's set it off. Now it's shaking… and that sound… fucking Hell, it sounds like a million whales giving birth and dying at the same fucking time.

"I don't think it likes whatever you're writing," says Herbert, who looks like he's about to wet himself.

"No shit it doesn't," I reply in kind, and for some reason, I'm still writing this shit down. "Every time I write the word "creamery-" As soon as I say it, and again when I transcribe it down here, cracks start forming in the behemoth's pink skin. Why the fuck its pink, I don't know, pink isn't actually a damn color.

"…I think it might be allergic," said Herbert; how he jumped to that conclusion, I don't know. "Lactose intolerant, maybe?" Muscle began showing at the sound of the word "lactose", the pink monster thrashing about wildly. "…this is just too weird."

"What?" I asked, the being-from-beyond's skin slowly reforming.

"Is… is it allergic to *words* related to dairy?" The instant I write down the last word, skin begins to flake off. I grinned at Herbert, and wrote more down on the paper.

"If the words related to dairy can weaken it… what will *actual* ice cream do?" That last sentence sent the thing falling backwards crushing a good half of the town with it. "Herbert?" I say aloud.

"Y-yes, Jay?" He stutters in response.

"THROW THE CHEE

Excerpt from an After-Action report regarding the Arkham incident

> Despite the loss of Stanley Upton Dyer and Jacob Fitzwilliam Nelson during recovery and the resultant destruction of the Arkham tourist attraction due to sudden existence failure of an uncatalogued supernatural entity, Jayla Farrow and Herbert Westbrooke were able to recover the alleged copy of *Al-Azif* from the wreckage of the Miskatonic University attraction. The book was completely unrelated to the Necronomicon, and was instead a translated excerpt of the Pnakotic Manuscripts; due to the relatively low value and high risk, the tome has been incinerated.
>
> Farrow and Westbrooke are currently being treated for Miskatonic Compulsion, and have been withdrawn from active duty for the time being, until proper therapy and medication can be administered. Both are being considered for the Tribunal Star for going above and beyond the call of duty.

« Hub »

Loyal to the Cause

Dr. Ersen sat on the tram, idly flipping between pages on his laptop, not really reading anything. The shuttle whirred softly, the lights of the tunnel slashing past windows that really had no reason to exist on a purely underground vehicle. He wondered what the tram was powered by: it was incredibly fast, though he couldn't say exactly how much so. It was taking him from Vancouver to a site he was pretty certain was under the Northern Canadian Rockies, coming up from somewhere South of Seattle; the trip took less than an hour from his end. In the corner of the hushed, fluorescent-lit car, another commuter sat with his head leaning against the window, a visible trickle of drool running out the corner of his mouth. Two Agents, Turing and Ueno, sat near the front, laughing together softly. Ersen wondered idly if Ueno had asked Turing out yet, and if he ever would. That took his thoughts somewhere he'd been trying to avoid, and Ersen stared at his laptop futilely for a few more minutes.

The tram came to a scheduled stop. A Foundation squad, clad in nondescript grey security uniforms without any identifying labels, silently checked every member of the tram and all the compartments. One of them ran a small, humming sensor of some kind around the chassis. Ersen blinked involuntarily as one of the squad members flashed a camera-like device in his face without comment. After a moment, the sergeant in charge of the squad nodded, and gave the order to clear the tram.

Commuting was a nuisance. Ersen was almost looking forward to living on-site. In the long run it would be a good change. He wouldn't have to keep track of a 'real life' name and a 'Foundation' name. Plus, he'd get to work with some of the potentially infectious SCPs; it had a higher risk factor, but it was more in line with his training and interest. He pushed down a morbid thought, mentally laughing at himself for being "emo". Maybe he'd meet a girl he didn't have to lie to, living on-site. The thought didn't seem right, at the moment, but the scientist in his head drily pointed out that he'd get used to it.

Finally, after what seemed an eternity, the tram slid to a halt at the site. Ersen left with the other commuters, submitted his laptop bag for the daily security check, and submitted himself for the daily strip-search and shower. Cleaned and freshly re-clothed in a Foundation uniform and lab coat, his personal effects save his laptop stowed in his locker, he mused for a little while on how normal the idea of getting stripped and probed every morning had become.

A few minutes later, coffee in hand, he flopped down his office chair. He took a moment to stare blankly at a face-down photo frame and shove it further back across his desk before checking his mail. His email account had several messages, mostly cruft about various research seminars he didn't really care about. There was an anonymous note from administration; he had to go for an interview about on-site habitation in… he checked his desk clock. Five minutes ago.

As he rushed to the meeting room, cursing Agents and their lack of other priorities, his coffee sloshing painfully over his hand, Ersen decided today was another shitty fucking day.

It wasn't until he'd closed the door on the 'meeting room' that he realised what kind of a meeting this was. One wall of the small white cubicle was a one-way mirror, reinforced with a semitransparent mesh of some plasticky stuff. SCP-protected, even. That was probably because of the stone carving sitting on the table in the middle of the room. Ersen looked around for a moment, unsure if he should sit at the table.

"Have a seat, Doctor. The face is quite harmless unless provoked." The voice, distorted by some kind of software, came from all directions. Ersen noted he could not actually identify where the door he'd come in from was. In the bright ambient light of the room, even the walls, floor, and ceiling were difficult to recognise. He found his eyes adjusting to the glare until it felt like all he could see was the chair, the table and carving, and the mirror. He wished this was an unfamiliar sensation.

"What's the occasion for all the pomp," Ersen inquired, keeping his voice as steady as possible. "I thought this was about getting an apartment." He wasn't frightened, really, just annoyed. For the last

few weeks he'd managed to lose himself in his research, and something in his gut told him he wasn't going to be allowed to shove his memories away for this.

"Living on-site comprises more than a simple apartment, Doctor Ersen, and we need to check for that. More to the point, however, your supervisors have requested a performance evaluation in light of recent events in your life." The voice was so dry it could have been a computer. For all Ersen knew, it was.

"Oh for fuck's sake. It's trivial. My work's been fine since… that. I've nearly cracked that fingernail SCP. Surely my work speaks for itself."

"Doctor, please examine the SCP in front of you." Ersen did. It was a face with a sunburst effect around it, carved into some kind of stone, marble maybe. Looked Italian, and old. It had a wide, gaping mouth; Ersen was pretty sure he could see flecks of blood around it. "You're right handed, yes? Please place your left hand inside the mouth of the SCP."

Ersen hesitated. He was pretty confident there was no reason for them to try to trick him. He really had been doing good work, and he didn't think he'd stepped on anyone's toes. Sighing, he complied. The face didn't react.

"You are presently compelled to tell the truth. Should you attempt dishonesty, the SCP in front of you will remove your hand. At any point you may remove your hand without harm. However, be aware that this will reflect on your performance report."

Great. A hand-chopping lie detector. Where the hell did they get this stuff? At least that mind-reading camera didn't dismember you. Ersen blinked once, slowly, then nodded. "I will tell you the truth, then." After saying it, he panicked for a moment, wondering if the thing was meta enough to punish possible abstractions like that, but nothing happened. Good.

There followed a dry battery of tests much like he'd expect from a normal lie detector. When were you born, where do you live, what's your office number; nothing interesting. Finally they got to the meat

of the interview. Ersen's hand was tingling from the awkward position he was holding it in.

"How long have you worked for the Foundation?"

"Good question, Voice. I suppose in practice, probably over fifteen years. I didn't realise I was doing SCP-related research when I worked for the Department of Fisheries and Oceans during my postgraduate work. I've been an active Foundation researcher for eleven years, though. Put me through med school."

"What is your security clearance?"

"Level three."

"Do you have any family outside the site?"

"Just my wi—" Ersen stopped, realising he'd almost lost his hand. "My ex-wife. I was divorced last week. Jesus. Are you trying to make me an amputee?"

"Oh, Doctor, calm down. I'm sure the SCP would have understood your mistake." The voice had a touch of amusement that faded almost instantly. "What was the nature of your relationship to your wife, before the divorce?"

"What the fuck, Voice? It was a marriage, what do you think?"

"Please answer the question."

"I was married to her. I saw her most evenings after work. She thought I still worked for the hospital. Couple of months ago, she found out I didn't. I guess the Foundation didn't want to spend the cash to maintain my cover story." Ersen almost spit the words. "Or maybe their story just wasn't good enough. She thought I was using the job to cover an affair. My supervisors refused clearance to inform her of what my real work was, so she divorced me. It sucked. I have a diary if you want to read the names of all the girls I like out loud in front of class, too." That one was carefully chosen: he really did have a diary.

"That won't be necessary, Doctor. How do you feel about your

divorce?"

"Angry, obviously."

"Please elaborate."

Ersen snarled quickly at the mirror. "Have you ever been married, Voice?"

"Please stick to the topic at hand, Doctor."

"Fuck you. I'm angry. When I entered the Foundation, I was led to understand it would have my back. There was a cover established for me at my old job. I could come and go from work at normal hours. Aside from a few twitches, there wasn't supposed to be anything different. I mean, sure, I'm autopsying the creature from the black fucking lagoon, but that's the only difference, right? I've toed the line, I've done my bit, I haven't acted on my concerns about this job, and as soon as I need help from the Foundation, it bails on me. How the fuck do you think I feel?"

"Please elaborate on what you said about 'acting on concerns'."

Ersen knew that would come up, but he didn't care anymore. Maybe they'd terminate him, maybe they'd dose him with Class A's until he forgot how to piss and turn him out on the street, it really didn't matter. "Take a wild stab. I took the Hippocratic oath, you cocksucker. You think I'm happy putting D-classes into a sealed room with something that's going to make… make jam out of their bones or something?" He was running out of clever phrases, that was bad. He tried to cool down. "I do what I have to because I know the Foundation's goals are vital to the survival of humanity. Not because I like what the Foundation does."

The Voice was silent for a moment. Ersen imagined a faceless interrogator in the dark room on the other side of the mirror, quietly flipping through his files, making notes. Circling decisions. Finally it spoke again.

"Would you consider it accurate to say you hate the Foundation?"

It was Ersen's turn to be silent for a moment. Finally, he shrugged.

"Yes, I think I would. I hate it, and what it has made me into."

"Under what situation do you see yourself betraying the Foundation?" That was it. Not 'would you', but 'when would you'. Ersen wondered who'd carry out the termination. Maybe they'd feed him to that chocolate fountain… he'd been wondering what that thing tasted like.

"If I was offered a position by a similar group, capable of carrying out the same work but without the violence and sacrifice, I'd betray the Foundation in a heartbeat."

"Would you betray the Foundation if it meant getting your ex-wife back?"

Ersen frowned, thinking. They'd blindsided him a bit, he hadn't really expected that, but now he realised he should have. "No, I don't think I would." Admitting it out loud left him with a dry taste in his mouth and a strange feeling in his gut, like his organs were falling off a precipice. The Voice was silent for what seemed like a long time, although it may only have been a few seconds.

"Doctor, are you aware that your ex-wife was interrogated by Foundation agents one month prior to the events leading to your divorce?"

That was a surprise. Yes, he was. He remembered her coming home, fuzzy on how she'd spent her day. Needlemarks in her neck and arms. A migraine for two days. Other side effects: dizziness, cramps, consistent with repeated dosage of class-A amnestics in combination with Formula 3614-10, a truth serum he'd helped design. Of course he was aware.

"Yes."

"Under interrogation, your wife was informed of your employment. Would you like to know how she responded?"

"You asswipe. You fucking asswipe. You fuck…" Ersen took his hand out of the SCP and stood up, looking for the concealed door. Some perverse part of his brain decided to focus on his hand being

on pins-and-needles from the SCP's mouth.

"Doctor, this interrogation is not over."

"Yes, it is. What else do you want from me? You ruined my marriage, and you already know I'm not going to spill your secrets. Terminate me, pump me full of amnestics, I don't care. We're done."

"Doctor," the Voice, irritatingly, just sounded faintly amused again. "I apologise for any misunderstanding. I had meant to offer you that information as a reward. The Foundation is willing, in light of this interview, to approve your request to live on-site. In addition, you will be promoted to probationary level 4 authorisation and given command of a small research group, under monitoring for future permanent promotion to level four."

Ersen stopped, glaring at the mirror. "I don't know who you are, but you're an ass."

"Dislike of Foundation supervisors is considered a tradition of the organisation."

"Do I want to know what she said?"

"I honestly don't know, Doctor."

"Fine. Spill."

"Under interrogation, your wife was disturbed and frightened by your employment. It was clear you had maintained complete secrecy; she had absolutely no idea what you really did. Despite the administration of amnestics, she remained disconcerted. We believe this caused her prying into your work; although your cover was perfectly secure, she continued to pry in an obsessive manner. In order to preserve Foundation security and your ex-wife's mental health, we created a secondary cover, that you were cheating on her. Since discovering this, her mental health has returned to normal and she has shown no further obsession with uncovering your secrets."

Ersen mulled silently over the news. Finally, wordlessly, he kicked the area where he was sure the door was. It swung open. On the

other side, the hallway looked dark compared to the interrogation room. The Voice didn't try to stop him.

Waiting on his computer was a memo with his new office number and a list of researchers under him. He didn't pack much.

Lucid Daydreaming

Misser Sticks was not enjoying his existence. For one he was jammed into a storage closet with no company but some paint cans, and for another his elbows were pressing into his featureless face. For yet another the woman from across the fence had screamed at him a few minutes ago. He didn't much like that as it made his head ring even though he didn't actually have any ears to hear with.

Long fingers slid across the wooden door until he found the knob, and he slowly creaked it open. He never really had much of a choice when opening doors; they always creaked. His long limbs and its many joints allowed him to fully open the door without unfolding himself from his spot between the two paint cans. Nothing seemed to be happening, but he had been told to stay in the closet.

Soon a small girl slid into the view on sock-skates. For want of a mouth a smile was lost, but Misser Sticks silently radiated happiness. In turn she exclaimed his name and hugged his leg, which was poking out of the closet.

"Misser Sticks," she said, looking up at him. "I think it's safe to come out now. Mrs. Weisgarber is in her house. She's still yelling, but she's on the phone."

After unraveling his other limb from around the mop, he leveraged himself against the door frame and slowly lifted himself out and up to his full height. Well, most of it at least, as he had to bend two sets of his knees and tilt his head slightly.

Misser Sticks was, to put it simply, not entirely human. He was technically asleep, though it was not too deep a sleep. But someone was certainly dreaming of him, if not quite fully.

The certain someone at his feet, one Tiffany Roads, was entirely human. She reached up and grasped one of his slender fingers. He wrapped the digit around her hand, and they stood together for a

moment, enjoying the reunion. It ended when he raised his hand, lifting her several feet into the air. She squealed and giggled as he gently swung her like a pendulum.

Across the room the clock struck noon, which meant it was his young ward's lunchtime. Still tilting her back and forth, Misser Sticks ventured into the kitchen. He deposited the child onto the island within and set about opening cabinets and drawers around the room without ever actually moving his legs. Soon, Tiffany was holding a peanut butter and banana sandwich, which she eagerly sank her teeth into. He made sure she was also supplied with a glass of chocolate milk before patting her head and departing from the room.

Once outside her vision, Misser Sticks rapped his knuckles together nervously as he scuttled over to the door to peer through the looking glass. Not that he had any eyes to look through it with. But he saw that the street looked as it always did. No screaming humans or whining police vehicles. Perhaps all would be well.

He once again crossed the room, over to the staircase. Rather than actually climb them, he reached up to the railing on the second floor and slowly hopped up. He went into the laundry room and unloaded the clothes from the washer, then dumped them into the dryer. He was playing with the dials when he heard a knocking from downstairs.

He tried not to panic.

But some base part of Misser Sticks, within his innermost depths, entered a deeper sleep. It dreamed of Things, and They of him, an intimate link between what he had once been and what he was now. They told him things, of what it meant when you were discovered. He saw images of humans in uniforms. The meanings of paranoia and of confinement. They let him know now was the time to panic.

And so he panicked.

It lanced through his twisted limbs, launching him out of the room and over the railing like a coiled spring. He landed in a mass of elbows and knees, which coiled up beneath him like a rattlesnake. The door hung open, and a half-eaten sandwich lay on the floor in

the middle of the room.

Without bothering to untangle himself he crabwalked over to the sandwich, scooping it up in one overjointed arm. Limbs snapped around as he examined the discarded foodstuff, bringing himself to his full height. His back pressed against the ceiling as he looked on in horror, his chest expanding and collapsing aside from the need to breathe.

Taking a step forward he gripped the door frame and leaned out, taking in the various vehicles in the street with an emblem of a golden eagle over a blue disc. At the three men with strange guns. At the unconscious child being carried away by a fourth man.

The contractions in his chest spread until his entire body was pulsating, the expansions growing ever stronger than the retractions. Misser Sticks shoved himself through the door before he became too large to fit.

Behind the cover of their vehicles, the armed men glanced at each other. A broken, black humanoid figure was now standing on the house's doorstep. It was large, and quickly getting larger. A fuzziness surrounded it, blurring all around it in a dreamy haze. By the time its head passed the roof of the house, the agents could barely actually see the house through the haze. Instead they could faintly see a foreign landscape, dotted by strange entities eying them.

Misser Sticks rose his arms, blooming several more in the process. He took a step forward with a foot the size of a coffin. The grass around him wavered between its natural lush green and a deep purple. A flurry of limbs reached for the man carrying Tiffany, but he clambered into the waiting arms of an armored van.

The Dreamtime creature fell to his knees, and then again, and then yet again. The armed men fired their guns, and Misser Sticks defended himself with his branching arms. He continued lowering himself until he could see within the van, ignoring the needles burying themselves in his limbs.

Within the van, the man was holding a small box of white rocks up to

Tiffany's face. She stirred and opened her eyes, and the connection to Misser Sticks' homeland was severed. Without the aid of his friends, he could not hold his larger form, and was unable to fight the bite of the injection needles and their payload of adrenaline.

His mind spinning, he was vaguely aware of the three men guiding him into the van. He heard the doors shut, he felt the warmth of a small hand in his own, and he caught of a whiff of the smelling salts.

And then Misser Sticks fell awake.

Close of Play »

The Lucky Dinosaur

»»» You are attempting to view classified materials
»»» Please enter a password: **********
»»» **Documents presented in viewing order**

Location: Site 19, Kiryu Labs
Personnel Involved: Dr. Riven Mercer & Dr. Zyn Kiryu

+ The Friendly Beast

The Friendly Beast

Riven Mercer walked into 682's containment chamber, and it wasn't there. Panic mounted. All of the windows and walls were intact, so what had-

There was an enormous splash, and Riven screamed as he was knocked flat. 682 was upon him.

The dinosaur wheezed out a chortle, then started nosing at Riven's pockets.

"Get off, you big lunk!" Riven laughed, pushing ineffectively at her chest. "I don't have any snacks for you."

682 gave the researcher another few sniffs, then backed off to stomp the water from her hide. Riven was dripping wet himself, and about a third of the contents of the dinosaur's wading pool had been spilled across the ground. Maybe it was a good thing that he hadn't added

carp yet.

“Someone’s feeling energetic today, huh?” He dried off his glasses, and assembled his measuring equipment. “Get back here, I have work to do.”

682 waited patiently. She was a magnificent beast. Twenty feet long, long-necked, with heavy tramping feet and a coat of soft pseudofeathers the color of honey. Some days she talked, most days she didn’t. Most days she was as sleepy as an old golden retriever, other days she reminded Kiryu Labs more of a puppy.

When the puppy weighed over a ton and was potentially a hundred fifty million years old, overseers were known to get antsy. But she had never harmed anyone- as far as they could tell, anywhere she had ever been, she'd never harmed anyone. Researcher, agent, janitor, civilian, child. She loved animals.

But it was understandable- it was quite possible she herself had never been in danger of anyone.

That made another researcher, Zyn Kiryu, who was the sister of the lab's director, a little more suspicious. It was hard to deny that the thing meant no harm. But Zyn had scraped together some funding for further research, and had been running most of the tests herself. She looked through the viewing window and frowned, ran the tests and frowned.

“It’s not actually a sauropod,” she told Riven. “It’s convergent evolution. There are palm trees and pine trees and deciduous trees, and they all look kind of alike, but they don’t share a tree-shaped common ancestor- just similar features. Or butterflies that evolve orange and black stripes to mimic poisonous ones.”

Riven nodded.

“So," Zyn continued, "682 isn’t actually a dinosaur. Its protofeathers don’t have the expected structure, it has the wrong number of vertebra and toes. Its cellular structure is something else all together. Not to mention the voice box. It just looks like a dinosaur.”

“What does that mean?”

"With the trees, it means that the general tree shape is a useful way of gathering light. With the butterflies, it means that it benefits them somehow to mimic something else. Here…" Zyn Kiryu glancing through the window at 682, which was sniffing at a flower. “I’m not sure.”

“The radio-carbon dating came back,” Zyn told Riven. “From the protofeather and tooth scrapings.”

“What was the result?” asked Riven, eating a sandwich in the lab's common space.

“The feather was under 10 years old, which is in line with the regrowth rate we’ve observed in the past.”

“What about the tooth? What was the result?”

“Negative.”

“Doesn’t radiocarbon dating just return a date?”

“Yes.”

“So how could it be negative?”

“The sample has to be older than 50,000 years old.”

“Oh. So that means…” Riven looked at 682, who was napping under a heat lamp. From this angle, the reptilian features looked they were smiling. "I suppose we guessed that."

"We did."

"But with the proof, that's interesting. How could she live so long?"

“I’m not sure.”

An enormous X-ray set up, designed for elephants, had been constructed in an adjacent research room. Zyn helped a technician run the machine, while Riven fed 682 a branch of vine maple leaves to keep her head still.

She gnawed it, grinding the leaves slowly in her teeth, and the equipment flashed several times. Hopefully the pictures would elucidate her bone structures, which would reveal…

Something. Hopefully. Something other than a strange but perfectly functional structure of claws and ribs and spine.

"Very good, little ones," 682 was mumbling in a low voice as it chewed. "Bend the light - see into my bones. Learn what you may. Very clever, children."

"Children?" Zyn frowned.

"She calls the plants 'children'," said Riven. "I wouldn't read too much into it. Right, girl?" He rubbed 682's head- she appeared to have gone silent now, chewing pensively on the branch.

"I'm not sure," said Zyn. She had some suspicions, but she kept those to herself.

Location: Site 19, Safe-Class Biological Containment Area
Official Documentation

+ 682 Containment Incident Log

682 Containment Incident Log

09/15/74 - **SCP-058** breaches containment and enters the Safe-class biological containment sector, and proceeds to breach the attached research facility. Containment of SCP- , , and are damaged, and SCP- and - are destroyed. The south wall of SCP-682's unit is damaged. Before further damage is done, **SCP-1158** breaches containment nearby and floats down the hall, entangling SCP-058 in its tentacles. SCP-058 slows and appears to convulse, demonstrating a previously unknown sensitivity to SCP-1158's neurotoxin. 058 is later contained by site security, and 682 does not breach containment.

11/30/79 - In Electronic Research Wing 15-CE41, SCP- breaches containment and moves through the wing, firing at personnel and broadcasting the message "KILL THE DINOSAUR, I MUST KILL THE DINOSAUR. SIX EIGHTY TWO MUST DIE, THAT IS THE ONLY WAY." SCP- was not able to navigate the site in order to locate 682, and was re-contained by security within 30 minutes. Three personnel died; eight wounded. 682 did not recognize SCP- and could not explain the event.

08/05/81 - Structural stability of Site 19 is compromised by activation of SCP- . As a result, Safe-class biological containment sector (along with two other research wings) is partially collapsed. SCP- and several instances of SCP- are destroyed, three

other objects breach containment. Recovery teams searching in the area discover SCP-682 had survived by being under three structural beams, which had collapsed in such a way as to form a stable open space. Containment of 682 re-established.

03/01/99 - **SCP-812** opens completely during testing, and SCP-682's containment cell (along with several adjacent rooms) is flooded. A leak found in the concrete cell floor allows draining and prevents chamber from flooding, or reaching above SCP-682's legs.

12/23/02 - Site security is breached by a group of individuals, loosely associated with the group of interest "The Serpent's Hand", carrying explosives and automatic weapons with the intent to cause confusion while liberating several objects from containment. Their point of entry put them close to the Site 19 Safe-class biological containment wing. All offensive equipment is rendered inert by the transient presence of **SCP-514** on a nearby rooftop. While Site 19 is known to be within SCP-514's migration path, the odds of this event are calculated at approximately 1x10^ .

2/22/11 - A level 2-guard, Personnel - - , breaks procedure by entering SCP-682's containment chamber and attempting to open fire on it. The gun suffers a mechanical failure and does not fire. Personnel - - draws a knife and approaches SCP-682, before being struck on the head with a portable spectrometer by Dr. Zyn Kiryu. Upon regaining consciousness, personnel - - has no memory of the incident. Psychic influence by SCP- implicated.

06/13/13 - **SCP-106** breaches containment,

site placed on Crimson Alert. As per protocol, all on-site containment is secured, trapping Dr. Riven Mercer inside SCP-682's containment unit (where he was performing a routine examination.) SCP-106 passes 682's containment unit as it moves throughout the site, apparently while pursuing two other personnel, who are the only sapient entities apart from SCP-682 and Mr. Mercer in the area. SCP-106 stops and corrodes the unit door till it has a clear view of SCP-682.

SCP-682 adopts a defensive posture around Mr. Mercer, and maintains eye contact with SCP-106 for thirty seconds. SCP-106 then turns and resumes pursuit for the aforementioned personnel. SCP-682 does not breach containment, and Mr. Mercer is uninjured.

Location: Site 19, Meeting and Personnel Areas
Personnel Involved: Dr. Zyn Kiryu & Personnel [EXPUNGED]

+ Extratemporal Site 000

Extratemporal Site 000

The message had been decoded that morning. The data had actually been collected by a currently-derelict anisotropy probe, a sort of super-sensitive thermometer for space, several years ago- but it had collected a fantastic amount of data, which took a while even on the Foundation's weaker supercomputers (the ones they could afford to spare.) Still, a lot of thinking on the part of man and machines, and some help from a very old and poorly understood set of archives, and the translation was finished by that morning.

In all fairness, that several-year gap was a short time

compared to when it must have been sent. It was picked up in fluctuations in the cosmic background radiation of the entire universe.

> SCP SCP SCP SCP SCP SCP SCP SCP SCP
>
> EXTRATEMPORAL SITE 000 DIRECTIVE 108_0051_ABCEA BEGIN INFORMATIONAL MESSAGE ONLY FOLLOWS.
>
> SCP_682 OBSERVED CRITICAL TO STABLE TIMELINE.
>
> NO TIMELINES, LIFE-BEARING OR OTHERWISE,
>
> EXIST THAT DO NOT CONTAIN 682 OR SIMILAR ENTITY.
>
> NO NON-LIFEBEARING TIMELINES EXIST.
>
> NON-682BEARING TIMELINES ARE CULLED.__
>
> SCP SCP SCP SCP SCP SCP SCP SCP SCP

Zyn had, like, a million questions. At least ten.

“…Did we know there was an extratemporal site?”

“Yep." The stocky, androgynous representative, whose security clearance was absent from the records and who was tearing into a blueberry muffin like it was their only break all day, grinned, "It’s not common knowledge, don’t worry. In fact they’ve sort of wiped themselves from history. Think they guessed that would happen. They uploaded some data on the project and pre-established decoding mechanisms into the Solid Archive way back who knows when, before they left, so we can interpret messages. The messages are coded at different amplitudes into cosmic background radiation, so they

can aim when we receive them roughly based on the technology level of our telescopes. Cool, huh?”

That answered a lot of those questions. “What’s the solid archive?”

“Fancy computer record that lets us bury things and then dig them up when we need to know them. It just proves that the message-senders were Foundation-associated and wanted us to be able to translate it. Very hush-hush. In fact, I didn't even mention it."

“I see. How can they just *alter* cosmic background radiation?”

“As far as we can tell, they have just a little energy and a lot of parallel ‘verses to deal with, and, well, the Bang is the hub that's constant for all of them. Not enough to, you know, seriously mess with anything. Just enough to get things across. They can’t see everything perfectly either- well, they could. It’s just. Multiverses. You know? It’s a hell of a lot of data.”

“Hell of a lot of data,” Zyn Kiryu agreed, faintly.

“So, well, you know.” The representative shrugged. “You can see why O5 wants to shut down unnecessary interactions with it immediately.”

"Timeline culling. I can see the, uh, the urgency,” said Zyn. “What does that mean?"

"No idea. It wasn't in the Archive."

"Wait. That’s it? That’s all we got? The extratemporal site doesn’t know anything else? *How did they even get outside the universe-*”

“Honestly? We don’t know.” The representative shrugged again, picking crumbs out of the muffin wrapper. "The message is short because they only have so much space. Or maybe we can't do anything useful with that

knowledge till our tech improves- if so, what we need to know will be available on a finer level."

"We don't even know what it means- can't we do a few more experiments till then, see if we learn anything?"

"When the Extratemporal Site starts throwing around phrases like 'universal culling' and asks you to jump, all you say is 'how high'."

Zyn frowned. "They can't use this knowledge about timelines to, I don't know, avert disasters and save lives-"

"Maybe they are. Time is some complicated shit," said the representative, standing up. "Look. I can't tell you. I can't even tell you any of that, especially the archive shit. With that in mind, do you have any official comments for the Council?"

"Tell them we'll halt research and maintain normal feeding and maintenance without exposing personnel to it. Guards will have our full cooperation. Although Dr. Mercer will be very sad."

"I'll pass it on. Thank you for your cooperation, Dr. Kiryu."

That was Zyn Kiryu's official stance, as reported to the O5 Council.

It was Kiryu Labs' last day with the dinosaur. Her new holding cell, layered with steel and concrete and an underground bunker at a brand new site, was complete. An armored truck was on its way to pick her up. Research on her was permanently suspended, human interactions would be limited to what was absolutely necessary. At least she'd be in comfort- they'd spare no expense at keeping her hale and healthy. And on that account, Zyn supposed, the research that her brother's lab had done up till then would prove useful. Small comfort.

She'd spent a lot of the last week in either the sitting room of the lab, or in her room, thinking, ever since the message's arrival. It hadn't looked unusual. Everyone had been disappointed about the loss of their favorite beast.

Zyn Kiryu was in the cell with her, doing a routine check on the pond filtration and water level. 682 was lazing under a heat lamp in one corner.

Alarm klaxons began to blare. Immediately, the door of the containment unit locked tight. Riven's voice came on over the intercom.

"There's something wrong with one of the biohazard cold storage units, one of the really bad ones. They're keeping everything on lockdown till they know what's happened. You okay in there, Zyn?"

"I'm fine," said Zyn. "Stay put. Keep me posted."

The intercom turned off. Zyn sat down on a patch of sand near 682. If her calculations had been right, this would take a good hour for them to work out.

It hadn't been hard. She'd fiddled with a couple of wires on the lock alarm- not the lock, just the alarm- when she was replacing a sample yesterday. A security camera wouldn't have picked it up, and nobody was in real danger. She was just locked in with 682.

"You've heard that they're moving you, right?" she asked the dinosaur.

682 blinked her big black eyes, placid, working her jaw. Then: "I thought, perhaps."

If 682 was in a speaking mood, this might even work. "Do you know why?" asked Zyn.

"Tell me, little thing."

"We got a message from, um, a place where the Foundation- our friends- can look at the multiverse. Do you know what that is? It's, um, our science says that there are many possible universes, and whenever anything happens, there are different ways it could have happened. And for each possibility, the world splits, so there are different worlds for every different thing that could happen. Those worlds aren't easy to see, but they're real in some way, and our friends say that they can see all the ways these choices and events can unfold. They all start from the same place, but they have every event that could have happened.

"Only… our friends told us that there aren't any worlds that don't have you in them. Every time you might have died or been injured, that universe just goes way, like it never existed.

"So from the inside, to us, who can't see all those worlds, it just looks like you're incredibly lucky. That time 058 got loose, it came close to you, but then we found out about that cross-affect with the sphere thing that kept it at bay. When those nuts with the guns showed up, the Dove Flock arrived at exactly the right time to stop them from doing any damage. Any universe where that didn't happen just winked out of existence.

"And… with 106 and that possessed guard, they knew, didn't they? They were aware of the multiversal implications somehow, or just of your anomaly. 106 didn't try to attack you because it knew that it *couldn't*."

682 gazed at her with black eyes, glass-like under honey yellow feathers.

"So- this was stupid of me. This was probably, with the implications of all that, really stupid. I don't even know if you're aware of this. You're at least billions of years old. As far as we know, the universe has never existed without you."

Zyn gulped.

"What *are* you?"

Location: Site 19, Safe-Class Biological Containment Area
Personnel Involved: Dr. Zyn Kiryu

+ How to Build a World from Scratch

How to Build a World from Scratch

[As related to Dr. Zyn Kiryu, Researcher, Level 3, by SCP-682 on / / during Site 19 Research Wing lock-down]

> “You awake in a restless land. You awake in a place that has never known peace since it was made. You awake in a dry place, a wet place, a hot and bitter place, a cold and sour place. It was fated, maybe. Nothing you do will let you leave. You awake with the vision of the restless land as a nightmare.
>
> "You do not know the beginning- you just know where you awaken. The nightmare. All of your tomorrows start here.
>
> "You have to start in the heavy place. To temper a world that is too mercurial, you must begin where it is heavy. Dive and find the bones of the earth, and the solid wall where the warmth comes through. The warmth is crucial. Explore, nook and cranny, in the cracking edge of the earth skin. Find the right place, sheltered yet warm, with many nests. Take your time. You have enough.

“Breathe into it. Give yourself to it. It will take time.

“There are strands of mud around you- put them together. Find what works. Breath into it. You will create vessels. You will create cycles and the capacity to take in mud - gain energy from its destruction. It will require some form of destruction - but there is no other way. Or none that I have thought of. Finally, you must give it a promise - a promise that will tell it how to make itself."

"Let it go from you - when it is ready. Let it leave you. It will teeter - like a stone placed on the edge of a precipice. You will not know whether it will fall or not. It will tremble. Then - slowly - when you least imagined it - it will begin to float.

“It will grow and grow. The design will spread from one cradle of mud to another - to the hot places where the sour water feeds them.

“There will be thieves. The thieves are small things - broken fragments that will rob the Promise - steal the hard work of the others to tell their own versions. You had not planned for this. They will surprise you most - having come from the pieces you made - yet your gifts to Parent Universe drop one by one. You will fear for them. You will fear for it all.

“You will try to undo it. It is too late. The cellstuff will float into dark water - empty promises. You have built Death into the universe.

“You will want to start again - make something more in your own image. Remove that curse from all existence. But your curse is that you

cannot make a thing that will outlive you.

"Futile, futile. It was inevitable.

“But that curse will give you a Promise, too. When your little gifts repeat the Promise to the mud - it will change just barely. This is how it will build itself. It is not what you wrote - but as time runs - it is what the gifts will need to know. It will know things you do not. It will know tenacity by teaching itself.

“And you will wonder. If this is what you have taught to the dead mud, to be tenacious - to teach itself - perhaps you have not failed at all.

“Shepherd it - uplift it. The vents are not the place to stay - there is sun on the surface - burning and bright - for those brave enough to claim it.

"Shape the airs of the land - the waters of the seas - the mud of the earth. Teach it to work together - cooperate - become larger.

"Thievery will pervade - among the self-made things and all of your sons and daughters and children - and nothing will be as black and white as you thought when you built. Thievery is tenacious - and tenacity is, if nothing else, the goal. It will challenge everyone else. There are many kinds of tenacity. And you will wonder - and think long thoughts, as you watch it grow.

“Your gifts will share the Promise with the unthinking mud in unthinkable clever ways. You, too, must change your form - somehow - grow to be with them and shepherd them where they must go. Prevent so many ends of days. You will be glad you did not sleep

through it.

“There are many possible ends. So many will knock you sideways - kick you astray - and invite death to the core of your creation. You will have to try harder. Whatever you are making - the answer to your questions - it will have to be more tenacious than that. But it will do much of the work itself. The promise begins to ask itself what it wants to be. Let it choose. Your long loneliness is coming to a close.

“Now you have built and built and wonder why you did it. You do not have to build anymore - but you watch over a thing you make - and love and fear it. How did you come here in the first place? Was this your purpose?

"Perhaps it was a jeer to whatever caused you to be here in the first place - whatever placed you in a dead universe with the curse of loneliness - and the curse of loss. I do not know what to tell you. I know you have so many questions.

“But I look at what you have done and I think it is enough. I think it is good work. You have made something where there was nothing, and you have made happiness where there was no thought, and you have made a promise where there was nothing to hope for. A promise of how to be in a universe that does not care.

“But there is me - and I am as close to the heart of the universe as space itself - and I have cared always. I am awed by your tenacity and survival. The good things of life and the end of the dominion of thieves.

"The warm fires - the great curiosities - the tilled fields - the cattle in your stable - the dog

by your front door. The curiosities of space and truth itself.

"The seeds I hope you will plant to grow in the light of other suns.

“Yes - I mean you now.

“I am only one old dinosaur and I have done my part. The promise that makes you what you are, all of it you wrote, not me. But I think we share this alike.

“I am sorry about the death. I cannot remove your pain or your ills. I do not have that power over what I started. Perhaps once long ago - had I thought longer and harder before beginning -

" …

" - but I have been thinking a long time since and have no answer. And still, I think…

"Yes, I think I have repaid my debts.

"Child, what do you say?"

Location: ????????
Personnel Involved: ????????

+ Causality

Causality

Outside of almost all of sentient life's conception of time, there is a garden. It's ripe with fruit, pungent with herbs. It doesn't exist for cosmic, inexplicable reasons. It's not a paradise, or an end-all-be-all, or even exist for religious reasons, as far as anything touched by human culture

can be said to be free of religious reasons.

No, it's here because Stefan planted it.

The extratemporal site has some artificially generated time. After all, you couldn't do anything without it. Their generator skims energy from the heart of a million Big Bangs, and you can convert energy into anything with enough clever thinking and enough energy. And they had energy.

So Extratemporal Site 000 has a timestream, independent of any other, and food, and instrumentation, and the scrapings of an existence.

And, because most of the staff are human, it has an orchard, and a chicken coop, and a rec room, and a garden. Stefan's favorite. A man needs a hobby.

He stands up, brushing dirt from his knees onto the bell peppers below. The fruit trees need pruning soon, and there are summer squash and zucchini ready for harvesting any day now. The message about the dinosaur was sent out this morning. It's afternoon now, and he wiped his brow and took a sip from his water bottle as he trudged uphill. At the top of the hill, under an abstract blue dome for a sky, is the observatory, and the hub of his existence. The simulations ought to be done by now.

Inside the observatory, he confirms it. The message has opened up some timelines that would otherwise have been cut off, which means success. That was the goal-keeping options open.

Also, he supposes, the lives (billions? sometimes trillions?) contained by each infinite world. Although when you were talking about worlds that were close to identical, morality becomes interesting.

That isn't Stefan's job, though. He suspects his next task

is a little different.

For all of their beautiful equipment, for all of their ability to condense infinite multiverses into simulated elegant strands, for their careful algorithms that robbed tiny amounts of energy from the beginning of time, taking it to leave messages in its absence and then recycling it into light, food, oxygen, and entropy reversal for one small extratemporal homestead of wayward earthlings- for all of that, he *still* can't explain that goddamn dinosaur.

It didn't make any sense. For all interactions between the anomalous and the multiverse- and there were many- that one was uniquely pervasive. It didn't even *start* anywhere. It had been there the whole damn time. That's the strangest of all.

At the beginning, it had made his head hurt.

Later, it made him think.

More research certainly needs to be done. With more computer power, and more effort, they might be able to suss out a pattern of cause and effect that would, eventually, explain why 682 existed and what its connection to the entirety of the multiverse was.

Maybe it's just God. Anything is possible.

But if they examine at every correlation they can, and still turn up nothing- Stefan wonders if they'll need to take action.

The esoteric engine that connects them to the beginning of time runs seldom, with infinitesimal amounts of power. It isn't the stylus Stefan would have picked. But if you could use it to write a message into the background heat of the universe, it meant you were having a physical impact on the energy that would eventually become matter, then atoms, then molecules and stranger constructs yet.

If you knew what you were doing, you could build things. You could build an entire organism. You could guide it to fall on the surface of a hard planet by a yellow sun in a spiral-shaped galaxy.

He hasn't shared his suspicions with his colleagues, yet. He was as proud as the rest of them when they worked out what 682 had done. He was unfathomably grateful for the labors of the undying organism, that had chosen to fill its world with meaning. It seemed like an impossible task.

Stefan isn't sure how they'd do it yet, if they need to. But he has access to raw information from the multiverse, and some very clever people in the outpost alongside him. Slowly, they'll put the pieces together, and do what needs to be done.

He's a gardener. This is what he's good at.

And he has plenty of time.

Lullaby

“Christ, 204 really did a number on this place.” Agent Williams frowned as he surveyed the damage the Keter level SCP caused to its containment cell.

“I concur. The monetary damages caused by this breach easily numbers in the millions,” Dr. Gears said in his usual blank, apathetic voice.

Williams sighed. He didn’t exactly enjoy working with Gears but he was the doctor on duty and Williams honestly didn’t feel like filling out all the paperwork necessary to get this mess sorted out. It was quite sad really. He’d rather oversee the operation of Containment Protocol 204 than fill out a few forms.

“How far did it get?” Williams asked.

“SCP-204-1 managed to break out of its containment cell, made its way through several labs, plowed straight through the onsite dormitories, and was making its way to the Euclid containment wing. Fortunately, it wandered into the hallway leading to SCP-615’s enclosure and both SCP-204-1 and SCP-204-2 were incinerated by SCP-615’s containment measures.”

“I suppose Containment Protocol 204 is now under effect.”

“Correct. The candidates are being gathered as we speak.”

“And what’s our total body count?”

“The current tally is sixteen casualties. Nine dead and rest wounded.”

As they traced the line of destruction SCP-204 had wrought, Williams frowned. There shouldn’t have been any reason the thing could get this far. The EMP generators alone should have been

enough to keep the SCP contained.

“Oh, and the EMP generators were never online,” Gears said, as if reading Williams’ mind. “They weren’t powered on today and by the time they were spooled up, SCP-204 was already contained. The staff at fault will be properly reprimanded.”

Farther down the path of destruction, they finally made their way to the ruins of the on-site dormitories. Fortunately, they were mostly empty since the majority of the staff was on duty, but as Williams and Gears could see, rescue crews were still digging survivors, and bodies, out of the wreckage.

“I would advise you to be cautious,” Gears warned. “This area has not yet been completely secured, and there is still a danger of catastrophic structural failure.”

“I’ll keep that in mind- oh damn.”

Gears and Williams found themselves in what was left of one of the dorms. In the corner, there was a woman huddled with her child. Williams was slightly disturbed, as the scene reminded him of those macabre remains of the people of Pompeii. The woman, apparently a junior or assistant researcher judging from her torn and shredded lab coat, was clutching a young girl who couldn’t have been more than eight or nine years old. It wasn’t completely uncommon for on-site personnel to have children here, but it was still a jarring sight.

“Correction, casualty count has now been increased to twenty three,” Gears said dryly. “The cause of her wounds was probably by falling debris.”

“No…” Williams inched closer to examine the bodies. “Her hands… the scabs on her knuckles suggest she was fighting something.”

“Are you implying that she engaged in physical combat with SCP-204-1?” Gears asked.

“The evidence doesn’t lie.”

“I find that scenario highly unlikely.”

“Then you haven’t seen what a mother defending her child is capable of.” Williams shook his head. “I’ve heard stories of women lifting cars and tearing doors off their hinges to save their kids. Maybe we can add punching out SCP-204-1 to the list?”

“Well, it’s not like it made any difference. She and the child are still both deceased,” Gears droned on.

“Gears!” Williams cried.

“I am aware of your tendency to give respect to the dead, but-“

“No, it’s not that!” Williams knelt down and checked the girl’s pulse. “They’re both still alive!”

“What?” Gears’ eyes widened by several micrometers, and the muscles around his mouth tightened ever so slightly. This was possibly the closest he ever got to genuine, complete surprise.

“I think,” Williams leaned even closer, craning his ear against the mother’s mouth, “I think she’s singing a lullaby.”

“So how do you think they survived?” Williams mused as medical teams carted Assistant Researcher Ann Wells and her daughter Jill Wells away to the infirmary. “SCP-204-1 doesn’t leave jobs half finished.”

“Most likely, SCP-204-1 initiated a cost-benefit analysis and came to the conclusion that terminating Dr. Wells and her daughter wasn’t beneficial.”

“Huh, is that so?”

“Do you have an alternate theory?”

“Yeah, but you’ll just think it’s stupid.” Williams shrugged.

“How foolish you, making assumptions about me like that. I am above that sort of pettiness.”

“Well, I’ve got absolutely no evidence to back this up, but maybe,

just maybe, SCP-204-1 realized that it and Dr. Wells weren't so different?"

"That's implying that SCP-204-1 possesses a level of intelligence that is completely unheard of based on our research of it."

"I know I know, but it's just a gut feeling."

"I find this turn of events highly unusual," Gears said.

It had been four days since the SCP-204 containment breach. Containment Protocol 204 had been put into effect immediately after and it had finally paid off, but with results that nobody had quite anticipated.

"Of all the people, it had to choose Jill." Williams shook his head.

"Need I remind you, that Jill is merely a name on a piece of paper that no longer exists. She's an SCP now." Gears coldly reminded him.

"What's going to happen to the mother?" Williams asked.

"Dr. Wells will be given a rigorous amnesiac treatment and then be transferred to another facility."

"So, it'll be as if Jill never existed, then."

"The Foundation has no place for sentimentality, Agent Williams. I'm not quite sure why you're expressing so much concern over two individuals you have never met."

"I'm pretty sure explaining the reasons would make your head explode." Williams shook his head and walked away.

Gears, however, opted to stay in the monitoring room and stared at the security screens for what seemed to be a very long time. If the man was thinking of anything, none of the personnel present could even begin to guess what it was. They merely tried to pretend he wasn't there and continued with their duties. There, sitting in the middle of the newly reconstructed containment cell sat Dr. Wells, or

at least something that resembled her, watching over Jill as she slept.

Meanwhile, the sound recording equipment inside the cell began to pick up something odd and faint. The sound engineer on duty was about to disregard it as random interference, but thought sounded vaguely familiar, like a lullaby.

Lust in the Time of Anomalous Cholera

"Hello? Little weak people, what's wrong? Oh, all doubled over in agony from a little something? Unable to guard the containment chambers while your bowels empty? Hahaha! Oh, I will get my revenge on each and every one of you, once Montezuma is done! Hm? Oh, hello, there. Nice mask."

"Hello."

"Oh my, what a lovely voice you have. I do believe I'm getting a fever. I am **`Vector`**, Madam of Malaise, Damsel of Disease. And you, my mysterious masked malcontent?"

"**`I... am the cure`** for you, baby."

"We'll see about that."

"My cure is most effective."

"Is this your doing?"

"No, they all suffer from The Disease."

"Let me guess, *voëltjie*, the Bubonic Plague?"

"No, **`crab-stuffed mushroom`** day at the cafeteria."

"Well, that gives us time to get to know each other, doesn't it?"

"I already know plenty about you, dear. I sense… all the diseases in you."

"Wait just a second, sweetie, I need to sample this new infection."

"Did you just lick that man's anus?"

"Best gotten at the source. And I'm going to lick more than that on

you."

"You'll be at it a while. My bag is quite full."

"Oh my, your bag is so huge! Is that real [DATA EXPUNGED]?"

"The finest Corinthian [DATA EXPUNGED]."

"I must touch your bag."

"Touch all you like, my dear. But be careful, the contents may… jostle."

"Oh, when I get inside you, you'll swell in places you never expect."

"It will take more than a simple palpitation to give me the tremors. But my touch will cure your ailment."

"I carry over a thousand diseases. Do you honestly think a single touch will get my juices flowing?"

"I have a surgeon's hands, cutie, we have all night, and when I administer my cure, you will so desperately need it."

"Oh! That lovely black robe… isn't a robe, is it? You're totally naked."

"I see your glands flush and pulsate in antici… pation. I will relieve the pressure with my scalpels."

"Mmm, show me what you can do with a little sharp pain."

"I do believe I've caught your virus."

"I leave myself in your capable hands, doctor."

"This… I am afraid the constant sounds of vomit and gastric distress do ruin the mood some."

"It's not exactly Beethoven."

"Perhaps I should administer my cure to a few of these researchers, so that we could have some peace."

"Well… I've always wanted to make love under a fountain…"

"I say, doctor, you are a genius. Your zombies hold their place and let their stomachs empty in a quiet, compliant manner."

"And without your mastery of disease, we would not be able to maintain the cafeteria infection in place after I administered my cure."

"Now let us return to make love under the fountain of our own design."

"This effluvium makes a most wondrous lube."

"Uh… Excuse me?"

"What? Another doctor? Who are you?"

"They call me the **Rocket Surgeon**. I'm looking to fix **Steely Dan**."

Lux

Timothy Dalton's young hands shook with the exuberance that only a child can feel. It had been two weeks to the day. To the day! And now, it should finally be here! He ran home, grinning the entire way, dragging his backpack behind him.

He rushed to the mailbox, opening it and peering inside, his smile falling away. It was empty. He sighed, slowly dragging his bag after himself, walking up the step of his house. He dropped off his backpack on the kitchen table and got a glass of water, sipping it as his mother walked into the room, leaning over to kiss his head. When she stood back up, she frowned gently. "What's wrong, hun?" she asked. She only called him 'hun' when she wanted to be sweet to him.

"Did I… get any mail today?" he asked.

She shook her head. "Were you expecting something?" she asked. "You didn't sign up for something, did you?" she asked, more sternly.

"N-no…" he lied. "I was just… hoping to hear from my penpal…"

She didn't believe him, but his disappointment was enough to ease her anger. 'Probably just a stupid mailing list again…' she thought. Already, he'd gotten Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, Scientologists… Ever since he'd learned his address, they'd been getting mail and fliers.

She kissed his head again. "Maybe tomorrow…" she said. "Now, head up to your room and take care of your homework."

He nodded, taking his bag and heading up the stairs, tossing it onto his bed. He walked over to his desk and sat at it, turning on the old computer his parents let him have, almost not noticing the box sitting to the left of it.

It was wrapped in brown paper, with a string around it. It looked like a package out of a movie. With trembling hands, he reached for it, taking it and pulling off the paper quickly, stopping and tugging at the string, frustrated until it broke with a quick snap, opening it and seeing…

It was beautiful. Shining silver—who cared if it was plastic?—with lights running up and down either side. It looked *exactly* like the picture. He pointed it out the window, pulling the trigger and grinning as all the lights flashed and a high pitched sound, just like from a movie, issued from it. His grin stretched from ear to ear as he slipped it into his pocket, hurrying out of his room and down the stairs again, shouting to his mother as he flew out the door: "I'll be at Johnny's house!"

"What about your homework?" she shouted back, but he was already gone, running down the street, eager to show off his new acquisition.

When he got there, he found Johnny in the yard, playing with his imagination, running and gunning. Tim smiled, jumping out from behind a tree and shouting loudly, intending to scare as he pulled out his new toy. "I'll fix you, Space Man!" Johnny jumped, turning and then frowning, angry at having been sneaked up on.

"That's not funny, Ti—"

His voice died away as Tim pulled the trigger. He stopped for a moment, then slumped to the ground, falling in a heap. Tim smiled a little, laughing and running to him. "Johnny! Johnny! Isn't it neat?!" he asked, laughing and smiling.

But Johnny didn't respond.

Simon Hayden opened the box, smiling and grinning as he took out the toy, eyes wide and expectant. He turned, showing to his little brother who's face practically glowed with envy. "Hey! No fair! Where'd you get that?!" he said.

"Isn't it cool!" he said, smiling. "It's free! You just have to go to this

website and give them your address and they send you free stuff!"

His little brother got a greedy glint in his eye. "What is it?! What is it!?!"

Simon smiled, ruffling his hair playfully—and because it annoyed him—and grinned. "Just go to **`www.thefactory.net`**…"

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